A schoolgirl disappears, aged 12; a set of copper plates reappears, after 130 years – but what is the significance of these events? And are they connected?

THE BLAKE PLATES

a *Cuckoo Farm* story

VICTOR WATSON

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Principal Characters.

Rebecca Meredith, studying Art and English at A Level. She is Olivia's daughter, her father is unknown.

Jessica Burnside, Rebecca's closest friend. Her father is a printer in Stanton St Mary's.

Cressida Wiseman, aged 25, currently living in London and working at a detective agency.

Zoe Whittaker, aged nine, living at first with her father at St Adelaide's College, Cambridge, later at Cuckoo Farm.

Dr Whittaker, Zoe's father, tutor and English lecturer at St Adelaide's College, Cambridge.

Naomi and **Olivia**, sisters, who run the residential Cuckoo Farm community in Norfolk; Naomi is in charge, Olivia commutes to a job in London.

Patrick Cuthbertson, currently serving his National Service in the Royal Artillery.

Peter the Postman, Patrick's father and Olivia's partner.

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Polly Whittaker, Zoe's Aunt, living at Cuckoo Farm.

Edward, Naomi's husband.

Jasper Travis, Olivia's London lover.

Poppy and **Paul**, residents at the Farm.

John Whitehead, living in a cottage by the village green at Codling.

Miss Babbington, headmistress of the village primary school at Codling Green.

Melanie Bloom, English teacher at Rebecca's school in Norwich.

Mr Brackendale (Mr B), a private investigator in London. He formerly lived next-door to Cressida.

Edward Coulson, lives in Newcastle and collects old tools.

Tristram Steadman, former owner and manager of a large printing-house in Newcastle.

Alice Mummery, former employee at Mr Steadman's printing-house.

Ellie Bassett lives with her mother, father, and younger brother in a cottage in Codling Green.

Alexander Zeppelin runs the detective agency where Cressida works.

Toby Jugg, a private investigator at the detective agency.

'Auntie' