THE WIND OFF THE RIVER

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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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THE FATHER 1904

It must have been the snow on the hills. That's what he'll tell himself years later. Explain to Dee when she's old enough. The snow on *his* hills. Wales. The land of his fathers. Dee's ancestors. That jagged blue line hovering above Birkenhead across the river. The way the sun caught the snow, unnaturally white, dripping down the slopes like runny icing.

Huw paused on the pavement outside his shop, watching his breath float out over the street. *Like clouds of unspoken words.* He was a bloody poet. A Welsh bard. Wasted in a fishmonger's. He sighed and a bigger breathy cloud shot out into the chilled air. He should be at the National Eisteddfod not gutting fish in Bootle.

He pulled up the metal shutters on the shop. Wedged between the butcher's and the grocer's, it was fronted by two marble-topped counters – no doors or windows. He gazed up and down the empty street, hands on hips. Sucked in the air through his wide nostrils – a tang of seawater, coal smoke, burnt jute. It was five in the morning. He loved this time of day. An hour until the first footsteps would echo past. Bouncing off the hard tiled walls of the shop, the concrete floor, the cracked marble slabs on which his fresh corpses would be laid out.

A tiny figure in beige rounded the corner. The material so faded she was almost invisible in the half light. A wraith floating towards him. Bony knees piercing the cloth of her skirts as she walked. No coat, even on this freezing February morning.

—Good morning, Honorah.

She dropped her head. Huw gazed at the flop of blond hair that fell from the bun pinned clumsily, not quite in place. *Yellower was her head than the flower of the broom*. Sweet Olwen. He was about to reach out when she pushed it back inside the thin knot.

—It's Norah, Mr Morgan.

—A thing of beauty deserves to be given its full title, *Honorah.*

She ducked past him into the shop.

—And do white lilies grow in your footsteps, Honorah, my lovely?

She curled her lip. Turning away from him, she tied her coarse hessian apron over her dress.

He imagined her skin. Smooth as a herring under the cotton cloth. Not yet fourteen. Trapped between girl and womanhood. Burgeoning breasts. A flawless body free from unsightly pubic hair. *Whiter was her flesh than the foam of the wave*.

The sound of iron shoes clanging rhythmically against the cobbles started up a few streets away. Muted at first, rising in pitch, tossed over the roofs of the terraces. Then the heavy metallic beat pounded off the brick-walled houses as the delivery wagon pulled onto the street.

The horses steamed quietly, catching their breath as the driver unloaded crates of ice-packed fish. Silvers and blues, golds and pinks. An artist's palette. Huw checked the eyes of the fish, staring brightly back at him as though just woken from sleep.

–My colours have arrived, Honorah. What shall we paint today?

The girl was busy shovelling the crushed ice onto the two marble slabs either side of the shop.

–Friday is fishday. We need something special, my lovely.

Queues would begin to form at six-thirty. After the gates had slammed shut on the Dockyards, the factories and warehouses. Men and women locked inside for the next twelve hours. Huw didn't envy them. Slave labour's what it was. At least he was his own boss. No one telling Huw Morgan what to do. Locking him up like a caged animal or a convict. Older children and housewives would snake for two or three shop fronts down the street. The dripping carcasses in the butcher’s would hang idle today. Huw smiled.

The last crate crashed to the pavement. Huw signed the heavy ledger with a flourished H and handed it back up to the deliveryman.

–Thanks, Jack. See you Monday.

A hand waved from the top of the wagon as it pulled off down the street.

–Right, my lovely. What do we have today?

Norah and Huw stood side by side gazing at the fish.

–They're pretty.

Norah pointed to a box of blushing salmon.

Huw closed his eyes, placing a thumb and forefinger over his eyelids.

–I'm getting a picture, Honorah.

He gestured to the broad slope of marble on the right side of the shop.

–On this slab, I see silvery skins of sprats and whiting. Sardines maybe. These shall form our sea. Cod steaks riding the waves like foam. A seahorse bobbing in their midst do you think? With a head of rosy salmon fillets. An eye of winkles. A winkle in its eye, ha ha!

–You sound like a book, Mr Morgan. Out the library.

Huw gazed at the girl and stroked her cheek with his thumb.

–I'm an artist, Honorah. The ice my canvas. Better than anything hanging in the Walker, let me tell you.

Huw looked back at the fish.

–We can use the last of the kippers to form a collar.

His hand waving over the marble shelf like a magician, as though the very words could conjure up the seahorse.

–A body of the yellowest haddock.

–The ones we smoked yesterday, Mr M?

–Scales of plaice will draw the eye down to the curling tail of this conger eel.

Norah began dragging the boxes into position.

–On the other side we'll have a spiral of sea trout. This one, Honorah.

He pointed to a battered box on the pavement. One side smashed on impact as it was tossed to the ground.

–Opening into a tumult of mullet.

–Tumult?

–Crowned by black and white halibut, mackerel—

–Which ones are they?

–These. No, this box. *This* one, child! Where was I?

–Mackerel, Mr M.

–Oh, yes. Spinning off to the four corners. And some glistening salmon's eggs between.

–What about these ugly buggers, Mr M?

–Honorah! A lady never curses. Hake. Vicious looking aren't they? All those sharp pointy teeth.

Huw made a pinching movement towards her. She squealed. He wrapped his heavy muscular arms around her, turned her to face the slabs. She was a jumble of fragile bones swaddled in the poor cloth of her dress. Shivering. He squeezed her tighter.

–Ugly and yet, the most easily bruised of all the fish.

Huw paused. Was that true of people too?

–They can form the frame around our *tableau.*

–Our what?

He kissed the top of her head then released her.

–I think I'll have a row of shellfish in front of each. Cockles and winkles this side, mussels over there. And I've a nice shiny tin bucket for the crabs.

The same bucket he'd heard scraping its way across the backyard yesterday. Packed with sardines, dragged by little Dee. Not quite five years old. A slight girl, slim frame but strong. Thick auburn hair falling over her face, heaving the bucket over the stone flags. Face contorted with the effort but determined. It was a heavy bucket when it was empty but full of fish?

–And where exactly do you think you're taking those, young lady?

–To the river daddy.

Huge eyes, most unusual shade of greenish amber. He could never quite put his finger on the colour. No idea who she got those from. Poor right eye drooping when she was tired. And her sweet little cupid's bow lips, so red and so plump. Just perfect to kiss her daddy. Her dark eyebrows – exactly like his – made her look older than she was. Especially when she was cross, which was frequent. She furrowed them so deeply they almost buried her eyes. She was going to be a beauty when she grew up. Break a few hearts in her time he was sure.

–Fishies have to swim in water or they can't breathe. They don't like being squashed in this little bucket.

Somehow he felt she understood the need for freedom. Instinctively. They were kindred spirits. He adored his little Dee. She was Daddy’s girl.

Huw stood motionless, watching Norah pull the fish out of the crates. Mesmerised by the water bouncing off their skins as she ran them under the tap.

–Do you know something, Honorah?

She stopped rinsing.

–Some of those fish have travelled further than I ever will.

He shook his head at the revelation. Nearly twelve years in this job and it had only just occurred to him.

Huw was standing at his workbench at the back of the shop. Slicing through the belly of a fat pink salmon. A wild Atlantic hen. He never ordered more than three of them, no money for expensive fish in this part of Bootle. But he had a few customers from the big houses on the main road to Crosby. He had a reputation for the freshest fish in the area.

As he pulled out the plump skeins of roe, he began to sing, *'...the virgin sturgeon's a very fine fish. The virgin sturgeon needs no urgin'...'* He glanced over at Norah, filling a bucket with icy cold water ready to rinse the eggs through. Her little buds of breasts were straining at the coarse fabric of her dress. *Whiter were her breasts than the breast of a white swan.* Olwen the fair. Beautiful Olwen.

–Have you ever tasted salmon roe, Honorah? Superior caviar to any of that black stuff from Russia. Come here.

He pinched some eggs from the skein and pushed the tiny moist balls between her lips. She reached instinctively to stay his hand as his gnarled fingers forced her lips apart, filling her small mouth. She gave a surprised moan. Her soft tongue felt like a plump wet fish against his rough skin.

–Bite into them. Let their salty juices explode between your teeth.

He pulled his fingers out. Sucked the spit and juices off them. She licked her lips. They were red, swollen-looking. He wiped a dribble of roe from her chin with his thumb, pushed some stray hairs back over her ear.

She waited.

When he didn't move, she turned back to the salmon roe.

He watched as she pressed the eggs through a fine mesh then steeped them in the water. He liked to rinse them himself. Sluicing the little orange globes under the tap water. He loved to feel the soft balls spilling over his palms, running between his fingers. Their squashy membranes at the point of bursting. The potential for life in each small sphere never ceased to amaze him. A small wave of melancholy always passed over him. He would pause briefly to mourn all the fish that would not now be born. All the salmon who would never now exist. Who would not swim back up river to breed, thrashing against the flow. Who would never know the joy of leaping out of the cold clear waters in their haste to return home. All that beautiful flesh that wouldn't now be savoured. Soft and moist, almost melting on the tongue. The crisp skin that wouldn't crunch in anyone's mouth. The fishy oils that wouldn't be licked from anyone's lips.

Dee's eggs wouldn't go to waste. Some lucky man's milt would enter her channel, create lots of beautiful little Dees. He was already jealous of the man who would, one day, make love to his daughter. No man would be good enough for his little princess. But she'd

have lots of babies. She adored them. Always asking to hold the neighbours' babies. Fussing over them, feeding them their bottles. A real little earth mother.

Norah was bending over the low stone sink, washing the wire mesh. He could see her buttocks pressing through the material.

He looked away, concentrated on filleting the salmon. Slicing the flesh clean from the backbone, which would be sold later, bagged up with the heads to make a tasty broth. A *bisque*, as the French called it. Sounded better than fish soup.

–All the way from the Atlantic, Honorah. From the cold waters around Norway. Can you imagine how far that fish has travelled?

He'd never even been to Wales though he could see it across the river every morning as he set off from home. Not even visited the land of his ancestors, his own people.

Last Saturday afternoon, after he'd closed up, he'd walked the length of the Dock Road from Bootle to the Pier Head. Avoiding the huge dray horses dragging their loads from ships to warehouses. They could be dangerous when they were waiting to be harnessed – a neighbour had walked behind one to cross the road, it had kicked him with his powerful back leg. Killed him stone dead.

He didn't really like the Docks, too industrial. Sulphurous smog pressing down on the river and Dockside. All those ships jostling for space on the quays, a sea of masts like some denuded forest. Massive fortress-like warehouses lining the road. Scruffy old pubs heaving with men, half-cut, whatever time of the day or night. Cart after cart after cart, nose to end, laden with goods. Hundreds of men, bent under their loads, swarming like ants. Others warming themselves at smoking braziers. The noise. The filth. If hell existed it would look like that. He was a country boy at heart, despite being born in the city. It was in your blood. You were either a townie or you weren't.

He'd stopped to look across the river. He couldn't see Wales from down there. It was too smoggy to see anything – he could scarcely make out Birkenhead. All the filth from the chimneys and factories created a yellowy-grey fug that blocked out the sky. The river reflected back a sludgy ochre. Endlessly churning, rising, falling, constantly swallowing itself. Debris caught up in the frothy scum was being washed into the Irish sea. It would be carried up the West Coast then out to the Atlantic. He watched it heading towards the mouth of the river – even the rubbish the city rejected got to travel further than he did. Got to escape.

Behind him there was another new building going up. A monstrosity in steel and concrete. The Port of Liverpool Building as it called itself, pompously. This city was growing uglier. Imagine putting a thing like that on the waterfront where all the foreign ships would see it – Liverpool would be a laughing stock. He turned towards town, trying not to look at the building site.

As he reached Lord Street, he felt exposed suddenly in his work clothes. Stinking of fish. Shabby and ashamed. Passing the toffs as he continued up Church Street, strolling by in their finery, loading their expensive packages into carriages. He glanced into glittering shop windows with displays of goods he could never afford. Mourning the exotic food his family would never get to taste. He was glad to reach Lime Street, leave the frantic commercial world behind. The open expanse, the calm and splendour that was St George's Hall.

He heaved open the solid wooden doors of the Picton Library, stepping into the dark lobby. They shushed closed behind him, locking out the din of the city. He paused, head bowed, eyes closed. Readying himself for the interior.

He pushed through the inner doors to the foyer, opening his eyes. The brilliance! Electric lights everywhere. Crystal chandeliers dripping with shards of colour that flashed around the walls, showering people with rainbowed drops of light. He'd never been in a building that dazzled.

He stood in the centre of the circular reading room, breathing in the smell of beeswax and printing ink and musty paper. Walked up and around the wrought iron galleries on all three levels, trailing his thick fingers over the crumbling cloth and leather spines of the massive tomes. Someone had slammed a big book shut on the other side of the room and the dull thud had echoed around the space. Muffled by the cushioning of books, there was something comforting about the sound. Later, he'd chosen the largest volume he could find and done the same thing. Just to hear the *Echo* again. The librarian had scowled at him. He'd felt like an errant schoolboy and slunk out.

He'd found the section containing books about mythology and legends in another, more ordinary part of the library. A square unimpressive room. After a long time searching he'd chosen one called *The Mabinogion*. Fabulous name. Mab-in-og-ion. He'd mouthed it several times to get the shape of it on his lips. Whispered it to feel the name on his tongue. He imagined the very act of saying the word made him look more Welsh. Just the sound of it

sent an ache of longing through his chest. *Hireath*. A single word in Welsh that took a paragraph in English to explain.

He'd been reading about the beautiful Olwen. If she ever married, her father would be fated to die. So when a young suitor comes courting – Huw couldn't pronounce his name, too many consonants together – the father sets him impossible tasks to win her hand. The beau, however, manages to complete them with the help of his cousin, King Arthur. So he marries Olwen and her father dies.

Huw stopped slicing the salmon. He put down his knife. Looked at Norah's shabby frock. The cheap undyed cotton.

–You should be wearing a robe of flame-red silk, my lovely. And around your maiden's neck a torque of red gold.

He trailed his fingers around her neck, pausing at the hollow of her throat, that most vulnerable of places on a woman's body.

She backed away.

–I think they're ready for rinsing now, Mr M.

He was staring at her throat.

–The eggs.

She pointed.

Olwen, Olwen, Olwen. *A woman so beautiful that all who saw her would be filled with love for her.* He imagined her body. Deliciously cold to the touch in the winter months. Peeling back the skin of her nightdress, exposing her flesh…

–D'you want me to do them?

…Stroking every inch of her from neck to toe. Rubbing cream into her delicate skin. His palms gliding effortlessly over it. Stroking her small breasts, her swollen mound of Venus. Slipping his hand between her tight thighs...

Norah watched him for a moment.

–You alright, Mr M? Will we smoke some more haddock today?

Huw glanced down at his apron. Then turned quickly away from her. Cleared his throat.

–Of course. Always replenish the stocks, Honorah, always replenish. I'll just wash my hands then finish the salmon eggs, you get started on the haddock. Rinse it well, mind.

Norah was already in the smoke hole out the back of the shop laying the haddock on the racks by the time Huw had decorated his display with the salmon roe.

–Well done, my lovely. You can thread them onto the rods when they're dry. I'll light the sawdust when you've finished.

The oak sawdust made lovely thick, almost sweet smoke when it was lit. Smouldering away in the dark, gilding the fish. He liked the way it got trapped in his hair and he could smell it for days afterwards. Not like the fishy reek of his hands. Even scrubbing with carbolic soap didn't get rid of the stench completely – it was ingrained in his pores. His once soft white hands were red and chapped. Swollen with water and ice. The cold. He wondered how they'd feel on tender young skin. Olwen's perfect skin. His caresses rough and dry despite the olive oil he soaked into them each evening.

He'd met an old fisherman at the Pier Head once, many years ago. He had salt water boils around his wrists and neck. Caused by his oily-frock, he'd told Huw – the constant chaffing. His fingers were maroon, swollen, painful looking. His hands covered in thick callouses. Couldn't feel a thing any more, he said. Huw had pitied him and his wife. For her it must have been like a rasp grating over her skin. For him, without the sense of touch, how could there be pleasure? Without pleasure, that kind of pleasure, what would be the point of life?

Huw parcelled up some plaice for that evening's supper. He put it to one side, burying it in the crushed ice. Jane had said a bit of cod would do but Dee preferred plaice. She loved to pick the bones clean. She was already adept at peeling back the skin, easing off the tender white flesh. A joy to watch. Such delicate fingers. Pianist's fingers. He should save up, buy her a piano. She loved the skeletons left behind. Last week she'd gathered them all up and washed them gently in a bowl of warm water. She was laughing as she snapped off the heads, singing a little nursery rhyme to herself as she painted them in bright colours. Then she decorated one of Jane's old hats with them. Fish feathers she called them. Wonderfully happy child, took delight in the simplest things. She walked around in that hat the for rest of the week. Insisted on wearing it when they went for their walk through Sefton Park that Sunday afternoon.

–I'm like one of the posh ladies now, aren't I Daddy? she'd asked.

–Darling Dee, you are a perfect little lady.

And he'd bowed to her.

She was going to marry well, he knew it.

But he had to tread carefully around her. He couldn't understand why he was so loathe to be in her bad books. It made him utterly miserable if he chastised her. Last week he was trying to help her tie her boot laces but she pushed him aside and insisted on doing them herself. She tried and tried but she could not tie a bow in them. He'd become irritated and grabbed the laces and tied them himself. The look on her face! He'd felt ashamed. She undid the bows, pulled off the boots and her stockings and stomped out of the front door in bare feet.

–You can't play outside without shoes, lovely.

–Bridget does, she'd shouted and slammed the door.

Slammed it. And not yet five.

He heard her laughing as she ran up the street, delighted to be barefoot. But he felt as if she was laughing at him. He'd fretted all day after that. Jane said she was independently minded, fiercely stubborn. It showed their daughter was intelligent, Huw should let the child be. He'd tucked her up in bed that night and read her favourite poem to her – twice.

Grace was easier. Always helping her mother. Although she could be a bit morose. It was a shame they never had a boy. It would have been nice to have a son to do manly things with – play football, go fishing. Join him in the business. He'd often imagined the sign, 'Morgan and Son, Purveyors of Fine Fish'. An image of Neptune between 'Son' and 'Purveyors'. Perhaps some fish swimming around his feet. Royal blue against a crisp white background of tiles.

His own father had wanted Huw to join him in business. 'Morgan and Son, Chartered Accountants'. In gold lettering he'd said, on the glass door of the office. Pneumonia carried him off just before Huw's thirteenth birthday. That was the end of his education.

By lunchtime, most of Huw's fish had gone. The cheaper stuff sold out by mid-morning. The few late stragglers would have to pay more for tonight's supper, juggling the housekeeping to hide the expense. His stock of smoked haddock had been depleted by nine.

He stood at the entrance to the shop, looking out along the street. Two rows of tiny hovels. The walls were bowing and the gutters leaking, tiles missing from the roof, but they were kept immaculately clean. He'd watch the women on a Saturday morning scrubbing the front doorsteps. A whole row of bottoms wiggling outside the houses, rhythmically dipping

bristly brushes into tin buckets. Dip dip. Scrub scrub scrub. Then the windows would be washed. He always held his breath as the young girls raised the sash windows upstairs, then eased themselves out onto the ledge. They'd perch, washing the outside of the bedroom windows, clinging to the frame for support. He'd never forget that poor young girl who lost her grip and toppled out. A couple of years ago now. One of the houses with basements, on the next street. Impaled on the iron railings below. Died while the firemen were trying to free her. The mother turned to drink. He would never let Dee wash their windows. Dee would grow up to be a lady. No, Dee was born a lady.

It was quiet now. There was always a lull between lunch and the last minute flurry when the factory whistles went at six. The poor old dears from the jute mill down the road – mostly women from the streets round about, the step-scrubbers – discharged like waste water from the sluice gates of the factory. Wheezing their way through an order. Barely able to fill their lungs enough to speak. Like fish gasping for breath on the quayside. Flapping in panic, beating their tails against the stone. Huw found himself breathing for them, sucking in great lungfuls of air. He wanted to release them into the water. Go on, he wanted to cry, swim, swim! Get away from here. There's a great world out there, sunshine and good food to eat. There is a better life beyond the mouth of the Mersey. And they lived so close to the river. Like domesticated animals, conditioned to be afraid of freedom.

A dark wintery shadow had crept over the terrace of shops on Huw's side of the street. It leached out across the road imperceptibly. A thin line of cold light remained on the pavement opposite where the stone flags met the sooty red bricks. The vestiges of the day. Vestiges. Remains. The last glimmer of light before darkness shrouded them. People used that word without thinking but it was an accurate description of the night. It was deadening. In minutes they would be entombed in darkness. Even though it was only for a short time until the lamplighter appeared, it made him melancholic. The jaundiced glow that replaced the shadows did nothing to raise his spirits.

He wondered if the snow would still be shining on top of the hills. Did the evening shadows feel so desperately bleak over in Wales? He couldn't imagine feeling melancholy up in those hills. Breathing in fresh air, standing on top of the world. From over there, Liverpool would look like a tiny smudge on the opposite bank of the river. A sulphurous carbon cloud hanging over its enslaved citizens. You couldn't feel trapped on top of a mountain whatever

your circumstances. If his folks had stayed in Wales, he could be living up there in a little stone cottage. His yellow-haired wife playing the harp. His little Olwen. His children running through the snow. Was there a distant cousin still living there perhaps. Or his doppelgänger maybe, living Huw's real life.

Perhaps if Jane hadn't fallen pregnant he might have found his way back there. Nineteen was too young to be trapped into fatherhood. He'd never really lived. And he'd only known her a couple of months. He'd refused to marry her at the beginning. Told her he'd have nothing to do with the baby. He'd been cruel. Young people can be. But every time he passed her on the street, he wanted her. She was so beautiful. And dignified. He'd caved in eventually when her mother came round to see him. To tell him how miserable Jane was. A ten-minute ceremony in the Town Hall. Quick pint for him and a glass of sherry for Jane – where was that? Rigby's? Did Jane even buy a new dress? Probably not, they were broke in those days. Poor as the wretches round here. The child was a burden. God forgive him but that was how he felt.

When they first got married, they'd go to the music hall on a Saturday night. Watch the comedians, join in the singing. Jane's mother would look after little Grace. But all that stopped a couple of years later when Dee was born. They'd managed to keep their romance alive for a while but once Dee started walking and Grace was growing up, it was difficult to find time for themselves. About twelve months ago, Huw began sending them off to Sunday school so he and Jane could have some private time together. But he'd close his eyes, imagine he was making love to a stranger. Then after reading his Welsh myths last week, he'd pictured the fair haired Olwen beneath him. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about her since. He felt like he'd committed adultery, used Jane. He wondered if that was normal but he'd no one to ask. No mates – he wasn't a pub-goer, even though he passed six public houses on his own street, one at every corner. He didn't like what fell out of them at closing time. Or the money wasted. Huw wanted to give his family everything.

He must warn Dee never to get trapped like he did. She valued her freedom. Be careful, he'd tell her. Wait. Keep saying no 'til you're wed and in bed. That came from a poem didn't it? Or a music hall song.

He watched for the pavement to finally disappear into darkness before he moved.

It was time to crate up the few remaining fish. The last of the shawlies had left. They'd come just before he shut up shop. He always let them haggle over the stuff that wasn't going to keep. He felt sorry for them really. Poverty stricken. But that didn't stop them having loads of kids. Catholics for you. Go forth and multiply, isn't that what they told them? He'd let them have it for coppers, for the kids' sake. They were all Irish. Straight off the boat into the first rented room they could find – in the courts mainly, further along the Dock Road. They were even worse than the hovels round here. One dirty outside lav for twenty families. Ten of them to a filthy room, the ashes coming to meet you at the door. Still, you had to admire them. Willing to travel to find a better way of life. But here? Life couldn't have been worse than this, surely? Even if they were poor, wouldn't it be better to be roaming the countryside freely. Climbing hills, picking berries from the hedges, tramping through the green fields – it was called the Emerald Isle. Wasn't that better than being locked into hell-dark factories for twelve hours a day, six days a week? Or trudging back-broken round the Docks like human donkeys. Wasn't freedom more important than anything?

He often pictured them on the boat, wind gusting their hair, shawls whipping around them. Green-grey waves crashing against the bow. And despite the grim reality, the only words that came to him were *escape, freedom*.

The dingy light from the street lamps had seeped into the shop. Everything looked insipid. Huw had sluiced down the walls, the concrete floor, the marble slabs. Now he was undertaking his daily washing ritual. His hands were numb under the freezing tap water. There was a strong smell of carbolic soap. He dried them off on the soaking wet towel hanging on a nail above the sink – he'd been washing his hands all day. He looked at himself in the mottled mirror. At his broad chin, midnight blue eyes, long black lashes. The image of his Dinorwic mining grandfather, he'd always been told. He combed his hair off his forehead. A slate-black cushiony wave, shining blue even in the weak gaslight.

Huw Morgan. Welshman.

When he came out to the front of the shop Norah was tipping buckets full of ice into the gutter. They formed small icy hills, sparkling in the sputtering gaslight. He watched her move to and fro between the shop and the road. First three hills, then four. Then five, six, seven little hills stacked along the gutter. He stared, mesmerised by the diamond flashes as the gaslight flickered across them.

–Olwen.

It sounded like a lament.

Norah stood up and followed him into the shop.

He pressed the parcel of plaice into her hands. Without removing his thick, blood-soiled apron, he pulled on his overcoat.

I'm coming, my lovely.

Norah stared after him until he rounded the corner of the street.

THE JUMBLIES

I.

They went to sea in a Sieve, they did.
In a Sieve they went to sea:
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a Sieve they went to sea!
And when the Sieve turned round and round,
And every one cried, "You'll all be drowned!"
They cried aloud, "Our Sieve ain't big,
But we don't care a button, we don't care a fig!
In a Sieve we'll go to sea!"
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live:
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

THE LOVER 1914

The studio was green. Arthur had expected it to be brown and cream like the photographs. Although that didn't make much sense really – his face was flesh-coloured and his jacket was navy blue. So how did they take the colour out of photographs? And why would they do that? And what was the point in painting the studio green? Strange kind of green at that. Like Dee's eyes. In a good way. Although hers were prettier – more like syrup-covered moss. Or amber with greeny flecks—

–Can I help you?

–I want to have my photograph taken.

–Well, you've come to the right place – this is a photographic studio.

The man's face was dead-pan. His thin-lipped mouth a straight line. Arthur wasn't sure whether to laugh or not.

–Name?

–Hondesson. Arthur Hondesson.

–Take a seat, Mr Hondesson. I'll have to prepare the plate.

–Can I watch?

Well, it was better than hanging around like a wet sock, as his father always called him.

–Interested in photography?

–Yes. I've always wanted to be a photographer.

Why had he just lied like that? He buried his hands in his pockets, scowling, pretending to search for something.

The man stood waiting.

–Ah!

Arthur pulled out a hanky. Blew his nose loudly.

–Follow me. When you've finished.

They went into a small windowless room next door to the studio. It was almost black.

–Leave the door open – I need some light.

The man picked up a piece of glass.

–This a quarter plate – five inches by four. This is the size your photograph will be. But you know that, having an interest in photography.

–Oh, yes. So, where's the photographer then?

The man lowered the glass.

–I *am* the photographer.

–You're William Hawtrey?

He'd expected someone handsome, taller.

–Sorry. I thought you'd have an assistant who did all this messing about.

–Messing about?

William Hawtrey raised one eyebrow.

–This for your sweetheart, I presume?

How did he know that?

–I've had a steady stream of young men in here since Lord Derby called for a Pals Battalion.

Arthur stepped out of his way. He watched from the doorway as Mr Hawtrey poured some foul smelling liquid over the glass, turning it this way and that until he'd covered the plate entirely. He was weedy, sort of folded in on himself but his movements were swift and skilful. He tipped the excess back into the bottle.

–Phoaw! That stinks!

–Collodion. You have to get it absolutely even. As you know.

Arthur put his hanky over his nose.

–Excuse me, I have to do the next bit in the dark. Sensitising the plate.

–Sensitising?

–I have to put it in a bath of silver nitrate to make it sensitive to the light— You don't know anything about photography, do you?

Arthur looked at his feet. His big mouth was always getting him into trouble. Now the photographer thought he was an idiot.

–I'll wait outside.

He wandered around the studio, touching things. Fingering the raised velvet patterns on the paper. It looked more like a front parlour than a studio. Settees and plants and all sorts. He'd been expecting something different. Less homely. It was posh though. Quite nice really. Apart from the smell of chemicals.

It was a dark day. Storm clouds were roiling above, churning up the sky. In combat with the wind driving them eastwards. The studio was in shadow despite the huge windows

in the roof. That meant a longer posing time his friend, Frank had told him. He'd had his photograph taken last week for his sweetheart. *You have to,* he said*, they expect it.*

Frank spoke in undisputed facts. Bit of a know-all but not a bad chap. *Give them something to remember you by,* he told Arthur. Arthur pictured his photograph in Dee's hands. Her slim, delicate fingers grasping the edges of the card, stroking his face. Would he feel it while he was away, her touch against his face? While enemy guns were blasting holes in the ship. She'd keep his photograph under her pillow, or next to her face, cushioned in her thick chestnut hair. Talking to it, kissing it maybe before she fell sleep. Would a stray tear perhaps, fall onto it, mixing with the egg white – that was what they used on photographs. Albumen. He knew that much, Frank had told him. How come the egg didn't go rotten?

–And what happens to all the egg yolks then? Arthur called out.

–Yolks? Oh, I see. Leather tanning.

Eggs. Fried eggs on hot buttered toast. The yolk soaking into the bread. He crossed his arms over his belly trying to deaden the rumbling noise. He was starving but dinnertime was the only chance he had to get his photograph taken – his mother was always waiting for her tea when he got home from work. She'd been tired lately. Couldn't bring herself to do anything. Nerves, according to the doctor. She always looked forward to the front door opening, she said. Highlight of her day. Lying swaddled on the settee like an overgrown baby. Spit dribbling from the corner of her mouth when she dozed. What would she do without his lovely smiling face? she asked him, every single evening. How was he going to tell her what he'd done?

His father could help but he thought it was beneath him. Sometimes Arthur wanted to grab him by the throat, shove him against the wall. Grind his fist into the old bastard's face. Watch *him* cower for a change.

'Course he never would. The old git was a bully. A road digger, arm muscles the size of Arthur's two thighs put together. He battered a man unconscious once because he looked at him sideways. His mother had always been scared of him.

If Dee ever got sick, he'd wait on her hand and foot. Feed her tasty tit-bits. Part her little red lips, all soft and squishy like, like... blancmange. Then dab her dainty little mouth with a linen hanky. Like the one his mother kept tucked into her sleeve. She'd sigh and he'd kiss her funny little turned-up nose. *Retroussé*, she called it. He'd skitted the way she said it, 'wetwoussé' and she'd belted him. But he liked the way she talked really, it sounded sweet.

She was a clever girl, Dee. Knew posh words. And she was a good laugh, always larking about. Wicked sense of humour. He couldn't help laughing even when she was making fun of him. She could have done better than polishing apples for a living.

The studio was certainly swish. Arthur sat on one of the chairs. It was going to cost him a bomb – posh place like this on Bold Street, in the middle of all the expensive shops. He'd felt like an impostor walking up there, past the gents in their top hats and Derbys – he was only wearing his straw boater. The ladies in their beautiful gowns and huge feathery hats. He was sure they were all staring at him. Still, it would be worth it – he'd look like a film star in the photograph. Or one of the gentry. Aspidistras, velvet curtains and was that one of those French things? Chaise-something. And who were the two old people in the fancy frames?

He stood up to inspect them.

Lord and Lady Muck. Staring away from each other in their separate gilded boxes. Looking into the distance. The future maybe. Imagining all the following generations looking at their faces. Victorians from their clothes. Did anyone know who they were? You had your photograph taken so you'd be remembered, but what was the point if no one remembered your name? He'd write his on the back of his photograph. Dedicate it to Dee – Best love, Arthur. And kisses. Then she wouldn't be able to forget him even if she wanted to.

Arthur spied a large wooden desk on one side of the room. Now, that was a fine piece of furniture. Leather-topped. Walnut or something classy. Fabulous shine on it. Smelt of beeswax. He liked the fancy gilt bits around the edge. A real desk. He'd look like the boss behind that. Like Mr Tucker. He leant over it, scowling, pointing his finger.

–Now then, Arthur Hondesson, I'll not brock any idleness. You, Cunningham, you're sacked.

Cunningham. Smarmy little git. If he was boss, he'd sack him straight away. Kick him up the arse on the way out. That little toe-rag got them into all this. *Pals* Battalion! Not one of those buggers he'd call his pal. Well, Frank was alright but he wouldn't want to be stuck with the rest of them. Shysters.

And the White Star Line. His employers. The great shipping company setting an example. Look how patriotic we are. Big desk in St George's Hall. Bloody guilt. Hoping everyone would forget the Titanic fiasco. After two years? Not bloody likely. That mob when the news came through – their faces. He'd never seen faces twisted like that. Trying to smash through the massive front doors. Good job there were bolts and iron bars across them – if

that crowd had managed to get in they'd have all been killed. Wrenched limb from limb. He'd only been in the job a few months, it was the day after his fifteenth birthday. The noise, the screams. And the women! How could women be so vicious? Like wolves. Teeth bared. *Snarling*. That old one banging against the glass in the door. Ugly face pressed against it. She'd have ripped the flesh off your bones with those fangs.

He'd been upstairs with a message. When he saw them pushing at the doors, he'd run straight back down to the basement. Safer he reckoned. Even though he'd always hated it down there. Twenty of them hunched over two lines of high desks. No windows. Dirty grey gaslight poking through the gloom here and there. Phuttering around the smeared brick walls running with condensation. No need to bother painting them for the lowly office clerks. Clerical *assistants*. Unestablished at that. Just a thin wall of brick between them and the River Mersey. Well, that's how it felt anyway. Sometimes he could swear it was bowing under the pressure. He imagined the full weight of the Mersey thrusting against it. Pressing in on them. The fury of the water bursting through, drowning them all. And it smelt like a grave – earthy, damp. Rotting vegetation. It was like being in the hull of a great ship—

Arthur shivered, his heart convulsing. He gripped the edge of the desk. Why the hell had he signed up for the bloody Navy? He couldn't even swim! His stomach twisted in tight knots. Deep breaths, Arthur, just breathe. He closed his eyes. All he could see was the basement.

It was a far cry from the outside of the building – striped orange brick and white Portland stone. Turrets and Dutch gabling. It stood out from the drab buildings on the Dock road. Even held its own against the new Port of Liverpool building opposite with its magnificent dome, and the Liver Building with its huge prehistoric-looking birds. Inside it was all marble and carvings and chandeliers tinkling away. He'd never have guessed from the grand hallway he'd seen at his interview that he'd be slaving away in the dank basement. Up there, it smelt kind of perfumey. Like a lady had just walked through. There was a brightly coloured mosaic of South America on the wall. A massive staircase rising through the hall. Like a palace. He thought he'd at least be working in a room with a window in it.

When he became manager – and he would – he'd be upstairs. Looking out over the Pier Head, watching the ships sail in and out of the Albert Dock. He'd be able to see the sky, look down on the river. Hear the seagulls maybe, watch them being tossed around like dirty rags on the wind blowing up from the Irish Sea.

If he survived.

Bloody Cunningham. Standing on his bloody desk pointing.

–Who hasn't signed up for the Pals, Hondesson? Didn't see you in the queue today.

The whole office staring. A white feather on his desk. He'd glanced at Frank but Frank looked away – he'd been first in line. Arthur had no choice. *Bastard* Cunningham.

–That's 'cause I joined the Navy, he'd said.

The bloody Navy! Idiot. It shut them up though. He wasn't a coward. But there was no way he was going to serve with that bunch of ignoramuses. Pals his backside! He'd had to go straight to St George's Hall after work to enlist.

He'd been planning to ask Dee to marry him. Thought he'd wait until he got promoted to Clerical Officer. That would have been two years, tops. Bloody War. Sodding, *sodding* Cunningham making him sign up – he hated that bastard's guts! Well he'd better bloody survive that's all he'd say. He couldn't tell Dee yet. He'd give her his photograph first. Something to hold onto.

Sweet Dee. His little apple-polisher. Thirteen weeks on Friday since he first saw her. She'd given him that cheeky little smile as he was choosing the brightest red apple for his mother. Then she'd blown on it – he could have sworn her lips actually touched it – and given it an extra polish on her apron before wrapping it in green tissue paper. He'd had to buy an apple every day for three more days before she'd tell him her name. He still had the tissue papers. Folded carefully in his secret tin.

After that he'd leave for work early. He'd wait on the other side of the market entrance, staring over at her shop, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. He thought she saw him once or twice but didn't smile or wave at him. She was always intent on her apples, either polishing them, or stacking them into pyramids. Always a smile on her face. Her lips often quivering when she chatted, a laugh ready to burst out. Her gorgeous shiny hair piled in curls on top of her head, a different coloured ribbon each day. Finally, he'd plucked up the courage to ask her out. He'd complained of feeling unwell on the Friday afternoon, left work early. He'd waited outside her shop until it closed. She'd definitely seen him but just walked straight past. He'd followed her, calling her name just before she boarded a tram.

–Would you like to go for a walk?

–When?

–Tomorrow. I only work half day on Saturday. So do you.

He knew that because he'd passed the shop the previous week as they were closing up. She didn't answer. Just boarded the tram without looking back. He waited outside the shop the next day until she appeared.

–Where are we going then? she asked.

The studio lit up, momentarily. Arthur blinked. A shaft of light sliced through the gloom, striking a winged-back chair, all fancy patterns and floppy velvet cushions. That would be a great place to pose. He could rest his elbows on the arms, looking relaxed—

–I'm sorry sir, that's only for the ladies.

Mr Hawtrey appeared carrying a wooden frame. He slotted it into the top of the huge black camera perched on the tripod at the end of the room.

–How about that throne then?

That looked brilliant – mediaeval. Two little heads carved on top. Leather covered seat. He could sit back looking serious—

–An antique, sir. Ornamental purposes only.

Well, maybe he could pose in front of the plant stand, hand resting on it casually—

–May I suggest a relaxed pose, leaning against the desk?

Arthur sauntered up to it, perched casually. Should he hold a book, pretend to read? He wished he had a cigarette.

–If you'd care to sit up a little straighter?

Oh, look! That bearskin rug would be—

–More sophisticated without, I think, sir.

Shame. How about the screen? Or that plant. Or that—

–Understated is so much more refined, sir.

Well, the walking stick looked quite debonair. And the leather gloves in his hand were quite man-about-town – or rather, officer class. He'd had a jacket made to look like a naval uniform at the Chinese tailors on Cleveland Square. Complete with three stripes and a curl on the cuffs. Why not? He'd be getting one soon anyway. It didn't matter that it clashed with the wallpaper, it'd all look chocolate-brown anyway. Frank said he was wearing a bright yellow tie but it looked washed out on the photograph. Sludge-coloured. Like the Mersey at low tide. Arthur had been down there last Saturday after work, staring into the oozing slob.

He'd gone to the river to paint. He wanted to get the colour of Dee's eyes. They were hard to pinpoint. Two colours at once. He needed to get them fixed in his head so he could

remember them when he was away. The Mersey was often a strange sagey green with rust patches in the shadows. But when he got down to the Pier Head, the tide was out. Just mud from Liverpool to Birkenhead, a couple of small watery channels snaking through it. There was a shape in it, a branch probably. Bent and twisted like the arms of a monkey. He'd had a toy like that as a lad. You could hang it off things. He imagined the monkey had fallen off one of the ships, sunk into the slob.

He'd hung around waiting for the tide to come in again, wrapping his jacket tightly around him – the wind had got up, a cold easterly wind. He tried to block his nostrils from the stench blowing off the Docks. It was like rubber and boiled mushrooms. Seaweed and rotting fish, singed with burnt molasses, oozing from the factory chimneys in Bootle. The smell was so thick you could eat it.

He'd bought a cuppa from the tea-stall near the Liver building. Warmed him up a bit and not bad for a ha'penny. There was a lung-rotting smog over the city dimming the light. Spreading out over the water, staining the low-hung clouds that were being bullied westwards.

Finally the river filled and the Wallasey ferry made its way across. He decided he'd travel back on it. Get a closer look at the water – it should be clearer halfway across where it was deeper. He squeezed through the crowd into a space on the open top deck of the boat, in front of a lifebelt. It was really blowy up there. Sooty-black smoke coughed out of the funnel behind him, adding to the dense mass overhead. He often wondered if all the ferries created the constant fog over the river. There was a sheer drop to the water below – past the covered main deck, down the rusting metal sides of the boat to where a dirty, yellow-brown foam frothed. Once out on the river, the spume lagged behind the boat and he had a clear view of the water. Green serge, the colour of camouflage, flecked with rusty dried blood. Shifting, emptying. It was hypnotic. Rising and breaking then smoothing into glassy pockets. Swells of happiness smashing into angry troughs. The rhythm was sleep-inducing. The river sucking at the sides of the boat as it butted its way across the estuary.

He was leaning further over the railing. Watching the tide, already on the turn, heading out to the mouth of the Mersey, out to sea. Strong, determined, there would be no holding it back. A tide like that was going to carry him away from Dee. Drag him to Lord knows where.

Arthur had stared at the water. It *was* the same colour as her eyes.

The photographer tapped Arthur’s shoulder, jolting him back to the studio.

–Don't slouch, young man.

Startled, Arthur thrust his shoulders back, raised his chin, sucked in his belly.

–Come on, son. This is for your sweetheart not the drill sergeant.

He slackened a little. The photographer was right. He shouldn't look too rigid. Casual is what he was aiming for. Blasé. Off to war – no big deal.

The curtain behind him was dog-eared but it had a nice fringe on it. Looked quite grand.

–Just lean on your stick a bit, son. That's it. Left hand over right, gripping your gloves. No, son, gripping not throttling them. Relax.

Mr Hawtrey disappeared under his black shroud. It was just Arthur and the camera now. Arthur and Dee. He stared at the lens. At Dee. This was a personal message to her. A love letter. Come on, eyes, focus. Show her how you feel. This is for keeps.

Mr Hawtrey burrowed his way back out from under the cloth.

–Okay. Completely still now, son. I'm going to take the lens cap off.

Best love Dee.

–And… hold it. About fifteen seconds now.

He pictured himself staring out of the photograph. Through the egg-white, shining under the wax glaze (it cost extra but lasted longer, Mr Hawtrey said). He scrutinised himself under Dee's gaze. Could she see the love in his eyes? See his prospects. A young man going places. Trainee shipping clerk for now. Permanent position in six months' time – well, when he got back. Should be over by Christmas everyone was saying. He'd be full clerical officer in three years and manager after a few more. Then they'd buy a house in Aigburth or maybe Cressington. If God spared him.

How would Dee see him? Clear skin, good complexion his mother always said. Full lips. Dee liked his lips. Liked kissing them. He'd like to do more than kiss. Maybe before he left... Would she remember his hair was red? From his Viking ancestors, sailing up the Mersey, invading the Wirral. Brave warriors fighting and conquering foreign lands. Valiant, unafraid. It was in his blood. He shifted his position slightly under her gaze. His chest swelled, eyes softened.

–Hold it. Steady now...

Hang on! Had he cleaned his nails properly? His hands were on show, his mother would be horrified. He tucked his fingers into his palms. Bugger! Would his hands would be all blurred now?

The studied calm thrown. Replaced by a look of consternation. Captured forever.

Arthur stayed to watch the developing process. He'd be back at work a bit late but it would be worth it. Besides, he'd be in the Navy in two weeks, what were they going to do, sack him?

It was amazing to see his own face and body appear in negative as the photographer poured developing solution over it, swirling it round in one deft movement. A black-faced version of himself with white shadows emerged through the ammonia-smelling liquid. It didn't really look like him.

They had to wait while the image fixed itself. Established its own life. Mr Hawtrey poured them each a nip of whisky from a flask while he told him how he envied young men like him, having the chance to fight. He was too old to enlist. If he'd been younger he'd have signed up straight away. He'd have loved to get a piece of the action, have a pop at the Hun. Easy to say when you knew you'd never be called up. He was an unpleasant man. Unhealthily thin. Greedy eyes. Everything about him was a sham – from his fawning manner to the props he used and the pretence he peddled. He'd dedicated his life to false impressions. Photography was all fake when you thought about it.

Still, the process was fascinating. Mr Hawtrey lit the Bunsen, heating the glass plate with his negative image on it. Then covered it with varnish.

–That'll protect the image. So you can have more than one photograph. People normally get four or six printed. So you can give one to all your sweethearts.

His laugh was shrill.

Two would be quite enough. One for his mother – his father could go to hell –and one for Dee.

The albumen-coated paper was dipped in a solution of silver-nitrate then laid over the glass plate image. The two were then locked together in a glass-lidded box – a kind of mystical union. This was the terrifying bit. Soon he would be fixed in chemicals, light and shade. For eternity. Or however long the photograph lasted. Maybe their children – Dee wanted lots of children – would keep it and show their children.

Look, they'd say, your brave grandfather before he went off to fight in the war. And maybe they'd show their children and generations of people he'd never get to meet would be looking at a photograph of him the way he looked at the two old people on the wall. Wondering who he was. Yes, he'd better write his name on the back straight away. In ink.

Mr Hawtrey lifted the box with the paper and glass plate in it towards the huge window in the roof. Like an offering to the sun god. Only there was no sun today. Arthur watched himself gradually appear, like an apparition. His soul rising from the white paper.

That was when he felt the first pang of separation. This other half-being, a part of him, lightening into existence. Him, but not him. He felt a little dizzy.

A week later, Arthur was down at the Pier Head again.

HMS VICTORY Black hull, white letters.

He kept trying to read the name of the ship but the letters were wobbling. Tears were distorting his vision. The wind was at gale force. It had been steadily building all week. He could barely keep upright. Not an ideal place to be hanging about but he couldn't think of anywhere else to go. He didn't want his mother seeing him upset – she was already beside herself at his going off to war. Hadn't stopped crying since he'd given her his photograph. Kept asking why? But why? The same question that was going round and round his own head.

He'd met Dee outside Bunney's the day after he'd had his photograph taken. He was going to walk her down to the Pier Head, go down on one knee, ask her to marry him. When she said yes, he would ask her to wait for him until he came back from war. Explain how he'd been forced to enlist. He'd bought a ring in Woolworth's that would do as a stand-in.

He thought she might cry a little – with joy at the thought of getting married and with sadness at his going away. Then he'd produce the photograph and tell her she could keep him close to her heart while he was gone.

But it didn't work out the way he'd planned.

Why didn't she want it? Why was she so angry? It had really shocked him. Her face, twisted with rage. Not like his Dee at all. He could barely recognise her.

Of course, he'd messed it all up. He'd pulled her into Bunney's doorway when she'd arrived, out of the wind. It was gusting so violently he thought she might get blown away. And if it was like that in town, it would be brutal down at the Pier Head. So he'd just blurted it out, there, huddled back against the door. And in the wrong order. He'd told her he'd enlisted

before he got down on one knee. Then he couldn't ask her to marry him because she was furious. Wouldn't speak. So he'd thrust the photograph at her and told her to keep it.

H.M.S. V.I.C.T.O.R.Y. The letters were blurring over. He wiped his eyes roughly.

Passengers were jostling down the gangway. The ship was spewing people out of a small opening on its side, onto the quay. Another crowd was surging towards them. A meeting of two great seas. Passengers and relatives crossing and weaving through each other, clashing, swimming through the human tide. Both in the tide and of the tide.

His father had actually shaken his hand when he'd made his announcement about joining the navy. *I'm so proud of you, son*, he'd said. First time ever. At least he had that memory to take with him.

Would Dee even come to wave him off next week? He'd pictured the moment so often – her clutching his photograph, tears streaming down her face. Crying, *I love you, Arthur, come back to me.* He'd give one final wave, *I will Dee*, *I promise*, before being swept along on a wave of blue serge and kitbags. Disappearing into the great black belly of the ship. The huge bulbous, dark cavern below water level. Just a thin sheet of metal separating him from the great bulk of the sea. Tossed about on the waves, fired at by enemy guns. He saw himself thrashing through freezing water, struggling to keep afloat as his cabin below decks filled with seawater. Rising towards the ceiling. Choking, clawing at the locked metal door. His lungs filling with water. The pain. Lockers and hammocks beating against him, threatening to submerge him—

A man, rushing along the quay, gripping his hat, barged straight into Arthur, knocking the wind out of him.

–Sorry, old chap.

Arthur, startled, watched him continue towards the ferry terminal. As he stood, trying to get his breath back, he remembered Dee's face. She'd stared at his photograph then back at him. She'd given him the blackest, cruellest look he'd ever seen. Filled with absolute hatred. He'd physically recoiled from it.

–A photograph?

She'd said it quietly.

–A rotten photograph?

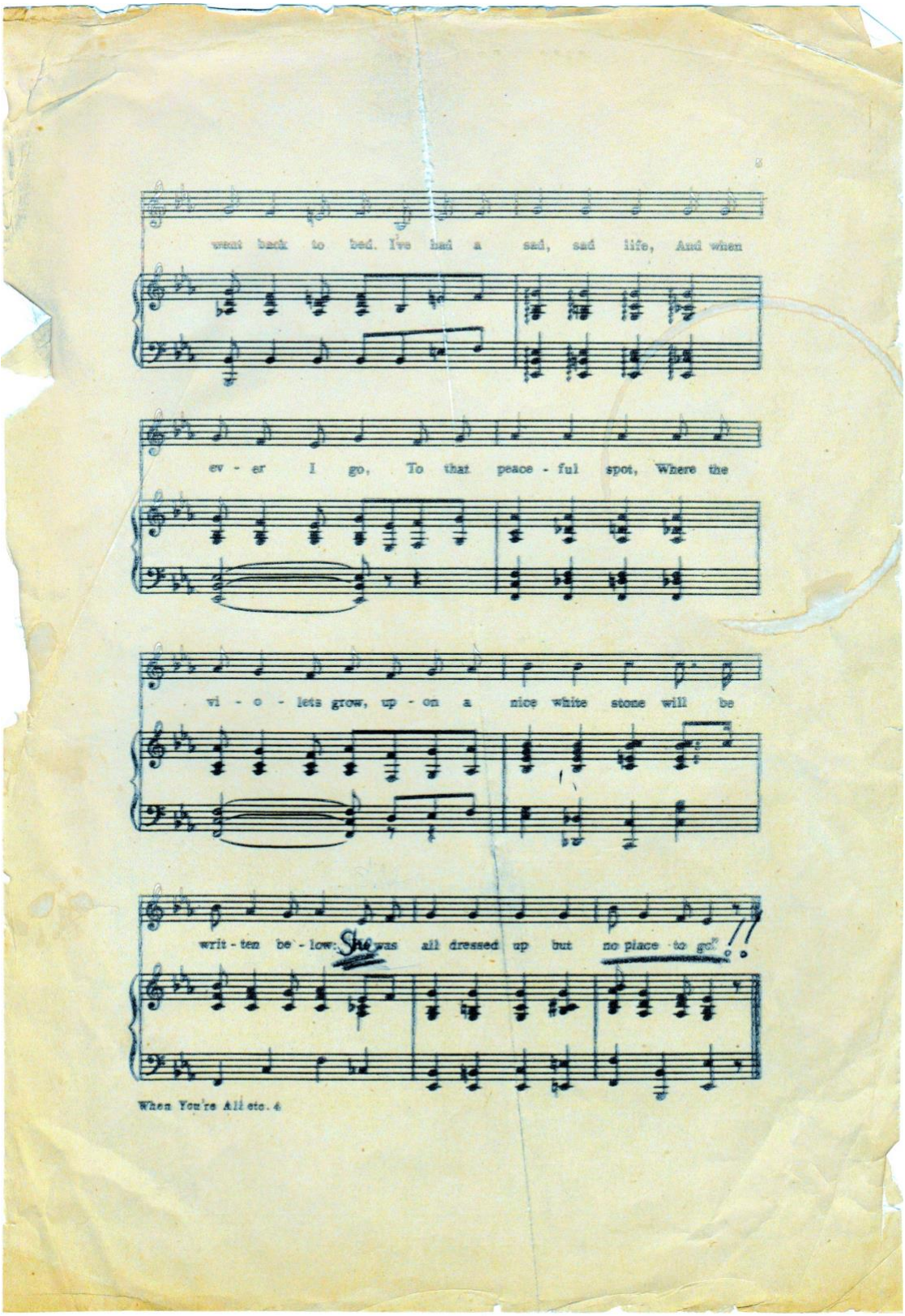
He'd just looked at her, unable to say anything.

–I'm going to throw it in the river and DROWN it.

She’d actually laughed when she said it. A horrible, hard laugh.

But she wouldn't have thrown it in the river – surely? It had cost him a week's wages. And how could she have just walked away from him like that? Knowing he’d be gone in less than two weeks. To *war*. To his death, maybe.

The crowds were still milling on the quayside, flowing round him. People calling to one another. Trams were clattering behind him. Ships sounding their horns as they left port. Seagulls were screeching and swooping, wings flapping, fighting each other for scraps among the jetsam. St Nicholas's church bells were pounding out over the Docks. But all he could hear were the last words Dee had screamed over her shoulder.

–Damn you, Arthur! Damn you!

went back to bed. I've had a sad, sad life, And when
ev - er I go, To that peace - ful spot, Where the
vi - o - lets grow, up - on a nice white stone will be
writ - ten be - low, She was all dressed up but no place to go!!

THE SISTER 1919

Grace dropped her bale of tobacco leaves onto the floor and sat down next to Hetty. It was a dismal room. Much smaller than the light-filled airy hall she was used to in Fancy Packaging. There were three long windows at one end but since the building across the narrow alleyway rose up five storeys, the light struggled to find its way in. The brick walls had been painted white once. Now the paint was flaking off. It was a cold room with a constant draft. That didn't relieve the overpowering smell of tobacco though. It was more intense here than her last section. You could actually taste the smell at the back of your throat. Smokey. It burnt your windpipe, right down into your chest. A series of steel columns held up the floor above. Metal pipes of various thicknesses ran clanging and knocking along the high ceiling. Grace and about twenty other women sat amidst the discarded stems on the bare, cold concrete. Propped up around the walls. Legs stretched out in front, bundles of leaves piled around them. This was the stripping room. Stripped down to its bare essentials.

–Do you ever get used to sitting on the floor all day?

–Nope! Your bum goes numb and your back always aches. Why they pay us more than the other buggers in here.

Grace had moved to the stripping section a few weeks earlier. Her first job had been weighing out tobacco. She and half a dozen girls sat on stools at a conveyor belt, filling little dishes with exactly the right weight of tobacco and shorts – cheap, coarse snuff. Grace had always felt it was a bit of a swizz making up the weight of the tobacco with that stuff. The dishes were swallowed up at one end of a huge, noisy machine. Neatly packaged boxes would magically appear at the other end while the empty dishes made their way back to the girls again. It was a boring job but it was easy. They couldn't really talk with the racket from the machines. Over time, Grace, like the other girls, had learned to lip-read and they passed the day mouthing conversations. Sometimes they'd meet in town and drop into their silent way of talking. A chap stopped them one time and asked if they were from the deaf and dumb school.

Stripping was much tougher. Grace's hands were already rough and stained from the nicotine in the stems. The coarse leaves ripped her fingers. But the job paid a lot more and she needed the money – she and Leonard were saving up to emigrate. And Leonard sold her

two hundred ciggies allowance every month to his mates in the hostel, which brought in a few extra bob as well.

Leonard was from Stoke-on-Trent. A grim red town full of chimneys and factories making pottery. He hated it. He'd got himself onto the 'Boys Farm Training Migration' scheme. They were to be sent out to the colonies and Dominions to work in agriculture. He was staying at the Williamson hostel in town with the other trainees. Seemed a funny place to learn farming skills – not as if there were any cows or fields in the centre of Liverpool. When he finished his training, Grace would be going with him to Canada – he'd find work on a farm. Hopefully save up enough for a farm of their own one day. She hadn't told her mother yet. Not with Dee the way she was.

Hetty dug her in the ribs.

–How's the beloved Len? Spent the weekend smooching?

–He prefers Leonard. And that's for me to know...

At that, Phyllis sitting on the other side of Hetty, broke into her French song. Any mention of a boyfriend and she was off. The other girls knew the chorus by now and joined in. Grace looked at Hetty.

–What do you keep singing?

Hetty sang it again at top pelt.

–*L'amour, l'amour, l'amour, l'amour.*

–Meaning?

–Love. It's a pain in the butt, according to Phyllis's fella. Never does what you want. From an opera called Caramel or something.

–*Carmen*, you dunce.

Phyllis raised her eyebrows at the other girls.

Phyllis had had a passionate, week-long affair with a French sailor. He was mad about opera and taught her that song. Or at least, one verse of it. It was from an opera about a girl who worked in a tobacco factory, Hetty said. Came to a sad end. Not that Phyllis spoke any French but the sailor had explained the plot to her.

–Love of my life, that man.

–'Til he went back to his missus and kids in France.

Everyone laughed.

–I'm going to go to France and I'm going to find him and bring him back. You'll be laughing the other side of your pinched little gobs then, won't yer?

Phyllis was thirty-four. Short, fat with rotten teeth and a squint in one eye. Her husband had been killed on the last day of the war. She'd never find another man.

Grace turned to Hetty.

–Leonard took me to New Brighton on Sunday. He says it's better than Blackpool.

–Blackpool is far classier.

Hetty was almost thirty and still living at home with her widowed mother. She had no interest in men as far as Grace could tell. Went everywhere with her best friend Madge. They'd gone to Blackpool for a week's holiday in the summer – Madge had a good job in the accounts office of Cripps department store.

–Bet it hasn't got beach huts. Leonard says when we've made our fortune in Canada we're going to come back to Liverpool and he's going to buy us a beach hut. I'll dress in furs and a posh hat and we'll have afternoon tea looking at the sea and all the poor people sitting on the beach.

Hetty stopped stripping the leaf she was working on and looked at Grace.

–Well. I don't intend being poor forever. Leonard bought us some hot peas and we walked along the sand. I wanted to go dancing but we've got to save all our money for Canada.

–Long way to go. How do you know you'll like it?

–Anywhere's got to be better than here.

–Some of us are quite happy where we are. At least you've got a job – what'll you do over there when he's working on his farm?

–Anything. Milk cows or something. We'll get married and I can keep house for him.

–And spend the rest of your life skivvying for a man? Not my idea of improving your lot. Independence, that's what you need, Grace. Live your own life. Do what you want to do. Women have got the vote now—

–Er, *some* women have...

–We don't need men if we've got jobs. We can look after ourselves.

But Grace liked the idea of looking after Leonard. Cooking for him, ironing his shirts. Sitting together by the fire in the evening while she darned his socks. She just wanted to make him happy. She'd never felt like this about anyone.

–Enough daydreaming, Gracie. Back to stripping. Faster you strip, the more you'll make.

Grace looked at her fingers. Bleeding, tobacco-stained – those stains would never come out of her skin. And the tobacco juice had seeped under her nails – even with a pin she couldn't scrape that dark brown line out.

At lunchtime, Grace stood up and stretched. Bending over to touch her toes like the others, trying to stretch out her spine. They could at least give them cushions.

–You've been quiet today, our Gracie. Anything wrong?

Grace shook her head. She'd been thinking about her father's funeral.

They'd had him laid out a couple days beforehand. The coffin was propped up on two kitchen chairs in the front parlour. The lid leaning up against the wall. Her mother and some of the old women from the street had done a nice job on him. His hair had been trimmed and he was wearing his Sunday suit. He had a neat way of wearing clothes – always looked dapper. Even in his coffin.

–You need cheering up. Here, catch!

Hetty threw a heavy leather football at her as they filed out into the yard, startling Grace.

–Doris has been poached by Preston so you'll have to go in goal now.

Grace had never played football before.

–It's dead easy. You see the ball coming towards you, you stop it going between the overalls.

–How?

–Boot it away, catch it, dive on it. Anything. But don't let it past you.

It would probably do her good. Something active to keep her mind off Dee and the whole coffin thing. Try as she might, she hadn't been able get that image of Dee out of her mind. The harder she tried, the clearer she saw it.

She leant against the wall, vaguely watching Hetty and another girl making up the goalposts from everyone's overalls while a few of the girls were having a kick around.

The night before the funeral, Grace had gone to check the candles were still lit. Her mother had taken herself off to bed, exhausted. As she reached the door, she saw Dee standing by the coffin, chatting away to their father. She stopped and waited. She should

have said something really, so Dee knew she was there. But she didn't. She just watched as Dee stroked his hair, his face. Fiddled with the buttons on his jacket, adjusted his collar. She looked at him for a long, long time then she leaned right into the coffin and kissed him. Not a quick peck or a brush of the lips against his cheek but full on the mouth. Grace couldn't move. She wanted to tear herself away. But she kept watching.

When Dee finally straightened up, Grace had backed out very quietly.

Hetty came bounding down the yard after the ball.

–Gracie!

Grace was still leaning against the wall, the image of Dee fixed in her mind.

–Bloody hell! You're useless! Stop daydreaming. Concentrate on the ball.

–It's hard to take you seriously with your skirts tucked into your bloomers!

–Management say they'll get us a proper football kit when we start winning a few matches.

Hetty gave the ball a hefty boot to the other end of the yard. Everyone ran after it.

–What, like men? Short trousers?

–Showing our legs, Gracie – imagine!

Hetty ran up to join the throng. Someone booted the ball over the wall. There was a collective groan. The racket and clatter stopped while someone went to find it. Grace sat down between two piles of stained overalls, picking at the nicotine underneath her nails. Dee had always been the favourite. Especially with their father. The spoilt youngest. Even now their mother was fussing over her. Like she was the only one who'd lost her father. The only one who'd lost a sweetheart during the war. Everyone was suffering. Everyone had lost someone during the war, you didn't carry your grief around like a trophy. You grieved in private.

Grace jumped when the ball shot over her head.

–You're sacked as goal-keeper!

–Sorry, Hetty. Can we have our dinner now, I'm starving.

–Alright. I've got an apple today, I'll save you my core. I shouldn't, after that pathetic performance.

–Not a Cox Pippin by any chance? I haven't got one of those yet.

–It's just green. Haven't a clue what my ma buys. Cheapest, usually. How many have you got now?

When Grace arrived home from work, her mother came out to meet her in the hall.

–Edith's here.

She raised her eyebrows, shaking her head.

Grace hung up her coat and threw her hat on top of the coat rack. Edith was sitting in front of the range in the kitchen. Grace and Edith had been friends since they were thirteen. They'd met working in service at a big house on the edge of Sefton Park.

Dee was at the table. Humming that miserable tune, *Oh, Danny Boy*. Those bloody pipes had been calling non-stop lately. She had a sour puss on her, poking the mince around her plate as though she might find something nasty in it. She was becoming quite gaunt. Her cheekbones had always been prominent but now they looked as if they might split through the skin. Why their mother didn't insist she eat something was beyond Grace. She just gave into her all the time, always had done. And Dee was looking quite unkempt lately – what had got into her? She was always so fastidious, usually spent hours preening herself, spending every penny she had on clothes and shoes. Had she gone to work with her hair uncombed like that? Her blouse needed ironing. And her nails were broken and dirty. She'd be getting the sack from the Kardomah, they were very particular about their how their waitresses were turned out.

–Edith. Nice surprise.

–I'll put your tea back in the oven then, Grace.

–Thanks, Mum. Oh, did you save the apple cores?

Her mother pointed to a small glass bowl on the sideboard.

–I'd love to know what you're doing with them.

–I won't keep her, Mrs Morgan. Grace, I'm really sorry. You know I wouldn't ask but I'm in big trouble.

The money lender again. Edith was often asking Grace for money to pay her back. It wasn't her fault of course, her mother was struggling to feed the seven of them since Edith's father had jumped ship in Australia.

Dee put her knife and fork down. Her mother dried her hands on her apron and stood watching them both.

–You know I would, Edith, but—

–I'm desperate, Grace. The old bitch said she'd cripple me if I didn't pay up this week and I just can't get the money together. I'm at my wit's end. Please, Grace.

–I can't, Edith—

–I know you've been saving. I'll pay you back, I promise.

Dee and her mother looked at Grace. Dee raised her eyebrows.

–You never do, Edith. You can't. I'm sorry, but I need that money.

–Please, Grace. You're my best friend. She really will hurt me this time. I know you've got the money for your passage.

–Passage? Grace?

Grace's mother looked as if she'd been slapped.

–I'm sorry, Mum. I was going to tell you in my own time.

Grace glared at Edith.

–Look, it's just a borrow. I'll give it you back, I promise. Please, Grace.

–Passage to where?

Grace's mother grabbed her by the shoulder.

–Where Grace?

Grace shrugged her off.

–Canada. I'll never get it back off you, Edith. I need that money. I'm sorry—

–Canada?

Her mother scowled at Dee.

–Did you know about this, Dee?

Dee looked up at her mother with big sad eyes. Tears glistening.

–I can't believe you didn't tell me. The pair of you kept it secret from me.

Dee shoved her chair away from the table and ran out of the kitchen. Edith started crying.

–Who are you going with?

–Leonard. We're going to get a farm.

–The other side of the world?

–We're going to come back.

–You're not even married.

–We'll do that over there. Edith, stop wailing for God's sake!

–I can't believe you're going to let your best friend get beaten up while you have the money to give her. And what about me? And Dee? You're just going to abandon us?

–Bloody hell! You're not children, Mother. You can look after each other.

–Just like your father. Running off. Not caring a damn what you leave behind – how we'll find the money to live.

Edith grabbed Grace's hands.

–Please, Grace. For the love of God, please help me.

Leonard was due to finish his training in just over a month. She'd made quite good wages the last few weeks – stripping was piecework and she'd been doing overtime every night. She had the price of her ticket now and just enough to buy a going away outfit. If she gave the money to Edith, Leonard would leave without her. The institute booked their boat tickets as soon as they finished their training. She'd never see him again. And Edith was always going to keep borrowing from money-lenders – she'd lost count of how much money she'd given her over the years. That family needed to get themselves sorted, she couldn't keep bailing them out every time they hit a rough patch.

She pulled her hands free and walked over to the hall door.

–I know you think I'm heartless but you only get one chance in life. This is mine. I'm sorry Edith, I'm going to Canada.

She ran into the hall, grabbed her coat.

Her mother shouted from the kitchen.

–That's right. Go on. Abandon us!

Grace slammed the front door behind her.

The following Saturday, Grace followed Dee to the tram stop. It was hard to keep up, Dee always walked in brisk long strides as though she was constantly late.

–Mum said you were going into town. Thought I'd join you.

Dee was carrying a bunch of white lilies.

–Flowers?

Dee stopped. Grace caught up and pointed to the lilies.

–Visiting someone?

Dee started tapping her foot. Her hair still looked messy, the bun not pinned properly in place. Her boots were scuffed and muddy. She was wearing the old dress she usually wore around the house. The hem coming down at the back. The old Dee wouldn’t be seen dead in something so scruffy – even round the local shops. Who on earth was she going to visit dressed like that?

–Didn't think you knew anyone who lived in town.

Dee tapped her foot a little faster.

–Dee, I'm speaking to you. Don't just ignore me.

She was in her one of her moods, obviously. Grace and her mother were constantly wondering what they'd done to upset Dee these days. She'd be fine one minute, then ignore them the next. Well, she'd just keep talking at her until she gave in and answered. She usually came round eventually.

The tram swayed up to the stop and Grace followed Dee onto the top deck. She kept up a full, one-sided, conversation all the way into town. They got off at the Pier Head.

Dee walked a few steps then stopped and turned to Grace.

–Bye then.

–Oh, I've not much to do really, bit of window shopping.

She was going to go to Bunneys to have a look at their dresses and coats. She didn't want to arrive in Canada in her old clothes. And Leonard would be getting a new suit from the Institute.

–Thought I'd just have a wander. Where're you off? I'll come with you if you like.

She was intrigued by the flowers. The Royal was at the top end of town so she wasn't going to the hospital.

Dee thought for a second or two.

–I'm meeting someone. A friend.

As far as Grace knew, Dee hadn't seen any of her school friends in years. And she never met up with anyone from work. Perhaps she had a new man. Although women didn't buy flowers for men, it was the other way round. And you wouldn't buy flowers for a friend.

–I'll walk with you then.

Dee folded her arms and stood where she was. Pouting. Grace looked at her for a few minutes then eventually said,

–I don't think I like that building much, do you? Too modern. I like the big vultures on the top but the rest of it's a bit boring really, don't you think?

–Liver birds not vultures.

–Oh, is that what they are?

Dee started the foot tapping again. Grace waited a moment.

–Dee, love. You might as well tell me where you're going. I'm not moving.

They stared at each other for a good minute.

Then Dee stomped off towards the river. Grace followed, almost running to keep up. She was glad when Dee stopped at the railings.

There was a sharp wind blowing. Worrying the surface of the water. Sending occasional sprays up over the railings. A group of barefoot children further along the quay were squealing every time they were showered with salty water. Running away then running back for more. They were stunted. Such bony faces on them, hard lives moulded into hard features. Little old men and women in children's bodies.

The water was black. It gave off an earthy-smelling cold blast.

Dee leant over the railings, watching the murky water simmering below. Turning her face whenever the wind whipped up a spray of water. Grace hovered close by.

Then Dee stood up onto the first bar of the railings, leaning right over.

Grace grabbed hold of Dee's skirts.

–Come down! You'll fall in.

Grace pulled on Dee's skirts until she climbed down off the railings.

–Stop fussing. I'm alright.

Dee leaned up against the railings, dangling the flowers over the river. Then one by one, she threw them in. They bobbed off in single file, heading out towards the mouth of the river – the tide was going out. Grace imagined them washing up on the shore on the Isle of Man. Someone, a young girl perhaps, picking them up, wondering where they'd come from. Bringing them home for her mother. The thought was quite comforting.

She put her arm round Dee.

–Are they for Arthur?

–Of course not. He's not dead! She shrugged Grace off.

The war had been over a full year. She hadn't had a letter in nearly two. How could she still think he might come back?

–No, of course not. Sorry, love.

Grace went round to the hostel after the flower incident, to see if Leonard was about. It had disturbed her. If the lilies weren't for Arthur, who were they for? She wanted to talk to Leonard about it.

He was a bit offhand when she arrived. Pulled on his coat without inviting her in. Suggested they get some tea at the bus station café – an odd choice.

They sat in silence until the waitress arrived. Carrying a tray with a teapot, milk jug, and two mugs.

–Sugar's there.

She pointed to a cracked white bowl on the table with a few sugar lumps in it.

Grace was staring round the room. She couldn't focus – everything was blurred by a blue smoky haze. It irritated the back of her throat. She coughed trying to ease it. There were a few old men slumped alone at tables, fags hanging from their lips, hands round empty mugs. Ashtrays in front of them heaped with ground butt ends. A couple of old women with headscarves and bags of shopping were chatting loudly. Scrawny children screeched at various tables while their mothers yelled their conversations over the noise, occasionally shouting at them to be quiet.

It suddenly struck her. The flowers. They were for their father. But why would Dee throw flowers into the Mersey? It's not like they'd scattered his ashes there. They were still at home on the whatnot stand. Waiting for their mother's to join them. She was getting odder, that girl. Between her miserable gob and Edith scrounging money all the time and their mother's bad temper lately, she'd had enough. Since their father died the house had been thoroughly dismal. She had a crap job. And Liverpool was a dump. Permanent black fog hanging over it.

–The sooner we're out of here, Leonard, the better. Let's get my ticket booked. Today. Let's just go and buy it now. I've got the money with me.

Leonard reached out for Grace's hands. He squeezed them. Grace forced a smile. He had a lovely face. Soft and rounded. Thick black eye lashes, chocolatey-coloured eyes.

–I've been thinking, Grace. It's going to be tough when I first get there—

–We. When *we* get there, Leonard.

He gave her hands another squeeze.

–I'm going to have to look for work – we have to find our own positions. And I might get sent out to Newfoundland or Nova Scotia – somewhere really wild. Not a good place for a woman, you know?

Grace pulled her hands away.

–What are you saying?

–I just think it might be best if I go on ahead, find a job. Get settled somewhere, find somewhere to live, you know? Then I could send for you. I'd have money. A place for you to stay—

–I don't mind if it's tough at the beginning. I'm a tough girl. I can help you. I can look for somewhere to live—

–That's just it. I'd be living on a farm. Probably in a bunkhouse at first with a load of other blokes—

–I'd find a house for us close by.

–It's not that easy, Grace. Canada's not like England, you know? It's huge, the farms are enormous. No towns or villages for hundreds of miles.

–I could work for the farmer's wife – I've been in service. And I can cook.

Leonard turned away from her, dragging his hands down his face, leaving them over his mouth and chin, eyes closed.

–Grace, he mumbled through his fingers.

–It's not going to work.

He dropped his hands into his lap. Opened his eyes but wouldn't look at her.

–Look, I don't want you coming out with me yet. I'll be with all the lads, we'll be travelling together. They don't want a girl tagging along...

Grace stared at him.

–Tagging along? Is that what I'd be doing?

He looked down at the table. Grace stared at it too. It was scratched and stained. The crockery was chipped. The windows that ran around the room above head height were so grimy they only let a dirty yellow light through. It was a scruffy little café. Why had he brought her here?

–I thought we loved each other—

–We do. I do love you, Grace.

–I thought we were starting a new life together, I didn't know I was just tagging along. An embarrassment.

–I didn't mean—

–Send for me? How long do you think I'm going to wait? I'm twenty-one. I can't wait for ever.

She'd read an article recently about the two million women who would never marry because so many young men were killed in the war. He'd never send for her. He'd meet some Canadian floozy, marry her while she was sitting at home like an idiot, waiting. Single. Like Hetty, still living with her mother at thirty.

She stood up. Looked hard at Leonard then shook her head.

Grace's mother came hurrying downstairs as Grace opened the front door.

–Don't take your coat off. Edith's in hospital.

Grace's insides loosened.

–The money lender?

–Edith's little sister came round half an hour ago. You'll just make visiting hour if you run.

Grace's stomach twisted. She should have given her the money. *Bastard* Leonard.

She hurried back out onto the street for the tram.

Edith's hand was in plaster. She was almost the same colour as the sheets. One side of her face was swollen, she had a black eye and a split lip. And it looked like her nose was broken. Grace stood at the foot of Edith's bed and wept.

–I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.

–Visiting hour is almost finished, miss.

A nurse walked behind her with a jug of fresh water, replacing the one on the bedside cabinet.

–It's alright, Grace.

Edith's voice was slow and hoarse, Grace could barely hear her.

Grace rubbed her eyes dry, then stroked Edith's arm.

–What did she do?

–Said if I stuck my hand in the doorframe she'd give me another week to pay up. Slammed the door on it. Smashed all my fingers.

–Oh, Edith!

–Then her sons gave me the usual beating—

Another nurse touched Grace's arm.

–She also has a ruptured spleen and needs her rest. I'm sorry but visiting hour is finished. You'll have to go.

Grace slipped an envelope under Edith's pillow, kissed her on the cheek.

A few days later, Grace and her mother were sitting at the kitchen table. The air was heavy with Dee, as always. The weight of her brooding was becoming unbearable. How much longer was this going to go on?

–Is she asleep, do you think?

–She was earlier, when I looked in. She's always sleeping these days.

–More tea?

–If there's a drop.

Grace poured the last of the tea into her mother's cup.

–Here, have the last scone, it'll only go stale.

Her mother smiled.

–We'll share it.

She pulled it towards her and Grace watched as she cut it in half and carefully scraped a little butter over each piece.

–There you go.

Grace took a bite, trying out a few opening sentences in her head.

–She's not well.

–Dee? Oh, she'll get over it.

–No, I mean, it's more than that. This isn't normal grief—

–You're an expert on grief now?

–Mum, I'm trying to talk to you. Why do you always get so defensive whenever I talk about Dee?

–Because it's not very nice talking about your sister the way you do.

–I'm concerned for her. She's ill.

Her mother got up and started clearing away the tea things. She hadn't touched her scone.

–It won't go away just because you don't talk about it. Mum.

She was clattering dishes into the sink, filling the kettle for hot water.

–Mother! For goodness sake, sit down.

But she wouldn’t. She started banging the pans around, rearranging them in the cupboard.

–You're going to wake her up at this rate. Stop!

Grace grabbed her mother's arm and led her back to the table.

–Sit.

She sat reluctantly, arms crossed.

–I think she needs help—

–Oh, here we go. You want to have her sectioned. Lock her up. Your own sister.

–No! Well, maybe it would help her. Just for a bit—

–It's never ‘just for a bit'. Once they get them they keep them there for life. Don’t you remember Mrs Edwards down the road? Nerves, they said. Carted her off to St Helens. Do her good, they said. She was in there nearly ten years, poor old soul. Died there.

–This would only be for a few weeks. Let the doctors sort her out.

–That’s what they said about Mrs Edwards. You send Dee off to the nuthouse she’ll come back in a box. Is that what you want? Sign your own sister’s death warrant?

–No! What a horrible thing to say.

This was all going wrong. Grace had wanted to talk to her mother quietly, explain that Dee needed help. Not from them but from doctors, people who knew what they were doing.

Her mother had picked up her sewing and was bent over her needle, holding the material inches from her face. She was stitching up the hem on Dee's old house dress.

Grace knelt down on the rug at her mother’s feet. She took a deep breath.

–I just think—

–Well, you can keep your nasty thoughts to yourself, thank you very much.

–Mum! This is for Dee's benefit. You have no idea—

–I have no idea about my own daughter? And you do? You barely notice her. Too wrapped up in yourself. I've really seen another side to you lately.

–What?

–Letting that woman smash Edith's hand. Planning to run off to Canada without so much as a by your leave. And now you're having a go at poor Dee. Sectioning? Well it's a shame you haven't got the money for that ticket now because quite frankly, Grace, I wish you *were* going to bloody Canada. Dee and I can manage just fine without you.

–Mother! Dee is unhinged. I mean worryingly so.

–Enough!

–She's bloody touched!

Her mother dropped her needle and slapped Grace hard across the face.

Grace put her hand to her cheek. Her mother went back to her sewing.

Grace waited a few moments. Calming herself. Then she looked at her mother.

–Mother you need to face facts.

–What facts?

She wanted to hurt her, hammer it home just how ill Dee was. Make her understand. She wasn't just being a misery, there was something wrong. Sleeping all the time. Starving herself. Walking round like a tramp. And that business about the flowers. And kissing their father in the coffin! But as her mother looked at her she could see something in her was crumbling. Her eyes weren't angry now, they were vulnerable. She was barely holding herself together.

–So? Tell me.

–Doesn't matter.

–Grace?

Grace went upstairs to the bedroom. Dee was lying, half-twisted on the bed, stuffing something back under the pillow. Grace knew what it was – Arthur's photograph. Dee turned to stare at her. Big sad, strange-coloured eyes – never the same colour twice. The huge spidery lashes that everyone adored, fluttering. Tears dripping down the side of her face.

The bloody waterworks again. Well, she could cry all she liked. Grace was sick of it. All of it. Dee's miserable long gob. Moping round the place. The silences. This dump of a city. Money lenders. Poverty. Men. They could all go to hell.

She'd stay at Hetty's tonight. See about things in the morning. She grabbed her nightdress from under the pillow. Pulled some underwear and a clean blouse from the drawer. Then looked at her hands. Stained, ripped, rough as a charwoman's. She'd moved out of stripping to the cigarette section but it was probably too late to save her hands. She

was overseeing one of the rolling machines. She'd spent the last week watching the cigarettes trundling along the conveyor belt. Eight hundred a minute. Thousands upon thousands of them being spat out of the machine onto the belt. No end to them. Bobbing ignorantly along, kept in line by the metal guides either side of them before being snatched up and shoved into little boxes.

She was going to move to London. It had to be better than this.

She grabbed her comb off the washstand but it slipped from her fingers. As she bent to pick it up, she saw her tin of apple pips under the bed. She opened the lid. Dozens of small envelopes filled with apple seeds, all neatly labelled. She'd spent ages over the last twelve months carefully washing and drying them. Well, she wouldn't be needing them now. She tipped the whole lot in the bin.

–Oh, Grace! Your orchard.

Dee's high-pitched, pathetic voice with its soft 'r's.

Dee was watching her, her right eye drooping. She'd have been really attractive but for that.

–I'm so sorry, Grace.

Grace looked at her. She was shrunken. Enveloped in a nightdress that was now too big for her.

–I'll be back in a few days.

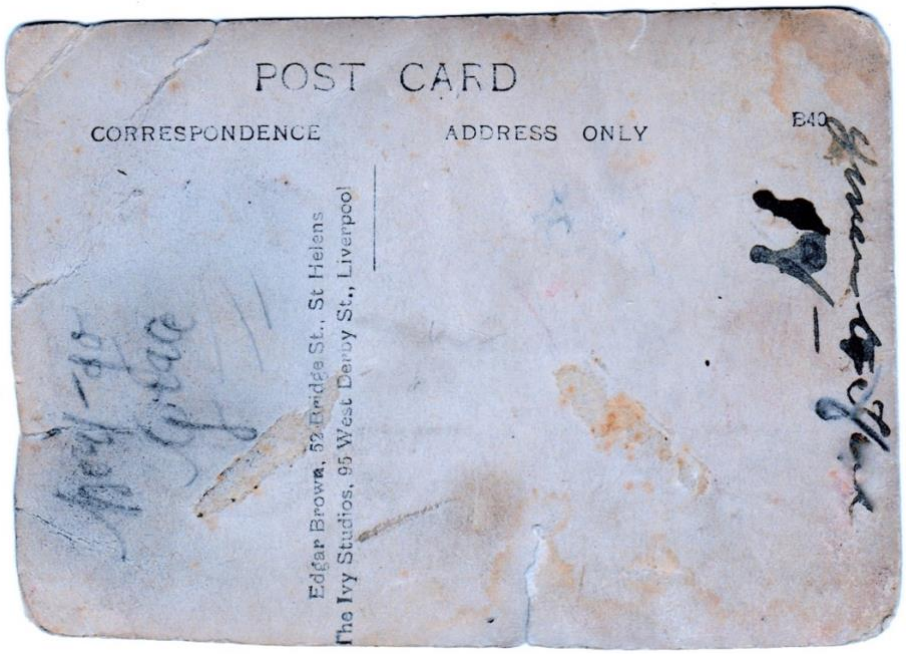
Grace hesitated. Patted her little sister's arm then went downstairs.

Her mother was standing at the kitchen door.

–Grace. Love.

Her arms were hanging by her side, shoulders hunched. She looked small and old – Grace was surprised how old she looked. Weak. And so terribly sad. Beaten, was the word. Grace wanted to drop her bag. Go to her mother and hug her. Feel her mother's arms around her. Cry, finally. Grieve with her. For her father. For her new life in Canada. For Dee. The two of them sitting in front of the fire, comforting each other.

But she pulled her coat from the hall rack. Closing the door softly behind her as she stepped out onto the pavement.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THE SPIRITUALIST 1922

Mrs Molyneux was sitting next to her son, Frederick. They were in a near derelict theatre on Bold Street. She didn't want to be there, it was distressing. All those poor souls. The air was thick with them. The dead – haunted by the living. So many of them. A cacophony of despair. Young men mainly, dragged back night after night by mothers, lovers, wives. Suspended between this life and the next like a held breath. A despair of ethereal skin and bone. Exploded skulls, limbs hanging, missing, mangled. And others, woven in with the khaki and navy – old men and women. Shades. Silent and lost. Babies crying noiselessly. Drowsy children roused from nightmares.

She looked around at the congregation. The living hopeful, bowed over their hymnbooks. Pathetic creatures – potential business, her son, Frederick, called them. Wailing *Jerusalem*. Trying to raise the dead. Each desperate for their own Lazarus. A familiar tune. A reminder of school halls, childhood. She was a sly one – *Madame Vronski!* Well, it sounded more exotic than Mrs Slater. Toxteth Buck. Regular Maggie Mae before the war, plying her trade up and down Lime Street. Wouldn't get a ha'penny these days.

The rafters were creaking as though the souls weighed heavy. The wind keening through the missing tiles, shutters railing against the windows. There was a stench of damp, rotting wood. Wet woollen coats, the reek of camphor. The air was charged with hope. Just waiting for the touch paper. She could hardly bear it.

Madame Vronski appeared on stage. Long black gown and cloak that might once have been curtains. Hair wrapped in a gaudy satin turban. Kohled eyes. Red lipstick. Perhaps the audience needed something exotic, out of the ordinary. A seer. A messenger from the other world.

Madame stood, eyes closed, breathing deeply. Mrs Molyneux knew what was coming next – the swaying, the low humming. Her servile assistant announcing that Madame Vronski was in a trance now, communing with the dead. The audience was silent, watching, waiting. Madame Vronski opened her eyes. Stared like a mad woman into the distance before looking at the audience, startled, as though woken from a deep sleep. *Charlatan*.

Madame peered around the room. Overplaying the dramatic pause. People leaned forward in their seats, willing her to pick them.

Suddenly,

–You sir. Yes you, gentleman with the green scarf.

She pointed her fat bejewelled finger at a man sitting towards the front of the hall.

–I have a young man here... Could be your son.

Safe bet! Nearly a million young men lost in the war. The *Great* War – what was so great about it? Over, four years ago, yet still they searched. Waiting for words. Craving dialogue with the dead. Clutching photographs. Albumen-bound sons, husbands, fathers, lovers. Muted shades of sepia. But who could blame them? How could they mourn with no bodies to bury? Where was the proof – the grave, the urn? Where was the place of remembrance? Humans have always needed a farewell ritual. Needed a way of taming death, ordering it. Taking control from the uncontrollable – it was the living who boxed up the body, who honoured it. They who decided where to place it. The living were the last ones to touch the body, not death. Or so it always had been.

–Has your son passed over, love?

The old man shook his head. The woman was a fake. Groping for scraps. A thread she could pick up, embroider with nonsense. Weave into *communing*. What a farce.

–No, no… he's a young man but he says no, he's not your son. A friend. He's a young friend of yours. He tells me that he's been in spirit about twenty, twenty-five years… This bloke—*gentleman*, you knew him in your early twenties…

She was struggling.

–Tall fella, very straight, stands really straight… You remember? If I take you back about twenty or so years, there was a gentleman you were friendly with… You lost touch… Your lives went in different ways, different directions, sort of thing.

The old man shook his head again. The audience began to shift, seats creaking. Whispering had started. She was going to lose them – with any luck.

–Would you understand if I said he went East? He's saying East. India maybe? A soldier? You were close then he moved away…

–No.

–Take your time. No rush.

–No recollection of anyone like that.

Of course he didn't. There was no such man there. Just the fading shimmer of his wife hovering behind him.

–I can see maps. A light. A green lamp on a desk. A suit… Does a smart suit and a bowler hat mean anything to you?

–No.

His wife was young. Wrapped in a bed jacket, wearing a nightdress. Blood-stained. Tuberculosis. She'd passed in her sleep.

–This man wants to say something to you. It was a long time ago. Twenty years or more… A Royal Crown. The Foreign Office perhaps?

–No.

There was more fidgeting in the crowd. The whispering was getting louder. The man's wife stroked his hair, very gently. Fingers soft with love. Then, like smoke dispersing, she drifted off. The man reached up and smoothed his hair.

–Well, I'll leave that thought with you. Don't worry, you can't remember everyone who's passed through your life. I'll come back to you later, lovely. This man is very keen to talk. Very keen. But I'm getting someone else now… I'm linking now with a lady. An older lady. A mother, maybe. I'm getting this sense of a motherly type… I think it's you, love. Yeah, she's directing me to you. Large lady with the red hat. Yes, darling, you. I'm linking with your mother. Your mother in the spirit world darling?

–No.

–Then it's your grandmother. Yes, she says she's your grandmother and here was a lady, a lady I feel kind of enjoyed her life. Good laugh, great sense of humour—

–She was a miserable old bitch.

The theatre erupted into laughter. This was a disgrace. A complete mockery. Where was the dignity for those who'd passed? Mrs Molyneux crossed her arms, pushed herself back into her seat. She was so angry – with Madame Vronski, with the disrespectful crowd but mostly with her son for bringing her there.

–Ma?

Frederick dug her in the ribs.

–Shut up.

He sulked back into his chair.

–Well, I think she had a great sense of humour but people – well, they don't always realise, do they? They misunderstood her, she says. She liked a laugh but couldn't show it and

she says that she felt, I think she didn't really feel as happy as she would have liked to be. Her life wasn't… you know?

The large lady in the red hat remained stony-faced.

–You may or may not have been aware of that because that's very much an inner thing isn't it? Yes, I think it's as if she felt, as if she didn't, you know – how she felt in here.

Madame Vronski clutched her chest.

–You understand? Maybe she had disappointments—

–Yeah, fourteen of the buggers!

More laughter. This was humiliating for the spirits. A complete farce. Mrs Molyneux rose from her seat but Frederick pulled her back down.

–You'll stay 'til the end.

Madame Vronski persisted. Oblivious or desperate. Mrs Molyneux suspected the latter.

–Yes, some disappointments along the way and what have you. We all have different lives don't we? But nevertheless… Did she have arthritis or something 'cause I'm picking up something here, with her hands. She's just sort of, you know how it is love, she must get into your head sometimes. You're doing ordinary things – peeling the spuds, blacking the grate and she just pops into your head without you thinking of her. D'you understand what I mean?

The large lady nodded. Safe ground. Vague enough.

–You're not thinking about her but suddenly she's there and – well, you're a sensitive lady, a psychic lady yourself and—

The large lady shook her head, lip curling.

–Alright love, you may not think of yourself like that but she pops in you see and I'm getting, I'm seeing someone else now. Young man. Impatient to talk. A young man in a dark uniform. Shy, timid sort of chap.

A *uniform!* Easy prey, you old trickster. Who wasn't anxious for news, a word? To know their loved ones didn't suffer.

–He's very shy. Not too tall. Good looking fella.

Look at her, peering round the room. Waiting for a flicker of recognition. Fraud!

–You, young lady. Auburn hair, striking eyes. Lovely hat, sweetheart. Yes, you, he's asking for you. His name's John… or Frank... Bill perhaps?

The girl was sitting a few seats along from them. Mrs Molyneux watched her. She didn't move, didn't react. Barely twenty she'd have guessed. Striking chestnut hair hanging in rich loose curls around her shoulders. The girl glanced back at her. The sorrow in those eyes.

–Sorry darling, he's so quietly spoken I can't quite hear the name. I think it begins with A or—

The girl's eyes flickered.

–Yes, definitely begins with an A. I'm hearing Albert, Alfred, Arth— Yes, he's saying it's Arthur… *Arthur!*

Well mined you old slattern.

The girl folded her arms, slumped lower in her chair.

–He's in a uniform. He went overseas. I can see… explosions and guns… and… mud.

Madame Vronski glanced at the girl's face.

–No, not mud, water. Lots of water. A ship, a big dark ship. He's saying, don't worry, he was – it was all very quick. He didn't realise he'd passed for a while, one of his friends from the ship had to tell him.

Look at her, the old crone, smiling away to herself. Landed the catch. As if she can see him. Go back, Arthur, leave the girl in peace.

–He's laughing at that. He had a great sense of humour. He says…

Madame started laughing to herself. She was on a roll.

–Sorry, lovely, he's just telling me he did something daft. He wrote you a funny rhyme, poem-thing – I won't tell you in case you're embarrassed – but you never got it, he says he never had time to post it. He says he's sorry for the little tiff you had before he left, he didn't mean to upset you, it was in the heat of the moment, so to speak, the anxiety and he says, sweetheart, he says he loves you very much, *very* much and he says he's looking forward to the two of you being together again. He says that, he's telling me to let you know he's always, always, you know, with you, at your side. You might feel a slight brush of the arm now and again – do you ever feel that, lovely? Well, that's just him, letting you know he's there with you, watching over you. Lovely boy. Lovely…

Frederick peered round at his mother.

–You can see him, can't you, Ma?

The back doors were thrown open. Mrs Molyneux and her son filed out with the grim-faced congregation. The odd begrudged coin was dropped into a pot thrust at them by Madame Vronski's sour-faced assistant. It was time the old slattern gave up. She was a con artist. People like her gave them all a bad name. They descended down the four flights of worm-eaten stairs. Rumbling, thudding, wood-cracking, heels clicking. A tumble of disappointment and bitterness. She watched them spilling out into the rain to be washed down the street.

At the foot of the stairs she spotted the neat young woman with the proud auburn hair and fierce determination. Shoulders thrown back, chin raised. Arthur's sweetheart. She was re-pinning her hat, pulling on her gloves. Such delicate, slim fingers. She was glowering. Hardly surprising after that fiasco. She tugged up the collar of her Astrakhan coat, which looked a little shabby in the brighter light of the foyer. Buttoned up against the chill, she headed out into the dark. And a night of unsettled dreams. Tossing and turning, rolling in the sea of her bed. Clutching at images like a drowning man. Like Arthur.

Before she had the chance to stop him, Frederick had touched the girl's shoulder. Wretched boy. Why wouldn't he stop meddling? The girl recoiled from him. Lord forgive her, even though he was flesh of her flesh, she could understand why. His skin was bloodless. His clothes threadbare, frayed cuffs, jacket worn smooth and shiny. And his fat, spittle-sheened lips were almost obscene. He was the image of his father.

He guided the girl to one side out of the streaming crowds. Offered his hand

–Frederick Molyneux, Miss. May I also present my mother?

His speech snipped with exaggerated consonants. Purely for effect – she'd heard him practising when he thought she was asleep. He formed the sounds through the rubbery movement of his lips – his teeth locked together as though loathe for the words to escape. There was something unwholesome about him. If he hadn't been her son, she wouldn't have liked him.

–Mrs Molyneux. Medium, seer, guider of spirits.

The girl stared at her. Rather rudely. Mrs Molyneux was aware of how she looked – a tiny cloak-enveloped creature. A malnourished bird-like claw extending from under the dark wool. The incongruous flash of her large solitaire. The girl would think her and Frederick a strange couple.

–How do you do.

Over the girl's shoulder, Arthur stood hovering. Surprised to find himself on the dark street. Mrs Molyneux looked away.

–And may I be so bold as to enquire your name, Miss?

The girl hesitated. Then, still staring at Mrs Molyneux, answered reluctantly,

–Dee.

–Ma is a very sensitive woman, Dee.

Frederick grasped Dee's arm, leaning towards her, his face inches from hers. She turned away.

–She could see Arthur but he wasn't talking to that phoney. Ma made contact with him while that fraud was prattling away. He says he wants to talk to you. Things he needs to say.

–No. I don't think so.

Dee shrugged him off.

Mrs Molyneux was surprised by how soft the girl's voice was. Timid, rather high-pitched for someone who appeared so self-assured. Dee pushed her hands into her pockets, glancing up the street. She wanted to get away from Frederick. Who could blame her? Bluecoat Chambers shrank back beyond its unlit cobbled courtyard. Reverend Styth's poor boys, clad in charity blue, shrouding its blind-eyed windows – what kept them there? The shuttered faces of the shops turned away. There were long stretches of blackness between the few small puddles of grey gaslight. Dee pulled away from Frederick's grasp, hurrying towards the light at the far end of School Lane. The watchful Arthur drifting after her like a balloon on a string.

Mrs Molyneux stepped in front of her son.

–Leave her in peace, Frederick.

But he pushed her aside and ran after Dee, grabbing at her coat sleeve.

–Please Miss. *Dee*. This is for Arthur's sake not Ma's.

Dee snatched her arm away, brushing the fabric where he'd touched it.

–I have to catch my tram.

–My mother has no control over who uses her – she is simply the messenger. Stop, please, miss.

Dee lowered her head, butting through the dark. Focused on Paradise Street and the trams rattling to safety. Her stockings a splatter of dirty puddle water. The hem of her coat

sodden. She looked like a wraith herself, barely visible in the shadows. Frederick ran ahead, stopping in front of her but she pushed past.

–She'd be more than happy to walk away. It's tiring talking with the dead you know, they take a lot of energy from her. She has to sleep for days after a séance – energy's all been used up, see?

Dee stopped. Facing him, eyes narrowed, mouth tight. Ready to spring. The forlorn spirit of Arthur trailing behind, disturbed.

–I said, leave me alone.

They stood, eyes locked. A battle of wills. Then Dee turned and marched away.

But Frederick surged forward, grabbing her arm again. The phantom young man began to fade.

–We're not doing this for money, miss. My mother is simply at the service of the dead.

Frederick clutched her arm, pulling her again to the side of the pavement.

–Stop, miss, my mother has something to tell you. Hurry up, Ma. Sorry, miss, she's slowing up these days.

Damn you, Frederick Molyneux. She walked unwillingly towards her son and Dee.

–Tell her what he said.

–I can't be sure. He was very faint. The channels aren't always that clear—

The young man had faded completely. Frederick thrust his mother at Dee.

–Tell her!

Mrs. Molyneux stared into Dee's eyes. They were a wall of defiance.

–Arthur said he wants to talk to you. Ma, just tell her what he said for crying out loud!

This was wrong. It wasn't fair on the girl. She stepped away from her son. Lowering her gaze.

–It's about his photograph, dear, but…

Dee shrank back, eyes rapidly blinking.

Frederick pushed a card into her hand, closing her fingers over it.

–We're there every evening after seven. Come on, Ma. Home.

Arthur was a persistent young chap, Mrs Molyneux would give him that. Far from being the quiet sort she'd expected from his first appearance, he hadn't let up since Madame Vronski's

farce the week before. A constant presence about her, nagging, imploring. Draining her energy.

She decided to have a walk around town. See if wandering through the shops could shake him off. Consign him to the edges of her consciousness for a while. She'd managed quite well in Coopers. There were so many unusual things to look at – exotic food, strange kitchen utensils, beautiful flowers. She'd quite blocked him out. Then she made the mistake of crossing over to Bunneys department store. Arthur became quite distressed. Incomprehensible. And he spoke so loudly she worried other shoppers might be able to hear him. Of course she knew that was nonsense but there remained that niggling doubt.

She navigated her way along the crowded pavement towards the river. Swimming between the bobbing shoppers along Lord Street, under Queen Victoria's stern gaze, down to the Dock Road. It was usually breezy on the quayside and quite noisy, she might be able to escape him for a while. Perhaps she'd take a ferry over to Seacombe – it was nice to look back at Liverpool from over the water. There was a small café on the seafront run by two genteel sisters who did a large pot of tea with buttered toast for a penny ha'penny – jam was extra. On second thoughts, that wouldn't be a good idea – Seacombe was a quiet resort. There wouldn't be many visitors mid-week. And Frederick would only give her a penny lecture on wasting money. No, she'd stay this side of the river. Mingle with the ferry crowd on the landing stage.

The water was choppy, disturbed. There was the constant ferry traffic of course but there was also a low wind on the surface, harassing it. Whipping it into a frenzy. The water looked dark and impenetrable. Fathomless rather than shallow and muddy as it was at that point. The river had many moods. Today it was menacing. Mrs Molyneux felt unsettled. Threatened. The incessant chatter started up again. Arthur! Of course. It wasn't the water, it was him. He was a soul with unfinished business. Mrs Molyneux sometimes resented the powers she'd been given. Arthur was insistent on talking to Dee but that would be harmful to the girl in her fragile mental state. Mrs Molyneux had as much responsibility towards the living as the dead. More so, really. Arthur knew she was unwilling to act as intermediary. That made him angry.

She turned away from the river. If only he'd leave her and the poor girl in peace. She hoped Dee had thrown Frederick's calling card in the bin.

Mrs Molyneux lived with her son in two dismal rooms on the second floor of a large Victorian mansion – Endor House. It sulked on the edge of Sefton Park. Cold-shouldered by its affluent neighbours, it squatted in permanent shade. Beady windows shuttered against the once-ornamental garden. Scraps of newspaper flapped round the spiny brambles that rasped at the ground floor windows like thorny Cathys clawing at the glass. Once a *pied-à-terre* to Lord and Lady Strickland-Nash it was now rat-holed with bedsits and squalid flats.

Frederick was giving Dee a short history of the place. Syward, he was telling her, only son and heir to the Strickland-Nashes, was now compost in some foreign field. Picked off by the Hun in the first month of the war. Lady Strickland-Nash passed away without opening the telegram. Lord Strickland-Nash retired to a nursing home on the South Downs.

–And never spoke a word since. Welcome, Miss, to our humble abode.

Humble was the word for it. They shared the one outside lavatory with the rest of the house's impoverished occupants. A stench of boiled cabbage and sulphur settled damply over the wet clothes dripping above the sink. A piece of salted cod lay soaking in a tin bowl on the draining board. After this length of time they hadn't expected her. She'd just turned up, looking sullen. Frederick, mercifully, drew the curtain across, screening off the large cupboard that served as the kitchen.

–May I take your coat?

Dee hugged it more tightly across her chest.

–Well. I suppose it is a little cold in here. Spirits don't like it too warm. Not what they're used to probably.

He tried to smile. Something he'd always found difficult to do convincingly – even as a child. He pulled out a chair from under a small square table in front of the kitchen and urged Dee to sit. She perched, back straight, ankles together, clutching her handbag on her knee.

–Ma is readying herself to commune with the spirit world.

Mrs Molyneux was watching from behind the threadbare curtain separating the living room from the bedroom. Dee was jiggling one knee. Then picking at her fingernails. This was no good. No good at all. For Dee or Arthur. Mrs Molyneux looked around their tiny living room. At all the show, the jiggery-pokery Frederick had permanently set up. The table sagged under the weight of floor-length, black damask. Dusty tassels at each corner polished the thickly varnished floor in small shiny arcs. At the base of each leg were four clawed feet,

resting on carved wooden spheres, peeping out from under the tablecloth. Bought from a junkyard to impress the clients. There were two Mass candlesticks – both in need of a polish – supporting the stubs of thin white candles with blackened wicks. A chipped glass globe Frederick had purloined at some pawn shop or other, sat at the centre of the table. Small air bubbles trapped inside, pockets of the past preserved forever. A cup of water was placed to one side. Stage props! Fakery! Frederick Molyneux was a trickster and a money-grabber like his father.

She was struggling to breathe.

Frederick drew the brown velour curtains, snuffing out the last of the evening light. He lit a small enamelled oil lamp on the teak sideboard.

–Spirits don't like too much light. I'll have to turn this out when Ma's ready.

He dragged out another chair from under the table.

–Ma sits here.

The sideboard was grazed with a shabby linen runner on top and a framed photograph of a fierce looking couple in front of a large house.

–The grandparents, on the Pa's side. London, 1885. Photographed by Herbert Rose Barraud.

Frederick raised his heavy brows at Dee.

–Barraud? Eminent Victorian photographer? Famous for portraits of London High Society?

He breathed on the glass, polishing it with his cuff.

–Those were the days.

Dee was inspecting the room, arms tightly crossed over her bag, lip curled. Mrs Molyneux followed her eyes as they flitted, alighting here and there on the worn upholstery. The faded rug. Chipped ceramic ornaments. After fluttering over the whole room, her eyes settled on the bedroom curtain. Mrs Molyneux shrank back into the dark.

She began pacing the room. She couldn’t let Arthur talk to the girl – she was only held together with flimsy threads of hope. One word from him and the threads would snap.

Frederick dragged back the curtain, hissing.

–She's waiting! I can't keep her here much longer.

She sat heavily onto the bed, panting, clutching her chest.

–It's not right.

She was sucking at the air.

–You should never have brought her here. I told him—

–Shush! She'll hear.

She tugged at the scarf around her throat, eyes wild.

–And I’m telling you I'll not do it. I can't breathe...

–Quiet!

Frederick sat behind her on the bed. One hand on her shoulder, the other rubbing her back.

–Relax, Ma. Breathe. Deeply now. In, one-two-three, out, one-two-three. Just breathe.

–Why the charade? There’s no need for all this nonsense.

–It's what the punters expect. They wouldn't believe you otherwise.

–But Frederick! Look at her!

She gripped her knees, head bowed, trying to calm her breath.

–It’ll destroy her. And for what? A few miserable shillings—

Frederick gripped the top of her arm, painfully. His eyes retreating under his brows. Teeth jammed firmly together, voice barely audible.

–We haven't paid the rent in four months. We're about to be evicted, dammit! Get your scrawny backside out there and start performing. It's what you do. It's what she's come for. Give her what she wants and salve your conscience afterwards. Repent, cry, go to bloody confession if it helps but now, just get out there and start jabbering.

The chair scraped in the living room.

–Quickly!

Frederick pulled back the curtain.

–Wait!

He cut Dee off before she reached the door, blocking her escape.

–Sorry to keep you, miss. Sometimes the spirits are very demanding. Ma has to prepare herself to accept them. It's not easy speaking with the dead.

Dee flinched.

–I mean those who have *passed*, excuse me. That was clumsy. Our loved ones are only ever waiting on the other side. There's a fine membrane between the living and the— those on the other side. Think of it as a thin veil. So fine we could almost see through it. We can

certainly talk through it. Well, those with special gifts I mean. People like Ma. Mediums. May I offer you a brandy?

Dee shook her head.

–Please, Miss. Sit down. Are you sure I can't take your coat? Alright, that's fine. Sit and relax, sweetheart. Ma will be out directly.

He called over his shoulder.

–Won't you, Ma?

Mrs Molyneux pulled the curtain back. She was wearing a black crocheted shawl, her head bandaged in a bright scarf, as Frederick had instructed. Hooped earrings dangled from stretched lobes. She'd smeared crimson across her mouth. Smudged Kohl onto her eyes. She looked like an Egyptian mummy. She felt like a fraud.

–Don't speak, Miss. Just follow Ma's instructions.

She took the chair opposite Dee. Chest rising and falling with the effort of trying to breathe. The pain was intense. Dee shifted in her chair. Frederick lit the two tiny candles, snuffed out the oil lamp.

–The spirits take it out of her. She's alright.

Frederick sat between the two of them.

Mrs Molyneux reached for the glass sphere, gripping it with both hands. Pulling it towards her. She gazed, pointlessly, into the globe. A cheap glass trinket.

–Are you there, Arthur?

Dee's teeth started chattering.

–Take my hand, my dear.

Dee hesitated. Mrs Molyneux reached out and grasped it. A series of bones bound together with fine skin. The girl needed nourishing, she was wasting away. Frederick clasped both their hands in his – they could have been carved from ice.

–Just concentrate on the crystal ball, he whispered. Don't break the circle.

–Can you hear me, Arthur?

Mrs Molyneux started rolling her eyes, tipping her head back. Frederick had insisted she play the part. Dee tried to pull her hands away but they both had a firm grip of her.

–Speak. Show me a sign if you can hear me.

Dee looked at the chipped glass bauble. There was a loud bang on the wooden floor. Frederick's heeled boot against the worn varnished floor boards. Dee jumped.

–It's alright, it's Arthur. Don't be scared.

Frederick did not have a reassuring face, much as he tried.

–Do you wish to speak to Dee, Arthur?

Another loud bang. Dee's eyes darted at each of them in turn. Mrs Molyneux let go of her hand.

–Oh! This is ridiculous.

Mrs Molyneux ripped off her turban then the cheap hooped earrings. Dee stared at the balding, tufty grey hair underneath. Well, if it scared her off so much the better.

–Ma!

–No, Frederick. No more. I'm sick of the pretence. Young lady, I think you should leave now.

Dee stood up. Frederick tugged her back into her seat.

–Sit down. Ma's overwrought.

Mrs Molyneux clutched her head. The cacophony from Arthur had become physical, his torment shredding every nerve in her body. He was running amok inside her head. Kicking through her brain, scrabbling her thoughts.

–Stop it! Just STOP!

Frederick sat back. A smile spreading across his lips.

–There's no one there. Who are you talking to?

Dee grabbed her shoulders. Shoved her back against the chair.

–WHO, you old bat?

Mrs Molyneux was confused. She could hardly breathe. Couldn't think straight. She shook her head, banging the side of it as though she could dislodge him.

Finally the screeching began to subside. Now Arthur was whimpering. Please, please, please, he was begging, over and over again.

–No! I won't. It's not fair, Arthur. Leave her in peace. Hope is all she has left.

–You filthy liar. You're not talking to Arthur.

Had she spoken aloud?

–You're charlatans, the pair of you.

Dee pushed her chair from the table, ran out of the flat.

Arthur's shrieking tore through Mrs Molyneux's head again.

Frederick sprang out of his chair, sending it sprawling to the floor.

–Oy! You owe us ten bob.

He chased after Dee.

–Come back, you thieving tart.

Mrs Molyneux heard Dee scream from the hallway.

–You can’t talk to him, you liars. ’CAUSE HE’S NOT DEAD!

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THE BROTHER-IN-LAW 1928

Tommy pulled on his soft suede gloves. They felt cool, slightly velvety. Fitted nice and snug. Cream-coloured to stop them marking the fancy white boxes. Well, a pair of silk stockings cost a few nicker, they had to be done up nice. There was a kind of perfumey smell off the cardboard. Might have been the ink on the gold lettering.

It wasn't a bad job, porter in a silk stocking factory – *Bergeron Esquires*. He couldn't complain. Better than working down the Docks or the railway station. The stockings were light – he'd stand on the platform throwing the boxes to his mate, Ernie, who'd pile them up inside the van. Had to be careful mind, Bergeron supplied all the posh shops – their rich lady customers didn't want no dents in their boxes, thank you very much.

They were a good team, him and Ernie. The two of them got on well, had a laugh. Time for a fag and a natter between picking up the stockings and the vans arriving. And Ernie wasn't against stashing a few stray boxes on the side. Perk of the job. Not that you got much for them down the pubs in Wapping but up the West End, if you could be bothered, you'd make few quid. He'd given Gracie a box of black silk ones on their wedding night. Fancy lace bit round the top and everything, but she wouldn't wear them 'cause they were knock off. Told him not to do it again, he could lose his job, yadder yadder. So he never gave her no more after that. Stuck up cow. Sold the knock off and saved the readies for himself.

It was nice to get the fresh air instead of being shut up in a factory all day. Every morning they'd slide open the huge doors on the parking bays, ready for the vans to back up. Sort of like working outdoors but with protection over your head. Bit whiffy, mind. The smell from the Thames could get right up your nostrils. Sewage or seaweed. And the stench from the dog meat factory mixed with the stewing hops from the brewery made him gag sometimes. It got a bit parky in winter but it was nice in summer. They'd filched some chairs from a factory that had closed down on the next street. Set them up with a stack of pallets for a table. Lovely when the sun was shining. Nice view of the river from their raised platform. All the factory girls were jealous – sitting on the wall, dinners balanced on their knees. Ernie used to tuck his hankie down his collar and eat with his pinkie sticking out for a laugh.

That's when Tommy first spotted Ada. Sitting on the wall with her mates, dangling her long legs. Lovely bit of stuff. When he'd gone to gather up more stockings later that day he'd seen her again, in the shaping department. She'd winked at him, sexy little minx. She was

steaming the stockings into shape – stretching them over them wooden leg things. Weird to look at, like a load of girls lying on their backs with their legs in the air, all shaped the same, toes pointed, knees slightly bent. Whenever he came past after that she'd stare at him, licking her lips, pulling the stockings on the moulds real slow, running her hands up and down them, all suggestive like. Gave him a right stiffy. So after a bit of banter over a few weeks, a wink and a nod, she came out the back of the loading bay with him one dinnertime. Became a regular little twelve o'clock treat.

Pay was pretty rubbish though. Not like the glory days of the war. Best days of his life, Tommy was always telling Gracie. He'd been flush then. Apprentice butcher to a German fella, old Weismann. In his dotage really. Lost the plot when his only son was killed at Ypres, right at the beginning of the war. Why'd he sign up, that's what Tommy couldn't understand – butchering was a starred job, you didn't have to. That's why Tommy's old fella got him the apprenticeship, keep him out the war. Maybe Weismann's son was trying to prove he was more English than the English. With a Kraut for a father you could understand it.

Old Weismann had been living in Wapping for forty years, perfect English accent but everyone still called him The German. Lovely gentle fella. Lost his wife when their lad was only a nipper. Polite to all the little old ladies, patient with them while they decided what they wanted for their old man's dinner. They loved him.

And it was an amazing shop. All kinds of German sausages hanging from the ceiling – every shape and size and colour you could imagine. Took a bit of getting used to – raw meat, all dried out. You never had to cook them like English sausages. Bit on the spicy side but nice once you got a taste for them. There was always a curtain of pig carcasses hanging from hooks outside the front of the shop and whole pigs' heads sitting along the counter. Stank to high heaven in summer, rotting meat. And the flies! Weismann'd soak some of the heads for a few days in buckets of brine, weights pressed down on them. Called it brawn. All brown and bitty. It looked disgusting, but after he'd tried a thick slice of it melted over his chips, Tommy was sold. Brawn nearly every day for his dinner after that. It wasn't a massive shop but there were seven of them working there – three apprentices and four trained pig butchers. And always a queue.

The police took Weismann away after the Lusitania riots. For his own safety, they said. Germans weren't too popular after they sank that ship. Weismann was called an enemy alien.

And him with a son dying for England. Banged up, poor sod. He died in the internment camp on the Isle of Man before the war ended.

Gilroy, the head butcher took over running the shop then. Called it Whiteman's. He kept Tommy and the other apprentices on, well most of the local lads had gone off to war by then. Once rationing came in Tommy had a right old time of it. Made a tidy packet. Gilroy was a bit thick – didn't notice him adding a few extras onto the Smithfield order. Tommy had his own customers who were in the know. He'd slip the extra bit of pork loin or pound of bacon in with their order. The larger parcels of meat he'd deliver in person, after hours, on the delivery boy's bike. And there were one or two very grateful housewives would give him a bit extra an' all. Hubby away, fighting the Bosch, girl gets a bit lonely. Would have been rude not to.

Of course, he got found out in the end. Gilroy was fined fifty nicker for purchasing more than he was allowed and not taking ration coupons for the meat sold. Tommy was out on his ear as soon as the coppers turned up. Shame really, it had been a nice little earner.

Yes, he had a few nicker in those days. Pity he didn't save any. Lived on tick now, mostly. Suit in the pawn shop all week. Furniture on the never-never. Which is why he was browned off when he came home from loading boxes for ten hours in the freezing cold to find the sis-in-law prancing about in a new frock. The toffee-nosed, peg-legged boyfriend, Raphe had bought it her for the wedding. *Their* wedding. Must have cost a packet – right posh number. She was a sly one, Dee. Had him wrapped round her little finger. Do anything for her, the daft sod. She just had to look at him with those big syrupy eyes and he turned to mush.

So there she was, twirling around in it, all lace and twinkly bits. Little auburn curls springing round her face. Fluttering her spidery lashes at Raphe. Tommy could see Gracie looking at the dress, then looking at him. That look. He could have slapped her face. She was getting too cocky that one. Didn't even ask him if Dee and her fella could stay with them, just announced it one night. Like *she* was head of the household. Okay, family's family. Got to look after your own and all that, but she should have asked. Never should have given them the vote. Gone to their heads, daft mares.

Not that he didn't love Gracie. And of course he wanted to buy her nice things. She'd look lovely in a new frock like that. Washed up a treat, 'specially when she'd done her hair. It was just that they didn't have the money. Even with her wages on top – soap factory didn't

pay much, specially to women. Not that he liked her working, a man should be able to support his own, but when you ain't got no qualifications, jobs you can get don't pay much. He knew she had plans before they married. Probably his fault really, telling her tales of the war, drinking bubbly with the WRNS up West, fancy dinners, natty suits and all that. Thought they could save up for a house of their own. Move a bit further out the Smoke, bit healthier and that. She always wanted a garden. Used to lie in bed, tell him what she'd have growing. Lay it all out. She'd got a way with words. He could see it all – the colours, flowers growing up the walls, a little lawn with a windy path up the middle, crazy-paving. His veg patch down the back – potatoes, cabbages, carrots in winter. Tomatoes and lettuce in summer. Said she wanted a fruit tree. Couldn't decide between apples or plums.

She thought he'd forgotten all that. He wished he could get it for her. Make her happy. He had tried, in his own way, but with the kids and the job and things... Well, you stop living for yourself when the kiddies come along. It was all about them now. Dee and Hopalong would find that out soon enough. All that romance stuff was for youngsters. Newlyweds. Just dreams. No room for all that in real life. Life was a vale of tears his old mum used to say.

And she'd changed and all, Gracie. Didn't smile much these days. Shouting at the kids. Giving him lip. That's why he liked being with Ada – didn't get none of that aggro off her. Always smiling, up for a laugh. And a bit of how's your father behind the stocking boxes. Sometimes he'd watch Gracie, soaking her feet after the kids had gone to bed. Cutting off the dead skin with a razor blade – always held his breath in case she cut her toes off – then rubbing cream into them. Sometimes he thought he should do that for her. The creaming bit. Be a nice gesture and all that but, well. He knew she was tired, on her feet for twelve hours a day but it was more than that. It was like she knew it wasn't going to get any better. That she was trapped here in this poxy little damp house. The joy had gone out of her. Blamed it all on him, of course. It wasn't how she thought her life would turn out. She looked at him like he'd let her down sometimes. Made him feel like a loser.

First time he'd seen it in her eyes, the sadness, the givenupness, that look of, 'Is this all there is?', he'd gone over to her, held her tight. Rubbed her shoulders. Her back. All tender like. Surprised him how thin she was. He could feel her bones sticking through the skin, every knobble down her spine. Dead fragile. He kissed the top of her head, her face, her mouth, like they used to. She smelt great. Like lavender and bread and... well, just Gracie really, that special smell she had. She started going all soft. Closing her eyes, leaning into him. So he'd

slipped his hand inside her blouse, thought she was up for it. She pushed him off! Told him he was a dirty so and so. He'd stormed out. Had to go down the boozer to calm himself down. Couldn't look at her for days.

Dee and Hopalong carried on yacking about that bleeding wedding for hours. Her still preening herself, twirling around in the dress and no tea on the table. Tommy didn't want to say nothing in front of *him,* so he just held his tongue and watched. She had a good figure. Slim, nice legs, shapely ankles. Just like Ada. He wouldn't have minded slipping that frock off her. And she knew it. Kept trying to catch his eye in the mirror. Probably at it like rabbits those two, when he and Gracie went upstairs.

He'd married the wrong sister.

After they'd gone up to bed, Gracie told him why Dee and lover boy, darling Raphe, had come down the Smoke. She'd only got a bun in the oven! Tsk tsk, naughty girl. And not very smart of him, neither. Hadn't he heard about rubbers? Tommy had learned early about using them – no flies on him. He and his mates used to go drinking down the Dock Road during the war. The girls there were right tarts. Half a stout and you could have them up the side alley. A few of his mates got the clap and one poor sod ended up with Syph – not pretty. Rubbers were scarce once the war started but there was still a barbers on the High Street in Wapping where you could get some if you were in the know.

Raphe thought he was so smart, strutting round in his spats and cane, his posh boy accent and there he was, done up like a kipper. Ada was smarter than that and she was pretty thick, even for a woman. Her mate had a job in the Women's Clinic, gave her a book called 'Married Love.' Bit ironical given the sort of love she was getting off him. Not a bad book actually. She'd lent it him a few weeks ago. He'd had a read of it over his sarnies. For a posh bird, that Stopes was a right rude 'un. Said that a woman's thingy can open and close like it was panting with longing! Made him randy just reading about it. And that dirty old mare, Queen of wherever it was, wanted it six times a day! Anyway, there was loads of stuff in it about not getting up the duff. Ada went down the clinic after her fourth nipper got born. Got the old cap thing fitted and tad dah! No kiddies. Best of all, he didn't have to wear no Johnny neither. Got the full impact.

It was horrible weather. Drab and wet. The wind was gathering up handfuls of rain, flinging it at them. Bit of a slow day. Ernie was off sick, so Tommy was working with a right boring sod. Couldn't crack a smile. Never spoke.

They'd just loaded up the last van of the day – the slow way – when he said he was taking his missus up town at the weekend for her birthday. First thing he'd said all day. He'd found a little caff did meat in gravy with potatoes followed by apple pie and a pot of tea for very reasonable. That had got Tommy thinking about Dee's posh frock. And how Gracie never had nice things no more. He decided there and then he was going to take her up the West End, treat her. Wasn't just Hopalong had the cash, Tommy had saved quite a bit lately from his stocking sales.

The following Saturday he told Gracie to get her best clobber on, that the two of them would walk along the river into town. He'd already asked Dee to take care of the nippers for them. Dee hadn't seemed best pleased – what was she going to do with them all day? How could she look after them on her own? Hopalong worked Saturdays – he had a job in Selfridges, demonstrating waffle irons. Moan, moan, moan. He thought all women knew about that sort of stuff. Kiddies and that. Funny girl. What was she going to do when her nipper was born then? He told her it'd be good practice at that rate and gave her a few bob to buy herself a cream bun and the kids some sweets.

When he and Gracie got down to the tow path along the river, Gracie stopped and leaned over the railings. The wind was getting up although the sky was still blue. Small blasts were knocking into the waves, disrupting the flow.

–Not like the Mersey, is it?

–How d'you mean?

–It's not... *open*. The other bank's too close. All those warehouses opposite. You can't believe this river actually goes out to sea, not really. All a bit hemmed in, London. I miss the Mersey.

He felt a bit riled but kept his trap shut.

–You don't have that feeling of space you get in Liverpool. You can hardly see the sky here, buildings are too high, all squashed together. The Mersey made you feel there was life beyond, you know? The sea waiting at the end of the river. Places out there you could escape to.

That was the first time she'd talked about her home town like she missed it. When he'd first met her she'd been complaining how crap it was. How she couldn't wait to leave.

–I used to love watching the tide. Breathing in the smell of the sea. Seeing the river change colour. The Thames just stays the same dirty grey.

Tommy stared at the water. Looked alright to him. Black but shiny. Like the sun was riding on the tips of the waves.

He pulled her away from the railings.

–Shops is going to be shut by the time we get there.

They set off down Wapping High Street. He hadn't been that way in years. As they stopped at the corner of a road to let a car pass, he recognised the shop opposite. It was the butcher's where he used to work. A chandlers now, Gilroy must have sold up. He still remembered it with *Weissmann* above the shop window – gold lettering on a black marble background. Before Gilroy changed the name. Before the riots. Before they wrecked the shop. May, 1915. He'd never forget that date.

Reg, one of the other apprentices, had knocked round at Tommy's, told him there were mobs on the High Street, destroying all the German shops. The two of them took off running to see if Weismann was alright. When they got to the shop there was a crowd around it. Smashing the windows, breaking up the counter. Women were running in and grabbing any meat they could find. Some of the men had run upstairs where Weismann lived. They started smashing the windows up there as well. A mirror got hurled onto the pavement. Then a piano. It splintered when it hit the ground and everyone cheered. The rest of the furniture followed to more cheering. Tommy and Reg waited 'til the mob moved off along the street then ran upstairs to find the old man. He was hiding in a wardrobe up in the attic. Terrified.

Gracie nudged him.

–You alright, Tommy, love?

–Yeah. Let's go to Covent Garden, do a bit of window shopping.

He linked Gracie's arm, enjoying the surprised but delighted look on her face.

–Ooh, Tommy. That wind is something else.

Gracie pulled in closer to him.

–Feels like a storm coming. Let's get a move on.

She really bucked up. Just like old times. He let her choose all the clothes she wanted – even let her choose for him. They had a right laugh! Standing in front of the windows, fitting

their reflections into the clothes. She had him in poncey, half-mast breeches. Like her old dad used to wear on his walks, she said. He had high fallutin' ideas for a geezer that sold fish for a living.

Then he took her to Lyons Corner House on the Tottenham Court Road. Ada had suggested it. She was a great girl, Ada – fair, not jealous of Gracie or anything. It was a dead swanky place. Surprised him how posh. Gracie didn't want to go in at first, said she was too scruffy.

–Our money's as good as theirs, he told her.

And she looked alright. Had a nice way of walking, holding herself. Sort of posh and ladylike. Could carry anything off, make it look good. She had the height. And not a bad-looking girl, even if he did say so himself. He always felt proud stepping out with her.

They went up to the first floor because Gracie could hear the violins playing.

–Oh, Tommy! My favourite tune.

He thought she was going to start dancing. Embarrass him.

The place was full of potted plants and proper white table cloths on all the tables. Shiny knives and forks – loads of them. Why would you need all them? The waitresses were dressed in black with white caps and frilly aprons.

Gracie wanted to sit in the corner behind a pillar. He led her to a table in the centre of the room. He had the best looking girl in the place – why would he want to hide her away?

They looked at the menu. Gracie waited for him to order, even though the snooty waitress had asked her what they'd like.

–Pot of tea for two and a couple of toasted tea cakes, please, darling. Heavy on the butter.

When the waitress came back with a tray of tea things, she put a small dish with a lid on it right in front of Tommy. Then tapped it, looking at him. He felt a right berk when Grace lifted the lid and he saw a big wedge of butter.

Gracie loved it, the whole experience. He'd never seen her smile so much. It cost him a packet but it was worth it, just to see her face. Glowing she was. From the inside.

They were talking like posh nobs. Pretending they'd left all their new clothes tied up in swanky parcels in the Rolls with the chauffeur. They'd seen them do it inside the shops. All flimsy, see-throughy paper to start, folded nice then wrapped in fancy paper with bows on. Or in boxes, sometimes. Like the stockings.

Tommy and Gracie held hands across the table. Like they used to in the early days. And he was thinking how much he loved her. He was playing along with her that they had their own house, with the garden and everything. Then he said, okay then darling, what's it to be – an apple or a plum tree? She looked at him for a second then dropped his hand. Her smile turned upside down. She bent down and started rummaging in her handbag. Grabbed a little hanky out – the nice one with the lacey bit around it for special occasions – dabbed at her eyes. Under the table like, but he could see. Then she got up and ran off to the ladies.

He didn't know what he'd done. Just sat there like Soft Mick. He could see other people watching him. Thinking he'd said something horrible, made her cry. He was getting madder, thinking how much longer's she gonna be? Leaving him sitting there on his own like a right pillock. Proper wound up he was getting. Ready to storm out and leave her there. He didn't care she had no money to pay for nothing.

Then she came back.

He couldn't explain it but she had a look, not pity or anything like that, but like they were in it together. And she managed this little smile and said, it's gotta be an apple tree so's I can make you apple pies of a Sunday. And he just hugged her, right there, in front of all them nobs. He didn't care what they thought – Gracie was his girl and he loved her. They held hands all the way back to the bus.

Tommy was loading the Harrod's stockings onto the van. Ada appeared behind him.

–I'm pregnant.

Tommy dropped the pile of gold boxes in his hands. The wind picked a few up and sent them hurtling across the yard – a storm had been gathering for a few days and had finally broken that morning. The wind was knocking over everything in its path. It clouted a tower of Fortnum's boxes behind him. Sent them sprawling across the warehouse. Looked like the storm was just limbering up.

Tommy looked at Ada, trying to take on-board what she'd just said. Waiting for a question to unscramble itself.

–What? was all he could manage.

She stared back at him. Folded her arms, tilted her head to one side.

–I thought you had that cap thing fitted. Pregnant? No. No. We agreed. We said, no kids. I told you to be careful. You said you was being. No. It's not happening, No way.

–Well it is happening. I can't stop it now. Nearly four months—

–Four months? How d'you know it's not your old man's?

–He was laid up wasn't he? Only just come back to work. Six months on a board, flat on his back. Even he'll remember that.

Tommy certainly remembered it. Ada couldn't get enough of him – every day, twice a day sometimes. Wouldn't leave him alone. He'd begun to feel a bit sorry for her old fella.

–I thought you was using that cap thing?

–I was. Mostly.

–Mostly?

His voice cracked.

–Sometimes I got caught up in the moment, didn't I? Didn't want to spoil things by nipping off to stick it back in.

–Spoil things? What d'you think you've done now, you silly mare?

Ada started crying. Tommy hated women crying. Bleedin' stupid cow. Made a right mess of things, she had.

–Shut your cakehole. You're going to have to get rid of it. I know someone I can ask.

Ada turned to go.

–And wash your face before your old man sees you.

Jimmy the maintenance man said he knew an old crone that helped girls get rid. It was dodgy mind, he said. You got caught, you got prison. Cost a bob or two and all, but what could he do? Probably take all the money he'd saved from the stockings. He wished he hadn't taken Gracie up town now. He'd have to sell loads more stockings. Go up West with them.

Never trust a bleedin' woman.

When Tommy got home from work, Gracie had her coat on.

–I'm just popping out to number twelve. Maisie's gone into hospital to have her eighth. I'm doing tea for Bert and the kiddies. Won't be long. Pie's in the oven, Dee's doing some mash and carrots for us. Kids are round your Edna's for their tea. Raphe'll be home at seven so we can all sit down then.

She was dead organised, Gracie. Just finished a twelve-hour shift at the soap factory but still had time to look after the neighbours and get their own tea on the table as well. And keep the house tidy. One of life's copers. And she was a great mother. Kids were well behaved

but happy. All seemed so easy for her. Though she didn't take care of herself enough, hair went unwashed for weeks and she never had time to iron her clothes properly most days. Ernie's missus was a disaster. Never had his tea ready when he came home, house was a mess, kids were filthy. Right slob he married.

Dee was in the kitchen peeling the spuds. Tommy walked up behind her and slipped his hands round her waist.

–Want an hand with that?

She knew he didn't mean it – women's work.

–At least let me help you with your apron, darlin'. Want it a bit snug? Like this?

She laughed and told him to sit down while she made him a cuppa. She had a lovely laugh. Came from deep inside. Not affected or anything. Lovely smile. Always wore a bit of red lippy. Nice that.

He sat on the settee and watched her. She didn't look like Gracie peeling the spuds, all in a hurry, wiping her soily hands on her apron. Dee stood up straight, peeling them like she'd never peeled a spud in her life. Standing back from the sink. Holding the spud with a finger and thumb as though she might catch something off it. Stopping to wash her hands after peeling each one. She was wearing her fancy blouse and nice skirt. Hair looked like she'd just combed it, pinned it up all careful. She still had lovely long hair. Hadn’t chopped it off like those slappers or flappers, whatever they were called. A real lady, Dee.

Gracie said that when they all lived at home together, Dee was obsessive about cleaning. She'd come down of a Monday morning and dump all the bed sheets in the sink on her way out to work. She'd take the curtains down every two or three months, pointing out dirt that Gracie could never see, telling her they'd all die from germs if they weren't washed. Sometimes she'd moan the kitchen floor was filthy. Then sit curling her hair while her mother got down on her hands and knees, scrubbing the stone flags with a stiff brush and soda crystals.

That was the thing, Gracie said, Dee hated dirt, even when it wasn't really there, but she never did the cleaning herself. Her mother would be left washing the sheets. Gracie washing and ironing and hanging the curtains back up. Not that Dee was bossy or shouted at them or anything. She just used to point it out and get quietly annoyed. Seething sort of. So Gracie and her mother felt they had to get it sorted, like they'd caused it or something.

Dee couldn't do the ironing because she had weak wrists. Couldn't do the washing because her skin was so sensitive it went all blotchy and cracked. Or she was rushing to get out, either to work or to meet some fancy man. It was like she was born to the wrong house, wrong class. She should have been living in a mansion with servants.

No, this life wasn't for her. She didn't want a life like Gracie. And he couldn't see her with Hopalong either. Two of them were a mismatch. Alright, he was educated. Could probably give her a nice life, bit of money eventually, but Tommy couldn't see her with kids round her. Hair a mess, nails broken. Mucky hand prints on her nice clean skirt.

Dee came in with the tea. Put it on the table.

–You want it here?

–Nah! Come here and sit on my lap.

She put his cup on the table. He pulled her down on top of him.

She giggled and told him to lay off, Gracie'd be back soon but he held her there.

–So, come on. Tell me. How do you and Hopa— I mean how do you do it? You know, hanky-panky. With him. Bloke's only got one leg – how's he balance?

–None of your business.

–Seriously, why'd you end up with a cripple?

Dee tried to pull away but Tommy held her fast.

–Nice looking girl like you could have got any geezer you wanted. Why him?

–I love him.

–No, you don't.

–What would you know?

–You two are chalk and cheese.

Dee stared past him towards the window.

–Curtains could do with a wash.

Tommy glanced at them. How could she see from there. He pinched her waist.

–Come on, you can tell Tommy.

Pulling her in tighter.

–I felt sorry for him I suppose. He'd never been with a woman before. And he was kind. A real gentleman.

–You can't marry someone you feel sorry for. Don't work that way.

–I’m twenty-eight. I didn’t want to be one of those unmarried virgins. Because of the war and that. All those young men…

–There are worse things than being alone, my old mum used to say.

–Easy for her to say with three kids and a husband.

–An husband what belted her every day of her married life? Easy? You don't know the half of it.

Dee was staring off into space. With that sad look on her face. Like she had a secret. He wasn't going to ask – hated it when women did that starey-eyed thing. Meant he had to listen to some tale of woe, come up with something nice to say, make them feel better. He always walked away when Gracie had that look.

–I presume he's got all his tackle. Well, with you up the duff, I'd say he has—

Dee's face twisted. Tommy squeezed her closer, enjoying the feel of her breasts against his shoulder.

–Get off me.

She was pushing Tommy away, thumping his chest.

–Is it more exciting? With a one-legged man. That what you like? Something a bit different?

– Shut up! You're disgusting.

–Does he take it off, the wooden leg, when he’s doing it? What’s his stump look like?

Dee slapped him across the face. He grabbed her hand.

–I just want to know how you do it. Don't be like that.

–Filthy sod. Let go of me or I'll scream.

–Okay, okay. Sorry sweetheart. Calm down.

Tommy held her but she was struggling out of his grasp.

–Don't do it darlin'.

She dug her nails deep into his hands but he wouldn’t let go.

–Don't marry him. Get rid of the kiddie. You ain't cut out for this kind of life. You should be a lady of leisure.

She stopped squirming. Looked hard at him.

She was hearing him, he could tell. That look in her eyes – just for a second – then she closed up again. She was always doing that. Pulling the shutters down if you got a bit close. Gracie complained she never really knew her sister. Won't let you in, she always said.

Dee tried to get up. But Tommy held her tight. Her face had that cold look. Scarier than when she was angry.

–I mean it, girl. Don't ruin your life. Some women aren't cut out for it. Not all women are meant to be mothers. Funny thing to say, but believe me, I know. My old mum, she should never have had kids. Hated us. Ruined her life, she always told us. I know someone you can go to.

Dee managed to pull away. She ran out to the small galley kitchen, slamming the door shut behind her. Tommy got up, tried to open the door but she'd bolted it.

–Listen to me, Dee.

He leaned against the wood, pressing his hands and cheek to it.

–Don't marry him. Be the biggest mistake of your life.

Ada said she couldn't go through with it. Young girl down her sister's street did it the other month and bled to death. He didn't want to hear no women's details thank you very much, he told her. Didn't want to hear nothing about it, just do it, he said. The old woman was arrested, she said. Didn't think they'd caught the father though – maybe she never told no one who it was. Lucky bastard. Ada, stupid cow had already grassed Tommy up to her sister. You're a strong girl, he told her, you'll be dandy. What's the alternative, eh?

There wasn't none.

She'd be alright.

Strong girl.

Gracie stopped. Dropped the potato she was peeling into the sink.

–Australia?

–You'll love it. Georgie's got a massive place out there. Says he'll help me build an house, give me some land. Be great for the kiddies – all that space. Fresh air. And you can have your apple tree. 'Fact, you can have an whole bleedin' orchard of apple trees. Plum trees too if you want 'em.

Gracie stood looking at him with the knife still in her hand. Which was a tad unnerving.

–Space, Gracie. You always complained Wapping was too crowded, you couldn’t see the sky. A life beyond, remember. The sea at the end of the river. A place you could escape to. This is it – Australia.

Tommy's brother had sent him the tickets a few days earlier. And some extra cash to tide him over. He'd been asking Tommy for years to bring the family out – he was doing really well. It'd be like a new start for them all. Oh, the kids would moan but they'd soon get used to it. And they'd love it once they got there. The boat trip would be like the honeymoon him and Gracie never had. A night in a boarding house in Sydney before they got on the train.

He'd been thinking about Gracie a lot lately. How it wasn't fair on her, Ada and all that. She deserved better. And he'd started to get scared in case she ever found out. He promised himself, no more messing about. Over there, in Australia, he was going to be the sort of man Gracie thought she'd married.

Gracie didn't speak. Didn't smile. Nothing. Just stood looking at him. Not the reaction he was expecting. He thought she'd be over the moon heading away from the Smoke. He was offering her everything she wanted. Bleedin' women! Never happy.

–But we'll have to wait until the baby's born. I can't leave without seeing our Dee's baby. She's the only family I've got.

But they couldn't wait. Not now. And if Dee had any sense there wouldn't be no baby. Tommy had given her some of the cash he'd been saving – well, Ada didn't want it now – along with the address of the old crone. Told her it would be fine. Women did it all the time. That other girl was just unlucky.

Ada had come in to see him a few weeks before. Crying, kicking off. She was really showing. He was getting proper sick of her moaning. She'd been like that since she found out she was up the duff. He couldn't be doing with it. What was the point? You had a tart to get a break from the missus moaning all the time. He didn't want two of them at it.

So he'd been trying to shut her up, stop her crying. He'd taken her to the back of the loading bay. Behind the piles of stocking boxes ready for loading. He started kissing her to quieten her down, feeling her up and that. She stopped crying. Went all gooey and soft. Six months preggers and she was still up for it. He'd just got her blouse undone, she'd hoisted her skirt up round her waist, when her old man showed up.

–I knew it was you, you dirty bastard!

He took a swing at Tommy but Tommy ducked, caught the old fella with a right hook. Threw him off balance, he landed in the stockings. Tommy was on him, knocking seven bells out of him. The old fella was shouting, saying he was going to the boss to get him sacked. Thing was, he was a line manager, he could do that – Tommy was just a porter. So Tommy

kept belting him. Ada was screaming at him to get off. Some of the other fellas came running out to see what all the argy-bargy was about. Next thing, he was up in the big glass office, in front of the whole factory, getting his marching orders. No reference, no nothing. And he was thinking, we're done for, Gracie and the kids. We'll end up in the poorhouse.

He kept pretending to go to work for a bit while he tried to find another job but there was nothing doing. It was hard enough to get work with a decent reference – without anything, no papers, you'd had it. That's when he'd thought about Georgie over in Australia. Last chance saloon.

Gracie grabbed hold of Dee when she walked in with Hopalong.

–Dee, can't you get married this month? I thought that's why you came down here.

She looked at Tommy.

–Well, at least we can go to the wedding even if we don't see the baby. Tommy's taking us to Australia, Dee. In one month.

Dee looked calm. Sort of saintly. Tommy couldn't work it out. She was silent. One of those deadly silences she fell into now and then. Meant she was thinking. Deep thinker, was Dee. And that usually spelt disaster for someone else.

–I'm not sure I want to get married.

Tommy looked at Raphe. Judging by his face, this was news to him as well. Served him right, smarmy git. But at the same time, Tommy felt kind of sorry for him. He really did love her, even Tommy would have to admit that. He looked like Dee had smacked him square on the kipper.

Grace grabbed Dee's shoulders, turning her round so she could look her straight in the face.

–What are you talking about, Dee?

–I just… don't think I want to.

Dee turned to Raphe. It was like someone had sucked all the emotion out of her face.

–I'm sorry.

But she didn't sound it.

Raphe dropped to the settee. His wooden leg stuck straight out in front. He didn't even bother tucking it under. They all looked at it.

Then Tommy gripped Dee's arm.

–Good girl, he said. Good girl.

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See, you've made a huge
mistake,
Gracie
X

THE MOTHER 1938

Jane was thinking about Dee's letter. Propped up on the mantlepiece. Unopened. She couldn't face it after the last one. It had arrived that morning, spikey handwriting, sloping downwards. Letters overwritten, the wrong street number scribbled out. Not at all like the old, obsessively neat, Dee – she couldn't understand what had happened to her youngest daughter lately. Another peculiar letter. She was too old for all this.

She was down at the Pier Head. The morning rush-hour ferries were dipping idly at the landing stage. Taking a breather having disgorged their last straggle of office-workers into the city. A nondescript day – not warm but not cold. A tatty cloud draped the sky, blocking out the blue. Seagulls were standing on the quayside, wearily. A few old people like herself wandering about, chatting at the tea stall, staring at the river.

She'd walked down from town. After she'd bought her bit of shopping in the market earlier, she thought she might sit in St Johns Gardens for a while. A bit of calm out of the bedlam of the city. Greenery. Bright flowers. And to put off going home. Dee's letter.

She'd been making her way to the bottom of the gardens. Following the path that ran along the back wall of St George's Hall. It would have been a lovely building if it wasn't so black. The whole city was black. The gardens a green oasis in a sooty desert. Laid out for the likes of her. She liked to sit at the bottom of the slope so she could look up and see the whole expanse. All the colours. The flower beds were kept beautifully – even in winter. She'd been going there since it opened thirty odd years ago. Although she could still see it as the old cemetery. The wonderful St John the Baptist church at the top. Why had they pulled it down? It wasn't that old. Everything was changing. When she walked around the city these days, she could hardly recognise it. All the old streets were being torn down. Communities who'd lived together for generations were being split up – families pulled apart. New buildings had sprung up like weeds. It wasn't her city anymore.

As she'd walked past the flowerbeds, she'd been startled by a group of men. They'd turned onto the path in front of her. A torrent of them. Marching straight towards her, three abreast, all dressed in black. Turtleneck sweaters, wide belts with big silver buckles round their middles. A terrifying crash, crash, crash of vicious black boots grinding the gravel into the path. Pounding through her body – she couldn't tell heartbeat from bootbeat. They were stabbing their arms up like a bunch of schoolboys with the right answer, chanting something

she couldn't make out, over and over again. Their faces, twisted in anger. Another, scruffier crowd appeared from nowhere, screaming, running at them. As they hurtled past, one had knocked the shopping bag out of her hand.

A fight broke out. It was awful to watch – men battering each other with wooden stakes, shovels, chair legs. Fists, kicks. Bricks and bits of wood flying. One man was butted in the face. Another had his legs swiped from under him. The violence!

She'd grabbed up her shopping bag – one of her eggs had cracked – then hurried away to the Pier Head.

There was an empty bench facing the river. Resting her bag on the floor she settled herself down. She vaguely wondered how long she could sit there, doing nothing, before people mistook her for a down-and-out – she wasn't in her best clothes. She inspected her coat. The cuffs were beginning to fray again – she'd turned up the hem a couple of times already. They might take one more turn. It had served her well, nearly twenty years. And it had only been a cheap thing from the market. Huw had taken her shopping for it. Six months before he died. A rare occasion. He'd normally go to the library while she shopped. Poor Huw. She'd been without him now almost as long as she'd been with him.

She was seven months pregnant with Grace when they married. He'd been angry at first. Marriage was a cage, he'd said. He accused her of trying to trap him into it. Refused to see her. The sky seemed permanently black, the heavy clouds crushing the breath out of the house. Then one day, he'd just turned up. Said he'd booked the registrar for the following week. And the clouds lifted.

She'd adored Huw and he loved her, she was sure of that. But he'd always held something back. Some secret part of himself he refused to share. Dee was the same. Daddy's girl. She gave the impression of being open, that what you saw was all there was. But locked inside was something she refused to surrender.

Jane had been happy with Huw for the first four or five years. The happiest of her life. Huw was kind, intelligent – a great story-teller. And he doted on his girls, especially Dee. But all that changed. He went off to work in his fishmongers one morning and didn't came back. She'd gone to look for him when it got late. Found his assistant, little Norah, shivering inside the unlocked shop.

Jane found a low-paid job as a live-out servant for a family on Huskisson Street. Took in washing and ironing. Grace sulked silently – she seemed to grow up overnight. A little old

woman at the age of six. Dee cried herself to sleep every night. It broke Jane's heart when Dee ran downstairs each morning asking if her daddy was back yet. Her face, every single time, when Jane had to tell her he wasn't. She couldn't bear to think about it. Dee refused to believe her father wouldn't come back.

And she'd been right.

Jane had come home from work one evening to find Huw sitting at the kitchen table. She'd got a fright. Thought an old tramp had broken into the house, he was so gaunt and dishevelled. She only recognised him when he looked up at her. The same beautiful, midnight blue eyes. But deadened. Defeated. A hard, invisible shell had grown over him. He was impenetrable. It was like living with a moving statue. She often wanted to hammer at his skull – break it open to find the real Huw, the man she loved, inside. She never asked where he'd been or even why he left. She waited, believing that he'd tell her when he was ready. He never did. She found out years after he died that he'd gone to Wales. He'd confided in Dee, of course. Said he'd gone to find his real self, live his real life.

But at least he'd been there, beside her. When he died, her life hollowed. Grace left within a year. Dee eventually went off to London. She'd been alone now for ten years.

A sharp wind slapped her cheeks. The tide was on the turn. The landing stage had filled with passengers while she'd been reminiscing. One of the ferries was getting ready to cross to the other side. The sun, seeping through the woolly mass of cloud had settled in a cold weak blanket of light over the river. Jane shivered, hugging herself. Perhaps she ought to head home.

She stood up to go. The image of Dee's letter with its hysterical handwriting appeared again. She sat down heavily. She really couldn't face reading it. Not yet. Perhaps Dee was going through the change of life. Was she old enough? She used to have such an elegant way of writing. Not just the words but the way she sat at the small writing desk in the parlour – back straight, auburn curls tossed over her shoulders. Her long slim fingers holding the pen. Pianist's fingers. Sometimes she'd fiddle with an earring or tap the pen against her lips when the words wouldn't come. She and Dee had the same high cheekbones – Jane always felt they were their best assets. But Dee's mouth was delicately curved while her own was straight as a letterbox. And Dee was much more attractive with her unusual eye colouring. No one on either side of the family had those eyes. Nutmeg, that shone olive in a certain light. It was terribly sad she'd gone so odd. Always had a complex nature though, difficult to fathom at

the best of times. She'd never explain. Never give reasons why she'd done things. And she would never, ever apologise.

Her letters had been getting stranger. The last few had been difficult to follow – jumping from one thing to another. It was a dreadful thing to say but they were like the ramblings of a lunatic. Dee shouldn't have had that last baby. Thirty-eight was far too old. In hindsight, she probably shouldn't have had the first.

What she really couldn't understand – and she'd said as much to Dee at the time – was why she'd decided to marry Raphe in the end. She'd refused for two years. Jane had told her she could bring the baby home, she'd look after it while Dee went out to work. Dee stopped writing for a while. Then one day a short note arrived in the post – she and Raphe had just married. No reasons. And she didn't love him, Jane knew that. Arthur had been the love of her life. So why do it? Why marry Raphe?

Jane sighed. It was all too much.

When she'd first lost her job at Walsh's, it had felt like a long holiday. She'd enjoyed the freedom. She pottered about for the first six months. Then boredom set in. She'd lie in bed after she woke, wondering how she was going to pass the time. She got herself into a routine – washing on Monday, ironing Tuesday, dusting and polishing, shining the brasses on Wednesday. Thursday she'd do her shopping – not that she had much to spend. Friday she'd wash the windows, scrub the front step. Saturday was her day for baking – a couple of loaves for the week ahead, a pie, maybe a Victoria sandwich. She wasn't very good at baking. Dee used to do all that when she lived at home. Dee's pastry was the lightest she'd ever tasted. Sunday was her rest day. She'd read the papers, do her embroidery. Cook something nice for Sunday dinner – enough to do her a few meals during the week. But it was just to fill the days. Each Sunday she felt relieved she'd managed to get through another week. Crossing the days off the calendar as though she were counting down to something exciting.

She gazed out across the river. The water looked empty, colourless, as if the life had been sucked out of it. She walked over to the quayside where there were no railings. The water was swaying. As she stared into the river her body relaxed. The movement of the water was hypnotising and she felt herself leaning towards it. It was easy to see how people might be lured in. The river looked comforting, almost protective – she could imagine being cradled in its soft, strong arms. Rocked into eternal sleep. As she listened, it seemed to be humming. The siren river.

Something caught her eye. A small black object was bobbing past. Like an urn. Swept along on the tide towards the mouth of the river, out to sea.

A few years after Huw died, Dee had finally decided to tell her she'd scattered his ashes on the Mersey. She'd taken it on herself to scatter her father's ashes. Huw's ashes – Jane's *husband's* ashes! Jane had been beside herself with fury. Couldn't look at the girl for a week, she'd wanted to slap her so hard. She still got annoyed whenever she thought about it. Even now, twenty years later. She'd wanted her ashes to be scattered with Huw's. Together. She'd kept the urn on top of the whatnot stand in the parlour. A heavy brass thing. She used to polish it every week. No idea it was empty.

Maybe Dee had always been a bit odd. She'd always been a bit of a loner. Jane wandered back to the bench, sat down again.

–Fancy a read of the *Echo*, love?

A thin man, stringy neck emerging from the collar of his coat, handed her the paper.

–I've finished with it.

She looked at the front page. There was a photo of a family leaning out of their bedroom window, the water eddying beneath the windowsill. She didn't want to read the paper actually. She'd come down to the river to get away from everything. And it was only ever bad news these days. There was trouble over in China with the Japanese. Hitler was causing ructions in Czechoslovakia. Over here they'd had eighty-mile an hour winds, been battered by the heaviest rains she'd ever seen. Phone lines had been cut off. Houses struck by lightning. Litherland had been flooded. People trapped in their bedrooms – she looked at the photo again. It was like something from the Bible. She threw the paper onto the bench.

She was tired of queueing every week to beg for her five shillings off the Parish. The way they handed it out – like they were giving you a fortune and you should be grateful. She'd like to see them living off five shillings a week. She'd worked her whole life – in the jute factory for years, lungs buggered with the dust. Then in service. Then various shops around the city. She'd still have been working in Walsh's on Breck Road if he hadn't sold up and gone back to the West of Ireland last year. No one would give her a job now. An old lady of sixty-one. On the scrap heap. Time she was gone.

Dee's letter popped into her head again. Nagging away at her. A heap of misery waiting for her on the mantelpiece.

Dot! She'd go and see Dot. She'd been putting it off for ages. She'd go and see the lovely new flat she and Judda had moved into. Must be nearly a year ago. Gerard Gardens. Although there was no grass, Dot said. Or flowers. Most of the inhabitants came from the streets of Little Italy when the council demolished the slums. All Catholics. Piled high into three blocks laid out in a triangle with one curved side. She'd been a bit jealous when Dot had told her about it – all very grand, the height of luxury – but she was curious. And it'd do her good to talk to Dot.

They'd been friends since they were children. Dot would understand how she felt. Maybe Dot was as miserable about life today as she was. And the talk of war. They might have a laugh about it. Dot still had Judda but they didn't really go anywhere together, they were never close. Judda was at work all day and spent his evenings in the pub, so Dot was on her own too. Jane used to pop round quite often when they lived on Lloyd Street nearby. But Gerard Gardens was too much of a hike from her house on Mackenzie Street. And all those stairs.

She didn't want to go home. Not yet.

She left the *Echo* on the bench.

Gerard Gardens was behind the Art Gallery and the Picton Library. More or less on her way home. She always thought of poor Huw when she saw the Picton. All the Saturdays he'd spent there, trying to educate himself. That's when he'd got those funny ideas about Wales and his roots, as he called them.

She walked, head down into the wind, round the side of the Art College. Gerard Gardens loomed up in front of her.

It was a frightening building from the outside. Four or five stories high. A couple of small balconies here and there. It looked like a fortress. If this was modern architecture, they could keep it. Ugly monstrosity.

She walked in through a huge arch. The building opened out into a fan. Children were swarming over swings and roundabouts. Scores of older boys were playing the biggest football match she'd ever seen. There were rows upon rows of doors and windows. Women were leaning over the lines of balconies at each level. Calling to one another. Conversations being shouted between floors, or across the wide courtyard. Washing hung like shoddy bunting below them. It was inhuman. All those people piled on top of one another.

Dot lived on the fourth floor. Jane had to stop and catch her breath at the top of each flight of stairs. Dot had to do this every time she wanted to nip out to the shops. Then carry all the shopping home with her, up all these stairs. She wasn't getting any younger either.

She couldn’t speak when Dot opened the door to her.

–Jane!

After a brief hug, Dot dragged her inside, immediately taking her arm to show her the indoor toilet and bathroom. Jane could hardly remember the last time she'd had a bath. The effort of bringing it in from the backyard, filling it with pans and kettles of hot water. Then emptying it again. No. A strip wash at the sink did her these days. And the po under the bed was just as handy as an indoor toilet.

Dot pulled her into the kitchen.

–Hot and cold running water – look! And a gas cooker. Cooking is so much quicker than on the old range. I can—

–I know. I've had one for a few years, remember? Our Grace sent me the money for it.

Dot ignored her.

–And I've even got a washing boiler for the clothes—

–No gas-heated drying room though.

Dot looked at her.

–They do in Caryl Gardens.

She’d read that in The *Echo*.

–Well, I don't know about that. But look, we've got a separate lounge with plenty of room for a dining table.

Lounge? What was wrong with parlour? It was twice the size of Jane's kitchen and front parlour put together.

–And wait 'til you see this—

Dot opened two glass doors.

–A sun balcony!

Jane couldn't walk out onto it. She could see down onto the roofs of the nearby houses from where she stood. You wouldn’t survive that fall.

–Oh, well, you'd need one of those for all the sun we get here in Liverpool.

Dot opened her mouth to say something. Then pursed it shut again. She clip-clapped off to the kitchen in her fluffy, heeled house shoes. When did she start wearing those? Where on earth did she even find such things?

–I'll put the kettle on then, Dot called from the kitchen.

Jane was just pulling her coat off when the lights came on. Then went off again. Then came on, then off. On, off. On, off.

–Electricity, Dot called.

–Instant light!

Jane plonked her shopping bag on the floor – same old threadbare rug, she noticed. She sniffed at the picture of *The Sacred Heart* hanging over the table. Who'd want to look at that while you were eating? She stood looking around the place. Two more doors opened off the lounge. Must be the bedrooms.

Neither of them spoke for a while. Jane sat listening to the sound of Dot clanking about in the kitchen. Running taps – *hot* water taps, if you don't mind. The sound of children shrieking in the yard below. It was like an echo chamber, the noise bouncing off all three walls. A sudden screech of laughter right outside the window made her jump. That would drive her up the wall.

They were both glad to see Judda arrive as Dot brought the tea things through. A short, fat, conceited man but he could be very funny once he got going.

Dot gave him a kiss. He looked surprised.

–Tell her about the gas masks, Judd.

Jane sat in the armchair with her back to the glass doors. The seat almost dropped to the floor as she lowered herself down. They hadn't bothered with a new suite then.

–They'll be giving them out next month. Cousin works in the factory that's making them. Kiddie ones and all. Serious stuff.

Why were they still advertising escorted tours of Germany then? She'd only just read that in the paper.

–The teacher who lives opposite me says it won't happen for another year.

–I wouldn't bank on it, Jane. Hitler could start a war any day now. Look at what's happening in Czechoslovakia—

–What?

She'd read about it, listened to lengthy discussions on the radio. She still didn't understand who was who, or what was happening.

–The Czechs have got their army on standby – they're fully expecting Hitler to march in. And them other, whatchamacallems, want unification with Germany—

–Well, what's that got to do with us?

–You can't let him do what he wants. Let him have Czechoslovakia he'll want Poland next.

–Not necessarily. He might stop there. I thought the Germans had no money.

–Listen. A British ship has just been bombed by Franco's lot – three of our fellas got killed. Goading us they are. And did you read about that spa in Austria? Said they didn't want Jews there. Won't let 'em go to concerts or restaurants or anything. I'm telling you, it's all brewing up.

It was worse than reading the *Echo*. Doom and gloom. Everyone you spoke to these days – it was all war, war, war. She was sick of it! And those horrible thugs in St Johns Gardens. She looked round at the smart new flat. Dot giving Judda a quick kiss, squeezing his hand. She thought of her old house. The condensation running down the walls. The black mould above the sink and on the ceiling. The writhing carpet of cockroaches that disappeared behind the wallpaper when she lit the gas lamps. The freezing outside lav. Huw used to paint it, cheer it up a bit. Had a map glued to the back of the door so he could study it while he was in there. She'd painted it for a few years after he died but then… He'd built her a little wall where she could plant flowers, brighten up the backyard. She used to grow sweetpeas and runner beans, snapdragons and all sorts. But she hadn't planted anything this year. What was the point? Funny, Dee never liked flowers in the house. Because they always died. She had a strange way of looking at the world.

Another war? She'd lost Huw at the end of the last one. Spanish flu. Fine at breakfast, dead by teatime. She and the girls never caught it, but then, Huw had been weakened by his time living rough. Looking for his real self. She never understood what that meant. Now she was on her own. No one needed her any more. No one bothered to visit. Her old friends had moved away or died. The girls were alright, they had their men, their children. It was their turn now. Old people should just disappear at a certain age. Make way for the young. No one would even notice. Or care for that matter. She was just existing from day to day on hand-outs. The world was becoming vicious and violent. She didn't want to be part of it any more.

She stood up. Grabbed her coat from the back of the chair.

–You've not finished your tea yet, sit down. I made scones—

Jane put her coat on. She looked hard at Dot for a moment. Squeezed her hand, looking straight into her eyes. Hoping they would say what she couldn't. Then she turned to Judda.

–Nice to see you again, Judda.

As she opened the door she added,

–Look after Dot.

Jane had to lean all her weight against the wind to close her front door. She slipped the bolt across. Then opened it again. Better not – how would anyone get in?

She took off her hat and stretched up to put it on the shelf above the coat rack. She used to reach it easily not so long ago. She hung her coat up carefully. That could go to charity, it was still in good enough condition. Someone could hem the cuffs.

The wind was whingeing through the letterbox, giving it a rattle, trying to get her attention. It was quite chilly in the house. Beginning of August – it felt more like Autumn. Perhaps she'd light a small fire in the grate. There was a bit of coal left in the scuttle. Although that might cause an explosion with all the gas. Better not. Mrs Brookes, three doors up, had put a cushion inside the oven to lay her head on.

Dee's letter was scowling at her from the mantelpiece. She supposed she ought to read it. She'd make herself a cuppa first.

She emptied the shopping bag. The cracked egg had oozed its broken yolk and white all over the bag. Just the empty shell left. She cleaned off her bits of shopping – that was a waste of money – washed the bag then filled the kettle, popping it on to boil. She had a look around to make sure everything was tidy. She'd dusted the parlour yesterday. The kitchen looked alright. Luckily, she'd just changed the sheets on her bed. She didn't want people thinking she was slovenly. She'd better leave her bank book and the rent book on the table. Oh, and the tontine – she'd paid up six months. She'd go upstairs after her tea, get them from the tin under her bed.

Everything looked shabby. Dot, with her indoor bath and hot water. And the sun balcony! Litherland's under water and she's got a sun balcony. What a joke.

The kettle started whistling then shrieking. Might as well have the last of the chocolate biscuits, they'd only go off. May be a while before they found her.

She settled in her old chair. Inspected the writing on the envelope again. It was getting worse. Why didn't Raphe do something? She sighed. Took a gulp of tea. Then ripped it open.

Madness! Utter madness!

Jane screwed up the letter.

What was the girl thinking? Sending her daughter here. How dare she be so high-handed! Not even a question – a statement! *'I'm sending April to live with you. She'll be arriving on the four o'clock train from Manchester on Wednesday.*' Oh will she? And what if she decided not to go and pick the child up – what then? What about *her* plans? She'd had it all worked out. Things were simpler this way. Damn and blast her! How did she raise such a selfish, thoughtless girl?

Well, she'd just write her a letter. This instant. Hang on, Wednesday? That was today. A telegram then. Do not send child. Stop. Won't be around. Stop. She could damn well take care of her own children. Not enough space? She'd brought up the two of them in that tiny back room. And the house was closing in on them? She'd actually taken the children to sleep outside one night. And the baby as well! What was Raphe doing? What was he thinking allowing her to do that? That's insane behaviour. Maybe madness ran in the family. Her great aunt had drunk Bluestone dissolved in water.

Oh, this was ridiculous. Now what was she supposed to do? If Dee was that mad, then maybe all three children ought to come and live with her. Not that she fancied that idea much. Raphe had a sister – maybe she could take the two youngest. And what was she supposed to do for food? She had one and nine pence to do her 'til the end of the week – that wasn't going to go far. And she doubted Dee was going to send the child with money. Perhaps the Parish would give her a little extra – the girl was a blood relative after all.

Damn and blast!

Jane sat glaring at the unlit grate for a long time. The letter screwed up in her hand.

Eventually, she stood up. Smoothed out the letter, lay it on the table. Well, she might as well light a fire now, warm the place up. Get the bed ready. They could have an omelette for their tea when they got back.

Had she been wrong to tell Dee that Arthur was missing in action? It seemed the kindest thing to do at the time. The idea of telling her his ship had been torpedoed off the coast of Norway. That there were no survivors. She couldn't. Dee was far too fragile. She'd thought, given time, Dee would come to accept Arthur wasn't coming back. Then she'd tell her the truth. But she never did accept it. Then there was all that stuff with the Spiritualists, talking to the dead. Perhaps she should have just given her the letter from Arthur's mother. Let her grieve. Then get on with her life.

Lime Street Station was packed when Jane arrived, breathless. She had to fight her way through to the right platform. The Manchester train was just pulling into the station – she'd made it by the skin of her teeth. Carriage doors were opening. People were jumping off as it screeched, slowly shuddering to a halt. She waited by the ticket collector to watch for April. Adults pushed past. Mothers with children, prams. People laden with parcels. She watched the passengers rushing along the platform. Coming, coming, handing in tickets, passing on through the gate. Then going, spreading in all directions. Submerging the concourse before streaming out through doors on all sides of the station. Like water finding its way out.

The passengers slowed to a trickle. Then finished. The last gentleman struggling under the weight of a large suitcase in one hand, bulky parcel in the other. She waited. Perhaps April didn't know she had to get off here, that it was the end of the line.

She spoke to the ticket collector.

–My granddaughter should have been on that train. Could I check to see if she's still sitting in one of the carriages?

–You got a platform ticket?

–No—

–Sorry. You need a ticket to enter the platform.

–Enter? I just want to— Well, could you check for me, please? She's only ten.

He whistled the porter.

–Bert! Check the train. See if there's a kid on it.

–Thank you.

Jane waited while the man made his way up the platform. Peering into every compartment. Closing the door afterwards. When he got to the top of the train he turned, waved at the ticket collector, shaking his head.

–Sorry. She's not on it.

–When's the next train from Oxford Road?

–Half an hour.

She'd probably missed the train. Dee always took ages to get ready. April'd be on the next. At least there was only half an hour to wait. There was a wooden bench opposite the platform gate. Be nice to have a sit down.

She sat in the quiet lull between trains. Watching for the cloud of sooty steam over the barriers. Hearing the screech of train brakes. Then another burst of people pouring through a gate somewhere along the concourse.

She couldn't stop thinking about the letter. Dee talking again about her terrible secret. The guilt she felt. She'd gone on about it just after April was born. Wouldn't tell Jane what it was. Jane had put it down to post baby blues. But Dee had mentioned it again in the letter. Something about not being to look at April without feeling shame. The child had two webbed fingers. Dee seemed to think that was her fault. That she was wicked. That it was God's punishment for what she'd done. It was totally out of proportion. These things happened, it was no one's fault. Just nature. She'd have to write back. Reassure her.

Half an hour later the Manchester train appeared. Jane took up her position at the gate. She stood on tip toe, trying to spot the child in a rush of adults.

When the last passenger had come through the gate, the ticket collector turned to her,

–Perhaps she's not coming.

–Oh, she will. My daughter wrote to tell me to meet her off the four o'clock. She's coming to live with me. She'll be on the next one. Probably just behind time. You know how it is with children, getting her packed and—

The ticket collector had already turned away.

She wasn't on the next train. Or the one after that. The long shadows had faded – Jane had only just realised – and the afternoon brightness had been replaced by a pinkish half-light. Fewer and fewer passengers were arriving now. Jane was cold and stiff. Hungry. And angry. Dee had said the four o'clock train and it was now nearly six. Perhaps the child wasn't coming. She really was the most infuriating girl. Utterly selfish.

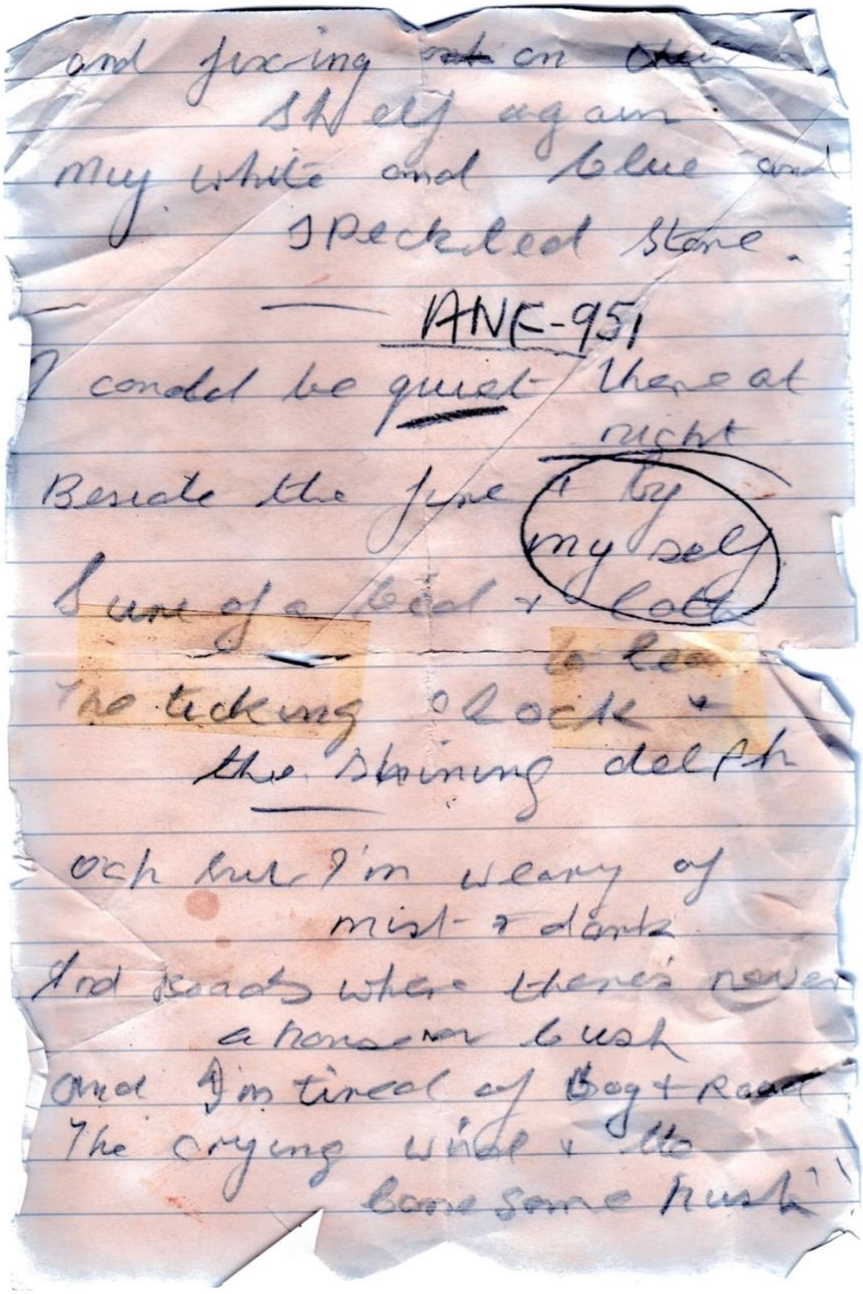
Jane bought a platform ticket and walked to the top where it narrowed. The rails converged beyond it, bending their way out of the station. You'd have to walk down that slope, along the tracks, through the tunnel. Make sure none of the guards or ticket collectors saw you.

She glanced around. There was no one on the platform and the ticket collector had closed the barrier and disappeared.

Another train shrieked its way into the station, blowing its whistle.

That was probably the last sound you'd hear. The driver, spotting you at the last minute, sounding a warning, pulling the brakes.

There were only three more trains due from Manchester that evening. Just under two hours to wait. She stomped her feet – they were so cold she couldn't feel her toes.



and fixing on
Shelf again
my white and blue and
Speckled Stone.

ANE-95

I could be quiet there at
night
Beside the fire I by
myself
Sum of a heal + Lots
to hear
the ticking clock +
the Shining delph

Och but I'm weary of
mist + dank
And roads where there's never
a house or bush
And I'm tired of Bog + Rain
The crying wind + the
lonesome hush

THE TRAM DRIVER 1940

Percy was kneeling on the cold linoleum. Bony elbows resting on the edge of the iron bedstead. Rusting in parts, he noticed, when his concentration lapsed. He had the sash window flung up as high as it would go. A cold wind whipped at his pyjamas. He shivered, grateful to be suffering, to show God just how contrite he was. He would stay there praying until the pain in his knees became unbearable. Trying to convince God, as he did every morning and evening, that the love he felt for Dee was a real, pure love. He didn't want to be disrespectful – he raised his eyes to heaven – but why had the Almighty put temptation in his way like this? He was, after all, a mere man. Weak. And he loved Dee. Surely God could see that? If this was a test, it was a cruel one.

He'd bumped into a fellow lodge member last week. Down at the Pier Head. He didn't know his name but recognized him from Stanley Park church where they both worshipped. And he'd recently moved branch to Percy's Lodge. After Percy and Dee had had their cuppas, he'd taken the mugs back to the tea stall. The chap was waiting to be served. Percy had been alarmed. He'd nodded, tried to smile. The chap had looked at Dee then at Percy. There was a look in his eyes. He couldn't recall if he and Dee had been touching or if he'd put his arm round Dee's shoulders while they'd stood and drunk their tea. They were usually discreet. Perhaps the chap hadn't seen anything. Perhaps it was just his own guilty conscience. But it had unnerved him. Especially when Dee said she might have seen him at her husband's surgery.

He leaned his forehead on the bed, exhausted. When he realised he was no longer praying, he slowly pushed himself to his feet. Rubbing the life back into his knees. Savouring the agony as the pain began to ease.

Dee had arrived, early as usual. Scarlet lipstick. Hat at a jaunty angle. Her eyes, caught in the sun, glinted like sovereigns. Wearing her curious uniform skirt. He still found it disconcerting. Split in the middle then sewn up like men's trousers. For modesty, Dee had explained, when she climbed the stairs. A normal skirt would be unseemly now they were wearing shorter hemlines. It did show off her calves and ankles though.

–Good morning, my sweet one.

–Morning, Percy.

She walked over to the office to hang up her coat. He inhaled deeply as she passed. *Soir de Paris*. His mother had only ever worn *Eau de Cologne*. It was still sitting on her dressing table though she'd been dead ten years. Sometimes he opened the stopper, breathed in the scent. He liked it in a nostalgic sort of way, because it smelt of her but really, it was rather pungent. Dee's perfume on the other hand was fragrant. Flowers and fruit perhaps, and just a hint of sensuality.

Of course, his mother wouldn't have approved. Perfume, in a time of war? He too, had been a little disappointed until Dee had explained that in times of great distress, women needed little luxuries like perfume, or lipstick – it was a way of coping. To make them feel normal.

But life wasn't normal any more. The Germans had started bombing Liverpool three months ago. Almost nightly. Every time he took the tram out he wondered what would be left standing. The Customs House had already been destroyed, the cathedral had been badly damaged. The Catholics were alright – they'd only just started building their crypt. Last month, a nurses' home in Fazakerley was hit. Targeting nurses? What evil bastards would do such a thing?

Dee pulled her ticket machine and money bag over her head, tugging the straps across her chest. His eyes lingered on the straps, the indent they made between her breasts. He pictured the small birthmark in the shape of Great Britain that lay just about where the straps crossed. He'd kissed it that night in Southport, claiming the miniature isle for his own.

Dee smiled. A touchpaper to his heart. Deep down, he knew it was wrong, that he should repent, but he loved Dee. Life would be nothing without her – dark, cold and lonely. And life was hanging by a thread now – nobody knew if or when it would be cut. Those poor nurses certainly didn't. Snip. Just like that.

–Shall we board? Percy?

She had a lovely, light voice. There was a musical chime to her words. And he loved the way her 'r's sounded so soft she barely said them. Percy offered his elbow, escorting Dee onto their tram – a Baby Grand. Once a beautiful crimson lake and cream, it was now painted over in a dark walnuty brown to stop it being seen by enemy bombers. Only the fender was painted white so people could see it coming – there had been one or two fatalities in the early days. The windows had cheese netting glued to them to stop them shattering – just a small porthole to see through. To focus on the destruction. The lightbulbs had been painted blue

to dim the light. It wasn't the same, driving something so dismal. He and Dee had been working the number 6A since she'd started as a clippie nearly a year ago. Answering the call to keep Britain on its feet. And it was hard work – they were long shifts. Never home much before midnight and the first tram took off again at seven the next morning. Dee hardly saw her children.

She stood close to him at the front of the tram. Jostling against him as the tram jerked its way along the tracks. He felt small spasms of joy with each contact. From the corner of his eyes he could see her cheeky little smile each time they touched. A laugh trembling on her lips, just waiting for him to say the right thing to release it. He loved the way her gold earrings caught the light as she moved. Bedded soft in her tiny plump lobes. Sometimes he'd put a hand on her arm to steady her. To feel that she was really there, next to him.

About quarter of a mile along Edge Lane, Percy drew the tram to a shuddering stop. Dee gripped the handrail.

–Mr Robinson, on cue.

Percy smiled as Dee made her way to the back of the tram. She was already punching his ticket as Mr Robinson gave her the exact fare.

–Single to the Pier Head, Mr Robinson.

–Did you hear? They hit the Seaman's Orphanage in Tuebrook last night.

Dee covered her mouth with her hand.

–Didn't explode, thank God. Bomb disposal's there now, our Larry said.

Dee swung back up the tram to Percy, clinging to alternate straps.

Percy watched her in the mirror. Her jacket rising as she moved, gaping at the top. But he couldn't see anything – she was too trussed up in that heavy wool armoury. *Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.* He didn't need to see them – he had a clear picture in his mind. His abiding memory of Southport. Their one glorious night together. White and firm with the palest soft pink nipples, turning a deep shade of red as they hardened under his fingers...

His mother had sellotaped paper over some of the lines of the *Songs of Solomon*. She'd encouraged him to read the Bible every day. He'd only discovered how erotic the verses were after she died. Carefully prising the tape off, he was shocked to the core. So lustful, so sinful, and in the Good Book. It was a wonder the Church allowed it to remain in the Bible at all. He'd been embarrassed by his erection, as though his mother might still walk into the room and

catch him. At thirty-four, he was very much an innocent back then. He'd felt uncomfortable thinking about women in sexual terms. The Songs of Solomon didn't sit quite flat anymore when he closed the bible – there remained a slight gap where he'd smoothed and creased the pages against the spine. Even now, even after Southport (God forgive him) he felt guilty and thrilled each time he read about breasts and lips and tongues. It was like a drug – he'd read until he was sated then slam the Bible shut. Sometimes just looking at Dee could bring on those feelings. That's what went wrong that weekend.

They trundled into town, past the burnt out shell of TJs. Percy held his breath. Dreading the possibility that St George's Hall might have been blown to smithereens. He pulled the tram round the corner into William Brown Street. It was still intact. He breathed out. The Picton Library had also survived, and the museum. He'd heard from a passenger yesterday that the Tobacco Warehouse on Stanley Dock had been hit. The man hadn't said how badly but Percy pictured it as a brick mountain slowly tumbling into the Mersey. The British Empire crumbling off the quay. The tension was rising in his gut. He clenched the controller harder as the tram swung into Dale Street. The Town Hall was still in one piece anyway. He wished he'd enlisted, although at forty-four he was probably too old. And they needed tram drivers to keep the city moving. He supposed he was doing his bit. But he felt so angry sometimes he wanted to punch someone.

The tram rumbled to a stop at the top of Water Street. The passengers fell silent. The tension seemed to pull the rickety old vehicle in tight, as if a collective breath had been drawn and the walls of the tram were straining inwards. What were they going to find when they turned onto the Strand?

While they were waiting for the lights to change Dee started singing. Holding onto one of the handrails, the other arm outstretched. Hat angled, shading one eye – like Greta Garbo. Unbearably sexy. Mouth pouting. Eyelashes batting in slow motion.

–*In my sweet little Alice blue gown*...

Their song.

They'd gone to the pictures on their afternoon off a while back. *Irene* had been playing at the Carlton on Moss Lane – that was just a crater now, a hole into hell. She'd learned the words to that particular song and sung it to him when they had their lunch together. Holding hands on the grass in Bowring Park where their tram terminated. He'd watch the tiny chestnut

curls that had escaped her hat bouncing against her cheek as she sang. Her nose, slightly upturned at the end gave her a youthful, mischievous appearance. He loved everything about her, even the way her right eye drooped a little when she was tired, it was sort of sexy. He wanted to reach across and kiss her neck, nuzzle her just behind her ears, suck her ear lobes – she'd been teaching him. But he couldn't do that in public.

The passengers were on edge. Dee was singing first to one, then another. Swaying her hips, waving her delicate free hand as the tram leaned round the corner. One or two women joined in, a few men came downstairs and gathered on the platform.

He smiled, wondering if they had any idea she was singing for him. He wanted to sweep her up in his arms like they did on the big picture. Kiss her long and hard on those beautiful soft lips. Lips that tasted like sin and felt just as good. Lord forgive him.

The lights changed to green. Percy released the handbrake and the tram jolted off again. Faces on the Dockside of the tram turned, squashing against the windows, peering through the small portholes in the wire netting. Other passengers peered over their shoulders. The Liver Building was still standing. The pressure in the salon released. In the distance, it looked as if the Albert Dock had also been spared.

Dee sang as they juddered along the Strand. Finishing just as they turned onto the Pier Head. To much applause, she bowed then tinged the bell as the passengers alighted.

She was an exceptional woman. His woman. And very soon, he hoped, his wife.

He whistled to himself as Dee ran upstairs to reverse the backs of the seats ready for the return trip.

He'd already untied the rope, pulling the trolley wheel off the overhead wires, when Dee hopped off. She walked up the tram with him as he dragged it round to what was now, the back of the tram. Stopping while he reattached it to the overhead wires, sparks exploding as it made contact.

–Tea?

Dee nodded to the tea stall near the ferry terminus where a jolly, fat woman was handing out mugs to a small queue.

Checking the wheel had made a firm connection, Percy wound the guide rope tightly back onto its bracket.

–Of course, my dear.

Percy and Dee leaned over the railings as they sipped their tea, staring down into the Mersey. He'd checked around as he did lately, to make sure there was no one they knew. No one who might recognize them. They stood very close, their shoulders touching, free hands brushing against each other. Fingers occasionally twining.

–I've never seen it so calm and so blue.

Percy gestured at the water with his mug.

–The water is an echo of your soul, Percy – whatever you're feeling is reflected back at you.

–Really?

Dee looked at him. Then laughed. Percy began to laugh as well.

–Oh Percy! For an intelligent man…

He grabbed her, squeezing her against him.

–You're a wicked woman, Dee Pendlebury.

She pulled away from him. Her eyes darkened. As if the sun had gone out. They looked more green than amber. The colour so deep they were almost black.

–I'm sorry, my love, I was only joking.

But she stepped away and turned her back on him.

He hadn't intended this relationship to start. It had begun as a quick drink in the Glasshouse after their shift. Both too tense to sleep after fourteen-hours straight. Within weeks they'd settled into an easy friendship. He'd heard people talk of their soul-mates but never understood what they meant. Now he knew – Dee was his. Despite his beliefs, his misgivings about her being married. Despite constantly trying to convince himself she was just a good friend, he fell in love with Dee. If her hand brushed against his, he felt a shock through his body like a wasp sting. Her breath on his cheek as they talked, heads bent together against the din of the pub, made him shiver.

One evening, as he saw her home, she turned to say good night. Somehow their lips brushed. They looked at each other. She didn't pull back so he kissed her. She kissed him back. Then quickly slipped from his grasp, through the gate, throwing it shut behind her. He watched her walk up the path and let herself in through the front door. She didn't look back.

But they kissed each time they said goodnight after that. And began to spend their one afternoon off together. Her husband was working and the children were at school. He started to plan a life with her. She'd leave the husband. She and the children would come and

live with him – his was a good sized three-bedroomed terrace. They could bring the eldest from Dee's mother's – her family would be complete again. Anfield wasn't a bad place to live, just round the corner from Stanley Park. Lots of space for the children to play.

He'd worked up the courage to tell her about his dreams a few weeks ago. She hadn't said no. Hadn't seemed alarmed or put off. She felt the same as he did – he was sure of that – though she couldn't really talk openly about her feelings. Well, she was still married.

–Time we were off, Percy.

Dee wouldn't meet his eyes. He felt a sharp pain in his chest. She took his cup and returned it with hers to the stall while he changed the destination on the front of the tram. He could have kicked himself. Why, oh, why did he call her wicked? Even in jest. She already felt guilty about their affair. And she was so sensitive. Probably wouldn't speak to him for the rest of the day.

At twenty to six, the following Tuesday, Percy put on his hat and coat and headed out into the frosty evening for the Lodge on Robsart Street. They normally only met the first Friday of the month. He'd had a letter in the post saying a special assembly had been called, all members must attend. The pavement was slightly crunchy underfoot where the ice was beginning to form. It glittered like tiny diamonds. He'd have to start saving for a proper engagement ring. He'd noticed Dee didn't wear one.

When he arrived at the hall, he was surprised to see the Grand Master at the top table. His old friend Harry was near the door, taking his coat off.

–Evening, Harry. Bit parky.

Percy rubbed his hands to get the blood flowing through them again. He'd been thinking about Dee while he was getting ready and rushed out without his gloves.

–What's happening?

Harry just nodded and turned away, slipping into the back row of chairs. He bent his head close to another of the members, had a whispered conversation with furrowed brows. Percy walked to the front of the hall to take his place at the deputy table. As chaplain for the Lodge he led the opening prayers of the meeting.

He pulled off his hat, unbuttoned his coat but before he could place it over the back of his chair, the Master, took his arm.

–It's okay, Percy. The Grand Master's going to lead the prayers.

–But I always—

–It's an emergency meeting. No need. Just take a seat on the front row. Charlie's saved you a place.

Charlie turned to talk to a group of men on the row behind, his back to Percy. Percy glanced at them. The man from the tea stall was there. He wouldn't meet Percy's eye. Percy adjusted his sash, smoothing it over his suit jacket. He fingered the silver emblems that were pinned down the length of the orange silk. It was always the ladder he paused over, something about the rungs felt good under his fingertips. Faith, hope and charity. He folded up his coat, laying it across his lap with his hat on top.

The Grand Master came in from the kitchen trailed by a few of his cronies. He banged his gavel on the table three times.

Everyone stood up.

–We'll begin with the Lord's Prayer.

When they'd finished, he rapped once on the table. People exchanged glances. Then sat, hesitantly.

The Grand Master straightened the wooden arc with the Star of David hanging from it. Lining it up with the table edge as the room fell silent.

He stood up. Bowed his head. Then with a deep breath, he raised his chin.

–An Orangeman should have a sincere love and veneration for his Heavenly Father.

His voice a throaty, Northern Irish bass.

–A humble and steadfast faith in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, believing in Him as the only Mediator between God and man.

He paused. Looked around the room, slowly.

–He should cultivate truth and justice, brotherly kindness…

Percy had stopped listening. He was thinking about Coopers on Wednesday – he was taking Dee out for tea – rehearsing what he would say to her. But he couldn't decide how to begin. A preamble or launch straight in?

–…and he should seek the society of the VIRTUOUS!

Startled, Percy looked up – the Grand Master was staring straight at him.

–And avoid that of EVIL!

Percy shifted in his chair, his neck stiffening.

–Women are the DEVIL'S CREATURES! And they will tempt a man beyond his endurance. Eve brought about the fall of mankind by her evil temptation of poor, weak Adam. But we must be STRONG! We have to FIGHT temptation. FIGHT IT!

He smashed his fist on the table. The arc jumped.

–Percy James Walker. Stand up.

Percy looked at the man next to him. Rolled up his coat, fumbling it onto his chair as he stood to face the Grand Master.

–Come here, Mr Walker. Face your fellow lodge members. Your friends. Your neighbours. Look them in the eyes.

Percy was gripping his hat, eyes locked on the floor. He glanced up as his coat began to slip off the chair. He stepped towards it. Then stepped back, watching as it gradually slumped to the floor.

–Look at each and every one of them. Look at the men you have betrayed by your lustful, *sinful* behaviour.

The Grand Master turned to the rows of intense, scowling faces.

–This man has been carrying on with a married woman. A woman married to a CATHOLIC! He has been seen on several occasions consorting with her. Not least in Southport, linking arms, coming out of a BOARDING HOUSE!

A loud judgemental gasp. Then low grumblings spread in waves around the room. *Disgraceful! Shame on you. Adulterer.* Percy's mouth set hard, teeth clamped shut. Who had betrayed him? That little bastard from the tea stall? Percy glared at him but the little shyster turned away. He couldn't have been in Southport as well, surely? Who else had betrayed him? How many of the bastards had been spying on him?

–You have desisted all attempts by the Pastor of your church to get you back on the straight and narrow. You have chosen, of your own free will, to follow the road to HELL!

Reverend Deighton had collared him a couple of times lately, coming out of the Eucharist Service. Said he'd heard rumours about him and a married woman. He'd told him to repent, give her up. Give her up? Like giving up chocolate or alcohol for Lent? Not that you could get much of either nowadays. But as much as he wanted to repent of sin, he just couldn't see his love for Dee that way. How could it be a sin to love someone? How could he possibly repent of something that was essentially – apart from that one weekend in Southport – pure?

–Percy James Walker. You will stand down as Chaplain of this Lodge and you will be ostracised from this community.

It took a few seconds to register. He was being drummed out of the Lodge! He picked up his coat from the floor. All eyes on him as he brushed the dust from it. He shoved on his hat. Bundled the coat over his arm. Then strode down the hall, knocking the picture of the King with his shoulder as he stumbled against the wall. He heard his old life shattering behind him as he pushed through the door onto the street. His friends from the Lodge would no longer talk to him. Not that he socialised with them much, he wasn't a drinker. But he'd bear the stigma for the rest of his life. The disgrace. He could feel the ghost of his father glaring down at him. His father had been Chaplain of that Lodge for twenty-two years. Honest and upright. A pillar of the community. Teetotal. A saint by his mother's accounts. He'd dropped dead of a heart attack at the age of forty-six, working on the railway tracks. Percy had spent the last twenty-four years trying to live up to him. It was a blessing his mother wasn't around to see this.

He pulled on his coat, tugged up the collar. Dug his hands deep into his pockets. He couldn't quite grasp it yet. The loss. He listened to the crisp click of his heels on the frosty pavement. Pictured Dee's beautiful smiling face. It was a sacrifice worth making. When he'd made it right with Dee, when she became his wife it would all be worth it. He wouldn't need the Lodge or any of those sneaky, spying bastards when he had her in his bed.

Coopers cafe was on the first floor of Coopers Foodstore. It was the poshest place he could think to bring her – he couldn't afford the Adelphi.

Dee had gone home after their morning shift to get changed.

Percy was waiting by the door. There was a sharp nip in the air and his face was beginning to numb. She was twenty minutes late. Perhaps she'd changed her mind. She hadn't sounded too certain yesterday when he'd suggested it. They'd only just got back on friendly terms after he called her wicked. Perhaps she still hadn't forgiven him. His treat, he'd emphasized, in case that was going to be a problem. She was usually so punctual. The smell of roasting coffee was acrid, stifling. He felt sick. Despite the cold, he was sweating inside his heavy overcoat by the time he saw her emerge from the crowds on Church Street.

–Sorry. My mother-in-law asked me to go for some Epsom salts as I was leaving the house.

–Let's go in.

He said it more sharply than he meant to.

They walked through the displays of food – sardines in glass jars, jugged hare, peacock ham, fish of all kinds. And cheese, fresh fruit and vegetables he'd never seen before – it was hard to believe there was rationing on. A war. And what on earth were military pickles? For those in the money, any type of food could still be had. He stopped, gasping at the price of the bacon.

–Can I help you, sir?

The assistant loomed, unsmiling. They both knew he couldn't afford to shop there.

–No. Thank you.

He hated himself for mumbling, for looking cheap in Dee's eyes. But she, bless her, turned away, exclaiming,

–Oh look! Potato scraping gloves. Just what I've always wanted. Why just wash your hands when you can buy an expensive pair of gloves?

–Be cheaper to pay someone to scrape them for you.

–Oh, but darling, these are for the scullery maid, quite obviously!

Darling. She'd called him darling. He wanted to get her upstairs to the cafe as soon as possible.

He led her through the hardware section – past the pineapple corers and porcelain lemon squeezers. Through the glass section with its port decanters and crystal custard glasses. Glinting at him. Flaunting their exorbitant price tags. He was glad to reach the stairs up to the cafe. His cousin had told him it was pricey but just about affordable if you stuck to something simple. He hoped Dee wouldn't order anything too expensive.

It was a beautiful cafe**.** He was glad he'd brought her here. This was a momentous occasion. Bit like an engagement really, if everything went well. The ceiling was high, the walls painted cream with pale green panels on which oval paintings hung or were painted on the walls – he couldn't quite tell – then framed in ornately moulded plaster. The furniture was simple but the tables wore white linen cloths. It was much bigger than he'd expected. He'd imagined something more intimate. Never mind. It showed Dee he meant business.

He hung their coats on a nearby hat stand.

–I've never been in here before.

Dee glanced around smiling as she waited for Percy to pull out her chair. The husband often took her to the Adelphi for cocktails and dinner. He wondered if she was disappointed. He felt a little deflated, as if he didn't quite come up to scratch, didn't quite match the husband's generosity. His class.

–It's lovely. What a fabulous treat, thank you Percy. Beautifully ornate.

He loved Dee so much.

A waitress brought a menu.

Macaroon gateaux, iced orange cake, Russian Vanilla. Was that the price for one cake? *One?* His cousin obviously had a different idea of affordable. Four pounds a week didn't go that far. The scones seemed reasonable – in comparison.

–Oh, that looks interesting. What do you suppose Nuvian nut meat is? Or Protose nut meat for that matter?

Very expensive, from what he could see.

–Eustace Miles' Embread – fresh, daily, it says it here.

She glanced over the top of the menu, gave him that little grin.

–Eustace Miles – now he sounds like a chap we should take seriously. But is he good at baking, that's the question?

Well, his bread was cheaper than the cakes.

–I think I'd quite like a lemon scone and some tea. How about you?

The cheapest thing on the menu.

–Are you sure you wouldn't like something more exotic?

–I like scones. I'm a simple girl at heart, Percy, you know that.

He fidgeted while they waited for their tea and scones. He knocked the small vase of flowers on their table but Dee caught it in time. Then he turned quickly to look at the light fittings Dee was pointing out and knocked the arm of a passing waitress. She spilled the drinks on her tray, tutting loudly as she returned to the kitchen.

Percy tugged at his tie. Smoothed his hair, pulled at his cuffs. He just wanted to ask his question. He needed to know. Especially after last night. He couldn't tell her about his disgrace – she'd think she was to blame. She'd probably break off their affair. He'd tell her after she said yes. If she said yes. She had to say yes. He pressed down on his knee to stop it jiggling. Bloody hell, were they growing the damn tea leaves? His nerves couldn't take it much longer.

Eventually, their waitress arrived. Before she could finish putting out the tea things and the plates of scones, Percy said,

–Divorce him. Come and live with me.

Damn!

Dee and the waitress looked at each other. When the waitress left, Dee picked up her scone. Sliced it carefully in two. Then reached for the butter.

–I want to make you honest— make an honest woman of you. Not that you're not. Honest, I mean. I know you are. Just not—

She reached across the table, gripped his hand.

–Ssh. I know what you mean. What we're doing isn't very honest. It's not fair on Raphe.

She let go of his hand and poured out their tea.

–Milk?

Percy nodded.

He watched as she slowly nibbled at her scone. Her face was impossible to read. She was wearing the gold locket he'd bought her. She still hadn't had the chance to put his photograph inside. He kept watching until she finished eating. She dabbed the corners of her mouth then looked at him, for a long time.

Percy had been tense all day. The Inspector had been riding the tram with them in the morning so he wasn't able to speak to Dee. She'd been bright and chatty as they huddled out of the cold in a park shelter to eat their lunch. She'd tucked into her sandwich but he'd had no appetite. His stomach was in knots. She'd said she needed to think. She'd let him know by the end of the week. What was there to think about? Was it that business in Southport? So humiliating. But it was his first time. He wouldn't let that happen again. Still, other than visiting fallen women – which he certainly was not going to do – to practice the act entailed the spilling of his seed. At his own hand. A mortal sin. His mother said sexual sins were the very worst kind.

Too late now.

His stomach spasmed. Publicly expelled from the Lodge. Should he tell Dee? Would that convince her to say yes, knowing the sacrifice he'd made for her? Or would she think less of him now he'd lost his standing in the community? He'd seen his mate, Harry, at the Post Office the other day – Harry had walked straight past him. Even after Percy had stopped to

say hello. The butcher asked him in a lewd manner who the floozy was and was she worth it – he wasn't even a Freemason. It seemed his disgrace was known to everyone in the locality. He'd have to shop further afield. His father would have banished him from the house. Drummed out of the Lodge for sins of the flesh. His mother would never have forgiven him – disgracing his father's name. He'd felt ashamed visiting his mother's grave last Sunday. He'd actually wept as he changed the flowers.

Percy leant hard on the controller, trying not to vomit.

He'd had one or two near misses earlier in the day – idiots wandering out in front of the tram. He'd got quite angry, Dee had to calm him down. Some fellows started getting rowdy on the top deck, just after they'd boarded along Dale Street about ten in the evening. Been out on the ale, some of them worse for wear. One of them had barged past Dee, up to the top deck, then refused to pay his fare. Percy had stopped the tram. Stormed through the salon, up the stairs demanding to see everyone's tickets. When he found the little sod who hadn't paid his fare he dragged him downstairs, hurled him off. His mates had come down to remonstrate with him but he'd threatened to throw them off as well. Said he'd call the police. They went back upstairs and started laughing, shouting down through the windows to the man who'd been thrown off. He wasn't sure if Dee was proud of him or ashamed when she'd come up to the front for a few minutes between stops to stand by him, rub his arm. But he'd done it for her.

When they reached the bottom of Edge Lane, the warning sirens had started. Most of the male passengers ignored it. Some of the women got a little bit jumpy.

–Can you stop at Durning Road shelter, one of them asked.

It was further along Edge Lane, not far from the depot.

Dee came to the front of the tram.

–I'll drop you off there as well, Percy told her.

–I can take your ticket machine and money pouch back to the depot. You keep safe.

–No, I'll stay with you. I don't like public shelters and the children will wonder where I am in the morning.

He tried insisting but she refused. She'd go straight home after the shift, she said, rather than staying out for a drink, if he didn't mind.

At Durning Road, all the passengers, including the rowdy group from upstairs, jumped off and hurried straight into the shelter. People were swarming to it – it was going to be full tonight.

When they reached the depot they were told to go straight home rather than on to Bowring Park. The raids were pretty bad and there shouldn't be anyone left wandering around in the blackout anyway.

Percy walked Dee home. She glanced up at the windows of the house. He gave her a quick kiss but she turned her head so it landed on her cheek.

–Goodnight, my darling. You are thinking about what I said?

–Night, Percy.

Dee was in the office when Percy arrived for work the next morning. She and a few other drivers and clippies were sitting in silence. They all looked up at him as he walked in. He felt defensive.

–What's wrong?

–Durning Road shelter took a direct hit last night. A hundred killed they reckon – more maybe.

–Loads of them are still trapped under the rubble – the school collapsed on top of it, someone else added.

One of the clippies started crying.

–And there's fires down there now, and the steam pipes are broken. They've been trying to dig people out before they burn to death.

Percy looked at Dee. She started weeping.

–I know. I know.

He dropped his bag and held her very tightly.

Dee stayed down the back of the tram all day. They had their tea in silence looking out over the river. The water was dark, churning. Like sump oil. Percy imagined it flowing through the countryside, turning the fields black and toxic. Like poison running through the veins of the country. Killing as it flowed.

At dinnertime, it was raining. Sharp, blade-like drops cutting their faces as they walked into the park. They sat in a wooden shelter that once overlooked flowerbeds but now watched over a square of cabbages. Dee remained silent.

Percy opened his tin box and looked at the single slice of ham and bread. The shrivelled apple.

–I'm sorry, Percy.

–For what?

But he already knew.

Dee shook her head.

–All those poor people. And children, little children.

Percy didn't speak.

–One of the passengers said they pulled a little girl out about two hours ago. Twelve years old. Still alive. They'd given up hope of any more survivors when a fireman saw movement under the rubble.

Percy stared at his sandwich. Rolled the apple back and forth.

–They cover bomb sites in lime – but what if there are more survivors? Trapped under the rubble. Still alive like that girl? Can you imagine, the flesh dissolving off their bones? Probably injured or badly burned by the hot water already. Oh Percy – it doesn't bear thinking about.

Percy looked out at the wet gravel beyond the shelter.

–I kept thinking, it could have been our children down there.

'Our' as in hers and Raphe's, she meant. Percy stood up, booted a large grey stone he'd singled out.

–You can't build your happiness on someone else's unhappiness.

Raphe's unhappiness. What about his? She had no idea what he'd sacrificed for her. Kicked out of the Lodge. Ignored by former friends. Gossiped about in the shops, a figure of ridicule. And banished from his church. She'd led him into sin. Mortal sin. Reverend Deighton had pointed down at him from the pulpit. Told the entire congregation that he was no longer welcome in their midst. That they should turn their backs on him. Shun the unrepentant sinner. Losing the Lodge was one thing but losing his church, his religion? And all those nights in bed. Practicing. For her. All that *sinfulness*.

–No!

He grabbed her by the top of her arm.

–You can't stay with him. You have to divorce him and marry me. I insist.

He clutched at her face but she slapped him then wriggled free. She stood up and walked away.

–Don't walk away from me. You owe me.

She kept walking.

–I love you, you selfish *bitch!*

Percy was waiting at the front of the tram, hands on the controller, as he was every morning now. Dee came out of the office, waving at someone on the other side of the depot. One of the drivers ran up behind her, grabbed her round the waist, then waltzed her up to the tram. She had her head thrown back, laughing.

She was breathless when she climbed on board.

–Morning, Percy. That Ted. Honestly!

She sat down and took some deep breaths.

–Not a bad day. Just a little drizzle.

He didn't turn around. He imagined her glancing through one of the small portholes, confirming what she'd just said. Smiling that damned smile. As if everything was alright. As if nothing had happened between them. Always bloody smiling. Damn and blast the woman.

–Sun may come out later.

An evil man is held captive by his own sins. God, how wretched was he? God took man's spare rib to make woman, and man had been in pain ever since.

He couldn't bear it. Dee carrying on as normal. Performing for the customers. She even sang their song last week. He'd gripped her arm when they stopped at the Pier Head for their morning tea. Pushing his face very close to hers, he'd hissed,

–Don't. Don't you ever sing that song in front of me again.

She hadn't even had the decency to look embarrassed. Didn't even flinch although he'd been furious. She'd just shrugged and said, alright. And smiled. Patted his arm.

He couldn't bear to see her. To hear her voice. To watch as the customers fawned over her. The other drivers telling him how lucky he was to have Dee as his clippie – must make the days fly by, what a breath of fresh air, what a livewire. *What a bitch!* He'd never hated

anyone as much as he hated her. And that was a sin as well, hate. Every which way he turned she led him further and further into sin.

He'd started splashing himself with cold water, sleeping with the window open to atone for what he'd done. But it wasn't enough. He couldn't, in all honesty, repent. As much as he hated her now, he couldn't regret what they'd had. He felt no remorse for that night in Southport. The feeling of being inside her even for those few short seconds had been blissful. It still gave him an erection. Reverend Deighton wouldn't let him back in the church. Not ever, he said, even if Percy repented from now until his death. Not after what Percy had called him. But he'd been so incensed when the Reverend had banished him in public like that. Hard on the heels of the Lodge humiliation. He was under a lot of pressure. And it was all her fault. And hating her now made his lustful thoughts and actions even worse. He could no longer say it was love. What he felt now was hate. Pure hatred.

The other week, he'd smashed his mother's china dogs in a rage. He tried gluing the pieces together again but they were too small and some of the pieces had disappeared or disintegrated. He'd had to throw them out. His mother's most precious possessions.

Dee had ruined his life. Totally and utterly destroyed it.

When he'd finally told her. When he'd pushed her up against the railings one morning at the Pier Head, hammered it home. Described the humiliation of being banned from his Lodge. Publicly expelled by the Grand Master himself. When he'd told her he'd been thrown out of his church. Lost his religion – probably his chance of eternal happiness. She said they'd been wrong to get close but it was just one of those things. *Just one of those things.* Now it was over, couldn't he just go back to the Lodge and tell them? Say sorry to the Reverend? *For the lips of an immoral woman are as sweet as honey, but in the end she is as bitter as poison.*

He gripped the controller, throttling it as tightly as he could.

–Well, we can't stay here all day, Percy.

Dee tinged the bell in a jolly little rhythm.

Percy released the handbrake. He looked at the rails in front of him, stretching straight ahead along Edge Lane. Narrowing in the distance until they grew hazy and melded with the tarmac of the road. The tram jolted off, carrying him, unwaveringly towards the river.

BEVERAGES

Pot of Tea, per person	4d.
Pot of China Tea, per person	5d.
Russian Tea, per glass	5d.
Coffee, per cup	3d.
Coffee, per cup, with Cream	4d.
Cocoa	4d.
Bovril, with Biscuit	4d.
HORLICKS plain	5d.
HORLICKS with milk	7d.
Milk, Hot or Cold, per glass	4d.
Orange, Lemon, or Grape Fruit Squash (served Hot or Cold), per glass	4d.

BREAD, CAKES, etc.

*Brown Bread and Butter	3d.
*White Bread and Butter	3d.
*Roll and Butter	2d.
*Butter, per pat, Id.	roll, 1d.
Dry Toast	2d.
*Buttered Toast	3d.
Toasted Bun, Scone, or Tea Cake	3d.
Biscuits, per portion	3d.
Scones or Tea Cakes	each, 2d.
Buns and Plain Cakes	„ 2d.
Custard, Fruit, and other Tarts	„ 3d.
Cut Cake (Fruit or Plain), etc.	per slice, 3d.
Cakes and Pastries	each, 4d.
Preserves, Jam, Honey, etc.	per portion, 3d.

FRUITS, etc.

Fruit Salad	10d.
Pears, Pineapple, Peaches, or Apricots	10d.
Stewed Prunes or Figs	5d.
Stem Ginger (when available)	9d.
Fruit Jelly and Cream	6d.
Trifle	6d.
'Quality' Ices, Vanilla	4d. and 6d.
'Quality' Ices, Strawberry	4d. and 6d.
'Quality' Ices, Mixed	8d.
Cream	2d.

SALADS, etc.

Fresh Salmon Mayonnaise or Salad (when available)	2/6
Salmon, Lobster, or Crab Conserve, Salad or Mayonnaise (when available)	2/-
French Salad	7d.
Green, Potato, or Vegetable Salad	6d.
Tomato, Sardine, or Egg Salad (when available)	10d.

CIGARETTES. Popular Brands are obtainable from Waitress or Cash Desk.

EGG DISHES

(as supplies are available)

Boiled Egg	
Poached Egg on Toast	
Poached Eggs (two) on Toast	
Scrambled Egg on Toast	
Fried Egg and Chips	
Egg Salad	
Egg Sandwiches	4d. and 7d.

FISH DISHES

(as supplies are available)

Fried Fillets of Plaice (two) and Chips	2/-
Sardines on Toast	10d.
Fresh Salmon Mayonnaise or Salad (when available)	2/6
Salmon, Lobster, or Crab Conserve, Salad or Mayonnaise (when available)	2/-
Fillets of Fish (two) and Chips	1/9

SANDWICHES

(as available)

Assorted Tea Sandwiches	per plate, 8d.
Ham, Tongue, or Beef	4d.
Sardine, Lobster, Crab, or Salmon	4d.
Egg Sandwiches	4d.
Lettuce, Cress, or Tomato (in season)	4d.
Bovril Sandwiches	4d.
Anchovy Sandwiches	4d.

SAVOURIES AND TOASTIES

Customers are requested to allow a few minutes for preparation

Heinz Baked Beans on Toast	10d.
Spaghetti on Toast	10d.
Mushrooms on Toast	1/-
Welsh Rarebit	10d.
Buck Rarebit	1/2

COLD MEATS

(as available)

Ham or Tongue	per plate, 1/4
Ham and Tongue	„ „ 1/4
Cold Roast Beef or Lamb	„ „ 1/4
Chicken and Ham	„ „ 2/-

GRILLS AS AND WHEN AVAILABLE

MORNING COFFEE, 3d.

*IMPORTANT BUTTER SHORTAGE

No guarantee can be given that butter will be supplied. The Management reserve the right to supply margarine or a mixture of butter and margarine.

NOTICE

All meals served must comply with Ministry of Food Regulations. The Ministry of Food has decided that no person shall be served at one meal with more than one main course of either Meat, Game, Poultry, Fish, Egg, or Cheese.

THE MOTHER-IN-LAW 1943

If only that damn woman would admit she broke the cup. All this unpleasantness could be over, could have *been* over days ago. She just wanted an apology, 'I'm sorry I broke your cup, Mrs Pendlebury.' Simple as that. All done and dusted. She wasn't a difficult woman, heaven knows she didn't want to come between a man and his wife, but it was the principle of the thing.

Dee had an irritating manner. It was her face. Defiant but calm. And that smile. Smug. Self-righteous. Sometimes she wanted to slap her, she really did. The way she just stood there quietly and denied breaking the cup. Point blank. Didn't get angry or raise her voice. Absolutely infuriating! How can you argue with someone like that? She could understand why Raphe shouted at her – pure frustration. And she was obviously guilty – you'd be annoyed if you were wrongly accused but she wasn't. Just goes to prove. You only had to take one look at all the chipped muggin cups and plates in their kitchen. The woman took no care of anything. Dyspraxic, William said once – he liked to study his medical encyclopedia. She didn't like harping on about it but it wasn't just any cup – it was her special cup. The last of a bone china set her parents had given them for a wedding present.

And there it was, almost a week later. In full view on the sideboard. Chipped and cracked. The handle lying next to it. Mocking her. Dee had done that deliberately, she could bank on it. Defiant to the last. She picked it up. It looked like her dear Raphe had tried to mend it, he knew how much the cup had meant to her, but the glue wasn't strong enough. Some things just can't be mended.

Evelyn emptied the teapot, pouring the last dregs of cold tea down the sink. Almost half a cup! She hated waste. Why make a huge pot of tea if you're only going to drink half of it. And a war on, not to mention rationing. All those half cups add up. She tipped the tea leaves into the compost bowl then rinsed the pot, leaving it upside down on the draining board. She lined up the cups in the sink, poured a little bleach into each one. Tannin. Dreadful stuff. Imagine what your stomach looked like!

She gave the bleach bottle a shake. Nearly empty. She'd leave a note to remind Dee to buy more. She could pick it up on her way home from work. *Work!* Why was she working with two young children to look after? And why wasn't the eldest with them? Plenty of room

here. They had the whole basement flat to themselves now Mrs Lomax had left. She'd also let them use the bedroom on the half-landing.

She pulled on her rubber gloves. It was important to keep your hands soft, even at this age. A dollop of cold cream on the face then rub the greasy palms over the back of each hand – didn't take much to look after yourself. Dee had let herself go of late. Broken nails, un-ironed blouses, hair left loose. There was no excuse for lack of grooming. Evelyn scrubbed the inside of each cup, filled them with water, then left them in the sink to get rid of the smell of bleach. They were ugly things. Harsh geometric patterns on them in horrible colours. Communist cups she always thought of them. William had shown her some pictures in a book of Russian painting from the 20s. It had a name. What did he call it? Construction, constructionist? Something that sounded as if it ought to be on a building site anyway. Brutal things. Thick rimmed. How Dee could bear to drink tea from cups like that... Evelyn had always loved the pale colour of the apricot roses on her cup. So unusual. You can't buy china like that anymore. Forty-seven years old. Forty-seven years she'd kept it and that woman managed to break it in one day.

She'd only nipped down to check Dee had put the curtains back up. She'd washed and ironed them the day before – well, that slattern would never get around to it. They were immaculate when she'd finished. Not a crease or a ripple. Iron them damp, that was the secret. Too dry and it was nigh on impossible to get the creases out of thick cotton. She'd imagined they'd still be folded on the sideboard getting crushed. The thought had popped into her head as she was having her afternoon cuppa so she'd gone straight down, cup in hand, expecting to have to hang them herself. But they were actually up. Raphe probably. Then stupidly, she'd forgotten her cup. Oh, she was so cross with herself.

She'd opened all the windows, as she usually did, it was always stuffy down there. She'd finished off her tea and put the cup down on the draining board. Then she'd been side-tracked by the filthy state of the floor. Mrs Lomax used to scrub it every day when she lived there. She'd been a great housekeeper. Served them loyally. And proved to be a decent cook when old Mrs Fern had died. A good church-going woman, unlike some. She couldn't have let the children run around in grime like that. No telling what diseases they could pick up. And they were still Raphe's children after all. Of course Raphe claimed Dee brushed and mopped it every day but she found that very difficult to believe. The dirt was ingrained. So she'd

scrubbed it. On hands and knees – at her age! Taken her a good couple of hours. But with all the windows open and that gale blowing through the floor had dried off in no time.

There was no excuse for dirt. When she was a child, there were nine of them living in a cramped two-up-two-down cottage. Her dad was a miner and money was always tight but her mam kept that house spotless. Of course Lady Muck was too busy going out to work. Shirking her duties. No time to keep the place clean.

Probably broke the cup for spite.

Yes. She'd wager that's what it was. The girl had gone running to her mam telling tales. *Grandma said...* Well, it was true, she *did* only have them on sufferance because they were Raphe's children. What's wrong with saying that? Why else would she have taken them in? Certainly not for that heathen's sake.

And the girl had only tittle-tattled to her mother because she'd been told off. Clumsy child. Obviously took after the mother. Running down the back steps to empty the po into the outside lav. Always in a rush. Jobs done slap dash, quickly as possible. But what could you expect? She'd told the child dozens of times not to run, to be careful carrying that po. Then the silly girl trips and falls down the back steps, breaking her best ceramic chamber pot. No apologies. Just sitting on the ground holding her knee and screeching. Totally uncalled for. And the idiot older sister – who just happened to be on her weekly visit – taking her off to the hospital to have it stitched. Just to make her look bad. Heartless Grandma. Fuss and bother about nothing. It would have healed of its own accord. Children were always scraping and cutting themselves. No need to go running off to the hospital every time. Four stitches indeed. And no offer from her parents to replace the broken po. She'd expected more of Raphe.

Oh, they thought they were very smart, running off to London like that. But she knew it was too sudden. They'd made no plans despite what they'd said at the time. Dee was pregnant before they got married – she was sure of it. That's if they *were* actually married. No photos of the happy couple, no sign of a wedding dress in the wardrobe or tucked away in any of the cupboards. She'd even found the key to the linen chest but it was just full of junk – keepsakes, letters. Rubbish. It would have been better put to its proper use. Not that her daughter-in-law ever bothered to keep on top of the laundry. It was always left to her to change their beds.

And she'd never seen a marriage certificate. She wouldn't be surprised if they were living over the brush. In her house! A house that welcomed Catholic priests. How could Raphe

possibly expect her to invite them up to play gin rummy with men of the cloth? Dee was a heathen. A Methodist, Raphe said – same thing in her book. And Mrs Jackson next door thought she saw her at a Spiritualist meeting a few weeks ago. Evelyn crossed herself. She hadn't told poor Raphe of course. To think their family went back to the Blessed John Rigby on her mother's side.

Right. She'd done enough down there for today. She pulled off the rubber gloves, left them hanging over the tap. Time for some soup.

Evelyn looked out of the living room window, peered up at the sky. It was cloudy but didn't look like rain. She'd wear her winter coat. 'Ne'er cast a clout 'til May is out.' April was always unpredictable. Would she need her woollen scarf or would the silk one be warm enough? She waited a few moments to watch for people passing at the end of the garden, to gauge the general dress sense. There were tiny green flecks on the wisteria. Spring was definitely upon them. They'd planted that bush nearly thirty years ago when they'd moved in. William had just started his new job as head of the Industrial School.

She stood a few moments longer but no one passed. She'd have to take a chance.

Evelyn pulled on her grey calfskin gloves then picked up her full length walking umbrella from the stand in the vestibule. It was getting a little faded now but she'd made a new cover for it to match her gloves and hat. Grey was a dignified colour – smart but understated. She tightened the checked silk scarf at her throat, adjusted her cloche. No doubt Dee thought it old fashioned but it was still perfectly good. Quality lasts. Actually, now she thought about it, the last time she'd seen Dee go out, she wasn't even wearing a hat. Or gloves. She'd tell Raphe to have a word with her – a slovenly wife didn't reflect well on a man in his position. What would his clients think if they saw her?

Evelyn was surprised how warm it was when she opened the door. The mild spring air hit her like an affront. Well, she wasn't going to change now. She locked the door, pulled her shoulders back as she stepped down onto the path. She was still slim at seventy-one and tall for her generation. Her simple black coat with its astrakhan collar never really dated. She felt herself elegant. It had been *à la mode* back in the twenties when William had treated her. She'd been self-conscious walking up Bold Street to Cripps but William had the aplomb – always looked the gentleman. He lent her confidence.

Evelyn paused at the end of the path, hands gripping the gate. It was so still. Not even a single bird call. There were usually starlings at this time of year. Blackbirds, thrushes. They used to get coal tits and the odd chaffinch too but today, not even a seagull.

The calm was unsettling. It felt false. Like the day was hiding something from her. It was hard to believe there was a war raging. Even now, as she stood by the gate, there were men, boys, dying in horrific circumstances. Civilians too. It had been over two years since the last air raid on the city but she still feared an attack. The war wasn't over yet. Not by a long chalk, Raphe said. She did all her shopping locally these days, but today she needed the air. The sea air. The salty smell off the river. The bustle of the Docks, what was left of them. She wanted to see the ships. Remind herself why she'd come to this city.

She hadn't been unhappy growing up in Billinge. The village was nothing startling, but it was surrounded by lovely countryside. She and her friends loved to go out walking. Her cousin Marge had been a keen bird-watcher, taught them the names of lots of birds. Sadly, there weren't any prospects for young folk in the country. And she had no intention of marrying a miner. A lot of her friends had moved to Manchester but she'd never liked the feel of it. Dark and pessimistic. A brooding city. Joyless. It had the Docks at Salford but that wasn't the sea. And the sea was what she yearned for.

Once, when she was a girl, they'd taken a day trip to Liverpool. The three youngest and her parents. She couldn't remember why. 1881. The day after her tenth Birthday. She'd never forget her first view of the Docks. A forest of great wooden masts, ropes like vines hanging from the rigging, a foliage of cream canvas. Great swathes of material had been unfurled on some of the ships ready to glide majestically out to sea. On others it was packed in tight rolls, like leaves about to uncurl, while the ship off-loaded its cargo. Sugar, tobacco, cotton. Timber, great trunks of it. Gangs of scrawny men on the quayside pulling huge crates and bundles off the ships. Cranes swinging massive wooden chests through the air. Huge ships jostling for position along the quays. Creaking. Bobbing weightily. Bowing slowly like stately gentlemen.

It was frightening, yet thrilling.

Her father loved the engineering skill involved in ship building. He'd been a clever man. Could have gone to university if circumstances had allowed. He'd marvelled at the technology while she'd admired the huge rivets that fastened the iron sheets wrapped around the hulls. She never could understand how something so huge and so heavy could actually float. That

was a feat of engineering her father had said. Something about a man in a bath shouting *Eureka*.

For her father it was all about the science. For her it had always been about the freedom. One ship had been bound for New Zealand – the other side of the world. She'd tried to picture the country, what it looked like. Imagined stepping off the ship, wondering how the earth would feel beneath her feet. It must be different down there. Upside down. It couldn't feel like English earth. And it must smell different too. Exotic flowers perhaps, or... She couldn't imagine what else. Ships were vehicles for new lives somewhere else. Stowing secrets of exotic foreign countries in their great hulls. They brought huge skies, open seas, *space* with them. Freedom. They promised so much.

She decided to walk into town. Not quite three miles and mostly downhill anyway. She could slowly adjust to the strangeness of the devastated city. It had been so long. Like stepping into a hot bath, you needed to immerse yourself a little at a time. She was afraid to see what it looked like now. Raphe said most of the city had been destroyed after the May blitz of forty-one, she wouldn't recognise it. But that was alright. As long as the river was still there and she could see the horizon open up at the mouth. The sky widening out to sea. The ships.

As she got closer to the city, gaps started to open up. Streets of housing reduced to rubble. Others with their windows blown out, bits of wood and plastic or hardboard blocking the holes left behind. She was surprised the glass hadn't been replaced yet, it was nearly two years since the last bombing raid. Wasn't there a housing shortage?

As she turned onto Islington a breeze blew up. The tide must be on the turn. It whipped up a shower of dust from a crater to her right, covering her coat. A piece of grit stung her eye. She stopped and rubbed it until she'd coaxed it out. When she looked down at her coat it was covered in a fine grey powder. She had a brief, horrible thought it could be the ashes of bodies incinerated in a fire bomb. She almost retched, brushing frantically at the dirt on her coat, her face, her hat. A woman passed, skirting away from her towards the edge of the pavement. Evelyn recovered herself. It was a ridiculous thought – it was just dust from the building. Rubble. Not people. She walked briskly towards town, brushing at her coat every few steps.

Her shoes were beginning to pinch. It had been a daft idea to wear her best pair. She normally only wore them for mass on Sunday, a brisk five-minutes on foot. But she couldn't

have gone into town in her scruffy everyday pair. Even in wartime you had to maintain standards. *Especially* in wartime. Order must continue despite the chaos. Society had to endure. Women like her daughter-in-law didn't understand the need for continuity, preserving the status quo. Men ran society and it was the job of women to support them. If women – married women with children – started working, what would happen to the family? And if that fell apart then society must surely crumble.

Sometimes she felt they'd reached the end of days. What sort of a world would emerge from all this destruction? What effect would it have on the people who survived? It was all too brutal.

From her position on the hill she could see gaps between the buildings, roofs missing, piles of rubble across the city. New buildings would spring up in place of those lost – if they survived this. If the war ever ended. It would never be her city again. She belonged to the old order, pre-war. The new Liverpool would belong to the next generation. She'd walked those streets, passed those old buildings for the last fifty years, more even. She was familiar with them. Like old friends. You stopped really looking after a while, knew them instinctively. Had a sense of them. She was too old to start again.

She and William used often come into town when they were courting and take the tram out to Otterspool Prom or the other direction, out to Crosby. They'd walk along the sands of a Sunday afternoon. She would have preferred to wander around the Docks, looking at the ships. Barques and clippers, and ships with great wheels in the middle – paddle steamers bound for America. They used to talk about emigrating. She would have gone anywhere – New Zealand, America, China even. But after they married they never spoke of it again.

William liked to escape the city. He relished the quiet. They'd walk for two or three hours, sometimes as far as Formby pine woods. That's when they did most of their talking. He was a real educator. Head of the Industrial School by the time he was thirty-five. He'd always encouraged her to read. And both the children. Said she could have gone onto college like their eldest if she'd had the chance, become a teacher like her. She had the brains, he said. But miner's daughters didn't go to college.

Julia was deputy head of a school in Bacup now, married to the headmaster. Raphe might have gone into teaching too, but for the leg. That damned cricket accident. And so avoidable. His knee, broken by a fast-bowled cricket ball, turning gangrenous because the

doctors were all away at war. Amputated finally. She was so angry. *So* angry. He'd never have looked twice at that flibberty-jibbet but for that. He couldn't go to the dances like his friends did. Missed his matriculation, in hospital for six months. Home for twelve after that. Waste of a good grammar school education. And he'd been such a clever lad. Saint Francis Xavier's would have got him to university. But he never complained. Always a smiler. Lovely temperament. Not like *her*. With her airs and graces and her from a slum on Mackenzie Street.

She from a slum.

Grammar, Evelyn, grammar. She missed William so much.

It took longer than she'd anticipated to reach the Docks. The wind was getting stronger. Fortunately she'd used a hatpin or her hat would have blown away – the wind was trying to grapple it off her head. It was difficult to get her bearings. A lot of the landmarks had gone – Lewis's was almost destroyed, St Luke's was just a shell. Would they demolish it now or rebuild the interior? It had been a beautiful church, even though it was Protestant – not that she'd have risked her mortal soul to step foot inside but she'd seen a photograph once, in the *Echo*.

She wasn't sure now if the Corn and Telephone Exchanges had been destroyed or if she was on the wrong street. The street names had been removed and one stretch of rubble looked much like another. It was all so confusing.

The Custom House had taken a battering. All that fine craftsmanship. The masonry skills of the builders. And the *mone*y it must have all cost. What a terrible waste. Such wanton destruction.

The other cathedral had most of its roof missing. Still, it was only Protestant.

Half the shops she'd known had been blown to smithereens – there was hardly anything left of Church Street. Rows and rows of housing flattened. Street after street of rubble. The Docks destroyed. Raphe had been right, the city *was* unrecognisable. By the time she got to the river she was close to tears.

Raphe had stood at the front door watching the night sky being ripped apart during the blitz. Fascinated by the lights, the flames, the noise. The sky had been really quite beautiful, he said, reds and golds burning against a sooty backdrop. Like a Turner painting. He was a sensitive soul.

All she could see were the missing people. Ghosts of lives snuffed out, and for what? The life of the city extinguished. How many dead? She brushed at her coat again. And no sign

of the war ending. Concentrating on Russia now, William had said after the last of the air raids, we'll be fine. But he'd died soon after that. Heart attack. Almost two years now. The angina had been slowing him down for a long time. They'd been out in the garden when he'd had his first attack. His left arm had gone numb and he'd felt a tightness in his chest. The doctor said it was a minor attack or possibly a mild stroke. He had three more over the following months, the final one when they were visiting Julia in the country. She and Julia had been out shopping. He'd died alone. Not even in his own home.

If you're going through Hell, just keep going. Sensible man, Churchill. And that's what she'd been doing since. Couldn't allow herself to dwell on her loss. Not in wartime. Not with so many losing loved ones, *young* loved ones. At least William had had a good life. Seventy-two years. Two more than the Bible predicted.

Down by the river, just in front of the Liver Building, there was a tea stall. A fat woman slouched behind it wearing a dirty apron. Wiping cups she'd just dipped into a basin of water, with a grubby tea towel. Cold water as well, probably. She had a customer, a goblin of a man in overalls. Giving her the glad eye and she, grinning like a sixteen-year-old. Thruppence a cup. Outrageous! Evelyn walked quickly past to the railings beyond and leant over, breathing in the sea air.

The tide was going out. Small sandbanks had appeared in the centre of the river. The water was dividing into separate channels. Soon there'd be just a single, deep channel cutting through the slob over towards the other side. There was a smell of soot, petrol fumes, burning wood and rubber. Not what she'd hoped for. Even the seagulls were over at Birkenhead. Too far away to hear their screeching. That would have been something at least.

She was relieved to see there were a few ships docked but they didn't fill her with hope the way they used to. Now they were heading into dangerous territories. Under threat from German gun boats and sea mines. And those terrible U-boats, sea monsters rising out of the water. Like something from John's Apocalypse.

She'd had enough. It was all ruined now.

She walked towards the tram terminus at the Pier Head.

Then changed her mind.

What if it was *her* tram? The glamorous Dee. Personally, she didn't see what all the fuss was about. She was quite a plain Jane really. Straight up and down. Sharp pointy elbows.

That awful thin-lipped line of a mouth painted garish red. And those weird coloured eyes, one of which looked half-closed most of the time. What Raphe saw in the woman was beyond her. She couldn't abide to see her dressed up in her uniform. Laughing with the passengers even though she couldn't crack a smile at home – the long gob on her. Performing – that's what Raphe had said. That was the word he'd used. Probably flirting with the driver. She'd seen clippies do that. Why did Dee need a job anyway? She wasn't charging them any rent, just a few pence towards the bills. And Raphe was earning enough to support the family. His physiotherapist practice on Princess Road was doing well. The first one in Liverpool – imagine! She'd kept the clipping from *The Daily Mail* – it was a good photo of him. He was going to move to Rodney Street as soon as he could afford it. The Harley Street of Liverpool. William would have been so proud.

No, she couldn't bear it. She'd rather face the long, slow rise back home. Do her good anyway. Keep her fit. That fat woman behind the tea stall should try walking. How was it possible to be fat during wartime?

The wind was steadily getting up. Blowing in off the river. She kept tight hold of her hat as she walked. It was actually helping, pushing her up the hill. She felt strong, almost young again. As if she had reserves of energy. If she'd been on the flat she'd have probably allowed herself to run a little – if no one was watching, of course. A good day for drying. She might pop down and wash their bed sheets. Raphe always loved the fresh air smell on his cotton sheets when he was laid up as a lad. She hadn't seen any on the line for almost a week. Well, Dee was so busy *working*, how would she have the time to fulfil her wifely duties with a *job*? Yes, that was a fine strong wind, no damp in that. They'd be dry in no time. She could get them ironed and back on the bed before the two of them came home from work. She'd dare say Dee wouldn't notice, but her Raphe would. He'd know his mother was looking after him at least.

The wind nearly ripped the door out of her hands as she opened it. Then it was a battle to close it again – she had to lean her full weight against it. She went straight down to their semi-basement without taking off her coat. She'd clear the sink and put the sheets in to soak before going upstairs to change and have a cuppa.

She emptied the cups. Smelt them for traces of bleach then gave them a final rinse. How anyone could drink from those cups at the Pier Head. The woman herself looked germ-ridden.

And thruppence! Wait 'til she told Raphe that one. And the size of her. She loved having things to tell him. She liked to see him smile, hear his jolly laugh. That one didn't make him laugh, she knew that much. Miserable article. How he put up with her.

She'd heard them last night. She hadn't wanted to listen but it was impossible not to. The rows were getting more frequent. More heated. More venomous. She could say that – it *was* poison setting in. Contaminating their marriage.

Evelyn dried the cups on a clean tea towel then put them back in the crockery cupboard. She glanced over at the sideboard. To her cup. Should she throw it away? Or leave it there as a reminder – make Dee feel guilty. Let Raphe realise what a stubborn, clumsy, insolent woman he'd married.

Startled by a clatter outside the half window, she looked up to see the bin being shunted along the path by the wind. The sky was growing dark too. Looked like a storm coming.

The pair of them had rowed so loudly last night she'd heard almost every word. 'Her or me,' Dee had said. *Her!* The cheek. How did she expect him to choose between his wife and his mother? He'd never say a word against his mother. Not now she had no one to protect her. No one on her side. Raphe knew Dee had broken the cup. Oh, of course he'd tried to find some other explanation, tried to smooth things over between them, but he knew. He probably knew she'd done it on purpose too.

Then she'd threatened to leave him. *Swore* at him. *Fishwife*. Well, daughter of a fishmonger so hardly surprising. You'd have to expect it. Well, good riddance. And if she had to live in squalor well then, whose fault would that be? No better than she deserved. She came from nothing she could go back to nothing. And she could take those brats with her. *She* certainly wouldn't be playing nursemaid to those children so that woman could go off gallivanting with tram drivers. That's all Dee wanted. Another man. She was certain.

She should damn well give up that job, start behaving like a real mother. Like a decent, Christian wife. She had no idea why Raphe didn't forbid her from going to work. He was the man of the house. He was her *husband* for goodness' sake. He should tell her. Too soft, that was his problem. Oh, it made her so cross.

She went into Raphe and Dee's bedroom. Folded Raphe's pyjamas, Dee's nightdress. Picked up a blouse that had been discarded on the bedroom chair, checking the collar and

cuffs before hanging it back up. She tidied a pair of Dee's shoes from under the bed into the wardrobe. Then stripped the bed.

She filled the stone sink with scalding hot water from the kettle, threw in a few soapflakes and a little Dolly Blue. She draped the sheets into the water, scrunching them down to make sure every inch was covered. Then went back upstairs. As she slipped off her coat and hung it on the hallstand, she thought, as she always did, how gloomy the hall was. There should have been a fanlight above the front door. It would have let the light into the hall, stopped it from being so funereal.

She made herself some tea in her little kitchen at the back of the house. It was usually quite bright but a thick bank of cloud had blocked out the sunlight. She was gazing down at the garden while the tea brewed. Two pigeons were fighting over something in the grass, pecking at each other, wings flapping furiously. Hard to tell if they were male or female. She hated pigeons. Dirty town birds she always thought of them. And she couldn't bear to see them hobbling about with a toe missing or their feet mangled in some way. Sad really but they disturbed her, made her feel uncomfortable.

The front door opened then slammed shut. She froze. Voices. Raphe's. And Dee's. Shouting as usual. What were they both doing back from work at this hour?

They went straight down to the basement. Raphe dragging his poor leg. Then there was banging. Doors, drawers. More shouting. Something smashed. Dee started screeching.

Evelyn stood still, hardly breathing, hand on her chest.

She could hear sobbing. Or at least it sounded like sobbing. Dee, of course. All for show. It was her Raphe who should have been crying. What she put him through.

As quickly as it started, the noise in the basement stopped. Evelyn poured herself some tea. She'd bought a new cup at the local chandlers. Not half as nice as her broken one but at least it was bone china. She sat at the small Formica table. The wind was shaking the window above so violently she thought it might smash the glass. Bits of rubbish were hurtling round the garden – the bin lid clattering as it was dragged across the yard. The blossom was being torn off her cherry tree. Her tulips and small spring flowers were being battered by the gale. The sky was a laden inky black, ready to burst. It was quite frightening even though she was safe in the house.

She pushed her shoes off one at a time, feeling her feet throb as the flesh expanded, released from the tight-fitting brogues. She wiggled her toes as much as she could in her Lyle

stockings. Massaging the toe joints, rolling and pressing them into the cold linoleum. That was a long walk, she'd sleep well tonight.

Then she heard light, quick steps running back up from the basement. Hers. Followed by a slower step, thump, step, thump. Poor Raphe. That wooden leg was so heavy. There was a sharp clicking of heels against the tiled floor – why the woman couldn't wear sensible flat shoes was beyond her. Trailed by the step, drag, step, drag along the hallway.

There was a dull thud as something heavy was dropped.

She listened.

Then took a sip of tea.

Another bang, a screech and the scraping of furniture as something fell against, what? The hall table?

–You BASTARD!

–*Dee…*

–Let go of me!

–Please, darling.

It hurt her to hear Raphe pleading.

–Get off me! I can manage.

–Dee, sweetheart.

–No! I said, don't TOUCH me!

Furious click-clacking. Something heavy being dragged. The door being kicked and rattled.

–It's locked. Undo—

–I can do it! Sod off!

The front door crashed against the wall.

That'll be the plaster knocked off. Well, she could damn well pay to have it re-done, *harridan*.

Evelyn jumped as her kitchen door slammed shut. The window started rattling again. She could hear two other doors slam down in the basement. Then there was the sound of something smashing in her front room – she'd left the window slightly open. Something had been blown off a shelf – one of her ornaments, she'd wager. That damned woman! She was about to get up when the front door finally closed again.

Thump, step, thump. Back down the hall, back down the basement steps. Should she go down and see if he was alright?

She put her cup down and stood up. Then sat down again.

No. Perhaps later. On some pretext. She didn't want to look as if she was prying.

Everything was still again. Even the wind seemed to have dropped a little. The plants in the garden were swaying less fiercely. The cherry tree was still raining its pink petals over the lawn – it actually looked quite pretty. The kitchen began to grow a little brighter as the sun broke through a rent in the clouds. Evelyn sighed.

As she was emptying the teapot and washing her cup, she heard Raphe walk back up the stairs and along the hall. The front door opened and closed again, quietly. She heard his key turn in the lock. The house always felt emptier when he left.

She might just have time to nip down, rinse those sheets and get them dried before Raphe got back. The storm seemed to have passed over – the sky lightened of its load. There was still a strong breeze though, the sheets should be dry before he came home. And if he came back earlier, well, they could have a little chat. Before *she* got home.

He'd be all nice and cosy in his fresh cotton sheets tonight.

When she walked into the hall she saw the console table was askew. The telephone receiver had fallen off. That vixen had probably lashed out at Raphe and knocked the telephone instead. Well, she wasn’t going to straighten it.

She went downstairs.

As she was wringing the sheets through the mangle, she glanced over at the table. Her note to Dee was still sitting there. She supposed she'd have to go and buy the bleach herself now. She gave the sheets a final wring then pegged them out.

When she went back inside, the curtains above the sink were blowing almost horizontal. Whipping the teapot that was still upside down on the draining board where she'd left it that morning.

She'd better move it before it got knocked off.

To: Proceeds of Policy with London & Manchester Assurance Co., payable on the death of Jane Morgan deceased. £ 21. 11. 6

Less: Legal charges and disbursements 3. - -

£ 18. 11. 6.

I Dee Pendlebury of 7 Marmaduke Street Liverpool and formerly of 24 MacKenzie Street Liverpool as surviving administrator of the estate of Jane Morgan deceased acknowledge to have received the sum of £18.11s.6d as set out above.

And I further acknowledge that this money is paid to me as such surviving administrator and is divisible by me between the next of kin of the said Jane Morgan

Dated this first day of March 1945

THE ELDER DAUGHTER 1943

April glanced up when the door opened. It was Miss Lavigne. Caught in the light of the one dim bulb in the staff changing room. Tiny waist, calves shaped like the fancy curved legs of Nanny's coffee table. Her blonde hair forming a fuzzy halo round her head. She was an angel in Utility clothing. Gossamer wings tucked neatly inside her uniform, trembling slightly as she walked. Unfurling them when the shop closed, Miss Lavigne would fly home, sprinkling stars across the city. Between the blitz and the blackout Liverpool needed a bit of light. A touch of magic.

April watched Miss Lavigne fasten up her uniform. She was so beautiful. Everyone else looked frumpy in their petrol-blue dresses but Miss Lavigne wore hers like an haute couture gown, with peep-toe high-heeled shoes. She was wasted in Marks and Spencer's – she should have been sashaying down the catwalks in Paris. And her make-up was always perfect. April glanced in the mirror. Her mascara was too thick again, like a cloud of midges had stuck to her lashes. Miss Lavigne had tried to teach her how to paint her face but she could never get her eyebrows to match. Sometimes she forgot to draw on the second one. And the lipstick always seemed to smudge over the line of her lips. She was hopeless. Why did Miss Lavigne even bother with someone as dowdy as her? Especially with her weird fingers.

Miss Lavigne walked over to where April was standing. April had to look up, Miss Lavigne was so tall. Taller even than her father. He would fall in love with Miss Lavigne if he ever met her. They should never meet.

–You forgot your top buttons, April. Allow me.

April glanced down as Miss Lavigne slipped the buttons into their holes. Such slender fingers. The emerald and diamond ring glinting on her left hand. Nails shining and smooth.

Miss Lavigne fastened the final button. April's heart was trying to break out of her ribcage. Miss Lavigne must have been able to hear it. Or feel it pounding beneath her fingers.

–There now.

She smoothed the fabric across April's chest, straightening the collar.

–Perfect.

–Thank you, Miss Lavigne.

–We always have to look our best. This is a very important time for women. *Crucial*. Now we have the chance to show the men we are perfectly capable of keeping the country running without them.

This was why Miss Lavigne was a supervisor.

–Probably do a far better job. The mistake our mothers made was to give up their jobs without a fight when the last war finished.

But Nanny had had to go out and *get* a job after the war. After Granddad died. It wasn't a great job – shop assistant in a general grocers on Scotland Road. Didn't pay much. So maybe that didn't count. Perhaps Miss Lavigne was talking about important jobs. Dee – Mother – had also had to work. She used to earn a few bob at the greengrocers in town. They were a family of shop girls.

–Oh, I know the lady firefighters tried down in London—

Miss Lavigne had such a posh accent. She should try to imitate it. *Landan. Give ap*. *Larst.*

–But the problem was, they weren't in a position of power when the war ended. We won't make that mistake. This company is putting women – young women like you, April – on management trainee schemes. How old are you?

–Fifteen, Miss.

–Only fifteen? You look older.

She frowned briefly.

–Well, you're working for a progressive company that treats its staff very well. When the war ends we'll be the decision-makers, we shall keep our jobs. Mark my words, April.

Miss Lavigne smiled. Glow-white teeth, all the same size. And her eyes crinkled right up, so you could hardly see the blue any more. Just long black lashes. Not all clumpy or stuck together like hers.

–In fact, April, I shouldn't tell you this but I may have some exciting news for you next week, if all goes according to plan.

Sam exciting news. Sam, sam, sam.

–Why don't you come for tea on Sunday? I'll write down my address for you.

She lifted April's chin, closing her mouth.

–You'll catch flies like that!

Then she turned, stopping to examine herself in the mirror on the way out. Sucking her finger to get rid of the excess lipstick. Patting her hair. Shiny golden waves teased off her face then clipped up at the back of her head.

–Chop, chop, April!

She smiled, holding the door open. April scampered out.

April was still thinking about Miss Lavigne as she walked home. Past craters where buildings used to be. Along roads with parts of houses missing. Wallpaper waving as she passed, tiled fireplaces clinging to bedroom walls, smashed windows sucking curtains in and out. There was a curious house with part of its upstairs wall still hanging from the roof, the lounge wall below totally blown away. A vase of dried flowers still standing on the windowsill. Everywhere was dusty, black. Beaten. Miss Lavigne probably lived in a big house. Surrounded by roses and lawns and trees. Maybe they'd play croquet – rich people did.

Gerty had been a bit funny when she'd told her Miss Lavigne had invited her for afternoon tea. Was that different from the tea you drank in the morning? They'd been having lunch in the canteen. April was eating herring roe on toast and Gerty had laughed at her for always ordering the same thing. Which was rich given that Gerty was eating tripe and onions for the third day in a row. April had been a bit annoyed and told her about the invitation just to get her back. Gerty had pushed her plate away, only half-eaten, and left the table. She'd been working in Marks much longer than April and Miss Lavigne had never invited her to tea. April didn't tell Gerty that Miss Lavigne thought her rather low class and suggested April ought to find more suitable friends. Gerty lived in a court off Scotland Road with her alcoholic mother and grandmother. She'd never met her father.

As April turned into Margaret Street, she glanced up at the water tower. She'd thought it was an ancient Greek temple when she'd first seen it soaring above the roofs of the terraces. Six years ago now. Getting off the tram with Nanny. Dee had put her on the train in Manchester a few hours earlier. Thrown a little suitcase in after her. Then closed the door, turned and walked back down the platform. April had squashed her face to the glass, hand raised to wave. Dee never looked back. When the train lurched and shuddered out of the station, smoke had come pouring in through the gap at the top of the window making April's eyes smart.

She'd thought she'd walked into a fairy tale. That maybe there were castles round the corner. Maybe she'd be living at the top of a turret and a handsome prince would come and rescue her. Take her back to her parents.

Nanny's terraced house was a bit of a let-down.

Maybe Miss Lavigne lived in a castle with turrets. Maybe a handsome prince had bought her the emerald and diamond ring.

Miss Lavigne lived in a big, old house just outside Little Crosby, surrounded by open fields and coppices. The bus had taken an age to get there. No turrets as far as April could see, but it had a huge front door with stone pillars either side of the porch. When April knocked on the door, Miss Lavigne appeared, her hair long and loose. Settling like curled sunbeams around her shoulders. She was wearing wide silk trousers and two tone brogues. A white shirt with a red cravat and a gold paisley-patterned jacket with a quilted collar and a belt tied round the middle. A smoking jacket she called it. And she was smoking an actual cigarette in a cigarette holder.

–April! You found us. Do come in.

She draped her arm round April's shoulder and led her through to a Victorian conservatory at the back of the house. It had black and white tiles and wicker furniture. And it was filled with huge potted palms and exotic plants April had never seen before. It was like a jungle. Warm, slightly humid.

–Come and sit here, next to me.

She pulled April down onto a high-backed rattan sofa with a padded seat and floppy cushions. A plaid blanket was draped casually over the back. April had only seen furniture like that in films. The sofa was quite small and they sloped, legs pressed together, into the dip where the padded seat was almost flat. Miss Lavigne rubbed April's knee,

–This is cosy, isn't it?

And she smiled. Her lovely plump mouth inches from April's.

An old woman, bent into a right angle, shuffled in with a trolley full of tea things. April stood up to help but Miss Lavigne gently pulled her back down.

–Mrs Dolby. Absolute dote. Been with the family donkey's years, Miss Lavigne said, as though Mrs Dolby were deaf.

The old woman didn’t look at either of them. They watched as she placed each item on the low table in front of them with great effort.

–Thank you, Mrs D.

Mrs Dolby grunted, still avoiding eye contact, and shuffled back out the way she’d come.

Miss Lavigne leaned towards April. A golden curl resting on April’s shoulder.

–Do you know, I don't even know her Christian name! Isn't that hilarious? She laughed. A high tinkling noise like a crystal bell.

–But you, my dear April, must call me Tupina when you're here.

Tupina. Like a princess. Princess Tupina. What did they call her for short? Tup. Tuppy. Tuppence. No, she would always be called Tupina. She was far too regal for pet names.

There was tea in a large china teapot, salmon sandwiches with the crusts cut off, a bowl of asparagus, hot crumpets and strawberry jam.

–We’ll eat these while they’re hot.

Miss Lavigne picked up a crumpet, slathered it with butter, ladled a few heaped teaspoons of jam on top, then handed it, dripping, to April. April remembered to keep her mouth closed as she chewed. When she’d finished the crumpet, Miss Lavigne offered her the plate of sandwiches.

–It’s only tinned salmon, I’m afraid but these are my own asparagus.

She pointed to the bowl of green spears. April had never tasted asparagus.

–I should have tomatoes, lettuce and cucumber from my greenhouse in summer – you must come back for the first salad of the season.

The greenhouse at the bottom of the garden was about three times the size of Nanny's entire house, with one long slanted wall made entirely of glass. There were vines creeping along the wooden frames but no grapes as far as April could see. And there were rows and rows of tiny green plants on the shelves running the length of the greenhouse.

Miss Lavigne dipped an asparagus into a small dish of melted butter.

–Here, try this.

She pushed it into April’s mouth and the butter ran down her chin – April was already holding a salmon sandwich in one hand, a plate in the other

–Oops! That tinkly laugh again.

–I’m so sorry.

Miss Lavigne dabbed April's chin with a linen napkin.

Nanny didn't have napkins. Perhaps she ought to buy her some – if they weren't too expensive. They could use them when they had their Sunday dinner. She must ask Miss Lavigne where she could get them.

Mrs Dolby came back in with a tray.

–Oh, my absolute favourite! Treacle tart with desiccated coconut.

Miss Lavigne knew such long words. She must ask Nanny what desiccated meant.

–Mrs Dolby stockpiled syrup and jams and treacle at the outbreak of war. She's an absolute Godsend. What would I do without you, Mrs D.?

Mrs Dolby smiled slightly, still avoiding Miss Lavigne's eyes, loading the empty plates and cups onto the trolley.

When April had finished her second helping of tart, Miss Lavigne brought her through to the drawing room. Miss Lavigne put a record on a funny old windup gramophone that had a big brass horn sticking out of it. Nanny just had a wireless radio with a big battery. April had to take it to the garage on the corner to get it recharged every two weeks – it was really heavy.

–Tchaikovsky, Miss Lavigne said, as the record started warbling.

–*Pathétique*. The final movement. Close your eyes. Listen to the rising strings, crying out as if for succour.

April squeezed her eyes shut. *Sackah sackah sackah*. The music surged into her stomach – her whole body shivered. The violins rising through her chest, making her eyes water.

When the piece had finished, Miss Lavigne came and stood behind April's chair.

–No, keep your eyes closed.

April shut them again. She could feel a soft brush on her hair.

–My best friend and I used to brush each other's hair for ages. You remind me such a lot of her. Same lovely auburn hair. Innocent face. We were so close. So, so close.

She started to brush, very gently, very softly.

–It's a lovely feeling, isn't it?

April stiffened, eyes opening. Miss Lavigne stroked her shoulder.

–Relax. Enjoy the sensation. You can brush mine afterwards.

The brush made April's scalp feel all tingly and her eyes closed despite her trying to keep them open. She felt her body soften and slump a little into the chair.

–I have great plans for you, April. I've been having words in high places. Stick with me and you'll do very well in Marks and Spencer. I'll get you into management…

April was falling asleep. Between the hair-brushing and the food she felt really quite tired. And she hadn't slept the night before, she'd been so excited.

–We'll be great friends, you and I. We can go walking and to concerts and out for supper. Just like Lavinia and I used to. I'll show you another sort of life. An exciting life. Would you like that, my darling?

April wasn't sure if she was dreaming or if Miss Lavigne had really called her darling. She wanted to stay right there, with Miss Lavigne brushing her hair, forever.

–Oh, Miss Lavigne—

–Tupina, my dear. Tupina when we're alone.

April spent her Monday lunch break queueing with the other women by the delivery vans round the back of the shop. They didn't even bother to unload and stack the shelves anymore – the delivery men just sold the food from the back of the vans, passing it out to a crowd of clutching hands.

April was thinking about Miss Lavigne – Tupina, but not in the shop. She could still feel the softness of her angel hair between her fingers. The tight hug as she was leaving. Miss Lavigne had held her for ages, rubbing her back, April's face buried in the silky softness of her jacket.

She managed to get six ounces of bacon and half a pound of mince from the meat lorry. By the time she got to the dairy van there was just a quarter of cheese and two ounces of marge left per customer. Still, Nanny would be pleased.

Not long after she got back to the Handbag Department – five minutes late – Miss Lavigne rushed over. Or rather, glided more quickly.

–April! I have the best news for you – you've been accepted onto the management trainee scheme.

Her face glowed, like there was a light burning just behind her skin. Her inner goodness shining through. A saint in Marks and Spencer's uniform.

April couldn't speak. Management. Her, a manager! Nanny would be thrilled.

Miss Lavigne smiled then floated back across the shop to Umbrellas. April caught the smile and tucked it into her heart for later.

–Beautiful, isn't she?

Mr Campbell had sidled up behind her. A wheezy asthmatic. Crumbly. Like a dead leaf. He'd been rejected by the army – unfit for service. Weakling. Miss Lavigne wouldn't look twice at the likes of him.

He'd totally spoiled the moment.

–Don't stand there gawping, Miss Pendlebury. Get yourself off to the stockroom. You're on labelling duty. Trainee manager or no.

April was tying up a handbag, two scarves and a pair of gloves, with string for a customer who was returning later to pick up all her purchases. All the paper bags had run out and there were no more to be had in the entire country by all accounts.

–Scissors! With which to cut the string.

Mr Campbell was Scottish. He sounded like he'd used the scissors to snip his words before he spoke. He tapped the two webbed fingers on April's left hand with the blades.

April curled her hand closed, using just the tips of her first finger and thumb to finish the job.

–Hurry up, child.

April tied a final knot in the string and cut off the excess.

–Waste of string, child. Now run along.

As she turned to go, he added,

–And, Miss Pendlebury.

April stopped but didn't look back at him.

–Don't be late back from lunch again or you'll find yourself off that trainee scheme before you've even started.

The stockroom was on the second floor with all the offices. The hairdresser's and dental surgery were also there. The holiday booking office was closed 'for the duration of the war' according to a notice sellotaped to the door. Miss Lavigne said there'd been fabulous camping trips organised before the war. Once they'd gone all the way down to Devon for a week. She'd love to show April the cliffs and wild flowers down there. April couldn't wait for the war to end.

When she walked in, Geoffrey was sitting on the floor with a pile of labels next to him. He was carefully crossing out the old prices and writing new ones.

–Afternoon, Geoffrey.

–Mr Broughton.

April looked around.

–There's no one here. We could call each other by our first names. We do in the canteen.

–Oh. Alright. *April*. Prices have gone up considerably, Geoffrey said, showing her his list.

–Well, material's hard to come by. Look at the horrid frocks everyone has to wear now. Like this drab effort.

–I think you look very nice. The colour suits you. Your red hair and... that.

The sentence petered out. The last few words mumbled into his chest.

April sat down quite close to him. Stacking her labels next to his, lining her list up with his. Keeping her left hand curled shut. He looked up and smiled. Gerty was always teasing her about Geoffrey. Saying that he mooned over her, calling him her boyfriend. He was a nice lad. Worked on men's shirts. Shy, but a bit pompous the odd time he did speak. Gentle though. Lovely eyes. Like they'd been cut from a blue sky. He was from over the water – very much a front-and-back-garden type. With a head of thick black curls. April always wanted to run her hands thorough them. They'd started in Marks at the same time. She wanted to tell him about the management trainee scheme but then worried he might not have been offered a place.

Geoffrey worked in silence. There was no sound at all in the stockroom. Just the scraping of nibs against the rough grain of the labels. She wouldn't be able to stand that for the rest of the afternoon. She watched him work. He held his pen funny, his first two fingers on top of his thumb, gripping the barrel tightly as if it might escape.

She tried to think of something to say. Something from the news. Nothing to do with the war. She wanted to tell him about Miss Lavigne's love affair with the young man who lived in a stately home in Yorkshire. How he'd given her that beautiful engagement ring. How angry he'd been when she'd called it off. She had decided she wasn't the marrying kind – *if April understood what she meant*. April didn't.

April was hopeless at small talk. Then she remembered the village over in Sheffield she'd just read about.

–What about those poor people? In Derwent? Having their village destroyed. Just for a reservoir.

Geoffrey glanced at her but didn't say anything.

–Doesn't seem right. Demolishing all those houses then flooding the valley.

He'd stopped scribbling and was staring at her. Like she was about to impart some amazing information. It was nice holding his attention.

–Well? Where are they all going to live?

Under his intense gaze she felt slightly dizzy. Alone on stage. Performing.

–And where are they going to get all the water and how will they fill it? I mean, is some man just going to stand there for days with a hosepipe pouring water into the valley—

–Do you want to go to the pictures?

April stopped.

–What, now?

Geoffrey started to laugh. A soft low rumble bowling and tumbling towards her until she was whipped up into it. They couldn't stop laughing for ages.

April rushed off the tram – she couldn't wait to get home and tell Nanny about Geoffrey and the training scheme. Nanny would be pleased that she was going to be a manageress. She must go and tell her father too. He'd be so proud of her, Miss Lavigne had said.

April hurried up Breck Road to Mackenzie Street. She had a date. A *date*. With the lovely Geoffrey. And she was going to be a manageress. Two amazing things in one day. And Miss Lavigne had stroked her arm.

As she reached the bottom of Mackenzie Street, she saw a figure sitting on the pavement. When she got closer she realised it was Dee. Her mother. Sitting on a suitcase in front of Nanny's house. Staring up at the sky. Her stomach lurched. She recognised the case. It was the posh cream one her father had bought for them to move to London. Before she was born. Lined with blue *moiré* taffeta. He used to keep all his important documents in there when they lived in Manchester. April wasn't allowed to touch it.

She slowed to a standstill. A few feet away from Dee.

–Hello.

Dee turned. Then smiled slowly, as if it were painful.

–Is Nanny out then?

Dee shrugged.

April unlocked the door and stood back to let Dee go in first.

–No, after you, April.

She took off her coat then turned to take Dee's but she was already hanging it on the hall rack.

April filled the kettle then put the cheese and meat onto the cold slab in the pantry.

–I'll make us some tea.

Then added quietly,

–Mum.

That sounded strange.

Dee dropped into a chair at the kitchen table, with a deep sigh. She unpinned her hat. Checked tweed with a pheasant feather tucked into the band. She wore it with the brim up at one side. Underneath, her hair was messy, uncombed. Her curls more of a frizz. And she had a bruise on her cheek – how had she done that? She picked at bits of fluff before laying the hat carefully on the table. Broken nails. Grubby too. She was wearing a smart camel coat with a lovely ruby brooch on the collar. High-heeled shoes though they looked a bit tatty – Miss Lavigne would never have worn them. And there was a ladder in her stockings. April could see the scar through it, a small dent, on her mother's shin. It ruined her otherwise perfect legs. She'd got it when she missed her footing climbing onto the tram one morning. Her father had made a fuss, tried to use it as a reason why she shouldn't be working. Dee had just laughed.

April sat down. Struggling for something to say. Her news was too big to blurt it out so soon. And she wanted Nanny to be the first to know. Eventually she said,

–This is funny isn't it?

–What is?

–You being in my house while—

–This was my house actually. Before you arrived. Dee raised one eyebrow.

–Oh. Yes, of course.

They looked at each other.

Dee glanced down at April's left hand then looked away. A slight scowl on her face. April closed her other hand over it.

–Do you want to make the tea then?

–No. You do it, April. That would be nice.

Dee stared out of the window. She looked thin. Tired. Like she hadn't slept for years. Her right eye was drooping. She had papery grey skin. Crinkled, like it had been screwed up then stuck back on loosely.

As she watched the kettle come to boil, April began to get a little excited. Dee had brought her suitcase with her so she must be expecting to stay. At last they could get to know each other. Have proper, long conversations like she and Nanny did. Catch up on the last five or six years. She would have Dee – her mother – all to herself. The little ones had had her all this time, now it was her turn. She'd have a mother again.

Nanny, strangely, didn't look surprised when she walked in and saw Dee and the suitcase.

–April, put your mother's suitcase up in your room. Your old room, Dee. I've got leek and potato soup for tea, it should just about go round. Did you bring your ration book?

April shared the bed with her mother that night. She didn't dare touch her, just lay with her arms tight by her sides. Like Toad-in-the-hole – two sausages in their batter bed. She couldn't sleep for the excitement. It was going to be like this from now on. Or as long as Dee stayed. All the questions she wanted to ask, all the things she wanted to say to her, just swam around in her head until she eventually dozed off just before dawn.

When April woke up, her mother's side of the bed was empty. She hadn't left already? April pulled her clothes on quickly and ran downstairs.

Her mother was sitting in the kitchen. She folded up the newspaper when April walked in.

–You look smart.

April grinned, smoothing her skirt, tucking her blouse in more tightly.

–I work in the handbag department in Marks and Spencer's. I wear a uniform over this.

–I know. Aren't you a clever girl?

–I'm on the trainee management scheme.

Damn! She'd wanted to tell Nanny first. She hadn't had a chance the night before.

–Oh. That's good. There's tea in the pot.

Dee smiled. Propped up a small mirror on the table and began to put her curlers in. April started making porridge for herself and Nanny, adding more oats than usual for her mother – she looked like she could do with a good feed.

She wished she could have taken the day off. Gone somewhere with Dee. Visited Sefton Park, had a row on the lake. Eaten ice creams. Spent the whole day together, just the two of them. She had a vague memory of picnicking in a park somewhere with her mother. Years before her mother had sent her away. They'd been sitting on a blanket, eating sandwiches. And cake with jam in it and she'd cried when her mother spat on her hankie and tried to clean the jam from her face. She couldn't remember how old she was, hadn't started school, but she remembered her mother laughing. She'd forgotten that. She'd been so angry with her for throwing her out, cutting her out of the family, that she only remembered her mother's stern, unsmiling face as she put her on the train. But her mother used to laugh a lot. And sing. If only it were Sunday and she didn't have to work. Still, there'd be plenty of time to talk. She stood and watched her mother applying her lipstick. Sucking her finger like Miss Lavigne did. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed eight. She'd better get a move on.

When April came home from work, her suitcase was sitting in the hall. A small, dusty battered thing. A label hanging from it with her name and Nanny's address written in impatient spiky letters, some of them crossed out, rewritten. It was the same case her mother had thrown into the train after her. Almost five years ago. Her stomach knotted.

She walked into the kitchen where Nanny was sitting at the table. Dee was standing at the sink, her back turned, staring out of the kitchen window. She was tapping her foot. Chewing her nails.

–Nanny?

–Your mother and I have been talking. We think it would be nice for you to live with your brother and sister.

So, she was to be parcelled off again. Like a present. Tears pricked at her eyes but she blinked them away.

–It'll be nice for you, the three of you back together. And your Grandmother will be upstairs, she glanced over at Dee, who rolled her eyes.

–You'll have so much more space there.

–When do I have to leave?

–Oh, there's no rush. Have your tea first. I've made some cheese and onion on toast.

April looked at Dee, waiting for her to turn round. But she didn't. She walked back out into the hall. Picked up her suitcase without a word and closed the front door quietly behind her.

–Wake up, Miss Pendlebury.

April opened her eyes. Good grief, had she fallen asleep at the counter?

–I'm sorry, Miss Lavigne.

Miss Lavigne placed her hand over April's.

–Is something wrong, April? I'm worried about you. You've looked dead on your feet for the last few weeks. I hope it's not that young chap on men's shirts.

–No! No, Miss Lavigne.

She'd never even had a first date. Father didn't think it was a good idea. Geoffrey hadn't spoken to her since.

–Because you're destined for great things, April. I don't want you being side-tracked with silly love affairs.

She rubbed April's arm.

–This is very important. Not just for you but for women in general. You are in the vanguard, do you understand?

–Yes, Miss Lavigne.

–The suffragettes did not waste their time dallying with young men. They stuck together. Kept their eyes on the job in hand. As you must, April.

April lowered her head.

–I'm doing this for you, April.

She tucked a stray curl behind April's ear.

–It took a lot of persuasion to get you onto this programme, you are a little young. This is your chance to fly, to soar above your situation. Independence, April, that's what we need.

Miss Lavigne rapped the counter then turned, walking briskly off to the rug section.

How could April tell Miss Lavigne about her new life. Having to be up at six to get the children's breakfasts, prepare their dinner before she left for work. About the endless clothes washing. The shopping, cooking, cleaning, ironing she had to do when she got home from

work. And then there was Grandmother's housework to do as well. She liked everything dusted and polished each Saturday – she had an endless collection of knick-knacks. Ornaments, she called them. Dust gatherers, more like. Tat. She didn't get to bed before midnight most evenings. There was no Mrs Dolby in their house. The other morning she'd woken up still wearing her clothes from the day before.

Mr Campbell was watching her.

–She'll be taking you off that management programme if you're not careful, Miss Pendlebury.

He was grinning.

April was ironing the last of her father's shirts when she heard the familiar step-thud-step coming down the basement stairs, then smelt his pipe. She loved that sweet smell, St Bruno ready-rubbed. He *was* that smell.

–It's gone twelve, April. What are you still doing up?

She waved at the clothes horse full of ironed shirts and uniforms. Greta's dresses. Grandmother's blouses and skirts.

–Come on, now. Leave it for tonight, you're tired.

April's father put his arm around her shoulder and led her over to the sofa.

–Would you like a hot milk before bed?

April nodded. She loved hot milk. She loved even more that her dad was going to make it for her.

She sat back and watched him pour the milk into the pan, light the gas.

April's body began to sag. Her energy draining. Bones dissolving, body soft and pliable. She imagined sliding down into a warm bath, face submerged**,** the water bobbing her gently upwards. That was the one good thing about this house – the bathroom. Nanny only had a tin bath hanging in the yard. April always added more hot water after the children had had their Saturday baths and lay in it, just soaking. Not thinking. Or working.

Her father handed her the mug of frothing milk, dropping down heavily next to her. He sighed, pulling his wooden leg round in front of him. He put his arm round her. Gave her a cuddle. She sipped her milk and leant into him.

–This is all too much for you, April. Looking after the children. Me. And your grandmother. Don't mind her. She's old and grumpy.

April laughed.

–All the housework and your full time job. It's really too much for a young girl like you.

But what was the alternative? He couldn't afford to pay someone to look after the children – his physiotherapy business was just getting off the ground. She didn't really earn much to speak of. Dee wasn't coming back. It was all down to her – what choice did she have?

–I think you'll have to give up the job at Marks.

April spluttered as the milk went down the wrong way.

–But I'm on the trainee management programme. I'm going to have a really good job. We could afford to pay someone then.

–No, dear, he stroked her hair.

–You'll make yourself ill.

–But we need my wages—

–My practice is beginning to take off. We can manage for a while. Your grandmother has some money put by—

–But Dad–

–No. My mind's made up. You can stay home tomorrow. I'll call into Marks and explain the situation.

–No, Dad. Please...

–Enough. Take your milk to bed now. I'll see you in the morning.

April pulled off her coat and hung it in the vestibule. Grandmother came out of her kitchen.

–Oh. You're back at last. Where have you been?

–Just out for a bit of fresh air.

–Well if you've that much time on your hands then you can go and dust my ornaments. I have to darn your father's socks, since you never bother. I'll be in my kitchen, the light's better.

April had walked into town. She'd only intended walking round Newsham Park but she'd kept going. She'd passed heaps of rubble that had been houses and shops. Crunched along glass-sprinkled pavements. She'd walked down to the Docks by way of Seel Street, so she could avoid Marks and Spencer's. In front of the Liver Building – which had miraculously survived – she'd stopped. Leaned over the railings, staring into the water.

The river looked small. It felt confined, bounded by buildings on both banks, brick and concrete pressing in on it. The water was so hemmed-in it barely moved, hardly a ripple on it. Unable to breathe. Washed-out, the colour and life squeezed out of it. April imagined it slowly draining downwards rather than being carried out to sea. Disappearing down some great plughole in the riverbed.

It all felt so hopeless.

She turned, then began the walk home.

April put on her apron and took the dusters and beeswax from the cupboard under the sink. Grandmother's room was airless and stuffy but she wouldn't let April open the window in case she caught a chill. Frail old people should stay away from cold air, she always said.

Frail? A hurricane couldn't budge that old hag.

Grandmother had dozens of ugly ceramic figures crammed onto the whatnot stand. More lined up on the mantelpiece and the sideboard. And April had to dust every single one then polish the shelves underneath.

–And don't forget to feed Gabriel, Grandmother called from her kitchen.

Gabriel. Her miserable old budgerigar. It just sat in its cage looking at itself in the mirror. Occasionally saying 'pretty boy' when coaxed by Grandmother. Stupid thing. What was the point of it? It was a horrible thing to do to a bird – even that mangey old thing. Birds had wings – they were meant to fly. It was cruel to keep them locked up like that.

April took the bag of bird seed out of the cupboard then opened the cage door. Just as she did, the bag slipped from her grasp and fell to the floor.

–Damn!

She bent down and began to shovel the seeds back into the bag. There was a flutter above her head as Gabriel flew out of the cage. It flew wildly about for a while then dived at the window, stunning itself. It recovered then flew back up to the windowsill, staring through the heavy lace curtains.

So it did want to escape.

April tip-toed up behind it. Then slid the sash window up very slowly, very quietly. It jammed a bit but the bird didn't budge. Just sat waiting. When she'd opened it as wide as it could go, April pulled back the curtain.

The bird still wouldn't move.

–Go on, she whispered.

–Fly. Shoo! You're a bird for goodness' sake.

After several minutes, April pushed it gently and it finally took off, flapping madly into the garden. She quickly pulled down the sash.

April smiled. It was an accident, Grandmother. I forgot the window was open. I was trying to air the room while you weren't here to catch a chill. He just flew out while I was feeding him.

There was a sharp rap at the front door immediately followed by the bell.

April ran to the other window near the front door. It was Miss Lavigne.

Her stomach lurched.

She'd better answer it before Grandmother or Dad got to it.

She stopped at the door. Glanced in the mirror and fluffed up her hair a little. Damn! She was in her scruffy frock with the rip. She'd kept meaning to stitch it up. And there was a stain down the front from when she'd made gravy the other day without her pinny on. Oh, trust Miss Lavigne to come when she looked such a mess.

The bell rang again and April prised the door open a little. Poking her head through the gap.

–Miss Lavigne.

–April.

Miss Lavigne pushed the door open a little wider.

–I believe you've left work?

She reached out her hand. April looked at it but didn’t take it. Miss Lavigne let it drop. They stood and looked at each other.

–Why didn't you come and tell me?

Miss Lavigne’s eyes were glistening. April looked at the floor.

–Gerty told me you'd moved here to look after your family. I could help you, April. Come back to work – the training programme starts next week. You'd make such a good manageress.

April couldn't look at Miss Lavigne. The weight of everything was pressing on her head. She didn't have the energy to raise it. She heard her father limping up the basement stairs. Heard his wooden leg and walking cane come to a standstill as he stepped into the hall.

April glanced back over her shoulder.

–April. May I come in? Is your father there? Let me speak to him.

April shook her head. Grandmother's kitchen door opened.

–Who is it, April?

–I have to go, Miss Lavigne. I'm sorry.

–April—

Miss Lavigne grabbed April's hand.

–Please. Don't do this. We can work something out. Find a domestic.

She touched April's cheek. Her hand was cold, April shivered.

–I can look after you. You need this, April—

April stepped back but Miss Lavigne grabbed her arm.

–All our plans, April. The holiday we talked about to Devon. The classical concerts. Suppers together. You can't possibly want to give all that up for this? To be a drudge. What happened to women's independence. To being free from the control of men?

–I'm sorry, Miss Lavigne—

–Tupina!

But April couldn't call her that. Tupina was a princess from a fairy story. A princess who was going to help her escape her humdrum life. Her father had put Tupina back into the story book and closed it. Locked it away. April wasn't meant to have a fairy tale life. Girls like her didn't go to concerts or on hiking holidays. It was just a dream she'd had. Her duty was to look after her dad and her younger brother and sister.

–They need me.

–I need you, April. This is your mother's job, her responsibility. She made her choices, now you have to make yours.

–I'm sorry.

–I'll look after you. Forget them. Come and live with me.

April wriggled her hand from Miss Lavigne's grasp. She began to close the door.

–Don't do this to me, April. I'm begging you.

Miss Lavigne pushed the door open again.

–Come back. Please come back. I put my neck out to get you on this scheme. You can have a good life with me. Surely you can't want this?

April closed the door slowly. Miss Lavigne pushed it back. April leaned her weight against it, pushing until she heard the lock click shut.

She turned and looked at her father and Grandmother. Miss Lavigne was shouting her name, hammering on the door. When she finally stopped, April's father went back downstairs. Her grandmother back into her kitchen.

April ran into the front room and watched fragments of Miss Lavigne passing along a row of small clear holes in the heavy lace curtain. When she stopped and looked back up at the house, April stepped away from the window. Miss Lavigne pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. Then walked briskly up the road and out of sight.

There was a quiet tapping at the window. April lifted the curtain. It was the idiot bird trying to get back in.

very kind of you!

21. Alton Road
Liverpool. 6.
Nov: 30

My dear Mum.

Sorry to tell you I won't be up to see you tomorrow night. I promised the girl over the road to mind her children on Saturday. But she came over last night to say she had made a mistake and the works do was on Friday night so I could not do much else but say I would see to the children. I hope you will understand. Would you like to come up on Sunday afternoon. We will be pleased to see you

Love,

THE BOSS 1947

He'd have her put away. Husbands could do that. He'd heard them talking in the bar. One fella was sick of his wife's nagging. Went the Doctor. Complained she was hearing voices. Demanding sex – not natural that, not in a woman. Doctor comes to the house, she starts shouting, carrying on. Doctor signs the form. Few days later two men in white coats turn up and cart her off to the looney bin. Easy!

He could do that.

He could.

The Doctor wouldn't believe she was demanding sex, though. Not Violet. Oh dear me, no. Not uptight, prudish Violet. After three weeks of marriage he was forced to go and talk to her father – did she have an aunt could explain a woman's conjugal duty? Embarrassing. She had no right, putting him through that.

Hearing voices now, that's possible. And she was agoraphobic – that's what the doctor called it. Well, that was mental in itself. But would he still be married? Technically, perhaps. Someone said a man can't divorce his wife if she's incarcerated. He could pretend she was dead though. Shop took a direct hit, she was killed instantly, he could say, shaking his head. Looking sorrowful. Dee's a compassionate woman. And it was half true.

No. What if Dee found out? What if someone let it slip? Sid the plumber lived next door to Violet's cousin and he was always at the bar, chatting to Dee.

Ah! And there she was. The majestic Dee. Stately as a galleon, gliding into the bar. God bless all who sail in her.

–Good morning Mrs Pendlebury. Cold enough for you?

Oh, he loved that smile. Gave him a thrill to the belly. Lower sometimes. The way she dropped her head like a schoolgirl. He liked respectable women. He wouldn't tolerate shop girls in Rigby's. Oh yes, he'd seen them and their like in town, bold as brass. Flirting. Batting eyelashes. *Tarts*.

–May I take your coat, my dear?

Mmmmm. Scent of... freesias? Could he ask? *Excuse me, Mrs Pendlebury, would it be previous of me to inquire as to which scent you favour?* No. Not even on first name terms yet. Best not. Slowly slowly.

He shouldn't watch. He knew he shouldn't. But he couldn't keep his eyes off her feet as she changed out of her snow boots. Such delicate narrow feet. Little toes all squashed up inside those deliciously silky stockings. They'd feel so nice to the touch. His hands smoothing their way up, over her ankles, along her shins, over the finely boned knees, up her beautiful slim thighs...

She bent, rubbed her feet, wiggling her toes. He'd love to take them and suck the life back into them. One delicate little toe at a time. *This little piggy went to market*... tiny nubs of delicious flesh, the salty taste on his wet tongue as he tickled the tender skin. He imagined the pleasure she'd feel, each little digit waiting impatiently for its turn. The slight roughness of his tongue, like a cat's. The thrill shuddering through her body. Then his toes. Her tongue. His mouth opened a little as she slipped her feet into her heeled work shoes. He wanted to press his finger in the little dent on the front of her shin. He inhaled the warm static-y smell of her stockings. The slight rasp of silk against leather tingled up his spine.

–Let me take those wet boots, Mrs Pendlebury. I'll switch on the electric heater for you. Warm yourself a little before you start.

Her hands were white. Pure white. The white of an angel perhaps. Tinged with blue at the fingertips. Raynaud's. Like his mother. He'd love to clasp them tuck them under his arms.

–Very kind of you. Thank you, Mr Collins.

She had such a cultured voice, every word clearly spoken. The soft 'r's only made her seem sweeter. Very well bred.

Smart cream blouse today. Little bow tied at the neck, puff sleeves. She pulled off her cardigan and draped it over a coat hanger behind the door. His lips formed a small 'o' as she leant towards him. Lovely rounded breasts pressing against the fine cotton. Fleshy sacks of pure ecstasy swinging, as she pushed first one, then the other arm into the sleeves of her overall – which she kept in pristine condition. Whiter now than when he gave it to her last year. He liked a fastidious woman. She crossed it over her bosom, separating her breasts. Her little gold locket nestling between them. Just where he'd like to be. She tied it tightly behind. Lovely slim frame. Suited the wide shoulders, they accentuated her narrow waist. And the horn-rimmed specs. Yes, he quite liked them now. Gave her a studious air. Bit shocked when she first wore them, must be nearly three weeks ago, but he'd grown used to them. And perhaps they didn't hide her magnificent eyes so much as drew attention to them. Unusual shade of green. Or amber. Or ambery-green. Yes. He approved of the glasses. Perhaps he

should mention it? No. Too personal. They were still work colleagues after all. For now, at least.

–Luncheon meat and Government cheddar today, Mrs Pendlebury. Save the powdered egg for Friday. The pies haven't arrived yet. This snow is such a pain in the— such an inconvenience. The vans can't gain purchase on the cobbles.

He'd heard a solicitor say that once. In here with a client. Two pork pies and a bag of scratchings between them – cheapskate. His car couldn't gain purchase on the wet lawn, he'd said. Quite an education working in a bar with a better clientele. Although lawyers made him feel uneasy. The way they looked at you – judging. They took no account of human failings, a moment of weakness…

Stop it, Stanley! It was just a trinket. A *trinket*.

There was Dee, straight down to business. So conscientious. If only all his staff were like that. Bread unwrapped, marge out, knife in beautifully manicured hand. She must have her nails done every week. Meanwhile poor old Agnes was still lacing up her brogues. Those lisle stockings could have done with straightening – nothing worse than an old woman in wrinkled stockings. Hobbling around with her arthritis. She didn't have the stamina any more. Or the looks. Not that she was anything startling to begin with. Mean little gob on her. And that huge conk. Perhaps he'd let her go at Easter.

But Dee... Beautiful Dee. Always a smile. Clara Bow lips and deep scarlet lipstick. That could look cheap on an ordinary woman but on Dee it looked sophisticated, powerful. He'd seen the regulars staring at her mouth as she spoke. Lechers. She glided serenely behind the bar, as though she was on wheels. Head raised on her elegant neck, shoulders gracefully pushed back like a swan about to take flight. She was brilliant at her job, a natural. Knew what the customers wanted before they asked. He'd watched her – a fella walked in and Dee was at the tap pulling his mild or bitter before he'd even taken off his coat. Customers liked that. Made them feel special. She always enquired after wives, children, any little ailments. Lovely friendly but confident way of chatting. Could talk about politics or corn plasters. And she had a poem for every occasion – what was the one about lilac trees and seas of bloom she recited the other day? Very intelligent woman. Private school probably. Highlight of their day, he'll wager, coming in here and seeing her. Couldn't get a seat if you came after twelve-thirty.

She was singing to herself behind the bar the other day. Dead quiet, under her breath. He stopped to listen. Bit of a sad song – *Alone from night to night you'll find me.* Perry Como.

One by one, everyone stopped gassing. When she realised, she didn't stop or cringe with embarrassment. She raised her chin and sang to them all. Beautiful, rich soprano. Smiling, doing all the actions and everything. Then he heard the words, *For one command I stand and wait now, from one who's master of my fate now.* She'd glanced at him – he was dead certain. That was as much of a come on as a lady like Dee could give. She felt the same way about him but couldn't show it. He was sure now. He'd have to play it just right. Didn't want to frighten her off by mentioning Violet. She'd got a belting round of applause when she finished singing. The clients couldn't get enough of her.

Some of them took it too far of course. That Chinaman for one. Oh yes, he'd seen him. Wheedling his way into her affections. Stammering over his English. Only did it so she'd fuss over him. Can't trust a man with slanty eyes. He'd come in bang on twelve. Same seat in the middle of the room so he could watch her move about. Sly, them Orientals. They're all the same. He knew what the sneaky git was after even if his innocent Dee didn't. Broke her heart when he disappeared.

Not that she'd confided in him. And of course, he would never ask. Never impose. Never *presume an intimacy*. Not with a lady. She just went very quiet for a while. Stopped smiling. No more singing to herself. The China fella had been in, sipping at his half o' mild for two hours, every day for four or five months – which was a bit dodgy in itself. How come he never got a ship in all that time? He'd heard some of them were troublemakers – part of the union, agitators. Maybe he'd been blacklisted. So, there he was, every day, drinking and staring at Dee for months, then, piff! Just vanished. No word, no apology. Nothing. Stanley had heard rumours that the government rounded them all up and sent them back home. Worried about Communists. One of the regulars – a Water Guard down the Docks – had told him. Married ones and all, he said, some of them had kids and everything. Though who in their right minds would marry a Chinaman was beyond him. Dragged out their beds, he reckoned, out the cafes and clubs they hung round in. Put on a big ship and sent back to China. But Stanley found it hard to believe the Government had anything to do with it. Clement Attlee was a solid Labour fella, he'd never be so underhand. They probably all just scarpered. Didn't want the responsibility. Probably had families back East. Can't trust foreigners.

He'd suspected at the time but didn't like to believe that Dee and the Chinaman had been an item.

Upset him, that. Her and that creep.

But they *had* been on dates together. Several. He was sure of it now. Something Agnes said. Oh, nothing tawdry, no *evening* dates, he wouldn't have thought. No. Dee would have simply wanted friendship. Decent woman like that. Wouldn't have got involved with a slimy foreigner. Not *that* way. Walks probably. After all, he was just an ordinary seaman. And Chinamen get paid even less than normal fellas. He had no money. And Dee... well, her wages weren't great, even he'd have to admit that.

He had the feeling Dee had been used to money, though. You could tell. She had bearing, as his mother would have said. Good stock. Old money. Before the war perhaps. A widow now, for sure. She still wore a wedding ring. Out of pride. Loyalty. He could always tell the women born to it and those who put on airs. Years working in the furriers. He knew instantly a woman walked into the shop whether she was after an expensive mink or a cheap rabbit. A flash silver fox – the tarts, the gold-diggers, they always went for the silver furs – or a serviceable squirrel. He preferred a discreet Chinchilla collar rather than a full length fur. Modest respectability.

Violet's sable had hung in the wardrobe since they were married. A wedding present from her father. Ostentatious. Stand-up collar in the American fashion. Best in the shop. But Violet couldn't pull it off. Plain face. And too short. A woman needs height, a good posture, to carry off a fur coat. High heels. A little make up. Dee, now, Dee would have suited a fur coat. Full length. She was tall for a woman. And she had the deportment, the looks, the *glamour.* At least Violet had the good grace not to pretend. Wore it once over her going away outfit. Took it off as soon as they were seated in the train at Lime Street. Then a second time when he'd persuaded her to wear it to the theatre in London – the one time they'd splashed-out during their honeymoon. Her father hadn't given them any money for the trip, tight sod. She looked terrible – like an overstuffed teddy bear with that ridiculous bit of feathery thing on her head – but he fancied they appeared rich. And they might have been. Eventually.

Oh! The pies. At last.

–When you've finished with the sandwiches – oh, beautifully arranged as usual, Mrs Pendlebury – perhaps you could work your magic on the pork pies. Quarters mainly and perhaps four or five in halves. I'll fetch the pickled eggs from the cold room, the jar's too heavy for your delicate constitution, my dear.

Such slim arms. He could almost imagine them snapping under such a weight. He'd never seen her elbows, even in summer. Kept her arms covered to the wrist. Modest woman.

He pictured himself linking Dee as they walked along Otterspool Prom or took a turn around Stanley Park. A warm day, he'd sling his coat casually over one arm, like they do on the big picture, so she could have the benefit of his fine wool suit. Tailor-made in London. Cost him his first two months' wages when he came out of the army. Nearly thirty years old that suit but still in mint condition. Get what you pay for. And it still fitted him. A man should look after himself. Take pride in his appearance – not just for women, that. He'd wear his Italian silk tie with matching pocket handkerchief. No. That was a present from Violet before she went funny. He'd buy a new tie. Save it for dates with Dee.

He had an image of Violet. Just as she was the day she'd given him the Italian silk. The shy smile, little red spots spreading across her cheeks. It surprised him. He'd almost forgotten what she used to look like. He tended to picture her as she was now, as though she'd always been that way. Face puffy, pinched eyes submerged in the mottled flesh. She used to be almost pretty. Well, not plug ugly anyway. Small face. Big frightened eyes, long lashes – like a cow. They'd been down at the Pier Head waiting for a ferry to Seacombe. A new restaurant had just opened, Violet had read about it in the *Echo*. She wanted to try it. They were both gazing into the water. It was an icy blue. A lovely colour that masked its cruelty, its malice. As if it would drown you soon as look at you. Spit you out when it got tired of you. Violet thought it looked agitated. The waves seemed to be retreating as though they were scared of the sea. Violet backed away from the railings. Shrinking into a shelter by the wall. But then, she'd always been a shrinking Violet – he sniggered to himself. Too shy for boyfriends. No mother. Her father discouraged her from going out dancing and it was couples mainly who came to the shop. Couples and a few older ladies. Wealthy widows, rich Jewesses— his stomach contracted. Forget it Stanley – it's in the past. What was wrong with him today?

Violet had been an easy conquest. Not that he was a money-grabber. He didn't target her because her father owned the furriers where he worked. No. He certainly didn't *target* her. He wasn't a mercenary. They'd been thrown together. Working long hours in that cramped space. Standing for hours, side by side behind the counter. Of course they chatted. There were often long periods between customers. They got to know each other over time. Likes and dislikes. Their own private jokes. Like a courting couple really.

Her father was only too glad to give his daughter to a valued employee. And he was good at his job. Always put in the extra effort to make the sale. Some of those old birds took a lot of persuading to part with their cash. The richer, the tighter, in his experience. Violet was an only child, no sons to inherit the shop. The old fella was happy that he'd take over the business one day. Stanley knew everything about the fur trade. How to flatter without *obsequiousness*, her old man called it. Educated man. Don't fawn, Mr Collins, he'd say. No one likes a creep.

Making the sale, actually getting the cash in the register, that was an art form. These women were shelling out a lot of money.

No, he didn't marry Violet for financial gain. He was fond of her. At the beginning. They rubbed along nicely. Until that tin mask thing. Until the children business.

He never blamed Violet for not being able to have babies. Some women couldn't. No reason, they just couldn't. He wasn't bitter. It was her who couldn't cope. Doctor called it nerves. She'd cry at the drop of a hat. The very sight of a pram or a toy in a shop window would set her off. They stopped visiting her cousin when she had her first child. And they'd been really close growing up. Violet said she couldn't bear it. To see her cousin so happy. The perfect little family, she said – it made her sick. It did seem unfair but what could you do?

Then she got scared of going out. *Agoraphobic*. He'd looked it up. It didn't happen overnight. It was a slow process. He'd hardly noticed. She started going out less and less over the years. Then with the blitz and the bombings and that, she was afraid to leave the house. Somehow or other, she'd never quite got back into the habit of venturing past the door. It became a huge hurdle. Just couldn't get her head around it. Then she lost the little zest for life she'd possessed. She'd been fading since. Getting fatter mind, all them cream cakes, but her *spirit* was fading. Perhaps she wasn't long for this world. But would Dee wait? Dee was an upright woman. She'd never consider a dalliance with a married man, he knew that.

Well, that bar wouldn't polish itself. And the brass rails could do with a bit of a shine. He'd need some elbow grease on them.

He put on his cleaning overall. Took out the box from under the sink in the back room; Brasso, beeswax, Vim scouring powder for the sink, vinegar for the glass cabinets. Cloths – damp ones for the dirt, dry soft ones for polishing. Brown paper. A small scrubbing brush for stubborn marks. He'd start on the bar first. He loved the smell of beeswax. There was something traditional about it. Natural. Made him think of honey and fresh bread. Candles

and churches – not that he'd been to church since he was a young lad but still. A clean, polished bar showed a manager who cared for his premises.

Always take pride in your work, Stanley, no matter what the job, his father often told him.

The interior of Rigby's was spotless. The mirror behind the bar trembled with the bright reflections of the lights. The dark wooden floor was polished every morning by Mrs Walsh and the copper table tops gleamed enthusiastically. Their glitteriness reminded him of Christmas for some reason. Stanley himself always washed the glass cabinet in which the sandwiches and pies were displayed. He scrubbed and wiped until there wasn't a crumb left or a streak on the glass – couldn't beat vinegar and brown paper for getting the smears off (*he went to bed to mend his head*....sang it to himself every time, couldn't help it). It was important that people saw their food was kept under hygienic conditions.

Shame Dee didn't like flowers on the bar though. A small bunch of forget-me-nots or carnations would have just finished it off. She hated to see them die, she said, it upset her. He could see her point he supposed. Sensitive woman.

Right. A last glance around the bar. All ship-shape and Bristol fashion. Stanley squinted up at the station clock behind the bar. Eleven-fifty. Time to unlock the front door.

Dee was a natural. She could serve several clients at once. They'd make a good team. Maybe he could get his own little bar. They could run it together. The place would be filled in no time. Word of mouth and all that.

Hang on! What was that shifty-looking fella up to? Toadying up to Dee. Flirting. He had his pie and his pint, why didn't he sit down?

–Excuse me, sir, I'm afraid there's no standing allowed in the serving area. Let me find you a seat. If you'd like to follow me, sir. This way please...

That seat in the far corner would do him. Wouldn't be able to keep ogling her with that pillar in the way. Who did he think he was? Only office fodder. Definitely not a lawyer. Not top brass. Didn't stand a chance with a woman like Dee. Out of his class.

It unsettled him all the same. Perhaps he should get his skates on or someone might snap her up from under his nose. She wasn't interested in that little weasel but there were lots of financiers and shipping merchants who lunched here. She might have her head turned.

Perhaps he ought to have a word with the doctor. Maybe he should take an appointment this week, start the ball rolling. A few days that fella said—

Now what? The police?

Stanley ducked behind the counter into the back room, slipping the bolt across the door. He was being ridiculous. He knew it was ridiculous. After all this time. Why did he still feel guilty? Why did he still shake every time he saw a policeman? It was done and dusted. A long time ago now. If they hadn't come for him then, they weren't going to come now.

He knew this.

He knew it.

Deep breaths, Stanley. Composure.

Why, why, why? He'd been kicking himself for the last twenty years. That one moment, the one time he gave into temptation. Madness. You were so weak when you were guilty of a crime. So vulnerable. If he could turn the clock back... The nights he'd lain awake, re-enacting that moment. Every time he'd put the jewel-encrusted cigarette case back on top of the mantelpiece. Put it back. He'd only been looking at it. Admiring it. So many nights he'd taken it out of his pocket, put it back. Back where it was and left the room. Left empty handed. Clear conscience. Shouted up the stairs and walked out of the house. Empty handed.

Did they just bolt the door?

Don't be stupid Stanley. They haven't come for you.

He sat down. Breathing hard. Listening for them to call his name. The whole bar to fall silent. Watching. Waiting to see the drama. His shame. Bastards.

So *stupid!* So soddin' pointless. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. He never even used the damn thing. Didn't even smoke. He'd shoved it under some papers in his desk drawer at home. Locked it. Hidden the key in the potting shed. He'd never even looked at the case again. Couldn't bear the idea of it. The guilt smouldered away inside the drawer every time he went into his office. Threatening to ignite, destroy his life.

And the joke. The biggest joke of all. What made him want to kick himself every time he thought about it – it wasn't even worth anything! He'd had it valued. Glass, the jeweller said. A cheap trinket. Silver-plated. Not even solid silver. A worthless, ugly knick-knack. Old bitch!

Dee was knocking at the door. The police wanted to talk to him. Why was the door locked? Was he unwell? Mr Collins?

Oh, Dee. Lovely Dee. She'd never look at him again.

–Mr Collins?

A man's voice.

–This is Constable Berwick. I'm here with Constable Gordon. Can you open the door please? We'd like a word with you.

That bloody rich Jewess. It was her fault. He was doing her a favour bringing the fur to her house. A blind widow. Out in Mossely Hill. They never delivered to people's homes personally – that was the courier's job but she was afraid of strangers her daughter said, wouldn't open the door to them. Would they be so kind? If she hadn't insisted, if Violet's father hadn't agreed. It was all their fault. He should never have been put in that position. If they'd ruined his chance with Dee...

–Mr Collins. Please open the door. We need to speak to you.

He couldn't put it off indefinitely. They haven't come for you, Stanley. He straightened his tie. Not after all this time. Smoothed the hair over his balding crown. Don't be ridiculous. Adjusted his jacket.

Then unlocked the door.

–I'm sorry, I wasn't feeling well. I had to sit down.

–This will only take a minute, sir. May we come in. A word in private?

He looked fat and officious, his mate skinny and suspicious.

–...thefts...

Stanley wasn't listening.

–...jewellery. Small items.

And what was the point of it all?

–We believe there's a team of them. Trying to sell the jewellery round the local pubs. Necklaces, bracelets, that sort of thing...

What?

–It happens often, sir, you must be aware of thieves operating on your premises in that manner.

Yes, yes, he had seen it once or twice but he'd always drummed them out of the pub.

–Let us know if you see any of these men.

Stanley would of course. He couldn't abide thieves. Should all be locked up. His hand was shaking as he took the poster from Officer Berwick. He was breathless. His lips were

quivering as he fought a smile that was rising to his lips. He glanced at the photos without seeing them. Yes, of course he'd keep them informed.

–Thank you, officers. Let me see you out.

Oh, they hadn't bolted the door.

–It's alright, Mr Collins, we'll close it behind us. Keep the snow out. Don't want your customers catching their deaths.

Stanley's laugh was more like a thin squeal.

He'd make an appointment with the Doctor first thing. Invite Dee out to lunch on Sunday. The Adelphi perhaps. Yes, why not? Push the boat out. You only live once. Perhaps he could pop out to the gents' tailors on Church Street this afternoon. Buy that tie. He'd been saved again. If Dee got to know him first he could explain, she'd understand. The weakness of a young man. A wrong decision made on the spur of the moment. He so much wanted to unburden himself. All these years dragging the guilt round with him. Weighing him down. He could never tell Violet. But Dee was a woman of the world. She'd be able to comfort him. Forgive him. She'd understand how he was tempted.

Of course, she herself would never have been tempted. But if you've always been surrounded by beautiful things you don't crave them. Married to a professional man he'd wager. Killed in the war no doubt. A hero perhaps. A photograph had fallen from her handbag one morning as she'd pulled out her compact. An old sepia tint. He only caught a glimpse of it but it looked like a young man in naval uniform. An officer with stripes on his cuff. He looked well-heeled. Perched on his writing desk. Distinctly middle-class. Probably died saving his men. Unlike him. Though he did his share in the first war. Oh yes, he was no shirker. Volunteered for active service. Ended up in an office in Chatham Barracks thanks to asthma and poor eyesight. But that wasn't his fault. What he wouldn't have given to see active service. He had courage enough for ten men. He wouldn't have flinched in the face of the Hun. Oh, no. But women don't understand that. They want wounded heroes not the men behind the scenes. Men like him who were controlling the war, keeping soldiers and civilians safe where they could. He'd worked with radio operators who were intercepting German messages. There were men of the highest rank planning important strategies in his building. They were important people. Their jobs were just as necessary as the soldiers on the front.

Not that Violet ever appreciated that. Never said as much but he knew she was disappointed she hadn't married a hero. A cousin of hers came to visit a few years after they

were married, wearing a tin face. It was quite horrific. Extremely difficult to talk to. You had to keep reminding yourself that behind that piece of tin there was a man speaking. His voice was muffled and every now and then he reached up to scratch the skin beneath the mask. Like he was burrowing inside his own flesh. Quite disturbing.

Changed everything, that. Violet's face. The way she looked at the tin man then looked at him. The disappointment. *She* was disappointed in *him*. He'd always liked her well enough. He could have learned to love her a little, even. But for *her* to be disappointed in *him*. He couldn't bear it. How dare she? How could you build a marriage on that – on disappointment? Mutual disappointment actually. And it was only him who really had just cause, not her. He might have tried but after that... Well, after that, why bother? She didn't deserve it. Made him feel less of a man. Like he wasn't worthy. And the really annoying thing about it, the thing that made him most angry was the fact that nothing was said. Just that look. How could he even begin to talk about it, to get angry with her, to shout at her, when nothing had actually been said? She wouldn't come out and accuse him so he couldn't defend himself. It had sat there between them since. All those years. A big brooding elephant squatting on their marriage. Crushing the life out of it.

And of course all the best jobs went to those who had been wounded. You turned up with a missing arm or leg or a scar across your face, you were made. He'd worked in an office for the whole of the war, he had experience, yet could he get a job as a filing clerk? He saw the look of derision when they asked him where he'd fought. Good as being branded a coward to say Chatham.

It took him nearly twelve months to find the job in the furriers. Beneath his capabilities but his father said he had to bear it with dignity. And in retrospect, it was a safe job – while others lost theirs during the great depression, the furriers stayed open. Rich people always had money. Only the ordinary man was affected by a recession. And after he married Violet he was set to take over the shop when her father could no longer manage it. Obviously it would be left to Violet but as her husband, he effectively owned it.

The future looked so rosy, so certain 'til that damned war. The second war to muck up his life. He'd had a bad feeling during the worst night of the May blitz. A coldness had passed over him – never had before during the whole bombing campaign on Liverpool but that night... Next morning, he and Violet took the tram as far into town as they could and walked the last mile or so to the shop. It was Violet who spoke first.

–My Lord! Castle Street has completely disappeared!

They'd stared at the spot where the shop had been.

–Father doesn't have any insurance.

The old man died of a heart attack within the week.

They still had their house in Childwall of course. Her father had bought it for them, cash, when they married. Nice area. Lovely house. Though Dee could probably do more with the decoration. Violet never had much of an eye for it. Dee's house had probably been grand. A huge Victorian edifice. Near Newsham Park she'd briefly mentioned once. Probably had a servant or two, a housekeeper. Large houses like that needed looking after.

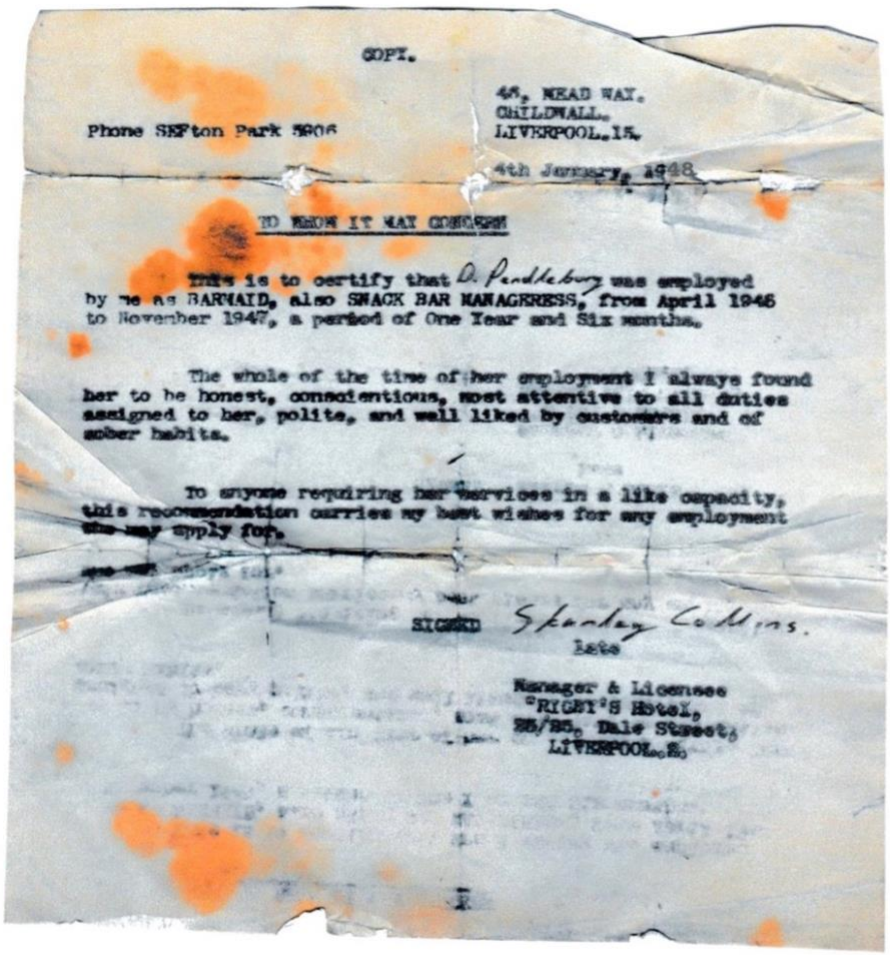
She'd mentioned children when she'd first started but he had the impression she no longer saw them. Perhaps they were married by now, moved away. At university perhaps, Oxford or Cambridge. Their father would have been an educated man of course. A boy and a girl if he remembered correctly. Or two girls?

Dee lived in a flat now. Well, the upkeep on those large properties would be prohibitive. Especially for a widow. Although she probably kept some of the smaller pieces of expensive furniture. Silk damask curtains cut to size, the bone china dinner service, crystal glasses... Shelves full of books, doubtless – all the classics. She was quiet, a deep thinker. Studious at school probably. Maybe even a college girl. Such a shame to see a fine woman in reduced circumstances like that. She deserved better. He'd make sure she had all the home comforts when she came to live with him. He was considering turning one of the bedrooms into a bathroom with indoor toilet. A lot of people were doing it now. Well, the *better* people. She'd have luxury. Nothing but the best.

He'd call Dee into the back room. Straightaway. Have Agnes bring them some tea and perhaps a sandwich if there were any left. He'd invite her out for lunch on Sunday then explain about Violet. That she was a nut— that she had a mental *impairment*. That was the technical term, the fella in the bar said. Would he mention having her sectioned? Perhaps he ought, relationships must be built on honesty. He'd tell her that. She'd appreciate honesty. She'd understand how he regretted having to do it, how his hand had been forced. He wasn't a bad man but he'd reached the end of his tether. Dee was a woman of the world. Not Catholic he was fairly sure. You could always tell a Catholic. They always talked about it, or gave the game away somehow. And Dee never wore a cross. Or didn't they call them crucifixes? She wouldn't insist on marriage. They'd be discreet. The neighbours would presume— oh, now, there was

a thought. They'd see the white van arriving. The men in white coats. They'd know Violet had been put away. Well, perhaps they could move house. Start afresh. He could bring Dee to a house where the neighbours didn't know his past. They'd be like a young married couple starting out in life. For the second time.

–Mrs. Pendlebury, when you've finished those plates, can I have— perhaps I might have a word...



GDPT.

Phone SEFton Park 2906

48, MEAD WAY.
CHILDWALL.
LIVERPOOL.15.

4th January, 1948.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that D. Pendlebury was employed by me as BARMAID, also SNACK BAR MANAGRESS, from April 1946 to November 1947, a period of One Year and Six months.

The whole of the time of her employment I always found her to be honest, conscientious, most attentive to all duties assigned to her, polite, and well liked by customers and of sober habits.

To anyone requiring her services in a like capacity, this recommendation carries my best wishes for any employment she may apply for.

SIGNED Stanley Collins.
Late

Manager & Licensee
"RIGBY'S Hotel,
85/85, Dale Street,
LIVERPOOL.2.

THE HUSBAND 1951

Sofia emerged first, bending out of the taxi. Her breasts swinging inside her low cut dress. *Ripe*. Strange word. Inappropriate, maybe. Raphe held out his hand to steady her as she stepped down onto the pavement. Cheap diamante earrings flashing in the last of the sun. A seagull screeched above them, swooping in low. Raphe instinctively ducked although the bird wasn't that close. Sofia didn't flinch. Stood there absorbing the grandeur of the Adelphi. *Absorbing*. Another strange one.

Greta leaned out next, pausing for her father to help her. A demure neckline. Discreet gold crucifix. Much more suitable for a girl that age. What was Sofia's mother thinking? Or her father for that matter.

Raphe lagged behind the girls to adjust his leg, smoothing its calico strap through the fine wool cloth of his suit. His best suit. Silver-grey. Made-to-measure. He touched the white silk handkerchief in his top pocket. Checked the small white rose in his buttonhole. Glanced down at his spats. You could judge a man by his appearance.

He walked stiffly to the steps. Leaning to the right, arcing the wooden leg around the good. Making his way up to the huge revolving doors at the top. The tip of the silver cane click, click, clicking against the white stone.

–Evening, Mr Pendlebury.

–Evening, Fred.

Raphe stopped on the top step. Glad to catch his breath. The girls were hovering at the opened door. Sofia impatient to enter, Greta hanging back. The green of Sofia's dress looked good against her olive skin. Greta by contrast looked pale, almost ethereal in her powder blue brocade. Raphe had chosen the dress, it suited Greta's colouring. Hair like cinnamon. A shade lighter than her mother's. Her mother had always looked good in blue.

–How's your father's shoulder?

–Oh, much better since he started coming to you. Much better, thank you, sir.

–Good man.

Raphe dabbed at his forehead with a cotton handkerchief. The leg was heavy. He'd just been reading that in the future, prosthetic legs would be made from titanium. They'd be lightweight, flexible. He'd be long gone before then, he'd told Greta. He'd been sitting on his bed, popping crisp green peas from their pods and reading aloud from his scientific journals.

He liked to keep abreast of new developments, the future looked exciting. He retired to bed early most evenings, especially in summer. The thick leather belt that held the leg in place became uncomfortable, the skin beneath sweated and rubbed in the heat. He was always relieved to take it off. Ease the stump. Greta often came up and sat with him. It says here, he'd told her, that one day, people will be able to run on the titanium legs. She'd raised her eyebrows. She had no idea what titanium was but she'd agreed it would be a good thing. Sweet girl.

–May I say, the young ladies are looking particularly beautiful this evening.

Fred tipped the garish top hat of his livery

Sofia smiled, tossing her thick black hair, sweeping through the door like Elizabeth Taylor. Greta dropped her head, stumbling in after her friend. She was too servile. Like her mother. No confidence unless she was performing. On the trams, behind the bar. Raphe had seen her mother behind the bar once.

Someone had mentioned she was working in Rigby's a few years back. Sort of ironic really – the same name as his mother's martyred Catholic ancestor. It had bothered him for some reason – a barmaid. It was on his mind when he walked down to the river one afternoon, a few days after hearing about it. A fresh summer's day and he had no patients for a few hours. He liked to walk as much as possible, keep himself fit despite the effort of dragging the leg around. He looked on it as a form of weight training, good for the stomach muscles.

The river was calm. A skin of silver stretched from bank to bank, as though there were nothing below the surface. A river with no substance. All the ferries were over the other side of the water. It was so still, so quiet. One lone bird – a curlew possibly – was flying over the water. It looked vulnerable, sad. As though it were searching for its mate. Its plaintive call pierced Raphe so deeply his eyes watered. Like a cry of pain wrenched from its heart. The words of a Yeats poem came to him – *O curlew, cry no more in the air… because your crying brings to my mind passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair that was shaken out over my breast…*

He left the Pier Head, turning up towards town, intending to take a tram back to his surgery. He'd walked enough, his leg and hip were aching. Instead, he found himself on Water Street, heading towards Dale Street. And Rigby's.

There she was. Dee. His wife – technically anyway – flirting with the customers. Smiling. Touching arms, shoulders. Briefly but still touching. Forty-seven at the time, making

a show of herself like that. And laughing. He never remembered her laughing. She never laughed. She was fluttering her eyelashes – shorter than they used to be. Eyes not so dazzling or large as they were. Lips even thinner. But she was dressed immaculately – for the last year or so they'd lived together, she'd let herself go. Stopped eating, became quite scrawny. Hunched. And unkempt, which wasn't like Dee at all. But there she was, waltzing up and down behind the bar, singing snatches of songs as she worked, like she was on stage or something. He thought she'd have learned her lesson after the Chinaman. Oh yes, he knew all about the Chinaman. He wondered if he'd seen her birthmark too – the small wine-coloured map of Britain just between her breasts. Had he kissed it, as Raphe had done that first time? A *Chinaman.* And only months after leaving him. After abandoning her children. *Months*.

She'd already made her mind up to go. There was nothing he could say.

The sheets had been stripped from the bed. His mother, interfering as usual – she hadn't helped matters. Granted, Dee hadn't been keeping up with the housework as much as she should have – she was always tired. Seemed to spend all her time sleeping when she was at home. Or crying. Neglecting the children. It was that bloody job. He'd tried to get her to read, something light-hearted, a bit of escapism, but she was never one for reading books. She always hated school and having to study. Lazy-minded, he'd often told her – she certainly wasn't stupid.

Dee had dragged all her blouses and skirts from the wardrobe and drawers, hurling them onto the bare mattress. He didn't know why she'd just stuffed them in the case like that. The children had been at school, they'd had plenty of time.

It was so dark in that semi-basement room. Even in daylight. She'd always hated it. The floor was almost black. Varnish on varnish on varnish. Layers of other people's lives. They'd never put their own mark on the place. Well, it had still belonged to his mother.

As Dee heaved the case off the bed it had knocked a glass vase off the bedside cabinet. It smashed. They both glanced at it, shattered all over the floorboards. Neither of them moved to clear it up. The case had sprung open, spilling her clothes onto the floor. She'd dropped to her knees, tried to stuff them back in. Giving up, weeping silently. He'd picked up the suitcase, then folded and placed all her clothes carefully back inside.

In the gloom he'd noticed her soft satin under slip. Palest pink, almost flesh. Wrinkled over the ticking like a discarded skin. Fragile and pathetic. Slipping off the bed finally.

She'd grabbed it, quickly stuffed it inside, then locked the case shut.

Later, when the house had fallen silent again, he'd touched the spot where it had been. Tried to remember the sensation of satin on his fingers, the flesh yielding beneath it. It had been a long time.

A ship's horn bellowed over the city.

–Empress of Canada?

–I believe so, sir. Off to Montreal.

Raphe paused a moment, then ushered the girls through the door.

–I say, young man, Raphe held out his coat and hat.

–There's a good fellow.

The bellboy raced over, arms outstretched. He draped the coat elegantly over one arm, suspending the hat from his hand, leaving the other free for the half-crown Raphe was holding out.

–Pre-prandials, ladies?

Greta lowered her head, mumbling something.

Sofia looked at him steadily.

–I'll have a cocktail.

She strode to the door of the cocktail lounge then waited. Head tilted back, gazing down the length of her long Roman nose in the direction of the doorman. Only fifteen. Already in command. Second generation Italian. From one of the small terraces off Scotland Road. Not far from where Dee grew up. Two-up-two-down, outside lav in the back yard. But she had the *élan*, Raphe decided. The will to improve herself.

Sofia's dress was lovely – from a distance – but Raphe could see it was home made. The uneven stitching around the sleeve irritated him. Poverty-stricken. A stunning girl like that deserved better. He glanced at the detailing around the neckline of his daughter's dress. Tiny seed pearls stitched discreetly around the curve. He squeezed her arm. She looked up at him. Gave him a big smile.

A young waiter led them to a table in the centre of the lounge.

–Greta, darling! Sofia declared to the room.

–You sit by me.

She linked Greta's arm.

–We'll both face your handsome father.

It irked Raphe that he felt flattered. He batted away the menu.

–I'll have a Scotch on the rocks. Balblair.

Greta was grinning. Perhaps it was nice for a girl to think her father handsome. For her glamorous friend to find him attractive. Even if she was a child.

He leant back, sliding his leg under the table. He was facing three huge windows overlooking Lewis's – recently rebuilt after the blitz. The whole city seemed to be propped up by wooden scaffolding. Supporting war damaged buildings, or raising new ones in place of the old. He hardly recognised the city any more. War changed a lot of things. Hastened development. Progress in fast motion.

A bus hurtled past. They were taking over from the trams now. Dee had been a clippie during the war. He'd been pleased at first, she'd had a new zest for life. The happiest she'd been since the children. Since that nonsense in Manchester, dragging the children out to sleep in the backyard. But then the job began to consume her. Her new-found independence made her cocky. She'd started to answer him back and he wasn't an argumentative man. She wouldn't let things drop. Some of the rows... Thank goodness Greta didn't take after her. They always rubbed along. Pals. Greta said she liked the creases round his eyes – his laughy lines she called them when she was little. But poor old Dee. Never a happy woman. He'd had no idea how to make her happy either, that was the problem.

He glanced around the bar. He liked its modern, clean lines. The simplicity. Nothing superfluous. Purely functional. Easy to relax in.

–Oh, there's so much choice.

Sofia's tone was melodramatic. Tiresome.

–I don't think I'll ever decide.

Sofia stared at the waiter. Willing him to engage. She was exotic, no denying that. Skin like liquid gold. Or was that a cliché?

–And for you, mam'selle? The young man turned to Greta.

The boy had a strong Liverpool accent which made the French sound unpleasant rather than sophisticated. Slightly obsequious but still. Do Greta's confidence no harm. She dropped her head again. Oh Greta! He wished she knew how beautiful she was. Raphe couldn't tell her, he was her father. Wouldn't have been right coming from him. She needed a mother to tell her that. A girl needed her mother. Dereliction of duty. Upping and leaving like that. He blamed that damned job.

–Oh, I don't really know. I've never had a cocktail before. Perhaps some ginger beer...

Greta's voiced trailed off and she blushed, head lowering into the cocktail list.

–If you'd allow me, I shall create a special cocktail just for you, mam'selle. One moment, please.

Sofia glared. Not willing to grant her friend even one small attention. Spoilt child. She was a dark mysterious creature. Dangerous. Irises so dark it was hard to tell their colour.

The waiter returned with Raphe's whisky and a crystal cut high ball glass. There was an umbrella on the side, a pineapple ring draped over the rim. Cherries bobbed about on the ice cubes as he placed it in front of her.

–And may I be so bold as to ask mam'selle's name?

–She's Greta and my name is Sofia.

Sofia draped her arm around Greta, pushing her face against Greta's, staring up at the waiter.

–Do you have a light?

She pursed her plump painted lips around a cigarette holder. Leaning forward to offer a full view of her cleavage.

Raphe sat back and watched.

The barman ignored Sofia.

–I call this, the ‘Greta Cocktail'. And he bowed.

Greta dropped her head again, reddening but smiling.

One to Greta. Raphe took a long sip of whisky. Excellent.

Sofia pulled the holder from her mouth.

–That looks like orange juice. I'd like something harder. Not one of those baby drinks. Get me a Tom Collins.

–Without the gin, waiter. She's only fifteen.

The hatred in Sofia's eyes shocked Raphe. Then Dee's face flashed across his mind. The way he always pictured her now. Mouth stretched tight, unforgiving. Eyes... not blazing, no, that wasn't the word. Blistering maybe. Hatred arcing from them, igniting with anger.

The ferocity was palpable when she walked out on them.

He'd been trying to be civilised. That was all. Keep things amicable. But she'd been so angry. Where did all that anger come from? He couldn’t listen to what she was saying, it didn’t make any sense. He’d been used to the silent periods, weeks when she wouldn’t speak to

him. Usually for no reason that he could fathom. He wasn't used to this Dee – this aggressive, loud, vicious Dee. He could hardly recognise her face the way it had twisted. The only constants were her red lipstick, her strange coloured eyes that looked, at that moment, as if they were on fire. Molten brass. Then he'd noticed a gold locket round her neck. She kept twisting it. He didn't recognise it. She hadn't had it when they first met and he hadn't bought it for her. He'd thought about that locket for a long time. It was probably what made him let her go in the end.

One court shoe – battered. The heel worn down. Why didn't she buy a new pair? He'd have given her the money, he wasn't a mean man. He'd just bought her the camel coat she'd admired in Cripps window. And a nice brooch to finish it off, as a surprise.

One stocking.

An old bra.

That was all that remained of her.

He'd found them after she left. On the floor. They'd slipped off the edge of the bed. Overlooked in haste. He'd put them in a bag in the wardrobe. They were still there.

C'mon, Kid. Hey, Kid. That's what they called each other. Humphrey Bogart – she loved Casablanca. Don't go, Kid. Let's talk, he'd said.

Thought he'd said.

Wanted to say.

After their drinks, they moved up to the elegant walnut-panelled dining room. They sat in the centre of the room underneath the draped crystal chandeliers. A shoal of bow-tied waiters glided silently between the tables, ever watchful of the diners, ready to dart.

Having studied the wine menu, Raphe decided on an Italian wine for a change. He usually ordered French. He clicked at a nearby waiter.

–I'll have this Neapolitan red.

As he was ordering, Sofia dug Greta in the arm.

–Look! she hissed.

–She's a prostitute, I'm sure of it.

Greta glanced over to where Sofia was staring.

–How do you know?

–Oh Greta. You're such an innocent, darling. Look at the awful powdery face and smeared red lipstick. All that smudged black eyeliner. And her dress! Good grief, she must have bought it in the thirties – when it fitted her.

–Sofia! Enough.

Raphe thought she of all people would have shown more charity.

–And that battered old hat with the peacock feather in it. *Frightful!* Who'd wear peacock feathers?

Raphe had bought Dee a hat with a peacock feather, when they'd first married. She'd hated it. Didn't even want it in the house. Bad luck apparently. Superstitious nonsense. He'd kept it in its box in a cupboard – it was an expensive hat. Perhaps Greta would wear it now she was a young lady.

–She's so ugly—

Raphe leaned towards Sofia, speaking quietly.

–I said, that's enough. You're being unkind. There but for the grace of God, Sofia.

Sofia raised her eyes to the ceiling.

–Judge not, lest ye be judged, Greta added.

Sofia gave her a warning look.

–Absolutely correct, Greta, Raphe patted her arm.

They sat in silence, Sofia sulking dramatically, until the waiter returned with the wine. Sofia studied Raphe as he swirled the wine around his glass, raised it to his nose and breathed in deeply, taking a sip as he did so. He sucked it through his teeth. Then swallowed.

–Very good.

The waiter filled his glass.

–And for the young ladies, sir?

–Just a small drop each.

Sofia pouted.

Their meals arrived a few moments later under silver cloches, which the two waiters removed simultaneously with a flourish.

–Ta-dah! Sofia grinned at them both but they just stared back.

Greta sniggered.

–This looks delicious, Mr Pendlebury.

Sofia had decided to forgive him, then. He felt irrationally grateful. She began picking daintily at her roast chicken with baked cherry tomatoes. He was enjoying his steak pie but wished he hadn't ordered the boiled potatoes. He didn't have the same appetite these days. Greta was carefully picking the flesh off her *Sole Meuniere*. Miss Guthrie, one of Raphe's patients, had shown her how to eat the fish when she'd taken her for lunch before the pantomime a few years earlier. Greta loved the skeleton that was left when the bones had been picked clean.

Sofia speared a glistening tomato. Resting her elbow on the table, she dropped her wrist, dangling her fork.

–And what is it you do, Mr Pendlebury?

The tone was challenging. She batted her heavily mascaraed eyelashes, raising the fork to her mouth. Slowly, she began to push the tomato between her lips, forcing them apart, holding Raphe's gaze.

He watched as her mouth closed over it and she curled her tongue over her lips.

–Napkin, Sofia.

He lifted the corner of his linen napkin, pointing to it, tutting.

–Greta says it's something very clever.

–I'm a physiotherapist, as I'm sure Greta has told you. Excuse me, young man.

The hovering waiter nearest them, who'd also been watching Sofia, reddened as Raphe nodded towards his empty glass.

Sofia smiled, not looking at the boy as he poured Raphe some more wine from the crystal decanter on the table.

–*Lacryma Christi*. Raphe turned to his daughter.

–Which translates as, Greta?

Greta was still concentrating on her fish.

–Greta? He said, more sharply than he'd intended.

Sofia was still staring at him, licking her lips between each mouthful.

–Erm. Well, *Christi* is Christ. With a plural ending.

–And *lacryma*? Come on Greta, you remember this. *Lacryma* – Latin. Which English word is derived from that?

–Oh, Greta lowered her knife and fork.

–Er, lachrymose. Um, tearful. Tears of Christ.

She was a clever girl. Attended six different schools before the age of seven. Two infant schools in Liverpool, that backward village school in Wales, then three different primary schools when she returned from evacuation. Such a disrupted childhood yet she sailed through the eleven plus. She seemed to act daft in front of Sofia though. Raphe couldn't understand why.

–And what exactly does physiotherapy entail, Mr Pendlebury, or may I call you Raphe?

Sofia exchanged smiles with Greta.

Raphe scowled at his daughter.

–No, you may not. Mr Pendlebury is more appropriate.

The wine waiter returned. He lifted the decanter ready to top up Sofia's glass.

–Er, not for the young ladies, waiter.

Raphe stayed the decanter lightly.

Sofia pouted.

–I treat pain, Sofia – injuries, diseases. Using massage mainly, heat treatment. Occasionally—

–And if I came to you with, say, a chest injury. How would you treat me?

Greta lowered her head, glancing away.

–Sit up straight, Greta. Stop slouching. And take that smirk off your face.

Raphe clicked his fingers to no one in particular.

–Sweet trolley.

A waiter close to the kitchens was already wheeling it across to their table.

Raphe was not going to be sucked in.

–Would you have to perform massage?

–It's not a performance, child. Greta, anything you fancy?

Greta was staring down into her plate, poking at the skeleton with her knife.

–I don't think you'll get any more fish off that. Put your knife and fork down.

The knife slipped from Greta's hand and crashed onto the plate. Her blush deepened.

–Oh, for goodness' sake, Greta! Behave.

Raphe scowled, then looked over at Sofia. Surprised to see a look of hurt in her eyes. He turned back to the trolley.

–Oh look, the sherry trifle is back on. Your mother used to make fabulous trifle before the war, Greta. Old English custard, fresh whipped cream. Although I imagine this stuff is artificial.

While Sofia and Greta studied the trolley, a waiter spirited their plates away. Another combed the tablecloth for crumbs, sweeping them into his tiny silver dustpan.

–She was a great cook, you know. Used to love baking cakes and pies. Do you remember? Lovely light sponges…

Greta looked up at her father, eyes politely wide. A courteous interest. She had no idea who this woman was that he was talking about. Her own mother, a stranger to her. Raphe's stomach contracted.

Dee had accused him of throwing her out on the street. Throwing her out! He'd carried the suitcase up the basement stairs for her. Dropped it by the door. It was heavy. She'd already packed it – he just helped her repack. He was trying to be amenable. What was he supposed to do?

The hall was too long and too narrow. Black. Always. A film of weak light crawled up the basement steps from the window in the butler's pantry, dying at the top. The air was always soured. Not the most welcoming. But what choice did they have? They were lucky his mother had room for them after they were blitzed out of Montrose Road. Of course it was difficult for them living with her, she wasn't an easy woman, but there was a war on – you had to make sacrifices, put up with things.

And he didn't throw her coat at her. No matter what she told the children. He'd taken it off the hall stand for her, was holding it up to help her on with it. Her new camel coat. It was cold out but she wouldn't let him call a cab. It had slipped from his grasp. He'd tried to grab it but somehow it had whipped round and caught her face while she was bending to straighten a stocking.

He wasn't a violent man.

She'd lost her balance. Fallen against the hall table. He'd leant down to help her up, not hit her. Why had she cowered like that? As if he'd ever hit her before.

And the pink slip. A vivid memory. Like a peel of flesh hanging from the case, trailing in the dirt as she dragged it up the path. The tenderness of it against the rough gravel – he'd felt rather than thought. The daylight was intense against the dark hall. He'd watched her go.

Up the path to the gate. A slim silhouette. Walking into the low winter sun. He kept watching as she turned the corner.

He'd had to shade his eyes.

Sofia chose the exotic fruit salad. Chunks of pineapple, sweet red cherries, pieces of pear and apricot halves. Raphe supposed it must be the addition of pineapple that made it exotic.

Sofia dipped her finger into the whipped cream. Raphe could see from the corner of his eye. He concentrated on his trifle, reminding himself to savour the tartness of the raspberry against the sweet custard. There was a lot of sherry in it. The sponge fingers had almost dissolved. Bit too soggy for his liking.

He noticed Sofia had stopped eating. The supercilious look she'd maintained all evening had disappeared. Replaced by a sadness. Uncertainty. She glanced at him. She had a strange look of fear in her eyes. And he saw Dee – running into the children's bedroom one night. When they lived on Montrose Road. Shrinking between the wardrobe and Greta's bed. The curtains open. The child's face unearthly blue in the moonlight. Her brother, hands above his head, totally abandoned to sleep.

–Come out, he'd whispered through gritted teeth.

She'd pressed back against the wall.

–Out!

He'd grabbed her wrist. Just to get her out of there. Just to talk. She wouldn't move. He'd yanked her arm and she'd squealed.

–SSH! The children. *The children*, he'd hissed.

It was a stressful time. Trying to set up the business, still continuing the correspondence course by night, the city collapsing all round them. Two young children.

If only she'd waited. They'd have come through. He'd finally got the practice on Rodney Street – they could have moved somewhere else. Brighter. It was probably the gloom that did it. Starts you brooding.

And she was always thinking about *him*. Arthur – her dead sailor. He knew she was. Arthur had been the love of her life while he'd only ever been second best. The one-legged man. Got her by chance. The lottery of war. She always carried his photograph in her handbag. A boy in a uniform. Forever fresh-faced and youthful – sainted. How could he compete with that?

He'd pulled her out of the room. That was all. She'd started yelping like a beaten puppy. Woken Greta. The child went running down the hall, out onto the street shouting, Help! Police!

Heaven knows what psychological damage she'd done to the child.

She shouldn't have gone in there.

Raphe called for the bill. Two waiters pulled out the girls' chairs. Sofia tossed her hair then clutched Greta's arm. The two of them swished out of the dining room, Raphe limping behind.

The doorman had already hailed a cab by the time Raphe had put on his coat. He made his way down the marble steps behind the girls. He was disappointed Sofia hadn't thanked him for the meal.

Raphe always enjoyed arriving at his surgery. It felt good unlocking the door, putting his newspaper and medical journals on the desk. Opening the wooden shutters to take in the view. He could see the half-finished Protestant cathedral from his window. His practice was on the ground floor of a large Georgian house. The last in one of the two facing terraces that made up Rodney Street. The Harley Street of Liverpool. He was in good company – Gladstone had been born at number sixty-two – Arthur Clough, the poet at number nine. The novelist Nicholas Monsarrat, was also born on the street but he wasn't sure which number. He'd just published a new book actually, *The Cruel Sea*. He must buy a copy.

Raphe liked to walk over and watch the builders at lunchtime. A chap had told him once that was the reason building sites had peepholes in the hoarding. Not for people to look at the building going up but to observe the men at work. There was something satisfying about watching a skilled man. He often wondered how medieval cathedrals had been built without all the modern technology they had now. He should look it up in the library.

He always arrived early, a good hour before Greta came to open up the reception. He sat at his polished mahogany desk checking his appointment book, reading through his papers, dealing with correspondence, updating his patients' files. He liked to familiarise himself. Decide on the best course of treatment before they arrived.

Some days he could hardly believe it – Raphe Pendlebury, certified Physiotherapist. His certificate was in a silver frame hanging on the wall. His profession may not have been recognised by the Medical Council but his appointment book was always full and he had many

letters of thanks from grateful patients. He had his regulars – Mr Stapeley, the retired lawyer from over the water who brought him bottles of *Chateau d'Yquem* at Christmas. Miss Guthrie, the headmistress who bought expensive clothes for Greta – a two-piece bathing suit all the way from America last summer. Mr Bromilow, the musician who played for the Philharmonic Orchestra and gave him complimentary tickets. Mr Albright, the architect...

He'd finally arrived.

And it felt good.

It had been a particularly busy morning. His last client had just left when Greta popped her head around the door. Newspaper and a clutch bag tucked under one arm, walking length umbrella hooked over her wrist. She'd trimmed its smart grey cover with silk violets and sewn matching ones on her hat. She had a keen eye for style.

–I'm off for lunch now, Dad. Do you want me to bring you anything?

–Golden Dragon again? Nothing thank you, my dear.

Greta smiled and closed the door. He really should look at enrolling her on the physiotherapy course. She was eager to learn but cash was still tight. He would though. Very soon. For sure.

Raphe lowered the patients' couch a little. Raised the back rest then stretched out, undoing the top buttons of his trousers. He pulled his shirt out, loosened the belt of his wooden leg. His skin was red where the leather had chafed. He released the prosthetic limb. And sighed.

He massaged his stump. Good strong thumbs kneading the painful flesh.

There was a confident knock at the door, just as he'd settled to read one of his journals. That wouldn't be Greta. And he didn't have a patient until two-thirty.

–Yes?

The door opened.

–Sofia! I'm afraid you've missed her she's gone to the—

–I know. I watched her go.

The V-neck of her tight black top was cut low. Raphe's eyes were drawn to her cleavage.

–So.... Her lips pouted around the 'o'.

She dropped her handbag onto his desk then walked around the office, running her fingers over the furniture, picking up files. Her back was straight, chin raised, shoulders back, breasts thrust forward. Modelling herself.

–This is where it all happens then. The Physi-o-thera-py.

She left her mouth open after the last syllable. Dropping her lower lip to reveal her teeth.

Raphe watched her walk to the window.

–Nice view.

–Did you want something, Sofia? It's my lunch hour and I'd like to rest before my afternoon appointments.

–Greta said you were always busy.

–I suggest you come back when she's here.

–Usually takes an hour, doesn't she? Plenty of time then. So, where's this tanning machine?

–Sofia.

–Greta says all the models come here for their tans. Do they take their clothes off, Mr Pendlebury?

She'd lowered her voice, trying to sound husky. Been watching too many films.

–I think you should wait outside, young lady, until Greta comes back.

But he couldn't take his eyes off her. It had been nearly eight years since Dee had left him. There'd been no one else.

Sofia stopped in front of the cheval mirror, hands on her small waist. She adjusted her beautiful breasts inside her bra. *Beautiful?* That shocked Raphe. She was a *child.* Same age as his daughter. She patted her flat stomach, turned her ankle this way and that, examining herself. She leant closer to the glass, touching the corners of her mouth. Opened her bag, untwisted a red lipstick and dabbed it on her lips. Sucking them together then pouting at the mirror. Full mouth. Soft cushioned lips—

She caught his eye in the mirror. And smiled.

–I'd like a tan, Mr Pendlebury.

–You don't need one, Sofia. You already have olive skin.

–But I'd like it to deepen. Like Gina Lollobrigida. People say I look like her. Do you think so, Mr Pendlebury?

–I have no idea who she is.

She did bear a striking resemblance to her.

Sofia walked over to the couch where he was resting. Slid one arm along the back rest, leaning against him. He could feel her breasts yielding into his arm. Something in him relaxed. The lacy edge of a black bra was just visible inside her top. A child with the figure of a woman. His back softened. His arms felt heavy. His mind seemed to detach itself from the scene. Almost anaesthetised.

–What are you reading? She whispered.

Her breath ruffled the fine hairs above his ear.

He should put a stop to this now.

He watched her hand slide along his stomach, burrow under the magazine. Then he could no longer see but feel her fingers fumble over the leather belt. Then hesitate, feeling the half-opened fly. Her hand brushed the flesh between the belt and the top of his underwear. Two fingers skittered lightly over him. Then trembled, pushing inside his underpants, into the tight gap beneath the remaining fastened buttons. He could feel himself grow beneath her touch.

He should stop this...

Then she pulled her hand out quickly.

Without looking at him, she pulled her top over her head. Messing up her carefully coiffured hair. He caught a waft of stale sweat. Saw thick black hair under her armpits.

He turned his face away.

She grabbed his hand and pushed it inside her bra. Her nipples were hard.

He let his hand rest there a few seconds. Then he slid it back out.

–Sofia.

He spoke quietly. Without emotion.

–I'd like you to leave.

She looked at him.

–What?

–Please. Just leave.

–How dare you?

She went to slap him across the face, he gripped her by the wrist.

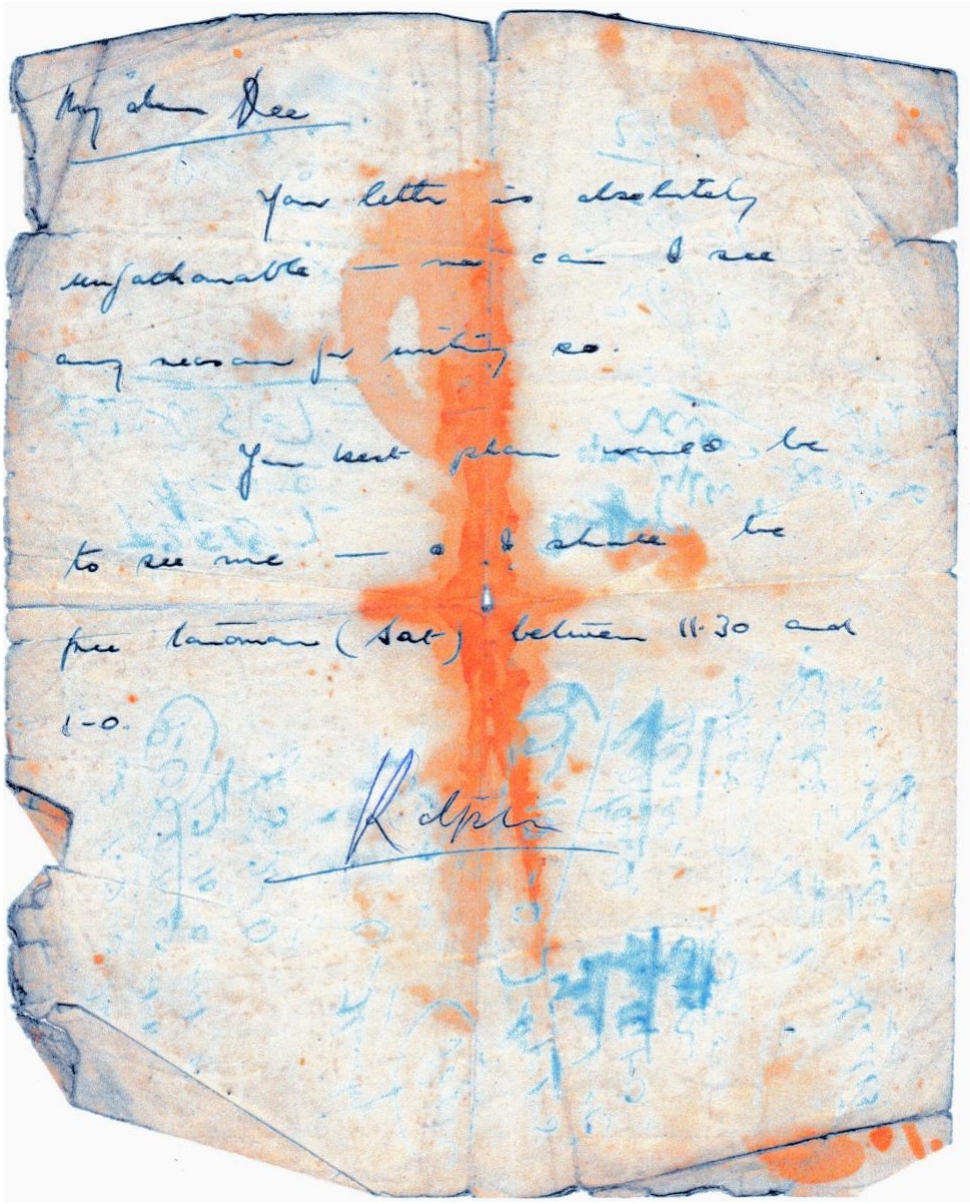
–Just go. Please.

Her eyes began to water. He released his grip. She bent down and grabbed her top from the floor. Dragged it over her head, flattening her hair, smudging her lipstick.

She snatched her bag from his desk then pulled open the door.

Raphe heard her footsteps clicking furiously down the hall. Out onto the street.

She'd left his surgery door open.



My dear Dee

Your letter is absolutely unfathomable — we can't see any reason for writing so.

Your best plan would be to see me — as I shall be free tomorrow (Sat) between 11.30 and 1-0.

Ralph

THE YOUNGER DAUGHTER 1952

Greta hung her coat in the cloakroom. It was more of an alcove in the vestibule really, with a gilt-framed mirror on the wall. She was the only one who used it – the doctors kept their overcoats in their surgeries. She unpinned her hat, stared at her face. She'd been looking for changes in every mirror she passed since Saturday evening. She had to look different, surely? The nuns said your sins were written on your face. She leaned closer to the glass. Inspected her lipstick, checked her mascara. She didn't normally wear makeup for work. She undid the second button of her blouse. Fastened it up again. Then unfastened it.

There was the familiar drone of the UV lamp coming from her father's surgery as she walked into the huge tiled hall. He had a large bright room at the front of the building. The lamp was for his arthritic and rheumatoid patients, heat treatment. He also advertised it in the *Echo* – it was popular with young models who wanted an all-over tan. She wondered if her father watched. A cough prickled her throat but she swallowed it back, hurrying over to the reception desk on the opposite side of the hall. Coughing quietly into her hanky. She didn't want her father limping out and fussing.

She settled herself into the swivel chair. Yawned then stretched, gazing up at the ornate plaster ceiling, at the mural painted in the middle of it – blue skies and fluffy white clouds. Dumpy little cherubs with blushing cheeks and dimpled bottoms. Swivelling in her chair she could see the broad wooden stairs that curved in an oval up to the first floor. A patterned runner in greens and reds ran up the middle, held in place with shiny brass stair rods. There were oak leaves and tiny acorns carved into the newel posts. Her father had moved into the building two years ago. A big posh house on Rodney Street. Got her the job when the last receptionist left.

She loved working there. Organising her filing cabinets, answering the telephone. She worked for all the doctors in the building – arranging their patients' appointments, filing, taking messages. She imagined she looked very efficient. There was a paediatrician – she had to get the titles correct – two osteopaths, a gynaecologist, an orthodontist, a chiropodist – although he wasn't actually a doctor – and her father, the physiotherapist. Also not a doctor but should have been, he was so clever. When she was bored, she daydreamed about the parties that would have been held in the great ballroom upstairs. Imagined getting out of a carriage in her empire line gown or her Victorian crinoline. Dancing with the lords and ladies

of Liverpool High Society. The ballroom was Dr Churney's surgery now – the gynaecologist. She'd had to look up what the word meant. It sounded awful. After that she always felt embarrassed when his patients came in, knowing what he'd do to them. She couldn't help picturing them all naked, with their legs open, which was horrible because a lot of them were old.

Dr Churney had the entire ballroom to himself. He liked her to bring his patients' files up to him as soon as she arrived – he was always in early, even before her father. The other doctors carried their own files up, but she didn't mind. He was funny. Always telling jokes, making her laugh. Telling her how pretty she was. He was probably as old as her father but you could tell he'd been handsome once – clear pale blue eyes, broad mouth. And he had a cheeky smile. Full of mischief.

She checked the appointments book then flicked through the filing cabinet behind her desk, pulling out the medical records for the morning. Her father had already taken his. Dr Churney had two cancellations this morning, which was unusual. He was much sought after, especially by the older ladies. Sometimes they had to wait a couple of months for an appointment.

She looked over at the waiting area – a sofa and two armchairs on the other side of the hall – the magazines were in a bit of a mess. She ought to tidy them up before the first patients arrived.

There were a few old copies of *The People's Friend*, some dog-eared medical pamphlets and a *Woman's Own*. It was a recent one. One of the models must have left it.

She read the front page:

A String of Beads by Somerset Maugham.

They'd read *Of Human Bondage* at school. After one of the nuns got hold of it, their lovely English teacher, Miss Lobley, was sacked.

Greta folded the corner of the page. She'd read the string of beads story over lunch – probably quite racy.

Gregory Peck: His life story.

Now he was rather handsome – she'd just seen him in *David and Bathsheba* at the pictures with Harry. Harry was a nice enough chap but too short for her liking. She must make a note in her diary.

She began flicking through the pages. Lipstick that doesn't come off when you kiss a chap, now that would be useful. 2-in-1 powder-cream, flawless finish. New home permanents. She didn't need a perm, it was all she could do to control the frizz. Ooh, Dolcis sandals. She'd love a pair of those. Gum-tinting to make your teeth look whiter. The problem page – the best part. All the stuff the nuns wouldn't tell them.

She sat down.

What on earth was heavy petting? You weren't supposed to let your boyfriend do it anyway. Was that what Willem had done to her on Saturday? Was that heavy petting?

She didn't notice Mr Rylands flustering in, shaking his umbrella on the hall mat.

–Women's magazines?

Could she ask Mr Rylands what it meant? She couldn't ask her father.

–You should be reading Kafka.

–Actually, there's a story by Somerset Maugham in this one.

She followed him over to the reception desk taking the magazine with her – she could finish the problem page on her tea break. She settled back into her chair, patting her curls down.

–I'll bring you my copy of *The Trial* tomorrow.

Greta looked up at him. Would he notice the change in her? He was rather severe. Pasty-looking, weak-chinned. He had a schoolboy's haircut – parted at one side, swept off his forehead, even though he must have been thirty at least. And quite poor by the looks of his clothing. Dr Churney wore beautiful suits and shirts with square buttons. Well, Mr Rylands was only a chiropodist. And he didn't have many patients. She watched him as he checked through his appointments for the morning. Stared into his eyes when he glanced down at her.

–Are you alright? You seem…

He had noticed! He could see she'd had an experience. A *sexual* experience.

–A bit pale.

–*Pale?* Oh. No, I'm fine.

She began sputtering as she spoke. She'd started with a slight cough on her way to work. Probably just a cold – she'd shake it by the end of the day.

She cleared her throat then gazed into his eyes again, widening them so he could see the real change.

–You should see a doctor.

The hint of a smile on his lips as he mounted the stairs. She'd never seen him smile before.

He must see the change in her. That she was a woman now, no longer an innocent sixteen year old girl. Willem had changed her. Willem with a 'V'. A Dutchman, which made it doubly exciting and naughtier somehow.

Dr Churney called down to Greta from the top of the stairs.

–My files, dear child. Are you daydreaming about your beau down there?

Beau? How did he know? He hadn't even seen her yet. Greta picked up his patients' notes and ran upstairs, coughing as she went.

Dr Churney was waiting at the door of his office. Slim, tall. Shoulders thrown back. Elegant. Could you call a man elegant?

–That's a chesty cough. Would you like me to take a look?

He glanced down the front of her blouse as she passed. His nose was long and pointed – his round tortoiseshell glasses perched at the tip – but it suited his thin, hollowed face. She fingered the second button, smiling up at him. Would he see the difference too?

–New lipstick, Greta?

Yes!

–You look like Marilyn Monroe.

She grinned. Marilyn Monroe. The sex must be written all over her face.

He followed her. Pressing against her as she put the files into his cabinet, pretending to reach for something over her shoulder. He always did that.

–Right. Let's have a look at you.

He stepped back and held up the end of his stethoscope.

–Undo your blouse.

–I'm fine, Dr Churney. It's just a cold.

–I'll be the judge of that. Don't be shy.

–I'll make an appointment with my own doctor after work. Really, don't worry.

But she didn't move.

–Nonsense! I'm here now. Open your blouse.

His tone sounded slightly irritated.

Her fingers were shaking as she undid the rest of the buttons. She wished she'd put her best underwear on.

–Undo your brassiere.

He held the stethoscope with a finger and thumb, the rest of his fingers were splayed on her skin. Breathe deeply, he kept saying. He pushed the stethoscope inside her bra, his palm brushing her nipple. His other hand firmly on her back. The straps fell loose, the bra slipped below her breasts. Should she leave it there? Would he think she was a tart? He felt all round the other breast then. His hand was cold. Fingers thin but firmly prodding.

It was odd. She was in a room with a handsome older man who had his hand on her bare breasts. It was exciting. Naughty. But she didn't feel the same sensation she'd had with Willem.

When Willem had kissed her, she'd kissed him back. Pushing her tongue a little way into his mouth. Hers felt funny against his.

They'd been leaning over the railings at the Pier Head.

–I love Liverpool, he'd said. It's so beautiful here by the river.

Greta had never really looked before. The Pier Head was where you changed buses or took a ferry over to New Brighton. It was a lovely summer evening though. The air smelt sharp and fresh like laundry on the line. A hint of perfume. Couples were out walking, holding hands, kissing. The river was gold and sparkly. Like it had been sprinkled with fairy dust.

Greta tried to look into Dr Churney's eyes but he was concentrating on her chest. Unsmiling. She glanced down at her nipples. They were hard like they had been when Willem had touched her. It was strange seeing them exposed there in Dr Churney's surgery. She felt wanton. She had an image of Willem's face smiling at her.

When a dark cloud had begun to form at the mouth of the river, Willem had suggested they go to a pub he knew – she'd hoped it wasn't Rigby's. Her mother had been working there a few years before. Greta would have absolutely died of embarrassment if she was still behind the bar. The fuss she'd have made. Greta and Edward had been on her tram once when she was a clippie. She was wearing her uniform and her hat, she looked really smart. She'd grabbed them both, hugging and kissing them. Leaving little red mouths all over their faces. Telling everyone that they were her babies. Greta had been eleven at the time. She'd been mortified. She'd dragged Edward off a few stops earlier than they'd intended.

Willem had taken her up Water Street – in the direction of Rigby's. She was about to suggest they go somewhere else when Willem suddenly pushed her against the metal railings of the Town Hall and began to kiss her. Properly. He covered her whole mouth with his. Soft

lips, sucking hers in. Then he'd pushed his tongue right into her mouth. She thought she'd choke.

She was thinking how she'd tell Sofia all about it. Then he put his hand on her breast. He actually touched her breast. The nuns at school had warned them about young men like Willem.

Her nipples went hard and her stomach sort of rolled over on itself. Then she felt a strange sensation. Right down there. Sort of tingly, like it was vibrating. Then it felt all loose and open. And wet.

She'd pushed him away. It was horrible but nice. Really nice. Exciting. She wanted it to go on. To stop. It was so bad. She was wicked to like it. Was that sexual intercourse?

But she didn't feel anything like that with Dr Churney. Maybe he had to kiss her, put his tongue in her mouth. Or maybe it was because he was a doctor. Or serious. Or old.

He removed the stethoscope.

–Okay. Fasten yourself up. You have a slight chest infection. Buy some cough mixture. If it doesn't clear in a week, I'll take another look.

He patted her arm. Smiled at her with his perfect white teeth.

–Off you pop, then.

She hurried towards the door, fastening her blouse.

She was tucking it back into her skirt as she came out of the surgery. Mr Rylands was walking up the corridor. He raised his eyebrows, glancing at Dr Churney's door. Greta ran down the stairs straight into the cloakroom to look at her face. Did she look wanton? She felt the same thrill again, thinking about Willem and that kiss. It was sinful. But she liked it, she couldn't help it. Why hadn't she felt like that when Dr Churney was touching her? That was something else she needed to ask her mother.

She'd run away from Willem on Saturday. All the way back to the Pier Head. The rain cloud had spread quickly. Invaded the city. Filling all the spaces between the buildings with an inky blue darkness.

As she arrived, panting, her tram was pulling out. She ran towards it. Then stopped. She couldn't go home now – what would she say to her father? She couldn't tell him what had just happened. She needed to talk to someone. Find out if that was normal. Maybe there was something wrong with her. Perhaps she should go and see April. No, April would be

putting the baby to bed. And Frank would be there. Sofia – she could ask her. No! She'd tell everyone in the Children of Mary. No one would speak to her again.

She wandered back to the railings. Leaned over, watching the river slurp in and out. Making sucking noises. It sounded rude. She couldn't bear it. And she couldn't stay there all night. She needed to talk to someone. Other girls talked to their mothers. She hadn't seen hers for nearly three years but there was no one else. She would understand, she was a woman. She could explain. She glanced at the clock on the Liver building – just after eight-thirty. It wasn't too late. Would she think it odd, after all these years? Greta just showing up unannounced. But she felt confused. She had to speak to her tonight. Even if her mother did think it strange. She was still her mother. You can't stop being someone's mother just because you go away.

April had said she had a house on Wilmer Road. Just off Priory Road. Number seven. She'd take the Anfield bus.

The rain-sodden clouds made it darker than it should have been for that time of night. Lights were coming on in the houses as they left the shops and the city centre behind. Greta looked into people's front rooms where the curtains were still open. Most of them had net curtains but the lights inside made them see-through. It was like passing a series of pictures. She was looking for mothers and daughters. Someone was reading under a lamp. Someone else stoking the fire. One man was just standing there with his hands in his pockets. Another, smoking a pipe. Further on, a mother standing, a daughter sitting. Like a Dutch painting. Willem. That little thrill came back. She glanced round to see if anyone had noticed.

As they passed a park, a wide gap of sky opened up between the houses. A salmon pink glow broke through the clouds. Her pink velvet shoes! She hadn't thought about them in years. Her mother had brought them all the way down to Wales for her. Blaenau Ffestiniog. Such a long way. When she'd been evacuated there with the school they seemed to be on the train all day. Six years old. She couldn't remember missing her mother particularly – it had been a surprise when she'd shown up there almost a year later. She'd actually forgotten about her. Her mother was wearing a stripey jumper and tweed skirt. And a lovely velvet hat with a bow on the side. Mrs Roberts had invited her in for tea and sandwiches. Greta was to be bridesmaid for Bethan, Mrs Roberts' daughter. Bethan was so beautiful. The Coal Queen that year. Hair the blackest she'd ever seen, long and thick and curly. She wore a gorgeous white velvet wedding dress with a fur stole around her

shoulders. Greta's dress was pink velvet. The shoes had a row of pink and purple bows down the front. The most beautiful shoes she'd ever seen. Her mother had cried as she got back on the train to go home. Greta had cried too, waving at the train until it disappeared round the bend. Six months later she cried again, when her mother came to take her back to Liverpool.

The bus screeched to a halt. Greta jolted forward, banging against the seat in front. The driver shouted at someone then pulled off quickly, jerking the bus again. It took an age to get to Anfield. By the time Greta got off, her chest was hurting. A pain had been tightening across it since town. It was difficult to breathe. She felt terribly lonely.

When she got to her mother's house she began knocking. Timidly at first, getting louder, knocking harder.

She waited. Knocked again. Maybe her mother was in the kitchen at the back of the house. Or perhaps she'd gone to bed early – the bedroom curtains were closed. She peered through the letterbox. The hall was tiled, similar colours to theirs at home. She could picture her mother on hands and knees, in her overalls, hair tied up in a head scarf, scrubbing away at the floor. She seemed to be always scrubbing floors when she lived with them. Especially in their horrible basement kitchen. The stone flags with mushrooms growing between them. No wonder she left. Greta used to sit on her back and play horsies, telling her to giddy 'up, using the back of her collar as reins. One day, just as her mother was drying the kitchen floor, Grandma had walked in from the garden, trailing muddy footprints right across the floor. Didn't even apologise.

Greta picked up bits of gravel from the road, flinging them at the bedroom window. They made a soft scuttery noise as they scraped the glass and bounced off. She imagined her mother dozing off to sleep. Hearing these funny little noises. Like gritty rain. Or a bird's claw. They might have disturbed her enough to come to the window. Greta pictured her drawing back the curtain, with her curlers in, peering into the darkness to see what was making the noise.

It had started raining. Soft summer rain. So light Greta could hardly feel it. The street lights came on just as she was peering in through the front window, through the small gap between the curtains. The house was in darkness. She caught her reflection in the glass. Stared at herself. Did she look different? She looked up at the bedroom window, imagined seeing her mother's face – first surprised then delighted to see her standing there.

She pictured the hall light coming on. Her mother appearing in the doorway, beckoning her inside. Taking her through to the kitchen. She'd make her a hot drink. Greta would tell her about Willem. That strange feeling. Her mother would tell her what it was. Tell her that girls needed their mothers at times like this – that they really should see more of each other.

Greta thought she saw the bedroom curtain twitch. She threw some more stones. Knocked again, a little less loudly this time. Then walked away.

Dr Churney didn't come in on Tuesdays or Wednesdays. He worked at the hospital. When Greta took his files upstairs on Thursday morning he was sitting behind his desk.

She smiled at him, walked behind his desk to put the files in his cabinet. As usual, he stood up and squeezed her against the drawers.

–Tell me, Greta, are you free Friday evening?

His voice was gravelly, like Richard Burton. His southern accent intimidating but sexy. Every word purring separately in her ear.

Dr Churney was asking her on a date! She never went out on Fridays but she didn't want to sound too keen.

–I might be. I'll have to check my diary.

A client of her father's had bought her an Enid Blyton diary for Christmas, it was a bit babyish and she hadn't written much in it apart from dates she'd had with boys. She'd started to keep a list of all the boys she'd gone out with – name, age, eye colour and a brief description of looks and personality.

–Well, if you are free, I thought we might have an early supper then…

Greta didn't hear the rest. What was she going to wear? It depended where he was going to take her. Nothing too fancy because she'd have to work in it all day. Then again, it had to be something smart if he was taking her somewhere swish. Could she ask or would that be rude? And what would she say to her father? He would never allow Dr Churney to take her out, he was far too old.

–I'd have to ask my father. I'm not sure—

–Of course. Leave him to me, I'll have a little chat with him.

She tried not to wiggle her hips as she left the room. Chin up, shoulders back, tummy in. As she closed the door, she glanced back at him but his head was bowed, reading something on his desk.

When Greta arrived on Friday morning, Mr Rylands and her father were having a whispered discussion in the hall. Her father was rubbing at his thigh, adjusting the strap of his leg through the cloth of the trousers. His brows were furrowed. They both stopped when they saw her, watching as she pulled off her coat and hung it in the cloakroom.

When she turned back, Mr Rylands was hurrying up the stairs, head bowed.

–Greta! I forgot to say, I'm leaving early this afternoon – dental appointment. You be alright to pick up our fish suppers on your way home?

Dr Churney obviously hadn't said anything to her father yet.

Usually, she looked forward to Friday night. The fish and chip shop was a couple of stops from where they normally got off. She loved the warmth of the shop, the huddle of hungry people. The smell of hot dripping, fish frying. The steam on the windows. The heat from the fish suppers wrapped in a newspaper parcel – like a hot-water bottle all the way home. The steam from the chips would make the paper soggy and she'd tear a little hole In it, pulling out the fattest chips, blowing on them, too hot to eat straight away. But tonight was going to be far more exciting.

She was just going to make some excuse about meeting Sofia when Dr Churney came downstairs.

–Raphe! How are you, my good fellow?

–Very well, Clifford. And yourself?

–I've just come to inveigle your daughter.

Greta's cheeks burned. She pulled open a drawer of the filing cabinet, pretended to look for something. She pictured Dr Churney's hand on her breasts. The image caused that thrill, a spasm in her stomach – and lower down – again. In front of her father. This was awful. But it was so nice. Funny she hadn't felt like that at the time.

–I need to update my patients' records – some of my little old ladies have long since popped their clogs but their records are still cluttering my drawers. Just need a bit of cross-checking. I wondered if you might spare her this evening? I'd see her home.

Oh, that was a brilliant excuse. It sounded genuine. Well done, Dr Churney.

–I'm afraid Friday is our Dad and daughter night, Clifford. A fish supper and the Big Band Orchestra on the radio. The only time Greta will sit with her old dad.

Greta's heart slumped. She knew her father wouldn't agree to her seeing Dr Churney alone. She sagged, closing the drawers. Trust her father to spoil everything.

–It would only be for a few hours. I'll give her time and a half.

–I think Greta might be tired after working all week…

–Greta?

Both men looked at her.

She tried to sound casual. Imagining what sort of expression Sofia might adopt. Something slightly aloof, *laissez faire*.

–Oh, I'm alright. I don't mind.

She shrugged her shoulders. Sauntered over to her desk.

–You don't have to, you know, Greta. I'm sure she could help you next week, Clifford. There are quiet times during the day when she could look at your files.

–Oh, I totally understand. If you'd rather not, Greta, that's no problem.

Dr Churney began to walk away.

–No! I can do it. It's okay, Dad. Edward can go for the suppers. I don't mind. Really.

Dr Churney turned and smiled.

–Marvellous!

–Well, if that's alright with you, Greta. But watch him, he wagged his finger at Dr Churney.

–He's a bit of a ladies' man.

Her father smiled but it was his forced, polite smile. The one that didn't crinkle his eyes up.

–Oh, I'm sure Greta wouldn't be interested in an old man like me, would you, Greta?

He winked at her. Another spasm. Could he tell? Could her father?

–Thanks, Raphe. Awfully good of you to spare her.

–I'll leave your fish supper in the oven, Greta.

–Oh, no need, old chap. I'll take her for a bite to eat.

Greta tried not to smile too hard.

–Don't keep her too late, Clifford.

Her father looked at Dr Churney with an expression Greta had never seen before. Just for a moment he didn't look like her jolly, gentle dad.

–Well, work to do. Send Mrs Pennington straight in when she arrives, Greta. Clifford.

–Raphe.

The two men saluted each other.

Greta and Dr Churney watched her father limp back into his surgery. He looked so awkward, bending to one side to lift the wooden leg, dragging it around in front, shifting his weight back to move his good leg forward. She'd always hated that leg. Stopped him doing everything. Every Sunday she and Edward watched the families gathering at their bus stop to go to the Pier Head and on to New Brighton. They could never go – there was too much walking involved for her father once they got off the ferry. He didn't even come to Mass with them – the walk was too long, he said. Her mother had always taken them when she'd lived at home. He'd come once, for Easter Sunday, Greta remembered. But he hadn't taken communion. He walked out while they filed up to the altar, waited outside for them. When she'd asked him why he hadn't taken the host, he'd shaken his head with a really sad face then looked at her mother.

As her father closed his door, Dr Churney tutted, shook his head slowly. He probably thought her father looked stupid.

–I know, Greta rolled her eyes.

He looked at her slightly oddly.

–Be ready at six. On the dot.

Greta was sitting in her coat and hat, swivelling her chair, feet off the floor, looking up at the cherubs twirling round. She was thinking about *The String of Beads*. Miss Robinson had gone to the south of France and married a count. Mrs Livingstone, her employer, was angry because Miss Robinson was only a governess and now she'd be much richer than her. Dr Churney was probably filthy rich. He had a big house in Hoylake overlooking the sea, her father said. Maybe he'd invite her for weekends. They'd go sailing – he was bound to have a yacht. He'd buy her furs and pearl necklaces and Sofia and the girls in the Children of Mary would be mad with jealousy. She'd let him make love to her on the understanding that he would marry her when she was eighteen— there was that feeling again. Why did she keep getting that quiver when she thought about sex? Maybe she was morally corrupt – that's

what the nuns called bad girls. Like the girls in *Of Human Bondage*. Maybe there was something wrong with her. Maybe it would keep happening to her now. Perhaps Willem had infected her with a disease.

Dr Churney finally appeared at twenty to seven.

–You look worried, Greta. Nothing wrong I hope?

Greta flushed, hoping he couldn't read her mind. People couldn't really, could they? She rushed past him to the door, shielding her face.

He took her arm as they walked down Rodney Street. She was wearing her best coat and her Sunday hat – her father hadn't noticed – in case he took her to the Adelphi. She felt very grown up, linking arms with Dr Churney. She probably looked older now, now she was experienced. She could pass for twenty maybe. She hoped people were looking at them.

He brought her round the corner to The Golden Dragon on Hardman Street. A cheap place where she usually had lunch.

–We'll both have the Chow Mein, he said when the waiter arrived with the menus. Then turned to her.

–Everybody likes Chow Mein.

She didn't really care for it, actually. She normally had sweetcorn soup for lunch. When her father was treating her and Edward, her favourite dish was chicken and cashew nuts with fried rice. None of them liked Chow Mein.

Dr Churney wasn't as relaxed and cheery as he normally was. He was smiling but underneath he looked serious. Tense. When Greta tried to talk to him he looked at her but she could tell he wasn't listening. He kept glancing at the other diners. Looking at his watch. Adjusting his collar. Shifting in his seat.

It reminded her of going to Blacklers for afternoon tea with her mother and Edward. A few years after she'd walked out on them. Her mother had knocked on the front door. Greta had seen her from her grandmother's living room where they'd been waiting. She looked like a film star but very thin. And white-faced – her lipstick looking quite startling. But she was wearing a lovely coat with a sparkly brooch on it. By the time her father had answered the door, she'd walked back down the path and was waiting at the gate. He'd waved to her but she'd turned away. Greta thought his eyes were watering so she cuddled him, said she didn't want to go with her mother. He pushed her away, gently, telling her to give her mother a big hug and a kiss. Greta wouldn't. Even though her mother held out her arms to her. Greta had

walked past not looking at her. She hardly spoke to her mother all day. Edward snitched to her father when they got home. Her father told her off, said she'd been very unkind to her poor mother. Greta had stomped off to bed – she'd only done it for him.

Her mother had let them choose a toy each – which had taken ages because Edward couldn't decide between a drum and a wooden train. Then she'd taken them upstairs to the café and let them choose a cake from the menu. Greta had a strawberry tart with fresh cream, Edward had chosen a boring egg custard. Their mother hadn't eaten anything. Just stared at them the whole time, with a sort of sad but happy face. Her huge, funny green eyes gazing at them like they were chocolates she wanted to eat. Greta had felt uncomfortable, like she did now. Unsettled.

Dr Churney was shovelling the food into his mouth with one hand, drumming the table with his other as he chewed. She was surprised he used a fork – she and her father always used chopsticks. She could feel his feet tapping away on the floor. Occasionally knocking the toes of her shoes. It wasn't at all relaxing and jolly like having dinner with her father.

Her father often took them to The Peking Palace in Chinatown. It was the best Chinese restaurant in Liverpool, one of her father's clients had told him. And he'd heard that from a real Chinaman. Pale green silk wallpaper. A huge fish tank full of brilliantly coloured fish, dividing the room in two. Silk draped curtains at the windows. The Golden Dragon was quite tatty now she looked at it closely. The wooden screens with the Dragon head corners she'd thought were beautiful were actually chipped, the wood splitting. There were black patches on the floor where some of the tiles were missing. The red wallpaper was peeling and ripped in places. And although the table cloths were glowing white, they still had old stains that hadn't quite come out.

She was halfway through her meal when Dr Churney ordered green tea for them both. She let the waiter take her plate anyway – Dr Churney seemed to be in a hurry. She was beginning to wonder.

She'd imagined this evening in a completely different way. Cocktails and a leisurely dinner somewhere nice. A walk along the river afterwards maybe. A kiss as they parted. That feeling again.

Dr Churney slurped his tea quickly. Then stood up, pulling his mac from the back of his chair.

–Ready?

Maybe he wanted to get her back to his surgery. Somewhere private. He couldn't really kiss her here or on the street. He was probably mad with desire, that's why he was rushing her.

She linked his arm when they were out on the street. He patted her hand but kept looking ahead. Maybe he was nervous. Maybe he felt it was wrong – she was probably younger than his daughter. If he had a daughter. Did he have a wife? She'd never thought to ask. Gosh, if he was married, this would be adultery. A mortal sin – she knew it was wrong, yet she was going into it willingly.

She pulled her hand from his arm. He didn't seem to notice. Perhaps she should go straight to the bus stop now. Tell him she couldn't do it after all.

She stopped walking.

She was about to turn around and walk back down Hardman Street when she remembered her father had mentioned ages ago that he was a widower. His wife had died when they were both quite young. He'd never remarried. Not a mortal sin then. Just a venial one. Although kissing wasn't a sin, touching breasts probably was. And he was old, he'd probably want to do more than that. Maybe he'd want to do heavy petting. She should have asked Sofia if she knew what it meant. How could she stop him if she didn't know? He might make her take her clothes off and open her legs like he did to his patients. That would *have* to be a mortal sin. Then again, she might have already had sexual intercourse with Willem so she was already damned.

She should go home.

–Come along, Greta, old bean. Stop dawdling.

He was desperate for her. What should she do?

Dr Churney grabbed her hand and half pulled her along the street.

–Shake a leg!

She could let him touch her breasts because he'd already done that. And he was a doctor, he did that to women all the time, probably. But she wouldn't let him touch anything else. She'd put her tongue in his mouth and see if she got that feeling again that she'd had with Willem. It was all very naughty. And very dangerous. Her stomach was doing little flips. She hoped she wouldn't be sick.

The building was empty when they got back to Rodney Street. Most of the doctors left early for the weekend. Dr Rhys had a cottage in Tenby where he moored his boat. Dr Horyn had a place up in Scotland, Mr Rylands said. Some crumbling castle that had been in the family generations. Dr Horyn and Dr Rhys both left at lunchtime on Fridays. The place was deserted by four, her father and Dr Churney were the last to leave.

The building had a different sound at night. She'd stayed late once to sort out her father's filing system – an absolute nightmare. Not in alphabetical order, sometimes surnames first, sometimes Christian names. It had taken her ages. There were no voices or footsteps at night – the old house made its own noises. Creaks and groans as if it were settling down for the night, cracking its joints, resting its weary limbs. And it spoke through the pipes, indistinct chatter, short bursts of music. It was unsettling and comforting at the same time. Every now and then a ghost would ruffle her hair and she'd shiver.

Greta stopped in the vestibule, automatically hanging her coat and hat in the cloakroom. She heard Dr Churney thump up the stairs, quicker than normal. She'd take her time, treat him coolly.

She looked in the mirror. A sinful face. The face of a bad girl. She scowled at it. Reapplied her red lipstick. Powdered her nose with her new powder-cream – it was very good, hid all her freckles just like the advertisement said. When she stood back to see the result, her mother's face looked back at her. She closed her eyes and ran into the hall.

When she reached Dr Churney's surgery, he was standing over a sliding heap of files on the floor. She hadn't seen him take them out of her filing cabinet.

–You alright on the floor? Easier to work down there, more room. Here's a list of my current patients.

He handed her a piece of paper. Greta looked up at him as she took it.

–Can you check it against the files – any patient not on the list can be thrown into the bin. Here, I'll bring it over.

Greta stared at the mountain of documents.

–Everything alright, Greta?

Her heart was swilling around somewhere in her stomach. Her eyes stinging. She knelt down and started to sift through the small fat envelopes of notes.

–I'll pour us a nice little sherry. I know it should be port after dinner but we'll have to make do.

Greta lowered her head. She tried really hard to stop them but the tears started dripping onto the files. She had to dab at her eyes with her fingers so her new Film Star mascara didn't smudge. She'd left her hankie in her handbag down in the cloakroom.

Dr Churney placed a glass on the desk above where she was kneeling. Then settled into his big leather chair with one of his journals. She kept her back to him.

After a few moments she heard the front door open. She looked up at Dr Churney but he just carried on reading. Maybe he hadn't heard it. There was a heavy thud, tap, thud, tap up the hall. She stared at the door, following the sound of irregular beats up the stairs, muted by the carpet, THUD, thud, THUD, thud. It stopped. Then started up again. The door opened.

–Raphe! Come in. I'm afraid we've just got started. Greta and I had a quick supper at the Chinese place round the corner.

Raphe looked at Greta. Greta turned away.

–Shouldn't be long – Greta's a quick little worker, aren't you, dear? Here, take a pew, old chap. Rest the leg.

Dr Churney dragged an armchair across from the other side of the room.

–Drink? I'm guessing you're a single malt man?

Raphe cleared his throat, running a finger around his collar.

–Very kind.

He dropped into the chair, dragging his wooden leg into position. Greta cringed as it scraped across the wooden floor.

–Cheers!

The two men clinked glasses. Greta knelt on the floor in front of them, back to both. Silence. The weight of their gazes pressed down on the back of her neck. The occasional slurp and swallow of whisky made her feel sick.

She began with the A's.

PATTERN
A
B
C
D

THE SON 1964

–The Beatles played there—

–The Aintree Institute? You kidding me?

Frankie. Lead singer. Blond. A bargain basement Tommy Steele. Not a bad voice though.

–And not just once, Frankie – thirty-one gigs. Look at them now.

Eddie asked himself, as he did every Tuesday evening lately, what he was doing there. A defunct community hall. Raining on the inside. Listening to a band of four kids ripping the hell out of instruments they couldn't afford, bought on the never-never. Expecting to hit the big time with their first gig. He hadn't earned anything in six months. Nothing since The Dharmas broke up. He had just under two quid left of his savings, and Frankie and the Ferrymen weren't looking like the answer to his financial worries. His dad was right, he should have stuck to teaching.

–It's dead rough that place. They throw chairs at the band and—

–Johnny out The Bootleboys had his face caved in last week.

–A broken nose, Tony. Hardly the same thing.

The drummer. Tony. Short, running to fat even at sixteen. Huge vacant eyes set too far apart. An owl with its face flattened.

–And The Beatles was there back in sixty-one – it's nineteen bleedin' sixty-four now, Eddie. No one who's any bugger plays The Institute no more.

–*Any*more, Billy. The Beatles *were* there not *was* there. Cut the tmesis and less of the swearing.

Billy. Average bass player. Average acne. Horribly ambitious.

The water was running down the walls over the Rorschach damp blots. Eddie had thought it was orange and green wallpaper when he'd first walked in. The caretaker was sitting at the back with his fingers in his ears, pointedly looking at the clock. The lads were standing round fagging between songs, looking moody and despondent. And it was costing him ten bob for the privilege. He'd given up his nice flat on West Derby Road for an attic room in a condemned Georgian house on Upper Parliament Street. No heating, no hot water and an outside lav. Plus an overweight Valkyrie of a landlady swooping on him every Friday night for the rent.

Rock and Roll.

His mother would have approved. It was hard to think of her – Dee – as his mother. She always did set more store by freedom than comfort. He often pictured her as a fish somehow, swimming away, slipping from their grasp – his and his two sisters. Although she found herself a cosy little house. Settled down in the end.

–Some manager you are.

They were still moaning.

–We haven't even had a gig in Germany yet.

–Yeah! Even The Liverbirds have got gigs over there and they're crap.

–You promised us The Cavern.

–Billy, you've only been playing together for the last three months. I've got you The Aintree Institute. You've got to start somewhere.

–Brian Epstein got the Beatles a gig in The Cavern straightaway—

–No he didn't! They—

–Get us The Cavern or we'll sack yer.

–Sack me? What the—

–Shut it, Billy. No we won't. What about a record deal then? Everyone else has got one.

–Ray, you haven't even played your first gig yet, how can you expect to get a record deal? Come on, be reasonable.

Ray. Talented guitar player, most intelligent member of the band. Quiet. Deep. Nice voice too. He'd written a few of his own tunes, catchy little numbers. Reminded him a bit of George Harrison.

It was the greed that got him. Money and fame, that's all they wanted. And they only wanted the fame to get the money. What did he want at that age? He probably didn't think about anything back then. Just accepted what came at him. Habit, he supposed. No plans. Drifted into teaching because that's what his dad's family did. Except for his dad. But then his education was cut short. He wondered how his father was feeling. April had said he hadn't been too well the other week. He'd better call up and see him.

His dad was a good physiotherapist. Thriving practise on Rodney Street now, did Dee know? He'd wanted Eddie to work with him but he didn't really fancy it. Touching people. Bare skin. That intimacy with total strangers. Made him feel a bit... well. Dee would have

understood – she wasn't terribly demonstrative as he remembered. He couldn't recall sitting on her knee, or being cuddled before bedtime. Not like Mrs Evans did down in Wales. Lovely woman that, he was lucky. Poor old Greta was billeted with an oddity. Bit touched, Mrs Evans said. Used to sit in her front window, talking to herself, watching people pass. Killed herself after the war.

He still kept in touch with Mrs Evans. She knew more about him and his life than Dee did – his own mother. Mrs Evans used to stroke his forehead as he was going to sleep, tuck his hands under the covers. He didn't remember Dee doing that. Or maybe she did and he'd forgotten. But she was always a bit hands-off. It was her nature.

Meanwhile, he had to get the band under control.

–Okay lads, let's not waste any more time. Just play the gig Saturday night. Then...

–Then what?

–Then... Well, I might have something for you.

–Like what?

–Something…

He was treading water.

–Better than The Cavern even.

–The London Palladium?

–I'll tell you next week. After you've played the gig.

–It's a record deal isn't it?

–Germany!

–Yeah! We're off to Hamburg to make a single aren't we, Eddie?

–Well... not necessarily. But it's good. You'll see. Now get practising, you're raggedy. And Tony, up the tempo a bit, this is rock and roll not *Sing Something Simple*.

Eddie had just got back to his digs, soaked. The rain had started as he'd left the hall and he'd had a two-mile walk home in his tweed jacket. He'd been thinking of putting a bob in the gas metre to dry himself off. Just as he was closing the front door, the Valkyrie – Mrs Dillard – flapped out of her eyrie at the end of the hall. Coming to rest between him and the stairs. Wings folded tightly under her great bosom, bulked out by the crocheted cardigan she'd dragged on top of her overall.

–Woman called round for you this evening. Said she's your sister.

Mrs Dillard had what his dad would have called an unfortunate face. As though someone had thrown her features on in a hurry. Her clamped lips were permanently twisted in bad-temper. If she had been a Valkyrie she'd never have got off the ground, the rump on her.

–Which sister – April?

–I don' approve of lady visitors callin' after seven in the evening. This is a respectable 'ouse, Mr Pendlebury.

–What did she say?

–Yer old man's in hozzy. The Royal. You've to call 'er. Funny name that, April. Who's yer other sister, October? Ha ha!

She cackled off down the hall to her lair at the back of the house, slippers slapping between scrapes. He believed there was a husband but he'd never seen him. Actually, he'd hardly seen anyone else in that house. He'd hear doors open, then close again when he opened his. Or occasionally, he'd catch sight of the back of somebody hurrying into their room, head down. Mrs Dillard didn't offer breakfast, which is where he might have met his fellow lodgers, but then, that was probably a blessing, given the filth of her overall.

There was no payphone in the house. She didn't believe in them, she said. He'd asked her if that was an article of faith but she'd looked at him blankly. People take advantage, she said. And calls late in the night – she wasn't having any of that. He decided to nip round and use the one in Kavanagh's. Someone had vandalised the phonebox on the corner. It was twenty-past ten, he'd just make it before closing time.

One of the barmen was locking up and wouldn't let him in.

–More than me job's worth.

–It's only twenty-five past! It's an emergency – my father's ill.

–Police'd be down on us like a ton o' bricks.

–If I just used the phone? Listen, I won't be drinking. Please. It's—

–Mush! I need to lock up.

The rain was dripping down the back of his collar in cold fat gobbets from the gutter overhead. His shoes were letting in – they badly needed new soles but he couldn't afford any. He squelched round to Hardman Street. Waited nearly ten minutes outside the phonebox for some chap to finish an argument with his girlfriend that was, quite frankly, going round in circles. By the time he phoned April there was no answer. He imagined they'd all gone to bed.

Her husband, Frank, worked in Hartley's, the jam factory and was up early in the mornings. He wondered if she'd phoned Dee. Or if Dee even had a phone.

He'd promised the lads he'd get them something big. He had to get them a gig in The Iron Door – The Cavern wouldn't take them – or they'd lose all faith in him. He also badly needed the money. It was imperative he got a meeting with Sam Leach in person, persuade him The Ferrymen were going to be bigger than The Beatles. He'd already got him to take The Rocking Dharmas six months before. Great band, even if the lyrics were a bit deep. They broke up when the lead singer's dad sent him off to University to read English. One of Eddie's biggest disappointments.

He decided to go down to Temple Street first, beg Sam for a gig then head up to The Royal afterwards to see his dad. He had to wear his old mac because his jacket was still wet from the night before. His Chelsea boots were spitting rainwater each time he took a step. And he'd run out of black polish so there was a salty white tidemark around the front. Not really the right image for a professional band manager. Sam wouldn't be impressed and he was fully expecting the, I-told-you-so, talk from his dad when he got to the hospital.

There was a new doorman when he got to club. He was leaning back slightly, legs apart, hands folded over his crotch like Eddie was about to take a penalty. He stared over Eddie's shoulder while he tried to talk his way in.

–Morning.

A slight nod of the head.

–Bit parky today, Eddie rubbed his hands together.

–Autumn's setting in.

No reply.

–At least the rain's gone off.

–Yeah.

–Mickey not working today?

Slight shake of the head.

–Is Sam about?

–In his office.

–Excellent. I've got some business with him—

–He's busy.

–Oh, Sam'll want to talk to me. I've got something really special for him.

–Hasn't everyone?

–Look, just tell him Eddie Pendlebury's here. He knows who I am, we did business a few months ago.

–Mr Leach is busy.

–Oh yes, I appreciate that, but this is important. This is one band he won't want to miss.

The doorman stared off into the distance.

–You know, he'll be furious with you when he finds out I've taken the lads to The Cavern and they get their big break there.

–I'm quaking in my boots.

–Seriously. I mean, you could lose your job.

– I'll live with it.

What was it about bouncers? Totally implacable. Were they born like that? He couldn't just give up. He decided to stall.

–Fancy a cigarette?

For the first time, the doorman dropped the frozen stare and glanced down at the packet Eddie was offering him.

–What's them?

–*Gauloises.*

–Foreign?

–Strong French cigarettes. Unfiltered.

–Alright then, gizza go.

They bent towards each other, heads close. Hands cupped around the cigarettes to stop the match being blown out. There was a cold wind blowing up from the river. He should have worn a sweater. His mac was billowing, his bones turning to ice. He wondered if that was how it felt to be dead. It took three attempts to light up. If he could hold him long enough in this conspiratorial huddle he might soften. A bit more chat and he'd be in.

The bouncer straightened up. Grolshed, gobbed on the cobbles, then took a long drag.

–Not bad, eh? A friend gets them for me from Paris. His wife's French.

But he went back to staring over Eddie's shoulder. Fixed gaze on nothing.

–Actually, Sam asked me if I'd bring him some. I was just going to drop them off.

He held up his briefcase, patted the square box pressing through the battered leather. It had some sardine sandwiches in it for his dad.

–Mr Leach is busy.

As Eddie ground out his cigarette, a slight ray of hope shone through a tiny chink in the bouncer's pokerfaced armour.

–You might catch him tomorrow lunchtime. He wants to see Mr Epstein's new band.

–Oh. Excellent.

–And er, Mr Leach doesn't smoke.

His dad looked done in when Eddie eventually found the ward he was on. He seemed to have aged ten years. Eddie had only seen him a few weeks earlier but he'd lost so much weight. His face was gaunt. Dee wouldn't have recognised him – if she'd actually thought to come and visit. When was the last time she'd seen him?

He was glad of the sandwiches – the porridge was watery, he said. And no salt. The meal the night before had been inedible. He and a few of the other chaps on the ward were taking bets on what the meat was supposed to be. Whatever it was, it didn't die a happy death, he said.

He was weak but he still had his sense of humour. Eddie didn't remember him and Dee ever laughing. But then, he was only six when he came back from evacuation and Dee had left within the year. Perhaps he'd just forgotten. He thought his dad would have liked her to come and see him. It would have been a good thing. For them both. He hadn't long given her the money to buy her house. Only three or four years earlier he thought. So they were still on friendly terms.

–I always loved your mother you know.

Apropos of nothing.

–We were just different people. Circumstances were difficult. Two women under the same roof. Just doesn't work.

After leaving the hospital, Eddie decided to go round to Dee's house. Tell her about his dad, her husband – they'd never divorced. Tell her how sick he was. Perhaps April hadn't told her. He thought she might go and visit if she knew.

Her house was surprisingly small. Two-up-two-down. Although plenty big enough for one. Bigger than his cramped room anyway. Not terribly inviting but she was never really a home-maker. He was quite surprised she had net curtains though. The house looked so dark inside. He thought she might have wanted to let in the light instead of hanging those heavy lace things at the window.

He knocked a few times. Loudly in case she'd gone deaf. He was deaf in one ear and Greta had said she was too. He peered in through the windows. He could just make out piles of crockery on the table. A few dinner services. Looked like bone china, Royal Doulton or one of the good makes. He could just see into the kitchen at the back. The teapot on the table. A couple of cups and saucers set out as though she was expecting someone.

He stood around for a while, hoping that she might come back. That she'd just slipped out to the shops for milk or something. The woman across the road kept twitching her nets, looking at him, so he went round the back, up the alley. He presumed she'd have a small yard, all those houses did. He imagined it full of flowers, like April's. They only had a square of concrete with high brick walls around it but she and Frank had filled it with pots of plants and brightly coloured flowers. They'd found an old barrel on the beach at Crosby a while ago. Frank cut it down and they planted an apple tree in it. They might even get a few apples off it. You could do lots with a yard – they didn't all have to be concrete and white-washed walls.

He counted the houses and tried her back gate. It wasn't locked. He just lifted the latch and went in. The concrete was cracked and uneven. No whitewash on the walls. There was a bird table close to the kitchen window with a pile of bread on it. The birds obviously hadn't come down yet.

An old dining chair was sitting by the back door. He tried to picture Dee on it, warming her face in the sun. Tried to imagine her long auburn hair loose about her shoulders, eyes closed, a faint smile on her lips. But he couldn't. The Dee he knew – or rather, didn't – wouldn't have suited sitting in the sun, all relaxed like that. She was always rather formal. A clippie last time he'd seen her. Wearing her smart uniform. Hat cocked at a jaunty angle. And a terribly sad face. Mouth fixed in a straight-lined, semi-smile – he wondered if she still wore that deep scarlet lipstick he'd always hated. Her eyes, an unusual two-tone green, unable to hide the suffering, or the loss, or whatever it was in them.

Actually, that couldn't be right. She lost her job on the trams when the men came back from war. That would have only been forty-five, forty-six. Perhaps he was thinking of a

photograph. It was strange how you thought of people. You didn't picture them the way you last saw them, there was always a certain image you called to mind. Something striking or different or just memorable in some way. Something that defined them somehow.

He tried the backdoor but she'd locked it. And there were no plant pots to hide a key under. He thought about leaving her a note but he hadn't brought any paper. He looked around the yard, in the bin, to see if there was a scrap of something to write on but he couldn't find anything. He was going to move the chair so she'd know someone had called. But then, she might imagine a burglar had been trying to break in and it would alarm her. So he just went back out the gate and caught the bus home.

He was sure April would have let her know.

The next day he went back to The Iron Door. The bouncer, still staring straight ahead, gave a slight nod and opened the door. The club was packed even though it was only a Wednesday lunchtime. He fought his way down to the basement where the stage was. Most of the audience were teenagers or in their early twenties. Office boys and girls, sneaking out to watch the gigs. The band wasn't up to much – their timing was out, they lacked any spark and the lead singer was off-key. Most of the audience were chatting, bobbing to the music half-heartedly. He couldn't see Sam Leach anywhere. He went upstairs to the coffee bar. There were a few stragglers hanging around the door, girls mainly, waiting to see if anyone famous came in. A young lad was working behind the counter, rough-looking but he had a pleasant manner.

–Hello, mate. Lemonade or coffee?

–Actually, I just wondered where Sam Leach was.

–Not seen him today. The tea's off, but I've got orange squash?

–Might he be in the office?

–Might be. Fizzy drink?

Eddie pushed through the fire escape door and climbed a set of dusty concrete stairs to the first floor. It was a huge open plan area with bits of debris, odd items of furniture, machinery dotted around the place. It had been a butter packing factory until a few years before. The overseer's glazed office was in the corner. There were two men inside. One had his head in his hands. The other had his arms folded, trilby pulled low on his forehead. Looked

like his timing was out. He was thinking of going back downstairs when the man in the trilby saw him and opened the door.

–Toilets are on the ground floor, mate.

–Thanks. Actually, I was looking for Sam Leach.

–He's a bit busy at the moment—

–You can say that again, the other man laughed.

–So who are you then?

–Eddie Pendlebury. Sam and I did some business a few months ago. You work with Sam?

–That's one way of putting it.

–Sam signed up my band. Regular slot. The Rocking Dharmas.

–Rockin' Dharmas? Rockin'— yeah! I remember them. They were great. Shame. Could've been big. I believe Brian was interested. Could've made you a lot of money. What d'you say your name was?

–Eddie. Eddie Pendlebury.

They shook hands.

–I'm managing a new band now. Frankie and The Ferrymen. No word of a lie, they'd knock spots of The Dharmas.

–Yeah?

–Good-looking lead too. Girls'll go crazy for them.

–Sounds like you're onto a winner, Ed.

–Eddie. Yes, I know. I'm just looking for a—

–Bit difficult at the moment, Ed. You see—

–Listen, you put new bands on between the acts, let them jam afterwards. They just need a chance. The Cavern's interested but I said, no, sorry, The Iron Door's the place to be. This is where it's all happening.

The other man came out of the office. Bald head and brown shirt that barely fastened over his belly.

–Or happened, as the case may be.

–Happened?

Eddie looked from one to the other. They laughed.

–Nothing, son. Just a little joke.

–So what do you say? A lunchtime slot would do. Or Sunday evening?

–Sorry, mate. No can do.

–Well, when then? I'm not leaving here 'til you've agreed something.

He was trembling. He hoped it didn't show.

–Ooh! He’s hard, the bald man said.

–Fine. Okay, throwing his hands up.

–Next week then?

–Hell, you can have a proper gig, Ed, added the trilby.

–Really? When? What time?

–Why don’t we say next week? Eight o’clock.

Eddie was elated. He'd actually done it.

–Next week as in, Wednesday? A week today?

–A week today. Why not?

He grabbed the trilby’s hand, shaking it firmly until he pulled it away.

–You won't regret this. Sam will be delighted you gave us the chance. They're a sensational band. Truly.

He turned towards the stairs then stopped.

–Do you think there might be scouts, by any chance? You know, from the record companies.

–Oh yeah, bound to be...

The bald man looked at his friend.

–Scouts, record producers, agents, film directors—

Baldman elbowed him.

–Okay, I'm kidding about the film directors.

–Great! Excellent. And thanks again. I really appreciate this, Mr…? Sorry, we haven't been introduced.

–No. We haven't.

–Well. I really do appreciate this, sir. See you Wednesday.

They were already walking back into the office.

He couldn't wait to see the lads that night. A gig. A proper gig, not jamming between bands. A proper gig at The Iron Door. Unbelievable. He was seriously impressed with his powers of persuasion.

He was still on a high when he got back to his digs. He thought he'd call into the hospital later and tell his dad, cheer him up a bit. Show him he hadn't made a mistake giving up the teaching. He'd just reached the stairs when the door at the bottom of the hall opened and the landlady wheezed through.

Her bosom was lifted higher than usual, the cowl of flesh around her neck was quivering. She wasn't smiling exactly but she looked pleased with the news she had for him. Maybe she was going to give him his marching orders for breaching some rule he wasn't aware of. He imagined moving closer to town, somewhere where the walls weren't black with mould. He could be packed in ten minutes, he only had a suitcase. He felt a weight lifting.

–Yer old man's dead, she called up the hall.

She obviously couldn’t contain herself.

–Died this morning while you were out. Yer sister was here this afternoon. He's on a slab in the hozzy.

It took a few seconds for the news to sink in. She stood watching him.

–Thank you. For telling me.

She nodded, somewhat deflated. Turning and closing the door quietly behind her as if she were in the presence of his dead father. His father who was now dead. Incongruous, those two words in the same sentence.

He stood a moment longer, staring at her door. His brain had slipped into neutral. It lay idling in his skull.

Get a grip, Eddie. Come on. Think.

Hospital. He had to get to the hospital. He turned round, walked out of the front door again and onto the street. He watched his feet pounding along the pavement. Eventually – could've been minutes, could've been hours later – he found himself at The Royal, panting at reception.

–Name?

–Raphe Pendlebury. I'm—

–Have you got an appointment?

–Do I need an appointment to see my father?

–There are set visiting hours. You won't be allowed in until two-thirty. The doctors do their rounds after lunch.

–He doesn't need a Doctor. He's dead.

It didn't sound true.

Another woman, looking concerned, arrived behind the receptionist.

–Is there a problem, Miss Lanyard?

–EDWARD!

He turned to see a smart young woman in a grey fitted coat with a violet coloured hat tilted to one side. Greta.

–Have you seen him, Greta?

–He's already been taken to the mortuary. They won't release him until the doctor's signed the death certificate. April's bringing him to her house.

–Was it his heart?

–Apparently he had a stroke in the middle of the night then a massive coronary in the early hours.

Greta crumpled.

Greta was sipping her sweet tea. Eddie had ordered coffee but it was undrinkable. Hospital cafes were grim places.

–I suppose we ought to tell mother.

–Do you think she'd be interested?

–I don't know. They never divorced. And they were still in touch until recently. The house...

–Yes, Dad mentioned—

Her lips were quivering. She glared over his head at the clock above the counter, squeezing her hankie. Never cry in public. Grandma had drilled that into the girls for years.

He reached across the table and put his hand over hers.

–Do you want to go up and see her? Dee – Mother. Just to let her know. She might want to go and see him at April's. Come to the funeral. I'm sure she would.

Greta nodded.

–We have to let her know at least. It's only right.

Dee wasn't in when they got to her house. Eddie wondered where she went every day. He didn't think she'd still be working at sixty-four. Same age as his dad. He was going to leave a

note but neither of them had any paper. Again. He really should carry a notebook with him or something. He told Greta he'd write Dee a letter when he got home. Pop it through her letterbox if she still wasn't in when he came back. Greta had to get back home before the children came in from school and Nealie left for his night shift. Dee probably hadn't met her husband, Nealie. Greta had a nice house out in the suburbs. He didn't remember Greta saying Dee had ever been to visit. He'd baby-sat for the eldest children a few times. It was a quiet area. Greta had two lovely gardens – front and back, with a wide grass verge beyond for the children to play on. She'd done alright, Greta. Though he got the impression she wasn't that happy. Didn't seem to be much of a spark between her and Nealie. He was a lot older – nearly twenty years between them.

They walked to the top of Wilmer Street together then went in opposite directions. He didn't really have the heart now, but he'd have to go and tell the lads about the gig.

Eddie walked all the way to Lark Lane. The lads were already set up when he got there.

–Good to see you so keen, lads.

–So, what have you gorrus?

–Is it a record deal?

He was going to tease it out, make them wait but he couldn't help himself.

–I've just got you a gig at the best club in town—

–The Cavern? Bloody 'ell! Welcome to the big time, lads!

–Nice one, Eddie! I told fatso you'd do it – you didn't believe me did you, tubs?

–Will we gerra record deal out of it?

–I'm told some record producers will be there—

–There's always producers at The Cavern. 'Course we'll gerra record deal, Tony – just try keepin time, will yer?

–Well, hang on lads. It's not The Cavern, it's—

–I fishin' knew he wouldn't get us The Cavern. I told yer Billy, yer prat.

–Hang on. It's better than The Cavern, let me finish.

–The London Palladium? Like The Beatles. "Those in the cheap seats clap yer hands, the rest of youse rattle yer jewellery!"

–It's The Iron Door actually. Way cooler than The Cavern. Way cooler. Brian Epstein was there yesterday with one of his new bands. I had to pull a few strings, call in favours to

get you this gig. It's not easy getting a break at The Iron Door. Luckily I know Sam Leach. This is going make you lads. Stardom beckons.

–Sam Leach? Really? You know Sam Leach?

At least Frankie seemed impressed.

–First name terms.

He had to admit, they weren't as overjoyed as he'd been. He felt pretty peeved by their attitude. They had no idea how much this was going to mean to them. How much exposure they'd get. This was no mean feat – he'd done a bloody great job getting them a gig just on his say-so, no demo tapes. It was all down to his reputation but the lads had no appreciation. He wondered again what he was doing it all for. He wished he could go and tell his dad.

When he got back to his digs he put a bob in the gas meter and sat on his bed. He had a large volume of Dickens on his knee, using it as a desk to write a note to Dee.

He wasn't sure how to start. How do you write to someone you barely know to tell them their husband – even though they'd been separated for years – was dead? How do you begin? It would have been better face-to-face. How come she was out all the time? What on earth did she find to do at her age? Then again, she'd always been out, busy – she was a clippie the whole time she lived with them. He'd usually be in bed by the time she came home from work. And often she'd be gone again before he got up in the morning. The only time he remembered being with her was on his eighth birthday. She'd have lost her job by then. She'd promised him a trip on the ferry across to New Brighton. Just the two of them. He could hardly contain himself he was so excited. He'd jumped off the tram and run over to the railings to watch the ferries coming across the water. The water was all giddy, splashing around, gurgling – it sounded like it was laughing. And it was blue, just like a river should be. It was perfect. His mother had gone over to buy the ferry tickets then stopped dead. Just stopped, mid-walk, like she'd been frozen. Clutched her gold locket. She was a looking at a man and woman standing by the tea stall, their arms round each other, kissing. He was wearing a uniform, he looked like a tram driver. The woman wore a flowery dress, curly blonde hair. The man suddenly looked over at his mother, as if aware she was watching them. He didn't smile. Just looked at her. With that, his mother dragged Eddie onto the nearest bus – which took them

along the Dock Road towards Crosby, totally the wrong direction for home – and sat staring out of the window.

He'd written to her on and off over the years. She'd never written back, even though he always put his address at the top of each letter.

After she left them, he'd kept watching the front door. For years. Hoping it might be her every time someone knocked. Eddie had blamed his dad for sending her away but his dad said she'd been a difficult woman to live with. Nothing he did could make her happy. Okay, he could understand that, but why didn't she take them with her? Why abandon them as well as their father? He'd often wondered why he never made plans. He'd thought that was just his nature but he realised now he'd been conditioned that way. He'd figured out from an early age there was no point making plans. Grownups would whisk you away and plonk you somewhere you didn't want to be. Then, just when you'd got used to your new life, they'd drag you back again. And then, just when you were getting to know everyone all over again and adjust to your new surroundings – your new house, new friends, new school, your mother would disappear. She'd wave you off at the school gates one morning and never come back. Ever. Not even now. Where the hell was she? Why was she always so inaccessible? Why could he never reach her. Why was she never there when he needed her?

He picked up his pen.

Dear Mother,

Sorry we missed you. Greta and I called round to give you some sad news. Dad died this morning. He'd been ill a few days in hospital. I called round yesterday to let you know but sadly you were out.

Dad's remains will be taken round to April's. The requiem mass will be at St Cecilia's. I'll let you know the time and date when everything's been organised.

Hope you are keeping well,

Edward

The following Wednesday, Eddie and the lads were outside The Iron Door. Tony was pushing at the door. Hammering on it.

–It's locked.

–It can't be. Push harder.

–I've been pushin’. It's locked, I'm tellin’ yer.

–Let me try.

Eddie dragged Tony back down the steps then ran up, ramming his shoulder against the door of the club. It wasn't budging. He'd have perfectly round bruises on his shoulder and arms the next day from the iron rivets. He looked around for a bell. He started banging on the door. Where was the doorman?

–It's bleedin’ closed. You were lying. You never got us a gig here.

–Tony, we have a gig here tonight. Eight o'clock. It's all arranged. They're just late opening up that's all.

–Well, where is everyone then? Where's the crowds?

–I don't know, Frankie. Maybe it's a late opener on a Wednesday. I know we've got a gig, that's all.

He was thinking back. The two men. He didn't even know their names. They'd acquiesced rather quickly. And there was no written contract, nothing signed. But this place did open on a Wednesday. He'd been there the week before. It opened every night. He had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, like everything had turned to water. They wouldn't do that would they? Build up a young band's hopes and dash them. Just for a laugh?

Ray was leaning against a wall further down the street, gazing up into the sky. Tony was kicking a can against the kerb.

–So?

–So what, Billy?

–So, what are we going to do, Eddie? Can you ring them? There must be a phone box nearby or in one of the pubs.

–I don't have a number for them.

–Isn't it written on the contract?

Eddie looked away.

–He hasn't got a contract. Have yer, Eddie?

–That's not how it works in this business. It's not like dealing with a bank. No one writes contracts. It's all word of mouth, gentlemen's agreements—

–Gentlemen? In this bleedin’ city?

Ray had picked up his guitar – a brand new Epiphone bought for the gig – and was walking away.

–Ray! Ray, wait. Someone will be here soon. Trust me. I've got the right day. There's just some kind of problem, hold up, something. Don't walk off. Ray!

–I'll be in *The Grapes* if they show up.

–You're underage.

Ray gave him two fingers.

A bouncer Eddie recognised from The Cavern walked towards them.

–So. It's true then.

–What?

–They've been closed down.

–No. We've got a gig on here tonight. Late opening, Wednesday.

He started laughing.

–If you think so, mate. Ha ha! If you think so.

He swaggered off towards Mathew Street singing.

–*Listen. Doo-wah-do. Do you want to know a secret? Doo-wah-doo. Do you promise not to tell?...*

–You're full of shite, you are, Eddie. You don't know Sam Leach.

–Of course I do!

–What did he say to you? What were his actual words?

Frankie pushed his face into Eddie's. He'd never seen him look so vicious.

–Well. He just... Okay. I didn't actually speak to—

–You lying bastard! You said—

–I said I knew Sam Leach and we got the gig through my contacts with him. I didn't say I spoke to him.

Billy and Tony had crowded in. Tony, holding onto his jacket, standing on tiptoes to push his face into Eddie's as well. Eddie stood back, pushing Tony off balance.

–Well, who did you speak to then? Tony poked him in the chest.

–I spoke to two men in the office.

–Two men? Probably from the tax office.

–Repo men.

–Did they 'ave a big van outside, piling chairs and stuff on it?

–They work in the music industry. They knew my old band, The Rocking Dharmas—

–Never heard of them.

–That's 'cause Eddie here never got them a gig. Probably told them they'd be playing The Iron Door or The Cavern or some other bullshit.

–They would have made it big actually. Brian Epstein was interested. I got them a regular slot on a Sunday night. They were better than *The Beatles.*

–So what happened?

–Lead singer left. Band broke up.

–You're sacked as manager, Eddie. Yer crap!

–Yeah! Piss off, Eddie. We're gonna find someone who knows what they're doing. We'll never get anywhere with you.

–Yeah! Get back to yer teaching, *sir.*

–Get to the back of the class, Pendlebury.

–Stick a dunce cap on 'is 'ead.

Eddie had always been a calm person. Always kept his cool in times of stress. Never let the pupils rile him or wind him up. He'd always been able to deal with aggression by smiling and talking things through. He wasn't a confrontational person.

He heard himself saying,

–SHUT UP! You stupid little BASTARDS! You're a bunch of whinging no-marks! And I'm telling you now, you'll never get anywhere 'cause you're *crap!* Ray's the only one who can play and if he's got any sense he'll pack it all in and go to university and get a *real* job.

They didn't speak. He thought afterwards, there may have been one or two open mouths. He took a few deep breaths.

–People let you down. That's life. People *always* let you down, especially the ones you trust the most. Get over it. This is a *crap* job. I worked my arse off for you lot. I got you that gig in good faith. I didn't know they were a couple of lying bastards.

Eddie pushed through the lads, down the steps. They turned to watch him.

He started walking up the road then stopped. Turning to face them.

–Okay, you didn't get your gig tonight, tough! I could have got you other gigs even if you *are* mediocre. But you know what? I'm sick of it. Sick of you moaning. Sick of dealing with venues who don't pay. Sick of wondering where I'm going to get my next week's rent money. Wondering if I'm even going to eat.

He had five bob left in his bank account. He had no idea how he was going to pay the old crone on Friday. He would have asked his dad to tide him over – he'd been half thinking of moving back home.

He jabbed his finger at the lads.

–You're absolutely right – I should go back to teaching. I *will* go back to teaching. And you and everyone else in this God-blasted, crappy, let-you-down-world can go FUCK yourselves!

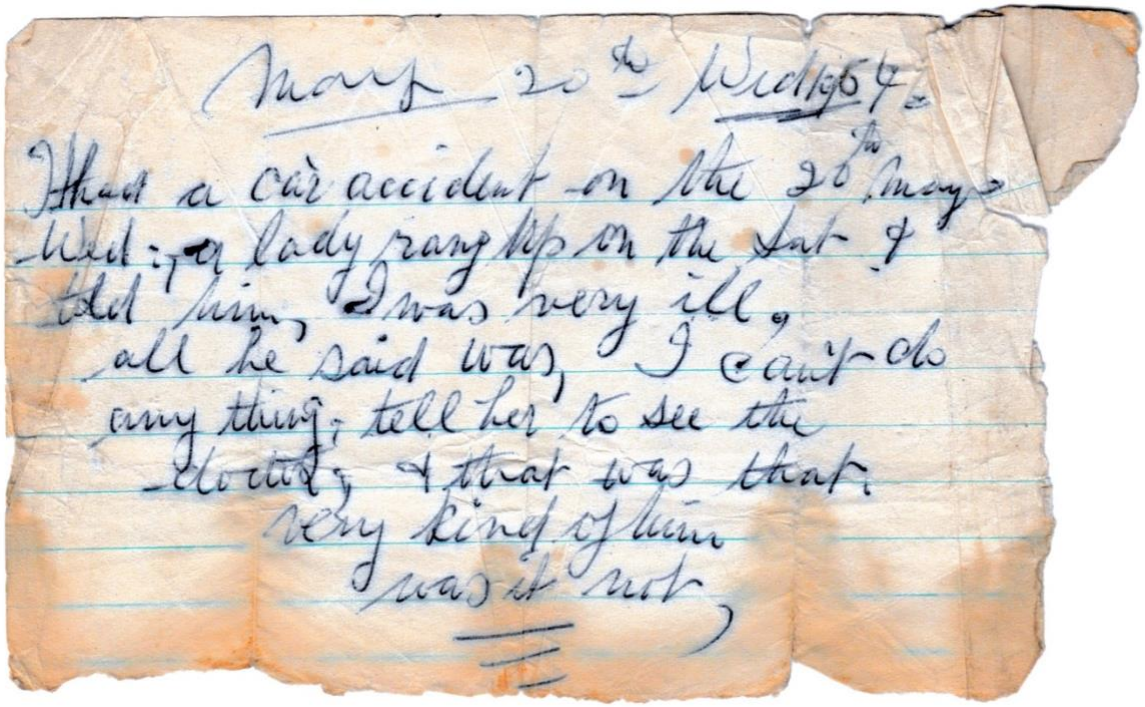
He booted the can Tony had been kicking, down the street.

–I don't need you. Any of you.

He pulled up his collar, shoved his hands in his pockets and began walking away.

–I've managed this long without you, I'll keep managing thanks.

He headed off towards the river. Wondering if his mother would bother coming to the funeral.



May 20th Wed 1964

Had a car accident on the 20th May Wed: a lady rang up on the Sat & told him I was very ill, all he said was, I can't do any thing; tell her to see the doctor, & that was that. very kind of him was it not,

THE DAUGHTER'S FRIEND, 1972

A ship's siren keened over the city. Sofia paused at the door of George Henry Lees to listen. It was quite a rare sound these days. Not much traffic on the river now – some oil tankers, a few ships taking scrap iron to Turkey. The odd one bringing grain from America. No more passenger liners, her father had written in his final letter. It had arrived the day after he died. She'd been planning to come back and see him for the last few years, bring the children to meet him, but life was just so busy. What with school terms, Gerald's job… It never seemed to be the right time. And now she'd finally made it back – for his funeral. It all seemed rather pointless, an empty gesture, too late – she swallowed hard. Couldn't cry now, she'd smudge her mascara. He'd told her that they'd opened the great flood gates at Brunswick so the tidal currents would eventually silt up the South Docks. She'd like to go back and see them. Revel in the decay. Relish every smashed window of the warehouses squaring the quay. Every shattered roof tile on the stone-slabbed walkway. The stench of fetid mud. The Liverpool she was glad she left.

The city hadn't improved. If anything, it had declined. She'd been out shopping for an outfit – something spectacular to impress the other diners at lunchtime. She walked up Bold Street first. One of the smartest streets in Liverpool when she'd left. Quite downmarket now. Tawdry actually. Cripps had gone, so had the Kardomah cafe and most of the other decent shops. Even Cooper's had been demolished. She'd ended up in George Henry Lees and bought an acid yellow catsuit and green hat with a wide floppy brim.

She had a short wander round town – platform shoes weren't ideal for walking. It was sad to see the beautiful old market building had gone, replaced with an ugly bland effort. She'd always liked the market, you could buy exotic foods and freshly roasted coffee there. Imagine you were somewhere else. The fish market next door always stank but she enjoyed looking at the stalls. The fishmongers took great pride laying their fish out in patterns. So many different shapes and colours. All shiny and wet, as though they'd just been pulled from the sea. Of course back home— listen to her! Back in Australia, they had far more exotic fish. She'd wager they'd never even heard of mahi mahi or barramundi over here, let alone knew how to cook it.

You couldn't compare this dump with Melbourne. Melbourne was a city on the up. New buildings, a new bridge across the Yarra river – they'd never bothered building one over

the Mersey. It was dreadful though, when the first one collapsed. All those construction workers. Gerald had been called back to work to deal with the emergencies. They hadn't been able to save anyone. He'd been subdued for a long time afterwards. Was that the start of it?

She was disgusted by the state of the pavements here. Empty cans, chip wrappers flung on the ground. Rubbish blowing about the street. You never saw that in Melbourne.

She passed Marks and Spencer's where Greta's sister, April, used to work. On the handbag counter. Even with April's discount they were too expensive back then. Now Sofia wouldn't give them a second glance – cheap, nasty things. She gripped her Gucci bag, felt her chin lift instantly. Gerald had bought it for her on his conference trip to Sydney, just before she flew back to England last week. An extravagant present for a working weekend away. She glanced around at the women in their nylon headscarves, dowdy macs – even the young ones! They could make more of an effort.

Sofia made her way back to the Adelphi. She'd booked one of the suites. The sitting room was a bit gloomy, all wood panelling, but it had a sense of grandeur about it. Somewhat faded now, but still. She had time to get changed and relax before going down to lunch. Perhaps she'd order a gin and tonic from room service while she was getting ready.

Sofia stood at the doorway of the dining room, head tilted back slightly, surveying the diners. Hand on hip, turning this way and that as though looking for a waiter. She brushed her hair from her eyes, ring finger raised so her solitaire would catch the light. She'd decided against wearing her new hat. Instead, she'd tied a green and white silk scarf around her hair – coloured and set at Peter Collinge the day before. She turned her head so it swished in a liquid ebony cape around her shoulders.

The dining room had hardly changed since Raphe used to bring her there. It was still the best place to eat in town. Chic. Huge arched windows, damask drapes at each one, marquetry wood panelling between. Three chandeliers sent prismed flashes from the ceiling. The furniture looked different from the last time she'd been there, but that was fourteen years ago. Once she and Gerald became a regular item, Raphe had bowed out of their relationship. Gently cutting her adrift. He was such a decent man. Thoughtful.

A waiter showed Sofia to a small table, pushed against the wall near the kitchen where the waiters hurried in and out.

–I'd like that table, she pointed.

–The one in the centre.

Before he could speak, she walked over to a large circular table then waited for him to pull her chair out. Raphe always used to choose a central table when he took her there. She didn't look at the waiter but she could sense the surly expression on his face as he shook the napkin from its origami straitjacket and laid it on her lap. The other tables were occupied by couples and groups of four. She ignored the sly glances. Why shouldn't she come here and enjoy lunch? She had money. She didn't need a man to escort her, wasn't that what women's liberation was all about?

–Would Madam care for a cocktail before lunch?

Yes, Madam would, but the whole ambience of the place was ruined by that harsh Liverpool accent. They should all be sent for elocution lessons.

–Dry Martini. With an olive, not one of those awful sticky cherries.

–Olive? Yes, Madam.

The girls at school had laughed at her accent,

Oh, has one rarely got to go, darling, rarely?

But look where those elocution lessons had got her – a modern, architect-designed house in the best suburb in Melbourne. Huge garden, lots of trees. Although she'd expressly forbidden their two boys to climb the eucalyptus. Gerald had been made head of Anaesthetics at St Vincent's within months of them arriving in Melbourne and he'd wanted a house to match his status. He wouldn't have given those scrubbers from school a second glance. Not once they'd opened their mouths. *Fishwives*.

She pulled out her compact, dabbed at her nose, inspected her lipstick. Using a compact was an art form. It wasn't simply used to repair makeup or check one's face in the mirror – she'd learned that watching Mrs Pendlebury. *Dee*. Her own mother had been rather dowdy. She felt disloyal admitting it but she was. Dee on the other hand, had a natural *élan*. An innate elegance no matter what she wore. Sofia discovered that a compact could be used to avoid an awkward question. Signal the end of a conversation. Buy time, muster confidence – *feign* confidence. Look occupied. Aloof. A powerful tool in a woman's armoury.

She'd bumped into Dee last week, the day before her father's funeral. She was just turning the corner near Owen Owens when she noticed a woman walking towards her. Head held high, well-cut grey coat. Slightly stooped but otherwise excellent deportment. Oxblood

patent leather shoes, matching handbag. Charcoal leather gloves with three small maroon buttons up the side.

Sofia had been shocked. It had been almost fifteen years since she'd last seen her but there was no mistaking Dee Pendlebury. The woman must have been in her seventies but she'd hardly changed. Sofia quickly lowered her head, turning to look in a shop window.

–Sofia!

She bent in closer to the glass, straining to read a small price tag.

–It is Sofia, isn't it?

Dee touched Sofia's elbow. Damn the woman.

–Oh! Mrs Pendlebury. What a *surprise*.

She stretched her mouth into a smile.

Dee looked at the pipes and tobacco in the shop window. Then looked at Sofia, eyebrows raised.

–For my husband. It's difficult to get… Oh, you know, she waved vaguely at the display behind the glass.

–In Australia, she added loudly, glancing around.

–Yes, Raphe told me you'd emigrated.

–You're still in touch with him?

The resentment, the jealousy she'd always felt towards Dee twisted her words into a sulky whine.

Dee looked at Sofia.

–Well, not now, dear. He never believed in Spiritualism.

She laughed. Then stopped.

–Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you would have known. Raphe died. Must be eight or nine years ago.

It was as though Dee had reached into Sofia's chest and crushed her heart to a pulp.

–Died? Raphe's dead?

Dee looked bemused.

–Heart attack. I thought you two were close?

Sofia's eyes were smarting. She wasn't going to cry in front of Dee.

–And how are you, Mrs Pendlebury?

–I'm very well, thank you Sofia. I have my little house and my voluntary work.

Sofia was waiting for Dee to ask her how she was but instead Dee said,

–Lovely suit, dear. Linen? Still got expensive taste, I see.

Sofia straightened up. Lifted her chin.

–My husband is a top consultant in Melbourne.

–Beats a struggling physiotherapist, doesn't it?

An image of Raphe struggling up the stairs with his wooden leg shot into Sofia's mind. He always went to bed early because of the pain. Give me five minutes, he'd say, then she'd follow him upstairs. He'd never let her see the stump, covered it with the bedclothes, just guided her hand underneath. But one time, she didn't wait. She crept up after him. He'd taken off his trousers, was sitting on the bed. The door was open slightly, she peered through the gap, watched him undo the straps, remove the leg. She saw the naked stump. Sticking out from under his shirt. Long and thin and white. Rounded at the end. He laid back, massaging it. Sighing as it throbbed, the blood pumping back into it. She'd felt utterly sickened.

She couldn't stop the tears then. She stared back at Dee while the mascara ran down her cheeks.

–Greta has five children now, did you know? Dee smiled.

Her smiles had never progressed beyond the stretching of her mouth so Sofia wasn't sure if it was an attempt to be affable or an accusation.

Sofia swallowed the lump back down her throat.

–And has she a nanny?

Dee laughed. Too loud and far too long. She gave Sofia a dismissive wave and began to walk away, still laughing.

Sofia called after her.

–And have you ever met them?

Dee turned.

–Your grandchildren?

That had wiped the smug grin off her face.

Dee. Bloody woman. Still full of herself. Walking round like she was the Queen of Sheba. Bit of a hunch developing though. And she couldn't hide the wrinkles or the sagging jawline. Thinking back, she'd looked rather ashen. Her eyes, that used to glitter – constantly flickering between gold and emerald – were sunken and dull. Like unpolished brass. Her face was drawn, the flesh scooped out from under the skin. She didn't look well. Yet she still

persisted in wearing that gaudy red lipstick. Hardly becoming on an old lady, especially with that mean, threadlike mouth. Sofia ran her tongue over her own plump lips.

She looked around for the waiter who'd taken her drink order. Where was that bloody martini? Was he growing the damned olives?

Just at that moment, he pushed through the swing doors from the kitchen. A single cocktail glass on a tray.

At last!

–Martini with an olive. And an umbrella.

The waiter looked pleased with himself.

–*Canapés*?

She picked the umbrella with its ballast of shrivelled black olive out of her glass and dropped it onto her side plate.

–Canapees? Er, would you like to see the menu?

–I'm here for lunch. Of *course* I'd like to see the menu. In Melbourne, pre-prandials are always served with cana-*pays*.

Pleb.

She turned away. The waiter must have made a face to the table behind because they all sniggered. Let them laugh. Probably living in their little boxes in Formby or over on the Wirral thinking they'd made it. Provincial solicitors or assistant bank managers. She'd wager they didn't even have a cook or a nanny let alone a gardener. Gerald's garage was probably twice the size of their crummy houses.

She was so lucky they'd moved to Australia. They would never have had the same lifestyle in Liverpool. They'd left two weeks after they were married. Boarded the Oriana in Southampton and finally arrived in Melbourne twenty-five days later, via the Med and the Suez.

Her mother had never forgiven her. Sofia had promised they'd be back within two years but her mother died within six months of them emigrating. Sofia thought at the time she'd done it out of spite.

It had taken her another twelve years to get back. Her father's death. Neither of her parents got to see their grandchildren.

Don't dwell, Sofia. Mascara.

It was strange, but it was Raphe she missed and thought about more than her parents. Raphe was the father she wished she'd had. And she would have made a far more suitable daughter than poor old mousey Greta. Always embarrassed. He'd been more than a father to her, but not quite a lover. Not in the fullest sense. Not with his leg. It was rather awkward. And they were both embarrassed by it.

Dee popped into her mind again. Annoyingly. Sofia's abiding memory of her was of an elegantly dressed woman, but in hindsight, that's not how she looked just before she walked out. Her nails – always kept so beautifully before, began to look bitten and sore. She was constantly twisting her wedding ring. And she'd stopped speaking. Funny how you forget. Sofia had been there one day after school. Greta was trying to ask her mother something but Dee just sat there staring up at the semi-basement window. A dazed look on her face. Greta said she hadn't spoken to her father for weeks before that. Just moped about looking sad. She'd poured salt instead of sugar all over the porridge one morning, then started weeping when Greta and her brother spat it out.

Sophia took a sip of the, very small, measure of martini.

–The menu, *Madam.*

The waiter bowed. Little upstart. He could kiss goodbye to his tip.

She pulled her handbag closer. That skinny ward sister had gone to the conference in Sydney with Gerald. Perhaps she should have insisted Gerald come back with her for the funeral. He could have taken the time off if he'd tried. They could have brought the boys with them. Made it a holiday. She'd have to go and visit him at work when she got back – have a little chat with that nurse. She knew her sort. Gold-digger.

An elderly waiter discreetly placed a copy of the *Echo* on Sofia's table.

–A little distraction while you wait, Madame.

Why did she need a distraction? She liked looking around at the other diners. Guessing their relationships. There was a family at one of the tables. Mother, father, two daughters. She remembered the first time she'd been there for dinner. Raphe had invited her with Greta. He wouldn't let her have a real cocktail. He'd called her a child. She was fifteen! She'd been quite annoyed. Poor old Raphe. He must only have been about sixty-four when he died. So young. Just as his business was finally taking off. It was too sad. Why hadn't Greta told her? She was sure she had her address in Australia – Sofia had invited her to come out and visit

but Greta had never made the effort. She could have written. She knew Sofia and her father had been friends.

A waiter approached the table. He coughed. Raised his eyebrows.

–I need a few more minutes.

She hadn't even looked at the menu.

She had thought she might call Raphe. Really, she had thought about it. But then… Well, they'd lost touch a long time ago.

She picked up the leather bound menu. It was heavy. An extensive wine list at the back. She'd ordered chicken when Raphe had first invited her there – the only thing she'd recognised on the menu. She quickly progressed to the more sophisticated meals, at his prompting. What did Greta order that first time? She scanned the main courses. Lobster Thermidor. She'd always wanted to try lobster but she'd never get away with it at that price. Gerald would have a fit. He always had to see the receipts. For every last tiny item she bought. He didn't like her spending his money, unless it was for jewellery or expensive clothes – things that would reflect well on him.

Raphe would have ordered the lobster for her. And champagne too. He had style. He would have done anything for her. Hadn't batted an eyelid when she'd asked him for that dress in Cripps' window. Twice the price of poor old Greta's wedding dress but then, Greta would never have been able to carry it off. And it was nice for him to have a glamorous girl to take to the wedding. She'd been prepared for a showdown with Dee, had half expected a slanging match but Dee hadn't turned up.

–Are you ready to order now, Madam?

The surly waiter.

–I'll have the *Sole Meuniere*.

That's what Greta had ordered!

–The Dover Sole, not the Lemon.

Greta had picked it clean, very carefully. Used to fine dining from an early age. She'd had a head start in life thanks to Raphe. Well, Sofia had caught her up. Overtaken her actually.

–Anything for starters?

–I would have ordered a starter had I wanted one.

–Wine?

–The *Chablis.* Sixty-six.

–A glass?

–*No.* And bring an ice bucket. I can't stand warm white wine. And I'd like the *Sauce Meuniere* served separately. In a sauce-boat. I don't want my fish drowning in it.

An image popped into Sofia's mind. Little mouths gasping for air. Her shoes! Dee's shoes had slits in them! And they looked new. Why would you do that to new shoes? The cheek of the woman – laughing at *her* while *she's* standing there with slits in her shoes. Raphe thought Dee was terribly glamorous. Sofia had always felt she was competing with her. She could never understand why Raphe always felt sorry for his wife despite what she'd done to him. The woman was devious. Pretending he'd hit her when she was leaving. When she was walking out on him and her children. Making out it was he who was a monster. At the time, Sofia had thought Dee was terribly brave and modern, striking out for her own life. She couldn't help but admire her. Now she had children of her own, however, she reviled her. Utterly selfish. Sofia would never leave without her children, even if it meant living in poverty. How Dee could have done that was beyond her.

–The *Chablis*?

A different waiter this time. Far more professional.

Sofia nodded, draining her martini. She watched while the wine waiter placed an ice bucket on a stand next to the table. He showed her the bottle. She scanned the label and nodded. He cut round the foil, peeled it off, then pressed the corkscrew into the spongy cork. It eased out with a little effort and popped satisfyingly.

–Would Madam care to taste?

She swirled the wine around the glass and breathed in the *bouquet* – as Raphe called it. He knew so much about so many things. The waiter sniffed the cork. She didn't know what she was supposed to smell. Gerald usually tasted the wine. The waiter seemed satisfied so she took a sip. It was rather tart but she nodded.

He poured an inch of wine into her glass.

When he disappeared into the kitchen she topped it up.

She was going to buy some wine for her father's funeral but her aunt had been horrified. Tea and ham sandwiches, that was how they did things here, whatever those queer folk over in Australia might do.

There was only a handful of people at the Requiem Mass. A few of them came back to her father's house. The house she'd grown up in. It was so small. She hadn't remembered it

like that. How had they all managed? A tiny parlour at the front for best – which they never used. Tinier kitchen at the back with a set of narrow stairs in the corner. Upstairs, two miniature bedrooms. And he still had the outside lav. In nineteen seventy-two! She'd felt ashamed of her father then. Never improved his lot. He could have tried harder. Too easy-going. Compared to the poverty in southern Italy… he would always say. Like that was a reason.

Then she'd felt ashamed for feeling ashamed of him and had wept openly – to the gratification of her Italian aunt who didn't hold with restraint.

With the few extra people in the house, Sofia had been overcome with claustrophobia. And she was desperate for a drink. She'd never really drunk much before they moved to Australia. The occasional cocktail with Raphe was enough. But everyone drank over there. Gerald had said it would look odd if she didn't join in. Standoffish.

She'd slipped out the front door while the old ones were chatting in the kitchen and hailed a cab back to the hotel. She'd called for room service, filled the marble bath with hot water and bubbles. Then lain there, washing it all away – memories, her past, her poverty, her father. Mother. All of it. She'd finished the whole bottle of *Riesling* and fallen asleep. Woken to find her empty wine glass bobbing in the cold suds.

–Dover sole with butter sauce. In a sauce-boat. Madam.

The smarmy waiter again.

–No vegetables?

–If you'd wanted vegetables, I thought you would have ordered them. Do you want me to get you some green beans?

Little runt. He needed taking down to size. She'd make a formal complaint. Demand to see the manager. She'd naively believed this would be a sophisticated experience. Had boasted to her friends back in Melbourne about it, determined to talk up her home town. She wanted to show those snobs that Liverpool was chic and trendy. All lies of course but her pride was at stake. She might have known. *Liverpool.* It would never change.

Which reminded her, she needed to ask someone to take her photograph. Show her in the restaurant. Proof for those jumped-up no-marks. She ought to have ordered a glass of champagne.

She rummaged in her bag and brought out her instamatic camera. A present from Gerald. He'd told her to take lots of pictures of the city.

Two well-dressed businessmen were sitting at the next table.

–Excuse me. Sorry to disturb, but would you mind awfully, taking a photo of me?

The swarthier looking one, mid-fifties she guessed, turned and smiled.

–With pleasure, Miss.

She posed at the table, wine glass in hand. Then he suggested she stand by the huge windows, with a view of *Liverpool Resurgent* in the background. Then with the whole restaurant behind her. People were watching. They probably thought she was a film star or a model. Gina Lollobrigida maybe.

–Here's yer beans, when you've finished.

That damn waiter. She wouldn't rest until he was sacked!

She turned to the nice gentleman.

–I'd best let you get back to your meal. Thank you so much, you've been very kind.

–My pleasure – it's not every day I'm asked to take pictures of a beautiful woman.

He bowed a little and she allowed herself a demure smile. This place attracted the right sort.

She enjoyed the food. She enjoyed the wine. She enjoyed the compliments, the covert glances. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience all round but it would have been so much nicer with a man to share it. To chat with. Not that she *needed* a man, it was just...

She drank a little too quickly. Drained her glass. The *Chablis* seemed to have mellowed. It was going down rather smoothly now.

A different waiter cleared the table. Gave her a sideways glance.

Dee had talked about I not we. And she'd referred to her little house not ours. She'd seemed perfectly content and self-contained yet she was obviously alone. Mind you, she never had any friends. Sofia had asked Greta once but Greta said no one ever called round to see her mother. And she'd never heard her mother mention a friend. Bit of a loner really. How could she be happy? She'd destroyed her own life.

The wine waiter had drifted up behind her, silently, to refill her glass. They were both surprised to find the bottle was empty. He raised his eyebrows a fraction then removed the bottle along with the ice bucket and stand. He hadn't asked if she'd like another.

Her mother had said at the time that Dee must have had a man on the go or else why would she leave? That huge house? Okay, it belonged to her mother-in-law but she wouldn't have had to wait long before she and Raphe inherited the whole thing. That old bag was on

her last legs when Sofia had first met her. And she died two years after Dee walked out. She'd never quite understood why Dee would have left it all behind. Raphe was a physiotherapist, highly respected. Perhaps it was the leg.

–I'm terribly sorry to disturb your reverie, my dear, but would you care to join us for a glass of champagne?

It was the nice gentleman again.

When she rose to her feet, she felt a little unsteady.

–I'd be delighted. But first, if you'll excuse me just a moment...

She wobbled, then mastered herself. Made a full tour of the restaurant, peering into all the alcoves before finding the Ladies quite close to where she'd been sitting. She'd quite forgotten where they were – but then it had been a long time since she was last there. They were very smart. Low level lighting, a beautiful display of roses and carnations next to the hand basin. Bottles of Aloe Vera hand lotion. *Roger & Gallet* soap. A basket of mini towels on the side. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were a little red and watery from all the wine. Face, blurry round the edges.

She re-applied her smudged lipstick. Powdered her nose. A Roman nose, her father had called it. Patrician, Raphe had said. Gerald started to call her 'Conk' not long after Angelo was born. In front of their friends too – who all laughed. Especially the women.

She touched up her eyeliner and combed her hair. The hairdresser had noticed some greys a few years ago.

–Sophisticated, he'd said.

But they'd kept dying it black regularly so the roots didn't show. Dee seemed to be natural. Still auburn. Perhaps a few shades lighter than it had been. And she was still attractive even without makeup. Damn her. It was her eyes. The strange colour. Sort of green-tinted honey. They drew you in. Not right for an old woman.

Sofia looked at her own painted face. That was the only criticism Raphe had ever made of her.

They'd been having cocktails before dinner. She was wearing the scarlet dress he'd just bought her. Lovely rich velvet.

–Really suits you, that colour, he'd said.

–But why do you wear all that makeup? You should go *au naturel*, like Dee. Nothing more alluring than natural beauty.

That had really stung.

When she returned, the nice gentleman pulled out a chair, handing her a glass of champagne.

–We were about to send out a search party! Take a seat, my dear.

She glanced at the bottle. *Pommery*. She'd not heard of that one.

–A toast. To fine dining and beautiful women.

–I'll drink to that. His companion had a Scottish accent and a sly grin.

Sofia took a large mouthful. The bubbles rose up the back of her nose. She coughed, reached for a tissue. Then took a smaller sip. It was rather delicious. She should remember the name and impress Gerald when she got back home.

–And tell me, Gorgeous, how did you enjoy your meal?

–It was… *satisfactory*.

–Satisfactory? he glanced at the Scot.

–The lady is a *gourmande*?

She quickly swallowed another mouthful.

–Oh, we have *fabulous* restaurants in Melbourne—

–Aha! You're an Antipodean?

It didn't sound like an insult so she smiled slightly.

–Excuse me. We haven't introduced ourselves. John Danvers and my business partner, Craig Campbell.

–How do you do. Sofia. Sofia Fairfax.

Should she add, Mrs? Or would that be too formal? Presumptuous? It was just a drink.

–I see you have a taste for Champagne. Drink up, Sofia Fairfax, we've a bottle to get through.

–So, tell me about life in Melbourne.

The Scot leaned towards her. What did John say his name was? There was something about his eyes. Unsavoury.

She turned to John Danvers – solid name – who leaned across the table blocking the Scot out of the conversation.

–Oh, Melbourne is absolutely *mar*vellous. Marvellous. Really.

As she talked – about the beaches, the swanky cocktail parties, the smart set – she hardly noticed the Scot filling up her glass. Barely registered the second bottle being brought

to the table. She was in her element. A man – well, two if you included the horrible Scot, which she *didn't* – who wanted to listen to her. Who was interested in what she was saying. She glanced down, John had his hand over hers. A little previous of him.

–... and they go horse-riding through the park. And jogging! So amusing.

–Jogging. That *is* amusing…

–And we have Christmas lunch on the beach. Can you imagine? Sitting there in our cats and hostumes— cats and *costumes*. I mean *hats*.

She put her hand on her chest.

–*Hats* and *costumes*. Dear me! I think I'm a little tipsy.

John glanced at his friend.

–You know, Sofia, Craig here, has a rather good single malt back in his room. Would you like to come up for a little *digestif,* as our French friends say.

–Oh. I couldn't. No. Thank you.

–*Sofia!* Just a little drinkie before you go. We might never meet again and that would be such a shame…

He had his arm around her shoulder now and his hand on her knee. It was creeping slowly up her thigh.

She tried to stand up but promptly fell back into her seat.

–Come along, Sofia Fairfax. I know a little lady who needs a lie down.

John stood behind her, tucked his hands under her armpits and hoisted her to her feet. The smarmy Scot was grinning. How dare he? And how dare John manhandle her like that. She suddenly felt more sober.

–Let go of me.

He was manoeuvring her towards the door.

–I said, get your hands OFF ME!

The restaurant fell silent. John stepped back. Sofia snatched her bag from the chair, then staggered towards the door. Then someone grabbed her arm.

The smarmy waiter.

–Er, where d'you think you're going? You haven't paid yer bill yet. *Madam*.

The sun had gone. Leaving a big bully of a cloud bank squatting low on the horizon. Scowling over the river. The river scowled back, dark and sullen. The air smelt of saltwater. Old fish. Cat's pee.

Sofia was standing on the quay at the Pier Head. She'd felt a need to go there when she'd fled the Adelphi. The hit of cold air as she'd left the hotel had made Sofia feel even more drunk. It was difficult to keep her balance. Even standing still. She had a vague recollection of stumbling through town, knocking into people. Then suddenly she was there.

She should have written to Raphe. Kept in touch. But... *oh!* There were so many reasons why she didn't. So, so many. And she loved him. She did. She really did. Always had. Despite his leg. Big heavy wooden thing. So sad. And that big strap. Holding it on. Horrific! But he never pushed her. Not like other men. Never forced himself on her. Pals, he said. Great pals. And now he was gone. She *was* going to call and see him. She'd really meant to. But it was too late now. Him. And her father. Her Daddy. Dear old Daddy. Both gone. All too late. Regrets. Terrible, terrible things.

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Swung round, looked back at the city. At the huge tower of the Anglican cathedral – still not finished, lazy sods. The spikes of the ugly Catholic cathedral poking up above the roofs. Hideous St John's Beacon. Bloody city. Evil, *evil* place. And the Adelphi. Ruined now. All her memories destroyed. Horrible men. How dare they? And that disgusting waiter. Should have smacked him. Punched him in his tight little super— Superlishous— Nasty little gob!

Horrible.

Bastards.

–Well, SOD OFF! THE LOT OF YOU!

Black miserable stinking city.

She swayed a little, steadied herself on a bollard then tried to sit on the metal chain linking it to the next. She just managed to stop herself from toppling backwards into the Mersey. She'd better stand up.

A young boy was fishing off the quay further along. He had a bamboo rod with string tied to it that just about reached the water. A small bucket waiting optimistically on the ground next to him. He was watching her.

She turned. Looked at him. He had a chubby little face. Blue wired specs with a plaster over one lens. He was wearing his school uniform. Skinny legs. Baggy underpants hanging

below the hemline of his shorts. His blazer was dusty and faded, the cuffs worn. A rip at the shoulder.

She tottered towards him.

–You alright, Missus?

He spoke quietly. Then obviously regretted it.

Sofia stared at him. Swaying.

He lowered his head but kept looking at her over the top of his glasses. Serious, worried little face.

She slurred, also quietly. Pleasantly.

–Why don't you just throw yourself in, kid?

He dropped his chin to his chest, stared into the water.

–Go on, jump in. Drown yerself. There's nothing down for yer, kid.

He looked up at her, then lowered his head again.

–Look!

But he wouldn’t.

She waved her arm over the river, then back over the city.

–Look at it. Look at that *dump!*

She staggered. Fought to regain her balance.

Then she pointed along the Dock Road. To the empty, blackened warehousing. The gaps in between – thirty-year-old bombsites. Derelict buildings, roofs missing or caved in. Pointed to the complete abandonment that was Liverpool.

–That's you, that is.

She walked over to him. Stood very, very close. Bent down. Whispered in his ear.

–You. Are. *It*.

Jabbing his shoulder with each word.

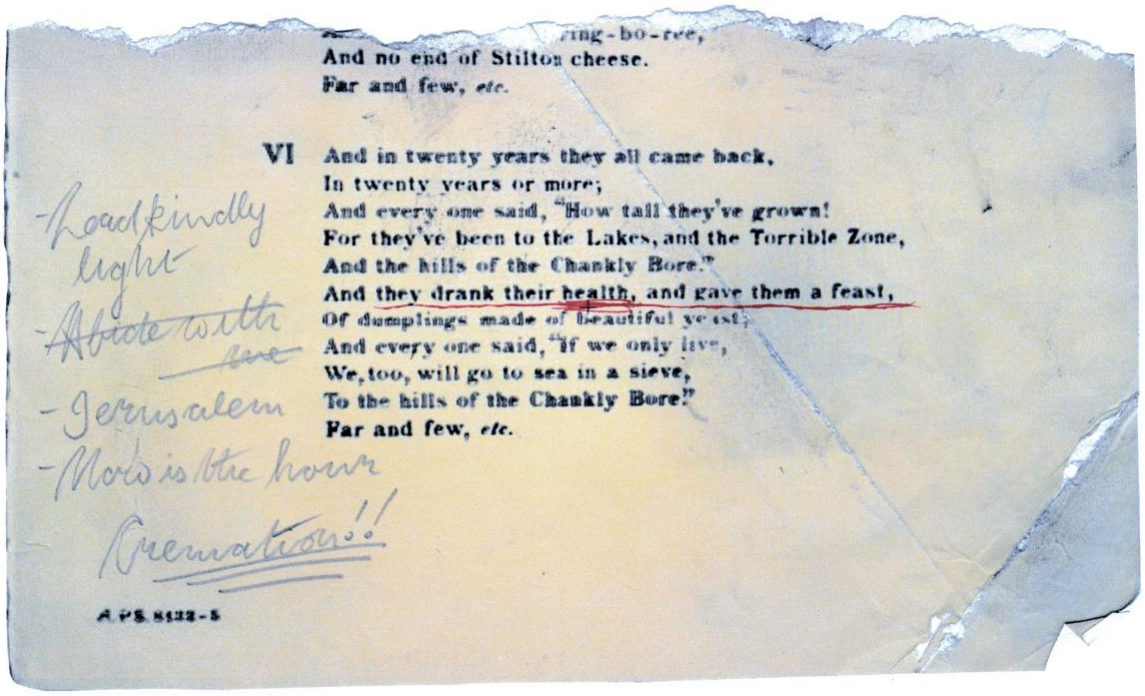
–And you'll never escape. *Never!* No matter how far you go. It won't let yer.

The wind had picked up. Sofia straightened. Stared at the river. The tide was on the turn. Heading back out to sea. Escaping. The water here would soon be making its way up the West Coast, past Scotland out into the ocean. Mingling with the waters of the Atlantic. Washing up on the shores of Iceland or Greenland even. Far away from here.

The cloud bank was lowering itself towards the water. Squeezing the thin line of light that separated it from the river, making it burn more intensely. She watched as the sliver of

silver turned gradually amber, then flame. Licking at the base of the cloud. A smoky burnt umber spreading upwards into a blaze of copper, singeing the jade sky above. Flashes of light caught the scaly surface of the water as it coursed out to sea.

Sofia took her bearings. Turned. Then began walking towards the Dock Road.



ring-bo-ree,
And no end of Stilton cheese.
Far and few, *etc.*

VI And in twenty years they all came back,
In twenty years or more;
And every one said, "How tall they've grown!
For they've been to the Lakes, and the Torrible Zone,
And the hills of the Chankly Bore."
And they drank their health, and gave them a feast,
Of dumplings made of beautiful yeast;
And every one said, "If we only live,
We, too, will go to sea in a sieve,
To the hills of the Chankly Bore!"
Far and few, *etc.*

-Lead kindly light
-Abide with me
-Jerusalem
-Nearer is the hour
Cremation!!

A PS 8132-5

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BECOMING DEE

A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

This PhD is in two parts. The first, is an 80,000-word short story cycle, *The Wind off the River,* which recounts the life of the central character, Dee Morgan, who is very loosely based on my grandmother, Nellie Evans. Fourteen different characters relate this fictional biography of Dee's life from her birth in 1900 to her death in 1973. Inhabiting the spaces between the stories are various documents that Dee left behind after her death.

The Wind off the River will be a vehicle to explore the working-class woman's place in society during this period of unprecedented change for women. It will seek to do this through considering the possible reasons why the real Dee Morgan – Nellie Evans – may have abandoned her children at the height of World War Two, choosing instead, a life of penury and solitude, dying alone thirty years later.

This short story cycle is accompanied by a 20,000-word exegesis which explores the issues that have arisen from my creative practice and also shows how, through reflexive practice, the book has in turn been altered by the reflective journal. The essay will examine ethical issues involved in fictionalising a real woman's life as well as the difficulty in navigating the moral contradictions between my grandmother's desire for freedom and the effects her abandonment had on her children. It will consider the challenges of writing a short story cycle driven by an absent present protagonist as well as the deliberations involved in giving her a presence in the book via a series of 'discovered' artefacts. It will examine how the writing technique and structure of the book express narrative multivalence with regards to Dee's character. Finally, it will look at how a protagonist who drives the book forward by her present absence can suggest a metaphor for the relationship of me, the author to my own work.

INTRODUCTION

Nellie Evans is a historical fact. In the same way General Hoche is. You'd know the latter if you'd studied French history at 'O' level. The former if you'd asked my mother. Nellie Evans. A name to which cling very few facts. The only one I knew for years was that she walked out on the family during World War Two while German bombs were blowing apart families all over the country. My mother was eight. Or perhaps nine. It didn't matter, Nellie left anyway. Just when my mother and her younger brother had come back from two years' evacuation. Just when they needed her most. At sixteen, I knew more about General Hoche than I knew about my own grandmother. A few years later, I realised that Nellie Evans was the mother referred to in my own mother's frequently asked question, 'How could a mother abandon her children?' A lament I'd heard so often growing up it ceased to have any meaning for me.

That phrase didn't begin to resonate with me until I grew older. Then I started to ask the same question, 'How *could* a mother abandon her children?' And in nineteen forty-three? Or forty-four. A period when a woman's place was in the home, especially a working-class woman. The primary caregiver, housekeeper, drudge – her husband's chattel.

I started asking my mother questions.

'When, exactly, did she leave? '

'Did you see her again? '

'What was she like? '

And I got the same answer.

'*I* don't remember.'

'I *don't* remember.'

'I don't *remember!* '

But I believed she *had* to remember something and I kept probing.

'Did she come to your wedding? '

'No. Why would I invite her? She was just a stranger to me.'

'Did she ever come to visit us? '

'I don't REMEMBER!! '

For years I had this image of Nellie, the clippie (I found a photo of her in uniform) hopping on a tram one day, tinging the bell and rattling off into the sunset. Or back to her mother's. Or a bed-sit in Toxteth.

I wanted to know who this woman was. I had a grandmother-shaped hole in my life that I wanted filling. But more so, I wanted to write an apologia on behalf of Nellie – to offer some reasons why she might have left. Why she abandoned my mother and her siblings in a time of great turmoil and stress.

I wanted to write the book as a PhD project because I wanted to explore not only Nellie's life, but the effect her absence had on my mother's life and consequently my own, in a historical context with all the complexities that would entail, within the rigours of an academic enquiry.

So I began to research, not only into Nellie Evans' history but the history of women, and specifically working-class women, during the period in which she lived; 1900 – 1973. In an attempt to console my mother, I began to look for facts that would suggest she had been forced out of the family home. That for some reason she had been prevented from bringing the children with her. My father told me she was mad even though he'd never actually met her. That was a starting point. Up to that period, according to anecdote, all a man had to do to have his wife sectioned under the mental health act was to obtain a doctor's signature. Perhaps then, she was threatened with incarceration. Or perhaps she couldn't afford to keep the children on her clippie's wages. Or perhaps her mother-in-law, with whom they were living, colluded against her. I wanted to suggest that Nellie didn't leave of her own accord. She was forced from home, forced to leave her children behind. She didn't abandon her family – she was exiled. I actually found three notes to suggest Nellie had edited her own life to just such an effect. Of all the letters she must have received during her lifetime, the only notes she kept were from her three children explaining why they couldn't make various rendezvous with her. I believe she wanted to show that she too, suffered, she too was abandoned.

Then I began to wonder. Why didn't she keep in touch with them afterwards? Why did she never come to visit my mother and us, her grandchildren? Why did she never send birthday cards?

After studying the family genealogy, the few scraps she left behind after her death, the photos, the postcards, I began to consider what form the book should take. Given that I had very little information about her, I decided the book had to be a part-fictional biography. I didn't want her to have a say in the book; I wanted to present her in all her contradictions and complexities, just as I'd found her, and leave the reader to judge – was she the villain or the victim?

I decided to write the narrative as a short story cycle, where the stories would be driven by the absent present protagonist, Nellie. They would be recounted by the people who knew her best from her birth in 1900 up to her death in 1973. Each character would have a different view of her, not only because she presented herself to each of them in a different light at different periods of her life, but also because their versions of her would be coloured by their own experiences and prejudices and the relationship she had with them. I wanted to examine to what extent fiction could accommodate the idea that character is essentially contradictory. I also wanted to explore through the stories, the changing roles and prospects for women during this period; a time of tremendous social change and comparative advancement of women's rights. I wanted to present a nuanced feminist perspective on the period and demonstrate the less obvious aspects of women's subordination.

As soon as I started, however, I realised that writing about a real woman whose relatives were still alive was going to be problematic. To tell her story I also had to tell the stories of my mum and her siblings too. And how could I do that – they are all still alive?

The story, I decided, had to be a wholly fictional account, loosely based on facts. Nellie would be a fictional character, whose story would be recounted by others. The novelist Linda Grant argues that, 'Keeping real names shackles the imaginative writer perhaps more than they realise [...] The most memorable characters of world fiction have always come from a great writer's imagination'.[1] So I changed Nellie's name to Charlotte (Lottie) Strickland. After I'd written six or seven of the stories, however, I realised the other characters weren't actually telling us much about Lottie; they were defending their own role in her life whilst telling their own stories. I decided, therefore, to incorporate artefacts, 'discovered' after her death, on which she, or others, had written notes or cryptic messages. Each document would relate to the preceding story and, when reflected upon, would offer an insight into her situation or thoughts at that time.

Lottie then underwent a name change.

When I'd originally changed Nellie's name to make the psychological shift from reality to fiction, I chose a name that was popular in the UK about the time Nellie was born – Lottie – and teamed it with an old family name from generations back – Strickland. Subconsciously

1 Anthony Beever, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/06/based-on-a-true-story--geoff-dyer-fine-line-between-fact-and-fiction-nonfiction [accessed 9 June 2018]

though, I didn't quite make the break from Nellie. Yvonne Bertills, in *Beyond Identification*, believes that, 'Just as naming is an aid to human orientation in the environment, the names of fictional characters function as orientation signs in the fictive world'.[2] I hadn't taken that into consideration. It was then that my supervisor, Professor Graham Mort, asked me to consider what role Nellie/Lottie had in the book. I concluded her narrative was a metaphorical river flowing through the stories of the characters. To keep that image locked in my psyche and to help me anchor Lottie as a fictional character, Professor Mort suggested a further name change; one that would function, as Bertills suggests, as an orientation sign in my fictive world. Lottie became Dee Morgan: Dee, after the river that flows through both Wales and the North-West, and Morgan to acknowledge her Welsh ancestry. As soon as I freed Nellie from the straightjacket of facts, and anchored her fictive name in the structure of the story cycle, Dee's story began to flow more freely.

Dee's artefacts are meta-narratives, flowing between the stories. They are disjointed. Ghost rivers. And she is the ghost in the ghost river; a ghost in the river of time.

2 Yvonne Bertills, *Beyond Identification: Proper Names in Children's Literature* (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi University Press, 2003) p.48

CHAPTER ONE

What were the moral contradictions and ethical issues involved in fictionalising the seemingly irresponsible act of abandonment on Nellie's part? How could I navigate the moral contradictions between this woman's legitimate desire for freedom, the trauma inflicted on her family and the implication of consequent self-harm in a fictional account?

I was four or five stories into the project when my mother asked me what I was writing about.

'I'm still writing about your mother – I'm writing a book; it's going to take some time.'

'Oh,' she said, 'you're not still writing about *her* are you? How *boring*.'

That shook me. This book was meant to be a form of catharsis for her – to offer her possible reasons why her mother might have been forced to abandon her. To help her with what I perceived to be her abandonment issues. She was the initial impetus for the book. Now she was making it clear she didn't want to read it.

That's when I questioned the whole endeavour. Did I have the right to tell my grandmother's story? How could I tell her story without also telling the stories of my mum and her siblings who are all still alive? How could I put words into their mouths, give them thoughts, emotions? How could I give their father dialogue – what did he sound like?

According to the literary and art journal, *Sinister Wisdom*, 'No one should ever "speak" or assume another's voice [...] it becomes a form of colonisation'.[3] And in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics,* bell hooks says, ironically:

> No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself […] I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way… in such a way that it has become my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still coloniser.[4]

By writing a possible account of my grandmother's life, albeit a semi-fictional one, was I an intruding force, speaking for my grandmother despite her wish to remain beyond the

3 Sinister Wisdom Collective, 'Editorial', *Sinister Wisdom,* vol. 42 (4) 1990, p.4

4 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) p.151

family narrative? Or was I not, rather, giving her the chance of a fair hearing and also restoring agency to my mother and her siblings, who were denied the opportunity to shape their own stories through what went before? As Liz Stanley writes, 'The notion of auto/biography involves the insistence that accounts of other lives influence how we see and understand our own'. [5]

Writing about Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother* [6], Alison O'Donnell says that bell hooks' 'condemnatory phrase',[7,] 'Re-writing you, I write myself anew',[8] can be translated into something positive. She believes that Kincaid's fiction allows us to understand that 'there is a way of restor(y)ing agency through representing an other and offering, "positive possession" of selves previously denied ownership of their own stories'.[9]

But at every turn, I questioned whether I could write about a certain thing, or use real events. How exactly could I situate my mum and her siblings in a part-fictional biography? How much of their stories could be based on fact, how much could be fictionalised? If I used their real names, readers – especially living relatives – would presume everything I wrote was true. And then I considered that as well as being an academic thesis safely locked away on a dusty library shelf, this book would, if published, reach a wider audience. If I recounted real events, did I have the right to expose my mother's life and the lives of her siblings to the scrutiny of the public? In the joint project 'Truth Troubles', authored by Tullis Owen, McRea, Adams and Vitale, they suggest, 'As life writers, we must consider who[m] we harm with the intimate confession(s) as well as who[m] we might help. Telling the truth is not always the ethical thing to do'.[10]

The idea of public exposure raised my anxieties about the book and I began to view it through the possible lens of an anonymous public. This resulted in extreme censorship on my part and partial paralysis whereby I was afraid to put anything in writing. I was writing in a straitjacket.

5 Liz Stanley, 'Lives and Works: Auto/biographical Occasions', in *Auto/biography*, 3:1 & 3:2 (Southampton: University of Southampton, 1994) p.i

6 Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of my Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013)

7 Alison O'Donnell, 'When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self', *Women's Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/biography*, ed. by Pauline Polkey (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1999) p.130

8 hooks, p.151

9 O'Donnell, p.130

10 Jillian A. Tullis Owen and others, 'Truth Troubles', *Qualitative Inquiry* 15 (1) 2009 p.194

Dorothy J. Hale believes, 'The author who must more or less use a character for his or her expressive ends is felt to be exploitative'.[11] Was I exploiting my grandmother, using her story for my own ends even if those ends were meant to help my mother? After deliberation, however, I resolved that she did have children and grandchildren; we are part of her story and she is part of ours. Amai Lieblich and Ruthellen Josselson believe that there is 'such a thing as family lore, a body of oral literature handed down the generations'.[12] Nellie broke that tradition.

My grandmother put herself beyond the narrative sphere of the family by disappearing. This was her rebellion. Her leaving was an act of sabotage. She steered the family narrative into incoherence by omitting to explain the reasons for her departure.

Disappearing from the family history could be seen as a form of self-harming – Nellie effectively disrupted the continuity of her own life. Charles Taylor, in *What is Human Agency?*[13] claims that in order to have a sense of 'who we are', to have an identity, 'we have to have a notion of how we have become and where we are going'. We grasp a sense of our lives *in* a narrative, 'I understand my present action in the form of an "and then"'.[14] According to Bert Cohler and Mark Freeman, in 'Psychoanalysis and the Developmental Narrative',[15] this narrative or life story provides integration of past, present, and anticipated future – as currently experienced – into a coherent account of life. They have suggested that in this way, lives may be considered analogous to texts. People constantly rewrite stories of their own life progression in order to preserve a sense of personal coherence over time. Narrative creates personal social, cultural and family histories and identities; in other words, narrative functions as a form of agency. Nellie denied herself this agency.

Carolyn Heilbrun writes, 'Forbidden anger, women could find no voice in which publicly to complain; they took refuge in depression or madness'.[16] When my father spoke of my grandmother as a mad Welsh woman though he'd never met her, I presume he must have

11 Dorothy J., Hale, 'Aesthetics and the new Ethics: Theorising the Novel in the Twenty-first Century' *PMLA,* 1 May 2009, Vol.124(3), p.903

12 *Exploring Identity and Gender: The Narrative Study of Lives,* ed. by Ruthellen Josselson and Amai Lieblich (London: Sage, 1994) p.218

13 Charles Taylor*, Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) p.47

14 Taylor p.50

15 Bert Cohler and Mark Freeman, 'Psychoanalysis and the Developmental Narrative', *The Course of Life: Vol. 5: Early Adulthood*, (rev. ed., pp.99-177) ed. by G. Pollock and S. Greenspan (New York: International Universities Press, 1993)

16 Carolyn Heilbrun *Writing a Woman's Life* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1989) p.13

heard this from his father-in-law. I began to think her anger and frustration at being trapped in an unhappy marriage was interpreted as madness by my grandfather as a way of diminishing her and absolving himself of any blame. *The Wind off the River* explores this perceived madness – was she insane? If so, was she made insane by her husband and situation – angry and frustrated, trapped in an unhappy marriage? Or was the label of insanity foisted upon her for daring to upset the acceptable norms of the day? Her rebellion was not just against her husband but against the patriarchal society at that time.

Myra Jehlen believes that, 'In attempting to find a "female tradition" of autonomy one finds that what is depicted is not actual independence but action despite dependence [...] a sub-culture born out of oppression'.[17] She says 'all women must destroy in order to create'.[18] Although *The Wind off the River* is now a fictional account of a woman seeking independence, the book is limited by the period in which it is set, as well as the fact that Dee is a working-class woman. Even had she been rich, it is unlikely she would have been able to keep her children with her at that time when the laws were created by the patriarchal ruling classes. So, unfortunately, even though she exists in the fictional world, Dee too, has no other recourse but to destroy her own family – and her own sense of personal coherence as a result – to achieve the autonomy she desires.

The concerns I had in writing about my grandmother's life raised questions about the ethics of representation in fiction. What was my duty as a writer? What effect would my narrative have on my family or the reader? Sandra Young, when writing about a veterans project she undertook with her students, suggests that writing biographies raised other ethical questions too, such as, 'What is the line between truth and fiction? How much do we have the right to know? How much do we need to know? What privacy issues are at stake?'.[19] All completely viable questions when embarking on a writing project that is going to involve researching into other people's lives, but extremely difficult to provide definitive answers to. My list of dilemmas was growing.

17 Myra Jehlen 'Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism', *Signs,* vol. 6 (4) (Summer 1981) p.583

18 Jehlen, p.583

19 Sandra Young, 'Writing the Lives of Others: The Veterans Project', *Pedagogy*, vol. 3 (1), 2003, p.73 Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/38683.

In *Between Plenitude and Responsibility*, Eugenio Bolongaro posits the relationship between ethics and literature thus; 'The insuperable divide between literature and ethics is the same as the insuperable divide between the imaginary and the real. Literature enters the real through ethics, ethics enters the imaginary through literature'.[20] He is careful to elucidate, however, that there is an essential difference between the two practices of ethics and literature. Ethics is about making choices in the real world whereas literature is a cognitive experience, at the heart of which is the suspension of disbelief. That said, literature can have a significant effect in the real world by altering people's opinions and actions. My biography could have the power to affect Nellie's living relations – I would have to approach it with careful consideration of their sensibilities. I couldn't risk portraying Nellie as a villain if that would cause hurt, and equally I couldn't justify her leaving her family if they believed they'd suffered as a result of her abandonment.

In 'Narrative Ethics', James Phelan proposes that ethics in literature can be understood in terms of four issues: the ethics of the told; the ethics of the telling; those of writing/producing; and those of reading/reception.

He suggests that questions of the told focus on characters and events, for example, 'What are the ethical dimensions of characters' actions, conflicts and the choices they make about those conflicts?'.[21] Questions in respect of the telling include, 'What are the ethical responsibilities, if any, of storytellers to their audiences?'.[22] With regards to the writing we can ask, 'What obligations, if any, does a memoir writer have to other people whose experiences s/he narrates?'.[23] And finally concerning the ethics of reading, we must question, 'What, if any, are the ethical obligations of the audience to the narrative itself, to its materials, and to its author?'.[24]

These were all questions I had to examine before, and continuously during, the writing process. With each new story I had to contemplate how my narrative would answer those questions ethically.

20 Eugenio Bolongaro, 'Between Plenitude and Responsibility: Notes on Ethics and Contemporary Literature', *Philosophia* (United States) vol. 47 (1) (March 2019), p.35

21 James Phelan, *Narrative Ethics* http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-ethics Created: 21. November 2013 Revised: 9. December 2014, p.1 [accessed 17 May 2017]

22 Phelan, p.1.

23 Phelan, p.2.

24 Phelan, p.2

I had serious concerns about planting false memories in my mother and her siblings by recounting events that didn't happen in order to illustrate certain aspects of the narrative as I was trying to tell it. If this was to be a part-fictional biography, where was the reader to draw the line between fact and fiction? In *Pieces of Light*, Charles Fernyhough tells us, 'It turns out to be rather simple to give people memories for events that never actually happened'.[25] By creating fictional events in the life of Nellie Evans, was I at risk of implanting false memories in the minds of people who knew her, possibly causing psychological trauma?

I was, however, also attempting to offer my mother an alternative perspective on events in response to her feelings of abandonment. Fernyhough says, 'In other clinical contexts, manipulating memory would seem to be a perfectly sensible therapeutic solution'.[26] But does that make for ethical fiction? Linda Tilman Rogers suggests, 'Reflection is a powerful tool; the researcher, simply by being there, causes a form of knowing an "event" differently'.[27] My mother would prefer to continue as she always had done, not thinking about her own mother or her reasons for leaving the family. Her way of dealing with being abandoned is not to discuss it. Am I raking up childhood feelings of being rejected which she has spent her life burying? Is it fair of me to force her to confront issues she finds painful by asking her to recall events from her past so I can better understand my grandmother?

I decided that the only solution to my moral and ethical dilemmas was to take my grandmother's story from the real to the imaginary world. As Bolongaro points out, 'Ethics is about making choices in the real world [...] Literature, on the other hand, can only accomplish its function because it posits an imaginary world and tests action in that sphere'.[28] I had to make my grandmother, Nellie, a fictional character, in ways that would push her outside my own sense of duty to familial truth and collective memory. Once I did that all the other characters in the book became fictional too, free to live their own lives. In fact, it could be argued that the relatives I'd never met – my grandfather, Nellie herself, her mother and father, her mother-in-law and father-in-law – were already fictional to me. They were characters I'd only been told about, they weren't 'real' to me. I was able, through Dee, to explore Nellie's dilemmas, her choices, her bid for freedom – if indeed that's what it was.

25 Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2013) p.129

26 Fernyhough, p.279

27 Linda Tilman Rogers in *Life History and Narrative* ed. by J. Amos Hatch and Richard Wisniewski (London: Falmer Press, 1995) p.119

28 Bolongaro, p.35

While discussing the Thomas Cromwell trilogy, Hilary Mantel says that, 'For a novelist, this absence of intimate material is both a problem and an opportunity […] She lives inside the consciousness of her characters for whom the future is blank'.[29] My intention to present a contradictory picture of the woman who could have left for any number of reasons was now made so much easier. I could throw off the straitjacket of facts and really start exploring Nellie's behaviour in depth. No longer shackled by what I knew of her, by trying not to offend my older relatives, I could really explore the reasons why a woman in that period might abandon her family.

Despite, however, changing the names of Nellie and her family to keep *The Wind off the River* a purely fictional account, whenever I discussed a character's story with my supervisor I kept referring to real events which had occurred to my mother and how they had influenced the story – especially when discussing Greta, the youngest daughter.

'But Greta is a fictional character,' he kept reminding me.

'Oh, I know,' I said.

But deep down, she was really my mother. And I was still reticent about putting her into situations my mother wouldn't have liked or approved of. I couldn't push her to the limits as I would have done with a truly fictional character. This half-life, this twilight zone the characters were living in was causing me to write with the brakes on – I was still self-censoring to a certain degree.

It felt like there was a very strong glue between my fictional characters and their real counterparts and it took a good deal of time and conscious effort to prise them apart. I kept falling back on certain historical incidents as a basis for some of the stories; there were real events which I felt were deeply significant to the book. However, I had a breakthrough writing about an affair that Dee was having with the driver of her tram when she was a clippie. There's no evidence Nellie had an affair so this gave me free reign to fabricate something without any factual basis. As I was writing the story, Dee's character developed in a surprising way; she emerged as cold – almost pathologically unempathetic. I was finally able to see her as the fictional character, Dee, not a character based on my grandmother. This enabled me to go back to previous stories and illustrate how this trait manifested itself in her behaviour; for

29 Hilary Mantel, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/06/based-on-a-true-story--geoff-dyer-fine-line-between-fact-and-fiction-nonfiction [accessed 4 October 2018]

example, being angry with Arthur for enlisting in 1914 – not because he might be killed but because she'd have no one to go out with. Or sending her eldest daughter off to live with her mother with no consideration for how that would affect either of them.

But would fictionalising her story defeat my original aim of providing a possible solution to my mother's abandonment issues?

According to Pam Morris in *Literature and Feminism*:

> One positive effect of the availability of a woman's tradition of writing is that it makes visible women's experience which has been excluded or misrepresented in mainstream traditions. That visibility provides women with a means of self-recognition, a shared voice and an identity. [30]

Telling Nellie's story through fiction gave me the opportunity to make this narrative an interplay between the particular and the historical – in exploring Nellie's story, I was also exploring the issues other women of her period were facing.

Walter Benjamin, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', states that, 'To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize it "…the way it really was"'.[31] He was speaking with regards to historical materialism – a school of historiography influenced by Marxism, which focuses on human societies and their development over time. However, I believe the same tenet holds true for personal histories, family narratives. Jawaharlal Nehru states in his book, *The Discovery of India* that, 'History is almost always written by the victors'.[32] Or in this case, by Nellie's surviving descendants, her children, who are now retelling her story as they experienced it, or the little they knew of it, and me, as the author of the short story cycle who is using and interpreting their memories and anecdotes.

In his introduction to Woolf's *Jacob's Room,* Gerard Cheshire explains how the eponymous character is patched together from the memories of other characters. We never meet him directly. He is an ambiguous 'fragmentary assemblage of information'[33] because the characters' memories are subjective. He continues, 'Just as history is always an

30 Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) p.86

31 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (Thesis VI), *Illuminations* (London: Random House, 2015) p.x

32 Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Centenary Edition (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) p.288

33 Gerard Cheshire, 'Jacob's Room' in *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013) p.ix

interpretation of past events, rather than the absolute truth, so Jacob's personality is an interpretation too'.[34]

Cheshire declares that Woolf's investigation was an existential one, examining whether we can get to know someone based on circumstantial evidence. He describes the book as a 'form of artistic abstraction'[35] where the reader is left to do some of the work. *The Wind off the River* is a similar form of abstraction; the narrative I'm writing is my attempt to navigate the treacherous path between Nellie's legitimate desire for freedom and the trauma inflicted on her family. I couldn't justifiably present *one* scenario explaining the reasons for Nellie's departure – to do so would imply a knowledge of an established fact or series of facts or motives to which neither I nor her children are party. Therefore, I used the conflicting accounts of my characters' stories to write several possible versions of Nellie's history. A history that is not, as historical materialism claimed and Benjamin rejected, an 'eternal picture'[36] but several renditions of the same events. As William L. Randall writes in *The Stories We Are*, 'Our life, it turns out, is not one story but many, a plethora of stories in fact, both stories within us and stories we are in turn, within'.[37] For me this seemed the fairest and most realistic way to explore my grandmother's departure.

In the words of Martha C. Nussbaum, in *The Fragility of Goodness*, in ethical terms, I'm offering the reader 'a reflective dialogue between the intuitions and beliefs of the interlocutor, or reader, and a series of complex ethical conceptions, presented for exploration'.[38] And specifically, I'm offering my mother a series of possible scenarios or reasons why her mother might have left. If she chooses to read the book, even though it's a work of fiction, it may well help her view her mother's abandonment in a different light.

34 Cheshire p.ix

35 Cheshire p.ix

36 Benjamin, p.x

37 William L. Randall, *The Stories we are: an essay on self-creation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) p.185

38 Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p.10

CHAPTER TWO

What were the technical challenges and decisions in creating a historical short story cycle? What are the additional challenges and implications of it being driven by a female protagonist without direct narrative agency?

In her paper, 'Ethics of Representation for Creative Writers', Shady E. Cosgrove quotes a student, who, when writing about America in the nineteen-forties, fails to see why he has to research the setting for his story, '"It's fiction, after all," he says. "It should be obvious I'm making it up"'.[39] Forgoing thorough research, in my experience, is a missed opportunity; some of the fascinating details I unearthed while undertaking research for my stories became the propulsion for those stories. As Linda Proud says in her article 'Truth is no Stranger to Fiction':

The novelist uses the work of the historian (with gratitude) to gather the facts as building blocks of the story, and then does something with them that the historian tends not to do, which is to view them in the imagination.[40]

For my story, 'The Lover 1914', I researched photographic methods of the period. The story was about a young man, Arthur, having his likeness taken to give to Dee, his girlfriend, before he went off to war. I became fascinated by the photographic process and the story eventually took place in a photographer's studio. The story of Dee and Arthur developed along with the photograph; it became the vehicle to tell their story.

Out of the lengthy research and realms of articles about the process, however, I had to sift through and find the most relevant facts and details in order to avoid an 'information dump' in the text. Tired of the modern writer's penchant for information overload, Andrew Rosenheim, in 'Too Much Information', says writers used to understand that 'their priority was the emotional understanding they instilled in readers, not the points they added to their IQ '.[41] It is important to get the facts right – especially in historical fiction or the reader will

39 Shady Cosgrove, WRIT101: 'Ethics of Representation for Creative Writers', *Pedagogy*, vol. 9 (1) Winter 2009, p.134

40 Linda Proud, 'Truth is No Stranger To Fiction', *History Today; London,* vol. 54 (11) (Nov 2004) p.30.

41 Andrew Rosenheim, 'Too much Information', *Publisher's Weekly*, New York, vol. 259: 44, Oct 29, 2012 p.60

lose confidence in the author – but not to bombard the reader with too many facts. It is also imperative to consider who is disseminating the information; it is acceptable coming from a character but not from the author. That said, even issuing from a character, there's a danger that too much information draws the reader's attention to the presence of the author – authorial intrusion – thus breaking the fictive illusion.

In an early version of 'The Mother 1938', I opened with a scene in St John's Gardens, where a group of blackshirts were attacked by a mob. I made the mistake of having my character, Jane, remember an article she'd read about them in the *Echo*, recognising them as fascists. A gentleman, who helps her up after she's been knocked over, comments on a fascist rally in the city a few months before, where Moseley was knocked unconscious as he addressed his small group of supporters. My supervisor remarked that he knew all about the rise of the fascists in 1938 and he didn't need me to tell him the facts – the reader does not like to be lectured. He suggested it was better for the skirmish to take place without Jane being aware of who they were – thus affording the reader a sense of self-satisfaction for recognising them as blackshirts and allowing them, according to Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading,*[42] the imaginative space to engage with the text.

I chose to write this narrative as a short story cycle because I wanted to show how fiction could accommodate the idea of an unresolved character. Alice Munro, defending her decision to write short fiction as opposed to novels says, 'The novel has to have a coherence'.[43] She said she didn't see that coherence in the lives of the people around her. I didn't see a coherence in Nellie's life nor the life of her children after she abandoned them.

However, according to Modernist principles, disruption is coherence. It recognises the greater truth that incoherence is more authentic because that's how our memories are made up; through constant re-editing and re-organising. A novel doesn't have to have coherence, contrary to what Munro believes. That said, however, I felt the short story cycle would better suit my aims of building a complex, contradictory picture of Dee. As Margery Sabin says in 'Colonial India and Victorian Storytelling', 'The self-contained brevity of the short story […] legitimizes a fragmentary form of narrative, without requiring a novel's sustained

42 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980)

43 Beverley Slopen, 'PW Interviews Alice Munro' https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/59494-pw-interviews-alice-munro.html [Accessed 12/1/19]

development of character and plot'.[44] For me, the whole point of writing the book was to present just such a fragmentary picture of a woman who made a decision to abandon her children. The plot wasn't important, I didn't want a 'sustained development' of her character. Using the fictive ploy of the short story cycle has, I believe, brought me closer to a more authentic depiction of a woman because her character is rendered incoherently.

Michael Chabon suggests that, 'A group of linked narratives can create an effect you can't get from a novel or from one story alone. It is like a series of snapshots taken over time [...] The interest lies in what has happened in the interstices'.[45] The stories in *The Wind off the River* take place between 1904 and 1972, more or less the lifespan of Dee Morgan. There are time lapses between each story – as many as thirteen years in one case. What happened to Dee during those years can only be guessed at or gleaned from what is recounted in the following stories. The purpose of the book was to explore what might have led Dee to abandon her children; not every single incident in her life would have contributed to that decision. It is my job as author to sort out the most pertinent moments. Coherence necessitates omissions; as J.M. Coetzee suggests, 'You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories and in the process [...] you leave things out'.[46]

According to Maureen Whitebrook in *Identity, Narrative and Politics*, however, coherence is a debatable term. She maintains that, technically, coherence 'derives from the relations that the parts of a text bear to one another and to the whole text, as well as from the relation that the text bears to other texts of its type'.[47] She goes on to paraphrase Frank Kermode[48] by saying that, 'In literary terms, coherence may be a state achieved over time, or through form, narrative structure, style and techniques, or it may consist in the ordering process whereby even an apparently disordered narrative is intelligible'.[49] J. Bruner in *The Culture of Education*, believes that 'we impose coherence on the past, turn it into history'.[50] When we as readers arrive at the end of a narrative, we have the benefit of hindsight; we join

44 Margery Sabin, 'Colonial India and Victorian Storytelling', *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Nove*l, ed. Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p.267

45 Michael Chabon, cited in 'Short Story Cycles' , K.L. Cook http://www.klcook.net/ata_workshops_linked.html [Accessed 12 Jan 19]

46 Coetzee cited in Bainville, J, *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 20 : pp.4-26.

47 Maureen Whitebrook, *Identity, Narrative and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001) p.119

48 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967)

49 Maureen Whitebrook, *Identity, Narrative and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001) p.119

50 J. Bruner, 'The Culture of Education' (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1996) quoted in *Identity, Narrative and Politics*, Maureen Whitebrook (London & New York: Routledge, 2001) p.121

the dots to make sense of what we've just read. A little like the law of closure – a subcomponent of Gestalt theory – which states that a cognitive process takes place whereby the mind jumps from understanding the parts of something to realising the whole. We have a tendency to take whatever information we're given and turn it into something we're comfortable with. More specifically, the law of closure explains our propensity to form imagined connections between things that are, otherwise, entirely separate.

It will be the reader, with my guiding help, who gives coherence to the narrative of Dee's life, constantly re-evaluating her with each story, joining the dots. Some of those dots I have provided with the intention of helping the reader understand what might have taken place earlier or in the time period between stories. For example, it seems strange on first reading, that Dee does not accept Arthur's death. In 'The Sister 1919' and 'The Spiritualist 1922' – set four years after the war has finished – Dee still refuses to believe he's dead. We only learn later, from 'The Mother 1938', that Dee was told Arthur was 'missing in action'. This was the thin strand of hope to which Dee clung for years. If the reader then reflects on the earlier story of Arthur, set in 1914, they might remember that Dee threatened to throw Arthur's photo in the river and drown it and that her last words to him were, 'Damn you.' The reader may then assume that Dee felt so guilty, and may even have believed she'd cursed him, that she can't accept he's dead. This guilt and unresolved grief leads to a prolonged bout of depression. In similar ways throughout the book, the reader will be perceptually filling the gaps until they arrive at a general 'sense' of who Dee is – even if that 'sense' is complex and contradictory.

The term, 'short story cycle' was first coined by Forrest Ingram in 1971 in his book, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre.* He defined it as:

> [A] book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts.[51]

51 Forrest L. Ingram *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre* (Paris: Mouton, 1971) p.11

However, there have been countless debates about this definition. Susan Garland Mann, for instance, identifies three possible unifying strategies in short story cycles – setting, theme and character[52] – while James Nagel suggests, 'Each component work must stand alone (with a beginning, middle, and end) yet be enriched in the context of the interrelated stories'.[53] These debates have led to a critical consensus, according to Ingram, that there is a spectrum of short story cycles, depending on the degree of unity or fragmentation they possess. At one end 'the "mere" collection of unconnected stories', while at the other end, 'would be the novel'.[54]

In her article, 'The Short Story Cycle: Broadening the Perspective', Elke D'Hoker, discusses René Audet's thesis, '*Des Textes à l'Oeuvre: La Lecture du Recueil de Nouvelles /* From Texts to Oeuvre: Reading the Short Story Collection'. She says Audet suggests that unity 'is an effect of reading rather than an inherent property […] of a short story cycle'.[55] He is concerned with how a short story cycle functions rather than what constitutes it. He suggests that the 'cyclical' element of a collection of stories is reached based on the interpretive strategies engaged by the reader. It is in fact the act of reading and whether or not the reader chooses to make connections or realise the strategies involved in the collection. In other words, the short story cycle is reader oriented. *The Wind off the River* needs reader participation to draw the fragments presented in each story together to create a 'whole' picture of Dee and her motivations. Dee is also the central character, the constant who appears in each story and, with one exception, they are all set in Liverpool. Each story is a standalone piece yet they are all enriched by the other stories in the book. Thus I believe *The Wind off the River* meets the requirements of Mann, Nagel and Audet's definition of a short story cycle.

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, was originally marketed as a novel (and Faulkner himself referred to it as such), but many critics since have suggested it is really a short story cycle. Jennifer J. Smith believes that:

52 Susan Garland Mann, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1989) p.14-15

53 James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001) p.15

54 Ingram p.14

55 Elke D'Hoker, 'The Short Story Cycle: Broadening the Perspective', *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice*, vol. 3 (2) October 2013 p.155

> …*As I Lay Dying* […] test[s] the generic boundaries of genre and borrows from the narrative techniques pioneered in the short story cycle […] Thus the best way to grasp his oeuvre is through the paradigm of the short story cycle.[56]

Approaching it then from the angle of a short story cycle, and comparing it to *The Wind off the River*, *As I Lay Dying* differs in that it follows the family's journey from their farm in Yoknapatawpha County to Jefferson in order to bury Addie, whereas *The Wind off the River* has no final destination; the stories are simply the literary equivalent of short video clips from the life of Dee Morgan. As Smith argues, *As I Lay Dying*, manages to straddle the boundary between novel and short story cycle. *The Wind off the River* is more fragmentary, its purpose being to illustrate the multivalent realities inherent in Dee's life as well as her character.

That said, there are many similarities between my book and Faulkner's. The 'I' in Faulkner's title refers to Addie Bundren – wife of Anse and mother of his five children – who dies within a few pages of the opening of the book. Despite being absent, in spirit at least, Addie, like Dee in *The Wind off the River*, is still the driving force behind her family because of her dying wish to be buried in her home county of Jefferson. The family must comply with her wishes and that is what sends them off on their quest. The story demonstrates her influence on her sons, training them to fight the patriarchal world view embraced by and embedded in their father. Dee doesn't train her children to do the same but she herself fights against the patriarchal society in which she lives.

David Williams, writing about Faulkner's women says 'the earth-bound symbols of motion are feminine in being'[57] whilst the static are masculine. Addie's husband, Anse, believes man was meant to stay put, 'Because if He'd a aimed for man to be always a-moving and going somewheres else, wouldn't He a put him longways on his belly, like a snake?'.[58] In my narrative, it is Dee who is always moving, leaving usually, the men in her life – her husband, her boss, her tram-driver lover – as well as her children. I have described Dee's narrative as river-like while her son, Edward, describes her as being 'slippery as a fish' (coincidentally, Vardaman, Addie's son, also thinks of his mother as a fish). No one, it seems, can keep hold of her. She extricates herself from any situation she doesn't care for. She refuses to be owned,

56 Jennifer J. Smith, *The American Short Story Cycle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018) p.114
57 David Williams, *Faulkner's Women; The Myth and the Muse* (Montreal: MacGill Queen's university Press, 1977) p.99
58 William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (Penguin Books: London, 1978) p.31

tied down, obligated, even while living in a patriarchal society that insists on doing all this to women. Though an absent presence, she is still a powerful force, refusing to be controlled. It is her absence which is powerful.

According to Sarah Drews Lucas, 'Narrative agency refers to the subject's capacity to construct a meaningful narrative, and not to the actual content of that narrative'.[59] And as the philosopher, Seyla Benhabib says, 'It is not what the story is about that matters but, rather, one's ability to keep telling a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and others'.[60] Lucas writes:

> An individual will make sense of her own identity by exercising her narrative agency, but she can never give a 'complete' account of herself because her identity depends upon the changing narratives of others in and over time.[61]

Since Dee withdrew from the narratives of the characters, she then lacks the agency to complete her own narrative within their contexts. Dee makes no contribution, no modifications to the stories told about her, so the reader only has access to one-sided versions of events. Since the characters contradict one another about the type of person she was, the reader is left to try and unravel the 'truth' about her nature. Dee's lack of narrative agency therefore obliges the reader to attempt a 'complete' account of Dee, which, as Lucas says, will be altered by the changing narratives of the other characters over the course of the short story cycle.

In her analysis of the relationship of Mary Shelley's *Mathilda* to both female gothic convention and dramatic tradition, Kathleen A. Miller argues that Mathilda might be read as 'exert[ing] a covert form of power through… "pretended and staged weakness"',[62] which gives her control over the outcome of her narrative. Mathilda wants to be free of the two powerful men in her life, her father and suitor, so she can tell the story of her unhappy life as

59 Sarah Drews Lucas, 'The Primacy of Narrative Agency: Re-reading Seyla Benhabib on Narrativity', *Feminist Theory* 2018, vol. 19(2) p.127

60 Seyla Benhabib, 'Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation Signs', *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1999, vol.24 (2): p.347

61 Drews Lucas, p.126

62 Kathleen A. Miller, 'The Remembrance Haunts Me Like a Crime: Narrative Control, the Dramatic, and the Female Gothic in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's Mathilda', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* vol.27 (2) (Fall 2008) p.292

she perceives it, free from their censorship or control. Dee likewise controls her own life by withdrawing from the men (and children) in her life – her inaccessibility is her armour. But equally she exerts control over their lives by virtue of the same. Her actions, her refusal to engage, could be perceived as passive-aggressive, just like Mathilda's.

By pretending to be a victim to achieve her liberty, however, Mathilda's character could be read as Shelley's criticism of both Mathilda and the oppressive patriarchal society that gave her no other option. She could be seen, according to Melina Moore[63] as embodying Shelley's concern about the sacrifices women had to make to achieve narrative autonomy in her society. Shelley was writing in the first half of the nineteenth century but society hadn't changed that much for women by the time Dee had to perform a similar task in order to achieve her own narrative autonomy.

Kathleen Miller suggests that this reading of Mathilda offers readers 'a positive model of female agency' since she finally emerges as 'a heroine whose performative activities code her as a powerful actress or artist rather than as a submissive victim'.[64] But powerful in what sense? Mathilda drove her father to suicide. And Dee's power was destructive as far as her children were concerned, so is that really a *positive* model of female agency?

There is a sense throughout the cycle, that Dee was withdrawing from the family's narrativisations of her, withdrawing from the way they were constraining her. Throughout the cycle she is trying to escape from the web of their narrated stories but at the risk of provoking a new narrative in which she is demonised. Like Mathilde accepting her father's suicide as collateral damage, this demonisation is a price Dee appears willing to pay for her freedom.

63 Melina Moore, 'Mary Shelley's "Mathilda" and the Struggle for Female Narrative Subjectivity', *Rocky Mountain Review,* vol. 65 (2) (FALL 2011) pp. 208-215

64 Miller, p.292

CHAPTER THREE

What were the considerations in giving Dee a non-narrative presence in the book that worked as a counterpoint to the dominant narratives defining her life? How is this trope of gendered absent presence encountered by the reader?

When I began writing this short story cycle, I was hoping that through the stories her family, friends, in-laws and employers told about Dee, I would learn something about my grandmother and her reasons for abandoning her family. According to Mario Vargas Llosa, in *A Writer's Reality*, 'When you succeed in creating something different out of real reality […] you also achieve the possibility of communicating something that was not evident before that novel or poem or play existed'.[65] After half a dozen stories, however, it became evident that the characters were mainly talking about themselves. Dee's cameo roles in each story were not illuminating her personality or motives. I'd made a decision that Dee wouldn't speak to the reader; to enable her to tell her own story, would, I believed, negate the core exploration of the cycle. Once I became aware that we weren't getting any closer to discovering who Dee was, however, I decided that she did, in fact, need a presence – one which would offer another degree of comprehension to the stories and, accumulatively, to the cycle as a whole.

The question was, how to do that. Given that the other characters had overwritten Dee's story, the task required a new means of communication without narrative. Something that had a correlative with abstract painting, inasmuch as it tries to move away from the implication of a narrative with particular reference points.

Inspired by biographical writing whereby information is largely gleaned from archived documents, I decided on a metafictional approach; generating artefacts for Dee that were 'discovered' after her death. The reader would gain another level of comprehension about Dee from each one. For example, the song sheet on which she has altered the words shows the impact that Arthur's enlisting in the Navy had on her rather than him, demonstrating her egocentricity.

65 Mario Vargas Llosa, *A Writer's Reality* (USA: Syracuse University Press, 1991) p.79

I used a mixture of original artefacts and fabricated ones. The originals I took from the documents my grandmother left behind or from the internet. I scanned them, deleted or changed words, printed them then cut them out. I stained them, scribbled on them, creased them up then re-scanned them. The fabricated artefacts were achieved by typing or handwriting various documents then aging them in the oven or with the use of paint or tea. Then trying to imagine how they would have been kept, how altered by the passage of time; roughening edges, adding stains, rips and folds then scanning them again.

These artefacts are a formal experimentation, an exploration of the relationship between the narratives of the stories and the apparent presence of the artefacts which serve to enlighten them to some degree. Dee has presence through the artefacts but no narrative agency – it is the reader who has the narrative agency engendered by the artefacts.

The artefacts as they appear in the book are facsimiles. There is a deep ambiguity about them. They have both an authentic and inauthentic nature – implying and resisting embodiment. What the reader encounters are copies of the artefacts which are absorbed into the paper on which they are printed. They look like documents you could handle but they are two-dimensional images; their ambiguous physical nature echoes their inauthenticity. Like Macbeth's dagger, which he can see and yet not grasp, 'I have thee not, and yet I see thee still',[66] the facsimiles seem to approach reality then fade. Consciousness creates three-dimensional images, or something close to them, only to find that they are illusory/factual presences on the page. In this way the facsimiles echo the fictive dream; believing in the story you're reading whilst being aware it is fiction. They set up a paradoxical presence in the book; they are there but not there, just as Dee's presence in the text is only reported; she can be seen but not experienced first-hand. These facsimiles look like real documents but are in fact fictional. However, they seem historic and so add an authentic dimension to the stories whilst remaining in the fictive realm. And just as Macbeth's dagger changes form then fades, so too the meaning associated with each of the facsimiles is unfixed; it can change in the eyes of whichever reader sees them and also over time.

The title of the story cycle, *The Wind off the River*, also has evanescent qualities; the wind is a thing you can't see but it has an effect. Just as Dee has an effect on the characters even though the reader never actually gets to 'see' her. The title came from one of the stories

66 William Shakspeare *Macbeth* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005) p.48

before I changed all the names. The story is now called 'The Mother-in-law 1943'. The wind is the cause of trouble between Dee and her mother-in-law, knocking the latter's china cup off the draining board for which Dee is blamed. A petty incident but the final one in a litany of disputes between the two women. It is at this point that Dee leaves her husband and abandons her children; the pivotal moment in the book and its central premise. The river also plays a role in each story; it brought great wealth to Liverpool, which grew up around it, it is an important geographical factor in the city's life and I wanted it to be a character in the book. A river is never the same twice; it shows a different side of itself to each character, reflecting back at them what they project onto it. Each character makes a pilgrimage to the Mersey at some point in their story. The title is a generalised abstract verbal construct but the wind and the river are both physical. In this way, there is a correlation between the title and the artefacts; while the originals are physical pieces of paper you can handle, the facsimiles are representations of them, containing abstract ideas which need to be reflected on.

The artefacts set up rhythms within the short story cycle. They occur at regular intervals between each story. They are experienced by the reader in a different way from the stories – in a way that is more similar, in fact, to the way in which photographs are experienced – so there is a shift from the stories to an encounter with the artefacts and back again to the story. The characters feed the reader information but the artefacts have to be analysed and combed for it. They generate expectation; as Susan Sontag says in *On Photography*, 'Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction and speculation'.[67] The reader must piece together the meaning of, and the story behind, each image.

Experienced as photographs, the facsimiles contain what Roland Barthes called 'punctums'. He explains punctums as 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.[68] Each facsimile pierces in a particular way like a punctum. Barthes says that very often punctums are a detail or a partial object, just as these artefacts are. 'Last thing about the punctum', he explains, 'whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph'.[69] The reader adds their own speculations to the facsimiles based on their accumulated knowledge of Dee and from their own experiences. Dee edited her life

67 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979) p.23

68 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000) p.27

69 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000) p.55

story to a certain extent through the things she left behind – by choosing what to keep but also by getting rid of things. And this is partly why the artefacts give the impression that she left behind a self-authored non-narrative record of her life.

The facsimiles are unmediated 'evidence'. Because these are images of the artefacts, the reader views them from a position that is once removed from the actual object. One example is a scribbled message to Grace on the back of an old photo. The reader cannot pick up the actual photo, turn it over and see the likeness on the front. Instead, they simply regard it as an image. Rather than solely reading the message, the reader looks at everything on that facsimile, mining it for information in an attempt to understand why it has been included in the book. Everything comes under scrutiny; the address of the photographer's studio, the staining, the handwriting of the pencilled message – is it Dee's? The smudged writing in ink at the other end is difficult to decipher but the reader might just be able to read the name Huw, or at least the beginning of it, and possibly the words, 'given to'; might this be the reverse of a photograph which Jane has given to her husband? The reader notices that both messages have been written side-on which seems strange. And it may appear equally odd that Dee – and we imagine it is Dee – has effectively used the back of a photograph as scrap paper.

The facsimiles are difficult to read but the information is less important than their ageing and what they represent in terms of Dee's life and her position in the book. For example, the only pictorial artefact is a drawing of little girls wearing hats but none of them look at each other or the viewer, echoing Dee's lack of communication with the characters, especially her own children. She's drawn a circle around one hat and scribbled a price next to it, indicating that she may have intended making, or indeed had made, that particular hat for one of her daughters, demonstrating her motherly love.

The artefacts disclose two narrative dimensions, time and space, but without deliberately narrating. There is a sense of history, not only from the dates written on some of the artefacts but also from the culture of the time from which the artefacts date. For example, the legal document and the reference written by Stanley Collins, manager of Rigby's, have been written on typewriters – an outdated technology. The menu has a disclaimer over the availability or otherwise of butter during the war. The use of pounds, shillings and pence locates some of them in a period that is pre-decimalisation. The artefacts gain a patina with time which also adds to their sense of history. As Sontag says of photographs, 'Given enough

time, many photographs do acquire an aura'.[70] There is something special about an object preserved from the past; to handle something that people who may be long dead have handled almost gives us a physical connection to them. Of course, in the book, the reader only has access to representations of the artefacts but like the stories, they give us access to the past even though they are fictional. We know the facsimiles are not real but they take on the same aura as real historical documents because they look old and because we know the artefacts do exist physically.

Susan Sontag suggests, 'To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real'.[71] She also says that a photograph is both a 'pseudo-presence and a token absence'.[72] In this way, the facsimiles – the photographs of the artefacts – mirror Dee's presence in the book. Things are related about her rather than by her. She is a memory in the minds of the characters, an image in the past.

The artefacts also disclose time through their presence; they have travelled, physically and temporally, they have a history. Whereas the stories generate time through narrative. However, the artefacts also echo the palimpsestic nature of the stories. A palimpsest is a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing. It is something which has been reused or altered but still bears visible traces of its earlier form. Just as the characters have overwritten Dee's story in their narratives, the artefacts have also been written over at later stages – another temporal dimension of the artefacts. They've either been used for shopping lists, like the spiritualist's calling card, for example, or are scrawled notes to people, such as Dee's childish message to her father on a page from Edward Lear's *The Jumblies*. The stories build up a picture of Dee, each version overwritten by subsequent characters – either confirming or contradicting what was written before. The artefacts build up another picture of Dee, sometimes tangential to the stories which slightly alter or enhance what the stories say about her – a form of overwriting to a degree – as do the palimpsestic scribblings on them, the literal overwriting on the artefacts.

70 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979) p. 140

71 Sontag p.164

72 Sontag p.16

They can be encountered in the same way as poems. Gaston Bachelard claimed that in a good poem 'the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface'.[73] Just as Barthes' punctums do. These artefacts speak directly to the reader. Daniel Miller claims material objects escape intellectual examination because they 'tend towards presentational form, which cannot be broken up as thought into grammatical sub-units, and as such they appear to have a particularly close relation to emotions, feelings'.[74] Even though these are facsimiles of material objects, they operate in a parallel way.

Finally, the artefacts/facsimiles could be read as messages in bottles. Paul Celan speaks about poetry as such:

> A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps.[75]

Dee made a decision to keep these artefacts, so they have a purpose and because of that, a potency. Even though she may not have intended them to be transmitted to others, they nevertheless contain some kind of message for the reader who encounters them after her death. She has written a note, obviously for her own benefit about a car accident – it has a partial narrative but it is difficult to read and doesn't quite make sense because it wasn't intended for the current reader. The content of the note is not important so much as the fact she wrote it to herself; we can conclude she had no one to share things with. Thus offering the reader another insight into her situation.

The message in a bottle can also be an act of courage, a risk, since it may never be recovered; relatives or whoever comes to clear the house may just throw everything away. It has to surmount winds, tides, hurricanes, sun or water damage – or being stashed in drawers, found and destroyed by toddlers or burnt. The bottle is fragile, like the paper on which things are written, typed or printed. On the journey the bottle becomes milky through abrasion just as the artefacts fade and are damaged over time, sometimes becoming difficult to read. The message crosses time and space, from where it was left to where it is taken years later.

73 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) p.xxiii

74 Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) p.107.

75 Josh Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995) p.115.

Finally, if the message is recovered it will be in the future – by those who come after the deceased and find the artefacts. Almost by definition, the recipient will speak another language – language mutates over time and there may be misunderstandings between generations through different use of language.

According to Sally Howgate, Agnes, of the eponymous novel by Anne Brontë, is missing because 'she occupies the role that epitomizes cultural and socially determined limitations placed on women in mid-Victorian England'.[76] Howgate quotes Agnes Grey as saying, 'to submit and oblige was the governess's part'.[77] Dee was living in a society where a woman's place was limited by the patriarchal ruling of that time; her husband was head of the household, she was governed by him. Her place was in the home. But when the Second World War began, it became a woman's patriotic duty to leave the family home and go out to work. She still, of course, had to fulfil her housewifely duties as well. She wasn't being offered an opportunity so much as being given a directive by the patriarchal government of the time.

Howgate claims that the 'erosion of self is caused by societal definitions placed on [Agnes] which conflict with her articulation of herself'.[78] Dee had been coerced into marriage – after two years of resistance – with the arrival of her eldest daughter. She was forced into the role of wife and mother, which didn't fit with her image or understanding of herself. That erosion of self is expressed through her lack of narrative. Yet, paradoxically, her silence is an affirmation.

Agnes often talks to herself in the second person, usually to admonish herself. According to Howgate, she has 'self-consciously and deliberately dissociated or fragmented herself, in order to talk only to herself',[79] with the effect of excluding the reader. Howgate believes this supports the notion that Anne Brontë created a 'missing Agnes that is integral to the act of narration'.[80] Dee has stepped outside of the role ascribed to her by society; her silence reinforces her position as an absent presence in the story cycle as well as in the lives of her family. Being inaccessible is Dee's most potent weapon against society. She refuses

76 Sally Howgate, '"I chose to keep silence": Textual Self-Effacement in Agnes Grey', *Brontë Studies*, Vol. 36:3, 2011 p.215

77 Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, ed. by Robert Inglesfield and Hilda Marsden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.105

78 Howgate, p.216

79 Howgate p.220

80 Howgate p.220

dialogue.

Dee's non-narrative presence in the book works as counterpoint to the dominant narratives defining her life. Counterpoint occurs in music when more than one line is played at a time, for example, the left and right hand on the piano. So while different characters come and go, like the melodies in the right hand, Dee persists between the stories, like the bass line in the left hand, providing continuity within the cycle.

Counterpoint is also an architectural feature whereby rhythm – visual or spatial – is employed to articulate the building's facade or echo its internal function and layout. In this short story cycle, the rhythm changes from the longer stories to the brief, sometimes purely visual sequences. Visually and spatially, the artefacts punctuate the cycle, lending it a logic in both sense, style and structure.

Counterpoint is also happening in the interstices between the stories, as discussed in Chapter Two. Part of the tissue of the book are the absences and silences between characters and different time periods. Gaps are also years; when the reader moves from one story to the next, Dee has aged, her situation has changed. The reader is required to fill in the gaps.

Absence is also counterpoint, defined as: not present, missing, lacking, without. Dee's artefacts are without narrative; she didn't exist for her family while she was alive and now she's dead she no longer exists for them physically either. And whilst absent, her influence is very much present, nothing is something, in fact, silence. Nothing can't be nothing because it has a name. But silence is something that *could* be said which isn't; the things left unsaid. Dee is always refusing to speak, to explain herself, to talk to her children. Silence is withholding. It is more than nothing. It is proactively not something.

Ronan McDonald, in 'Strategies of Silence', suggests that, 'The expressive gaps or silences of the short story can be powerful indicators of muteness'.[81] However, being mute doesn't negate Dee. McDonald continues, '[The short story] can use its eccentricities and ellipsis to work against dominant discourse, to give voice to occluded narratives without simply reproducing the language of authority'.[82] Dee is resisting patriarchy, she's lurking in the gaps refusing to use their prescribed norms of narrative. McDonald continues, 'the short

81 Ronan McDonald, 'Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 35 (Jan 2005), p.250

82 McDonald p.250

story also relies […] on a strategic use of silence. "Silence" in all its forms […] both as a symptom of a [patriarchal] condition and as an aesthetic strategy seeking to resist this condition'.[83]

The artefacts are easy to read but not necessarily to contextualise. Through relating Dee's story in this obscure somewhat oblique manner, I intended to create a manifestation of her independence from the dominant narrative discourse of patriarchy.

Laura Tansley, in 'The Frame Within a Frame', suggests that 'the story sequence or cycle relies on layering. An incident takes on significance in the light of the incidents that surround it.'[84] Tansley is discussing short-short stories, but what she says can be applied to the artefacts even though they don't fit into the 'story' category. She says:

> [T]he use of the short-short ... in a sequence creates a different kind of atmosphere, drawing the reader's attention to different aspects of storytelling ... The fragmentary flash becomes an ideal companion for the story sequence and cycle because it is exactly that, fragmentary.[85]

She says that where they are linked by something or someone, in this case, Dee, they build to make a whole. She suggests that 'the tension between the independence of the individual part and its integration into the work as a whole is what draws the reader in'.[86] She maintains that the gaps between the stories do not need to be 'transcended but exist to be explored, by the reader and writer'.[87] The artefacts appear in the gaps between the stories, however, they are not the gaps themselves. So although the artefacts may be opaque, within the context of the stories on either side of them and within the story cycle as a whole, they gain in comprehensiveness and equally add to the reader's understanding of the preceding and subsequent stories as well as to their overall comprehension of the cycle. They act as small keys between the narratives.

83 McDonald, p.253

84 Laura Tansley, 'The frame within a frame: a short-short story sequence theory in a sequence of short-shorts' in *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, vol. 1 (1) (January 2011) Intellect Publishers p.38

85 Tansley, pp.38-39

86 Tansley, p.39

87 Tansley p.41

Through the stories, we see the effect of Dee's actions without understanding them; the absent presence of Dee. Rather like a gale force wind, you can't see it but you can witness the devastation it leaves in its wake. For example, in "The Mother 1938", Dee's letter to her mother offers no explanation for her decision to send April to live with her, but that decision will drastically affect both her mother's life and April's.

Dee's absent presence is a gendered trope, and that is an important consideration. Barbara Godard, in her article, 'F(r)ictions: Feminists Re/writing Narrative', suggests that, 'Freudian discourse categorizes woman as lack or absence, forever excluded from subjectivity, perpetually the "Other" posited in the necessary moment of the consolidation of the patriarchal cultural body'.[88]

Under that pressure, how could Dee, having rebelled against the oppression of patriarchy, appear in the short story cycle of her life as anything other than an absent presence – forced into the corners of her life, into the gaps between the stories being recounted about her by others?

How different would it have been if Dee's husband, the children's father, had abandoned the family? In his article, *Psychobiological Roots of Early Attachment,*[89] Myron A. Hofer maintains that the attachment bond between a mother and child is formed in the womb. He suggests that a mother's abandonment of her child, her breaking of that attachment, can cause physiological as well as behavioural problems that may contribute to a sense of vulnerability later in the child's life. He asserts that mother-infant relationships shape the child's psychological and biological reactions to their environment well into adulthood. And Erich Neumann, in *The Child*, believes that when the mother is absent – either emotionally, physically or psychologically – it causes the child great anxiety, 'hunger, pain, emptiness, cold, helplessness, utter loneliness, loss of all security and shelterdness […] a headlong fall into the forsakenness and fear of the bottomless void'.[90] A mother abandoning her young children then, must have a catastrophic psychological effect on the child and its

88 Barbara Godard, 'F(r)ictions: Feminists re/writing Narrative ', *Gender and Narrativity*, ed. by Barry Rutland, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) p. 119.

89 Myron A. Hofer, 'Psychobiological Roots of Early Attachment', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol.15 (2), PP.84–88 https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2006.00412.x [ACCESSED 04/08/2017]

90 Erich Nemann, *The Child: Structure and Dynamics of the Nascent Personality* trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973) p.75

notion of self. According to Dr Jonice Webb[91], this may result in deep-seated insecurities; an inability to trust, guilt, shame and low self-worth. Dee's abandonment of her children then, would have been far more harmful to them than if Raphe had walked out on them.

Dee left her family in nineteen forty-three, a time when a woman's place was in the home. She was the 'slave of the slaves', as John Lennon reminded us thirty years later.[92] In a sense, we can see Dee's withdrawal as an escape from slavery; from the manacles of motherhood, from the shackles of patriarchy. Men weren't expected to look after their own children; that was a woman's job. Dee's escape, then, necessitated April's captivity. A prisoner for a prisoner. Had Raphe, Dee's husband, left the family, no one would have been dragged in to take his place, no other sacrifice would have been called for. The very fact Dee was a woman has caused another woman, a young girl, to lose her freedom. The reader witnesses this in, 'The Eldest Daughter 1943'; Dee's decision to walk out forces her eldest daughter – April – to jettison her career and her plans for the future to take over Dee's role as carer for the family. In, 'The Youngest Daughter 1952', Greta, imagines she's had sex with a Dutchman who takes her on a date, even though they've only kissed; she has no mother to explain the facts of life to her. Even when she goes round to talk to her about it, Dee is unavailable to her. Greta mistakes Dr Churney's attentions for something sexual because she believes she's wanton and already defiled but is consequently humiliated in front of her father. At every turn, Dee's decisions impact on someone else, whether intentionally or not. This would have been a completely different story cycle had Dee been a man.

The Wind off the River is a feminist tract; it deals with very real dilemmas women are faced with once they become mothers. Carol P. Christ, in *Diving Deep and Surfacing,* writes, 'Women's stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman […] does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strength, to comprehend her pain'.[93] It may appear paradoxical then, that I am imitating the patriarchy of the society in which Dee lived by having others speak for her, by not giving her her own narrative but I believe that's precisely how best to demonstrate the limitations imposed on her. As a feminist author I wanted to show Dee's bravery, the courage it took to

91 Dr Jonice Webb, *How to Overcome Abandonment Issues from Childhood,* https://drjonicewebb.com/the-3-main-issues-of-the-abandoned-child-in-adulthood/ [Accessed 13/12/2019]

92 Lennon, John. 'Woman is the Nigger of the World'. By John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *Sometime in New York City*, Apple, 1972. LP.

93 Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (Boston: Beacon, 1980) p.1

break those social taboos which still exist today, to rebel against patriarchy, to live her own life on her terms. She could have abandoned her family for the tram driver who offered her an easy escape, stability, financial security. She didn't because at that time she felt a duty to her children and husband. When the situation became untenable however, she didn't wait for someone else to free her, she left independently. She found a place to live, earned her own money and this was in the days before the welfare state; there was no safety net, she had to survive in a world with limited options for women.

According to Roxane Gay, in *Dissent* magazine, a feminist novel is one that 'explores what it means to not only be a woman, but to be a woman from a certain time and place. It explores the question of *identity*—the stories of who we are'.[94] I wanted Dee to be a courageous character, a woman who wasn't afraid, a role model for other women. She is a conduit for my belief that men and women are equal; both are entitled to their freedom even though that usually comes at a cost for women. It was important for me that Dee remained single. I wanted a female protagonist who was happy to live her own life, who didn't need a man to feel fulfilled. Growing up, all the books I read about women seemed to involve them ultimately finding happiness once they'd found the right man. Men in fiction do not, generally, look to women for their sense of completion. The only novel I discovered where the women actually choose to remain without men was *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson.[95] Ruthie, the narrator, and her drifter aunt Sylvie, reject domesticity in favour of freedom and a life on the road. I wanted *The Wind off the River* to show that women can lead independent lives and be happy in their own company; living alone is not a frightening alternative to staying in an unhappy marriage. Women have choices. In Dee's society that was a difficult choice to make but she didn't regret it. Before I got married, my mother said to me, 'There are worse things than being alone'. She explained that I didn't have to get married if I didn't want to and she wished she'd had a mother to tell her that. It was at that point I realised just how profoundly her mother's abandonment of her had affected her life. I was torn between blaming my grandmother and admiring her for her bravery. There's no easy answer to whether a mother has a duty to remain with her children even if that comes at a personal

94 Roxane Gay 'Theses on the Feminist Novel', *Dissent Magazine*:https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/theses-on-the-feminist-novel [accessed 28 July 2019]

95 Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 2005)

cost; there are arguments for and against and it is that dichotomy I wanted the book to explore.

As a feminist tract then, it raises the question, who is my intended reader? As opposed to Iser's implied reader who 'has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader'.[96] My intended reader is, primarily, a person like my mother who was abandoned as a child by their mother. The book is intended as a catharsis. It is equally intended for women like my grandmother who walked out on their families. I wanted to show each the suffering of the other. However, I didn't intend the book to be didactic as that disallows for an open interpretation of the text which would negate the precise aim of the book.

The Wind off the River is also for younger women who don't have to make the same stark choices due to societal pressures or lack of financial support; it is for men to understand the choices women are faced with or have been faced with in the past, to understand the devastation caused to both mother and child when a woman has to take the decision to break that bond, to walk away. It is to bear witness to dead generations of women who have abandoned their families and to those who couldn't, but suffered miserable lives as a result of choosing to, or having to, remain with their children and husbands.

Barbara Godard argues that what feminist theory has shown is that 'strategies of writing and reading are forms of cultural resistance. They work to turn dominant discourses inside out'.[97] Dee became pregnant not long after meeting Raphe, it wasn't planned. Raphe wanted to marry her before the baby was born to save her from the 'shame' of being an unmarried mother. However, she resisted for two years, prepared to live with the social stigma. This gives the reader an indication of how strong-willed she is. She is very much an independent, modern woman. Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice*, points out that 'women are produced in/by two contradictory discourses, the liberal humanist discourse of freedom and self-determination, and a specifically feminine discourse of submission and inadequacy'.[98] Dee chose the path of freedom; a path normally reserved for men at that time.

96 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) p.34

97 Godard, p. 115.

98 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980) pp.65-66

Joanna Russ, in 'What Can a Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write,'[99] claims that narrative plots have their basis in credibility and propriety: heroines must behave according to the roles ascribed for them by the society in which they live. To have Dee act in a way that runs counter to what the society of her generation expected is to shake the reader's expectations of a narrative of that period. It forces the reader to establish a new perspective from which to view women of Dee's generation.

99 Russ, Joanna, 'What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write', *To Write like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995) pp.79-93

CHAPTER FOUR

How does the writing technique and structure of *The Wind off the River* express narrative multivalence in relation to the character of Dee, conjuring presence from absence? To what extent can fiction accommodate the idea that character is essentially contradictory?

Having made the decision to write Dee's story in the form of a short story cycle, the next consideration was how to write the stories. First, I had to decide on the point of view (POV). It is one of the basic elements of a story that determines the perspective from which a reader experiences the narrative. It establishes the relationship between the reader and the text and decides who is responsible for telling the story. In 1955, Norman Friedman, in his article about POV, believed that it was 'becoming one of the most useful critical distinctions available to the student of fiction today'.[100]

Gérard Genette has famously characterised the narrative position as 'who sees' and 'who speaks'[101] while Ellen Peel, in her article, 'Feminist Narratology',[102] says feminists are not only interested in both, but more importantly, who has the *power* to see or speak. Friedman believes the writer is continually torn between showing what a thing is and telling how they feel about it. This balance will, to a great extent, be determined by the POV they choose. Given that the stories were going to be subjective, personal recollections of, or encounters with, Dee, I decided that close third person, sometimes called the free indirect style, would be the most appropriate. In this POV, James Wood suggests:

> The narrative seems to float away from the novelist and take on the properties of the character, who now seems to 'own' the words. The writer is free to inflect the reported thought, to bend it around the character's own words.[103]

100 Norman Friedman, 'Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept', *PMLA* vol 70 (5) (Dec 1955): p.1161.

101 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* Trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell University Press, ITHACA, 1980). p.186 https://archive.org/stream/NarrativeDiscourseAnEssayInMethod/NarrativeDiscourse-AnEssayInMethod_djvu.txt [accessed 24 October 2019]

102 Ellen Peel, 'Unnatural Feminist Narratology', *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 1 December 2016, vol.8 (2) pp.81-112

103 James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Picador; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) p.9

This gives the fictive illusion that the characters are autonomous and it is their opinions, not those of the author, that the reader is being offered. Yet, paradoxically, the author is also able to step outside the character's thoughts to show them in situ, offering the reader a chance to assess them more objectively. As Wood explains, 'A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge — which is free indirect style itself — between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance'.[104] This enables the reader to 'see through a character's eyes while being encouraged to see more than the character can see'.[105]

The free indirect style is a third person point of view constructed by an author that offers privileged access to those characters' consciousnesses in which Dee (or memories of Dee) resides – the characters being Dee's siblings, employers, relatives, friends, family and in laws. The effect of this method is that we eavesdrop on their inner thoughts and feelings – thoughts and feelings they might not publicly acknowledge – and we also see characters more objectively through reported actions with an authorial view. So we might see both Dee and the 'narrating' character together from the outside, as it were, from a third person viewpoint.

So these characters do not purposefully narrate. Narration is constructed by the reader through the characters' fragmentary memories of Dee. Therefore, they are not narrators but characters who secrete or disclose narration rather than deliberately address it as their purpose.

John Gardner, however, criticises the widespread use of close third-person in contemporary literature because 'it locks the reader inside the character's mind […] however limited that mind may be, so that when a character's judgements are mistaken or inadequate, the reader's more correct judgements must come from a cool withdrawal'.[106] Although Gardner suggests this is a weakness of the close third-person POV, for me that is its strength; it is that very subjectiveness of the characters I wish to exploit – to explore the unreliability of biography, to give the reader more hegemony over the text. Paraphrasing Mark Schorer, Friedman says that through the devices of POV the writer 'is able to disentangle his own prejudices and predispositions from those of his characters and thereby to evaluate those of

104 Wood p.11

105 Wood p.11

106 John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books) p.156

his characters dramatically in relation to one another within their own frame'.[107] It is not possible to do this with an omniscient third-person author who has an overview of both the character, their situation and Dee; I wanted the stories to be direct, if flawed and prejudiced, accounts of Dee from the characters themselves.

Whilst a first person narration would have given the reader the most direct connection with the character, it is a limited POV; the reader is forced to see things through the character's eyes rather than being able to assess their reliability. It is also difficult to describe the setting of *The Wind off the River*, in order to place each story in a specific period. The character would have to choose to describe their environment, which feels contrived unless there is something specific to be noted. The reader would be pulled out of the story, making them aware of the author's presence. To paraphrase Gustave Flaubert in a letter to his mistress, Madame Louise Colet, the author should be like God in the universe, ever present but nowhere apparent.[108]

Although the stories are related in close third person, it is only when the characters' inner voice or personal viewpoints are engaged that they bring their opinions to the story. And whilst Dee appears to speak directly, her speech is only reported by the characters through the filter of their recollections. She exists in the stories only through virtue of being observed and remembered by others. In a sense, then, she is constantly ventriloquised. Dee is 'spoken for' in the sense that her withdrawal from the family and her lovers leave them free to silence her with a voice that is not her own.

This may seem to suggest that her silence, her refusal to speak was not, as I'd suggested earlier, an act of rebellion on Dee's part but an appropriation by the characters. However, I would argue that it is both; she has rebelled by not explaining her actions and consequently, the characters speak for her in the vacuum she's left behind. Not only has she rebelled by her elective muteness, but she has also claimed the role of the victim because the characters have appropriated her narrative. She hasn't necessarily been forcibly silenced, so much as she hasn't been allowed access to the familial discourse concerning her.

107 Norman Friedman, 'Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept', *PMLA* vol 70 (5) (Dec 1955): p.1167
108 Dominick LaCapra, *Madame Bovary on Trial*, (New York: Cornell University Press, ITHACA, 1982) p.77.

The dictionary definition of multivalent is having many applications, interpretations, meanings or values. According to Ruth Sara Longobardi, in her article on Britten's 'Death in Venice',[109] multivalence can be understood as multiple phenomena working together or contesting and opposing one another. The multivalent strands in this short story cycle do both. The artefacts add to the multivalence of the narrative by offering the reader a different way to interpret events in the preceding story. For example, the artefact that follows the story of the tram driver is a menu taken from a café in Southport. Dee has made a note of what they both ate and the film they went to see. In the story, she appears cold and somewhat brutal by breaking off their affair. It doesn't appear to have affected her emotionally, yet she kept the menu until her death 33 years later which suggests she never got over him.

The reader can experience Dee's personality through what the other characters say about her, from what the reader can ascertain regarding their reliability, from what Dee reveals to the reader through, as well as the reader's interpretation of, the somewhat ambiguous artefacts. The fact that some of the artefacts are notes and letters addressed to Dee leaves the reader in the slightly uncomfortable position of reading personal mail that was only intended by the senders for Dee's viewing alone, not a public audience. There's an element of prying, not only into Dee's personal life but also into the private thoughts of the authors of those notes and letters. But that however, causes a closer engagement – a form of collusion – between the reader and the text and Dee as a character in that text.

According to Dr Rajula Albert:

> Through employing different narrative techniques, multivalent works offer a multiplicity of unique perspectives. Each perspective is self-conscious and inadequate, but is still a possible way of envisaging a reality, that remains in a flux even while one seeks to perceive and define it.[110]

109 Ruth Sara Longobardi, 'Multivalence and Collaboration in Benjamin Britten's "Death in Venice"' Twentieth-century Music, 2005, vol.2(1), pp.53-78

110 Rajula Albert, 'Vikram Seth: Writer of Multivalent Identity' researchscholar.co.in/downloads/100-dr.-rajula-albert.pdf [Accessed 27/11/2018]

Like the story of 'Rashomon',[111] which involves contradictory versions of the same event, each story in this cycle gives conflicting accounts of Dee. Each character in *The Wind off the River* is solipsistic to the extent that the stories they tell revolve around themselves; Dee is incidental to their stories but there is enough recounted about her to give the reader an impression of her that builds throughout the book.

This short story cycle is about a woman's desire for freedom; a feminist tract that uses close third person in the stories to show her as object in the patriarchal society in which she lives, a historical novel looking at the changing options women had in the twentieth century, a psychological novel, exploring the damage inflicted on her children by her abandonment of them as well as her own self-wounding in cutting them off. It is the story of Liverpool, a developing city, which ages and transforms in a way that mirrors Dee's own aging and altering states. It is a story about our inability to ever really know another person, even in fiction. And, finally, it is a book which deals with one of the last taboos in society even today – mothers abandoning their children.

Rebecca Lenkiewicz's play, *The Night Season*[112], is about a family still feeling the loss of their mother who walked out on them fifteen years previously. She is out of sight but never out of mind for the characters on stage. In Sara Hemming's review of the play,[113] she says Lenkiewicz was fascinated by the idea of a motherless household and that she 'toyed with the idea of having her on stage but thought it was more powerful to have everyone's projection of her'[114]. Hemmings also discusses Martin Crimp's experimental play, *An Attempt on her Life,* which consists of seventeen scenes in which unidentified voices offer contradictory clues to the identity of a mysterious woman. Hemmings says, 'The more we listen, the less we feel we know her'.[115] I would build on Hemmings' quote and suggest the more we feel we 'know' Dee, the less we understand her.

111 Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, 2nd ed., trans. Takashi Kojima; introd. by Howard Hibbett (Tokyo, Rutland, VT: C.E.Tuttle, 1962)

112 Rebecca Lenkiewicz, The Night Season (London: Faber and Faber, 2004)

113 Sarah Hemming, 'Missing in Action', Financial Times 7 April 2006 https://www.ft.com/content/0c9e80d6-c53e-11da-b675-0000779e2340 [Accessed 23/11/2018]

114 Hemming, 'Missing in Action'

115 Hemming, 'Missing in Action'

The picture of Dee that emerges from the book is unresolved thus leading to a greater truth; characters are constructed from contradictions rather than consistencies. Sometimes there are no justifiable or rational reasons why people behave in a certain way. Having a character with inexplicable contradictory traits forces the reader to investigate further to try and understand them. It compels the reader to engage more fully with the text. If there is no apparent reason for those contradictions then I would suggest the text is closer to reality; allowing for that incomprehension makes the fiction more authentic.

Fiction can accommodate this seemingly irreconcilable difference of character by offering different viewpoints. In my short story cycle, there are fourteen characters who all have conflicting opinions of Dee. Some are less reliable than others; those with grievances towards her especially, such as the mother-in-law and the husband. Dee herself, as demonstrated through the artefacts, shows a character at variance with all their opinions. Fiction can show a character's inconsistencies; illustrating behaviour that doesn't match a character's thoughts or motivations by allowing that character to demonstrate verbally, mentally and by action the conflict at work.

Joanna Kokot, in 'The Elusiveness of Reality', suggests that Katherine Mansfield's[116] short stories raise questions 'concerning the relations between the world and the observer about the possibility and limits of intuiting both reality and another person'.[117] She suggests the main aspect of Mansfield's reality is its evanescence and it is the writer's job to show that. Kokot compares Mansfield's writing to the paintings of the Impressionists; what they acquired through their use of 'light and colour effects, by chromatic blots and blurred contours, Mansfield achieves by understatement, vague suggestions, subterfuge, concealments, and shifting points of view, none of which is authoritative' and the meaning of which 'is never completely revealed. The stories and their essence appear just as elusive as the reality they create'.[118] In a similar way, the different characters' stories in my cycle could be seen as different coloured spots that, just as in Pointillism when viewed all together, the eye forms into a comprehensive, if conflicting and unresolved, picture.

116 Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2007)

117 Joanna Kokot, Chapter 5, 'The Elusiveness of Reality: The Limits of Cognition in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories' in *Mansfield and Modernism II: Self, Voice and Other in Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, ed. by Janet Wilson et al., Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lancaster/detail.action?docID=686915. P.67 [accessed 23 July 2018]

118 Kokot, p.75

Virginia Woolf claimed the eponymous protagonist in Orlando was in possession of a great many selves, 'some say two thousand and fifty-two'.[119] Dorothy Richardson in her thirteen volume epic, *Pilgrimage*, claimed that whilst trying for a female equivalent of the existing masculine realism, she generated 'a stranger with a hundred faces, any one of which […] summoned its fellows to disqualify it'.[120] This quest to represent identity authentically was what I too, was attempting with my multiple 'sketches' of Dee; each character disqualifying the version of Dee that went before.

Nancy Gray, in 'Un-defining the Self in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield', tells us that Mansfield's 'famous use of "Moments of being" functions as a technique that invites us to occupy narrative spaces that feel uncertain or undefined […] What emerges are ambiguous glimpses […] into complex possibilities of self and consciousness'. [121] The stories in the cycle are just such moments of being; brief periods in time in the lives of the characters. The reader is invited to occupy the spaces created by what is left unsaid as well as the missing gaps of time between the stories. The artefacts add to these uncertainties, allowing for contradiction, incomprehension and a more complex, nuanced reading of the text.

Gray points out the role of the reader in providing the missing information or at least trying to stitch together what they have ascertained from the text. She says, 'It is not outside our comfortable expectations as readers to encounter characters that do not see themselves clearly; but we, self-aware and practiced in the arts of reading critically, are supposed to'.[122]

According to Wolfgang Iser, each time we read a piece of literature, it can evoke a completely new meaning for us:

> Different meanings of the same text have emerged at different times, and, indeed, the same text read a second time will have a different effect from that of its first reading.[123]

119 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1956) p.308

120 Dorothy M. Richardson, 'Foreword', in *Pilgrimage*, vol. 1. (London: Virago, 1979) p9

121 Nancy Gray, 'Un-defining the Self in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield', in *Mansfield and Modernism II: Self, Voice and Other in Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, ed. by Janet Wilson et al., Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lancaster/detail.action?docID=686915. P.79 [accessed 23 July 2018]

122 Gray, P.81

123 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) p.29

We interpret the text according to our present experiences; the narrative slips beyond the control even of the reader. This isn't just a book about family life but about the family as narrative that slips out of the control of the characters. They are constructing the family by narrativising it. But their accounts lose authority when eroded by subsequent characters.

Gray tells us that Mansfield's writing comes to us 'in forms persistently resistant to definition' and that she creates 'unstable narrative spaces where we are invited to catch sight of it as if out of the corner of the eye, register its effects, and let it go'.[124] Judith Butler reinforces this idea by reminding us that we should understand these moments as 'sites of necessary trouble', which can produce pleasure in the instability of those states, knowing they are 'only a temporary stop on the way to the truth at the end of the story'.[125] The stories in *The Wind off the River* are not intended as stops on the way to the 'truth' of Dee but a journey towards an apprehension of the complex nature of Dee and of her decision to abandon her children.

124 Gray, p.81

125 Judith Butler, 'Imitation and gender insubordination', *The Second Wave* ed. by L. Nicholson. (New York: Routledge, 1997) p. 301.

CHAPTER FIVE

How does the trope of the absent protagonist who drives the short story cycle through her disembodied presence position me as author in relationship to my own work?

When I first visualised my book, I saw it as a gallery of likenesses of the absent present protagonist, Dee Morgan. As a trained visual artist, I pictured each story as a portrait of her, capturing an instance in her life from early childhood to old age – each painted by a different artist. There would be certain likenesses threaded through the paintings; enough for the viewer to realise the portraits were all of the same woman although painted in different styles at different periods and from the perspectives of the individual artists. The life of the physically-absent but image-present sitter, Dee, is the propulsion for both the paintings and the exhibition as a whole.

In fiction, the idea of an absent present protagonist driving the story forward is not a new one; many authors, including Henry James, employ such protagonists. In James' short stories the characters about whom the stories are told are either dead, as in 'The Real Right Thing' and 'Maud Evelyn'[126], or they are kept in the wings like Frank Saltram for example, in 'The Coxon Fund'[127]; the characters talk about him but the reader never meets him directly. Though largely absent, these protagonists are all central to the plot. Likewise, Dee is the central cog which drives the various narratives – the whole cycle hinges around her unveiling, or the ultimately frustrated expectation of it.

Dee's presence in the stories, like that of Flora Saunt in Henry James' *Glasses*[128], is negligible. As José A. Alvarez says in his article, 'On Flora Saunt being Vain', she is 'little more than a topic of thought and conversation for others'.[129] Donatella Izzo calls her the typically stereotyped, 'virtually voiceless woman'[130] – the woman whom Virginia Woolf dubbed 'the

126 Henry James, *Complete Short Stories 1898-1910* (New York: The Library of America, 2000)

127 Henry James, *The Coxon Fund* (New York: Melville House, 2009)

128 Henry James, *Glasses* (Whitefish MT, USA: Kessinger Publishing, 2010)

129 José A. Álvarez-Amorós, 'On Flora Saunt being vain: aspectuality and the social construction of identity in Henry James's "Glasses" (1896), *Textual Practice*, 11 January 2018, p.8

130 Donatella Izzo, *Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James* (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p.117

most discussed animal in the universe'.[131] It is the other characters who furnish Dee's speech, put words into her mouth. She never speaks to the readers directly. Just as I, as the author, never address the readers directly but through my characters and through Dee's archived material.

Referring to Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, 'The Extended Mind',[132] Alvarez suggests that Flora's mental state can be 'partly constituted by the states of other thinkers'.[133] The operative word here is 'partly'; the characters in *Glasses* can only conjecture on Flora's state of mind by her outward actions. The characters in *The Wind off the River* speculate on Dee's character from what they see of her through the lens of their own experiences. In the words of Alvarez, Flora's identity is:

> [S]ocially constructed from without by those who have some type of access to her and can hypothesise her interiority via observable actions, body language, speech acts, and, of course, their own expectations and prejudices. [134]

As the author of the characters' stories, I provide those 'observable actions' to further my story and shape, to some extent, how the reader views Dee. Through my editing of her character, Dee dictates to the other characters how they should view her. She is my finger puppet.

However, Roland Barthes, in his influential work, *Death of the Author*, claims 'it is language which speaks, not the author',[135] reiterating Stéphane Mallarmé's belief in the necessity of substituting language itself for the author. Barthes renames the author, the 'scriptor', someone who simply collects pre-existing pieces of writing. Of course, the title doesn't refer to the literal death of the author but to the fact that the author is absent from the text; like Dee, the author is an absent presence. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle in their book, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory*, describe the author's state as, 'both there and not there'.[136] Barthes believes that the author is not able to create or decide

131 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, intr. Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 1996), p.25.

132 Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers 'The Extended Mind', *Analysis*, 58.1 (1998), pp. 7–19

133 Álvarez-Amorós p.17

134 Álvarez-Amorós p.11

135 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text,* trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) p.143

136 Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Pearson Longman, 2004) p.20

the meaning of their work; that task falls on the reader. The same task I oblige the reader of *The Wind off the River* to undertake. The stories recount a series of incidents in Dee's life; sometimes it is not clear what decision Dee has actually taken, for example at the end of "The Mother 1938", the reader doesn't know whether April arrives or not. They find out in April's story a few years later that she did arrive eventually, although the reader isn't sure when. Likewise at the end of the brother-in-law's story, Dee says she's not sure she can go through with the wedding after all. The reader finds out in subsequent stories that she did marry Raphe in the end although she comes to regret that decision. The reader must conjecture why she changed her mind and stitch the texts together. As Barthes says, the reader is someone 'who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted'.[137]

Readers will often speculate on what the author meant. Preceding Barthes by more than twenty years, William. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsely in their 1946 essay, 'The Intentional Fallacy,' argue that 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a literary work'.[138] Barthes maintains that a reader must separate any piece of literature from its author because to give 'a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.'[139] However, Bennett and Royle argue that although:

> [T]he attempt to settle questions of interpretation through appeals to the intentions of the author cannot but be viewed with suspicion. It is not a question of simply denying or ignoring authorial intention: some hypothesis of what an author intends is an important element in reading and sense-making (…) it is not a question (as Barthes polemically argued) of simply 'removing' the author, but rather of acknowledging that s/he has a less central and authoritative, in some ways more ghostly role.[140]

137 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text.* Trans. Stephen Heath. (London: Fontana Press, 1977) p.148

138 W.K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', in *The Sewanee Review* vol 54 (3), (1946) p.468

139 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author, in *Image, Music, Text* (trans. Stephen heath (London: Fontana, 1977) p.146

140 Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Pearson Longman, 2004) p.24

As the author of the stories, although I fully encourage the reader to interpret the text in any way they choose, I have still furnished them with a limited set of parameters within which to make those interpretations. The information the reader is given about Dee is intentionally directed to guide them to some degree; I have chosen what to include and what to omit.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes suggests that the subject of a photograph inscribes itself on the film and the photographer plays but the briefest role. He believes the photographer's person is cut from the equation between who poses for the photograph and who later looks at it. He says, 'The Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger'.[141] The finger does nothing more than initiate the impression. Barthes reduces the photographer to a facilitator, a role to which he also assigns the author. However, it is the photographer who directs the viewer's gaze, adjusts the light levels, chooses the depth of vision, who frames what the viewer can see, who choses what to leave out of the picture. Just as I, the author, choose what the reader can and can't see of Dee and how they do or do not see her.

According to Bennett and Royle, John Keats believed that the poet as poet has no identity (for poet we can read author). They suggest, 'he or she lives, and lives on, in the strange space of writing.'[142] Both Dee and I, the author, exist in that same 'strange space'.

We are also both present absences. My aim is to maintain the fictive illusion for the reader, to disappear from the text. Jacques Derrida in *Grammatology*, identifies the presence/absence opposition as one of the primary binaries – binary opposition being a pair of related concepts that are opposite in meaning. It is also the system by which language and thought are defined, as well as the contrast between two mutually exclusive terms such as good and evil. Plato associated speech with presence and writing with absence, because, he said, the writer need not be present for a piece of their writing to exist. I won't be present when my book is read – I could very well be dead before my reader is even born – but the book will exist nonetheless.

Like Dee, I, the author, am a present absence in the book but nevertheless I drive the stories and control the actions of the characters. It is by my hand that Dee's behaviour

141 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill, 1981) p.15

142 Bennet and Royle, p.25

incites the characters to retaliate through their actions – what they do in the stories they do because of Dee, through their reaction to her and with her. She, as my fictional character, drives the stories just as I drive her and the other characters. And equally, it can be said, she drives me to write the stories that examine the pain involved for all parties when a mother separates from her children.

Presence/absence is a core concept in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan suggests that the symbolic order – concerning language and narrative – is characterised by binary opposition between absence and presence. In the symbolic order, absence has a positive existence or presence, 'Through the word, which is already a presence made of absence, absence itself comes to be named'.[143] Dee's virtual absence then, is a presence within the text.

Lacan also suggests language is always about lack; if you only knew satisfaction, he says, if you had no concept of lack or the notion of being incomplete, then you would have no need to present thoughts through language. The impetus for the book originally derived from my own lack; the lack of a maternal grandmother. Dee too is a lack. She has no agency nor a POV in the stories. She offers no explanation for abandoning her children. Likewise I, the author, present facts, snippets, clues but no definitive answers to that question. It is the questions which are raised but not answered that prompt the reader to dwell on them and thus engage with the text. As Iser says:

> … the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination.[144]

In *The Wind off the River,* the reader is constantly having to ask themselves why Dee does what she does. What happened in the time between the stories? Why did she marry Raphe when she felt she couldn't? And the crux of the book, the question that is a constant through every story – what made her leave her family?

143 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977) p.65 cited in 'Absence' https://nosubject.com/Absence [accessed 29th June 2018]

144 Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (London and Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press,1978) p.283

Dee haunts the text with her disembodied presence. To be disembodied is by definition, to be freed from the body, to be divested of material existence or substance. All textual presence is disembodied; I, the author, am not physically present in the writing but, by virtue of the fact that I have written the words, my presence exists in the text. Readers, even whilst immersed in the text, still have an awareness of me, the author. Dee is only referred to by the characters, she doesn't communicate directly with the reader; it is the artefacts between the stories that serve as a type of communiqué from her, even if she was ignorant of the eventual recipient. The images of the artefacts convey information about Dee's character to the reader. As the author, I too don't address the reader directly but use images, thoughts, memories to weave together a story.

The stories are written in close third person, which implies the presence of an author yet, paradoxically, I am absent from the text. In this way, like Dee, I 'haunt' the text with my presence. This absence/presence is a key hypothesis of hauntology; a concept devised by Jacques Derrida in his book, *Spectres of Marx.*[145] Hauntology is a portmanteau; a word that combines the sound and meaning of two other words to create a new one. In this case, it is a combination of haunt and ontology (in French, hauntology is pronounced in the same way as ontology). Ontology is the study of being, whilst hauntology is concerned with the spectre of being. According to Colin Davis in his article, 'Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms',[146] the term hauntology supersedes that of ontology 'replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive'.[147] The past which haunts the present. An author can haunt their own work from beyond the grave. Their involvement in the text remains intrinsic to it long after they are dead. There's an eternal presence of the author in their work. Dee too exists in a temporal paradox; she is alive during the telling of the stories but she is dead in the spaces in between.

According to Ailsa Cox and Michelle Ryan, in their editorial *Haunting in the Short Story*, 'It might be said that contemporary practices of re-writing in short fiction foster a sense of haunting, as palimpsestic, intertextual sources often lurk beneath the surface of

145 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (France: Galilée, 1993)

146 Colin Davis, 'Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms', *French Studies*, Volume 59, Issue 3, 1 July 2005, p. 373-379, https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143 [accessed 16 October 2018]

147 Davis, p. 373

contemporary texts'.[148] They suggest that short fiction 'appears to be a particularly "haunted" form'[149] because it deals in the currency of the implied as well as in metaphor, and it experiments with the visible and invisible. Corinne Bigot in her article, 'Ghost Texts in Alice Munro's Short Stories',[150] quotes Michel Charles, who posits that any written text is 'surrounded by other possible texts, alternative scenarios […] which the writer abandoned along the way'.[151] He calls these ghost texts. Bigot believes that Munro's stories are haunted in this way by her previous stories. She visits the same themes again and again in different ways offering different alternatives and outcomes. Because of that, Bigot considers that a similar story which the reader remembers will influence their current reading. In the same way, the reader progressing through *The Wind off the River* will recall previous stories, setting them against subsequent ones, raising 'what if' questions and wondering about possible alternative outcomes. For example, what would Dee's life have been like if Arthur hadn't died in the war, or if she hadn't married Raphe? How different would April's life have been if Dee hadn't walked out? How different would life have been for all the children if Dee had moved in with the tram driver? The possible alternative scenarios which the reader imagines form the ghost texts of my short story cycle; the previous stories haunting the one currently being read.

Davis suggests that the psychoanalysts, Abraham and Torok, embrace Derrida's concept of hauntology but they are more interested in transgenerational communication; they believe the presence of a dead ancestor could still live on in the ego, intent on preventing its shameful secrets from coming to light. They call this presence the 'phantom'. Davis suggests that according to them, the phantom is not a spirit from the world of the dead but simply a gap left in us by the secrets of others.[152] Dee keeps her secret hidden; even the artefacts or 'punctums' are not revelations. Her abandoning of the family leaves a gap in the characters' life stories and, just like the gap Derrida refers to in *Grammatology* – the gap that language tries to fill – the characters tell their stories in the gap left by Dee.

148 Ailsa Cox and Michelle Ryan-Sauter, 'Haunting in the Short Story', *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice*, vol. 7 (2) October 2017, p.112

149 Cox and Ryan p.112

150 Corinne Bigot, 'Ghost Texts in Alice Munro's Short Stories', *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, vol.(7) (2) October 2017, pp.141-152

151 Michel Charles, *Introduction à l'étude des textes*, (Paris: Seuil, 1995) p.168

152 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *L'Écorce et le Noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987) p.427

For Derrida, 'The spectre's secret is a productive opening of meaning rather than a determinate content to be uncovered'.[153] In *Papier Machine,* he suggests that, 'Literature keeps a secret that does not exist […] Behind a novel, or a poem […] there is no secret meaning to look for'.[154] Perhaps Dee has no secret to tell either; maybe there was no reason for her departure. The author in the same way may not have a secret to tell; just a story, a set of incidents played out among different characters. As humans, however, we are programmed to look for meanings in order to more clearly understand the world in which we live. Perhaps this then, is the role of both Dee and me as author – to make the reader look for meanings, not necessarily in Dee's life but through questioning her motivations, to try to make sense of their own.

153 Davis, p. 377

154 Jacques Derrida, *Papier machine* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), p. 398

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the project, I was working in the dark, feeling my way not only for the structure of the book and the relationship of the stories to one another, but also for a sense of who Dee was. The stories were exploratory and only partially realised. Theorising my own practice has provided some of the key insights into Dee and her motivations. There has been a dynamic interface between the theory and the creative practice; a triangulation between elusive historical guesswork, a re-imagining of history through the stories and a re-focalisation of the stories through the theory. As I was writing the critical reflection, I realised it was illuminating the historical circumstances and probabilities of Dee's departure more than my fictional account. Or, more accurately, the critical and reflective processes were aligning to synergise a more complete understanding of my short story cycle. I could more fully comprehend the ambivalence created by the characters' varying accounts, the stories within the stories and the narrative relations that unspool into human relationships.

When I began writing the critical essay, I still hadn't determined the final form of Dee's 'sequences' – the short sections between the stories which were intended to shed more light on the preceding story. Dmitri Mendeleev, the scientist who compiled the Periodic Table, knew there were certain elements missing, he even knew their atomic masses and chemical properties – he just had to find them. Similarly, I knew *what* was missing but I had to find the form those missing elements would take. It was only within the context of the critical essay, as I was analysing what part the sequences played in the short story cycle, that I was able to consolidate my ideas. I discovered that what was needed were not sections of non-narrative writing but artefacts collected by Dee over the course of her life.

I would like to think this short story cycle demonstrates how, when a woman abandons her children, there are many mitigating factors, including nature, nurture, precedents and circumstances. And it's an alignment of some or all of those factors, at one particular moment, that precipitates her decision to leave. Given that we constantly rewrite the stories of our lives in order to preserve a sense of personal coherence over time – a coherence which necessitates omissions and alterations in order for the story to fit with our currently perceived notions of ourselves – I felt that the combined recollections of the people who knew Dee throughout her life would give the reader a more complete account of the factors that could have possibly contributed to her leaving. Dee's own version would, for

reasons of narrative coherence, have been limited and biased and influenced the reader's opinion.

A woman deserting her children is seen as one of the last taboos, whilst a man walking out on his family barely warrants a comment – even in this period of supposed sexual equality. That would suggest the moral outrage lies beyond society's mores. It must be embedded much deeper, in fact, in the recesses of evolutionary imperative; the mother is the primary caregiver, the one who provides nourishment and protection for her offspring. Without that, babies would perish, the human race would be in danger of extinction – these fears are entrenched in our psyche. To desert your own progeny, then, is a violation of the laws of nature, a hinderance to the primal fight for the survival of humankind.

I would like this book to serve as an apologia for all women who have had to make the emotionally wrenching decision to forsake their children; to create more understanding and empathy in the world. I would like to think my implied reader, a hypothetical abandoned child-now-mother, is sitting in some fictional world contemplating *The Wind off the River*, concluding that perhaps her mother didn't abandon her or her siblings; on the contrary, she was forced to surrender those most precious to her.

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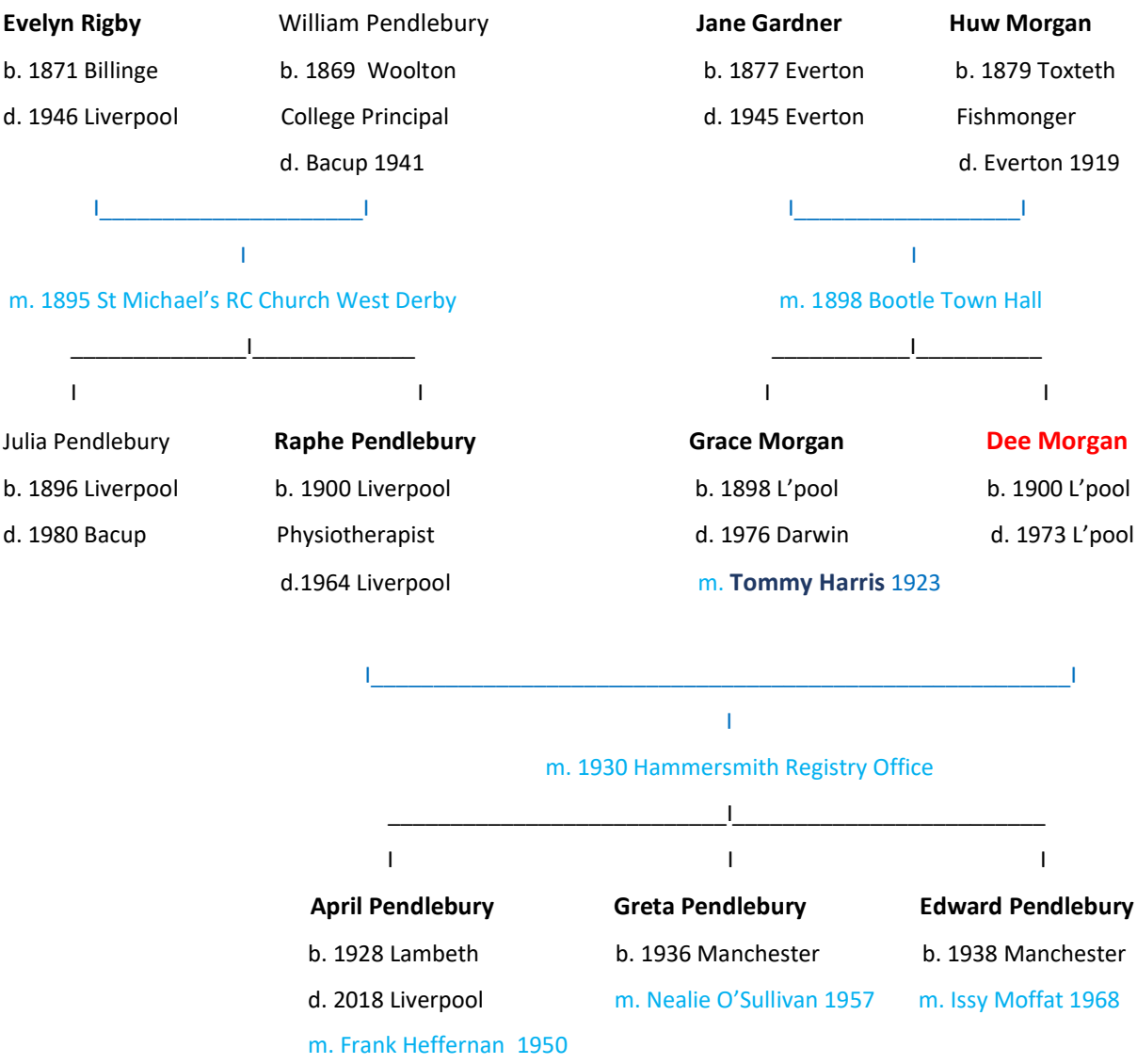
APPENDIX I

THE FAMILY TREE



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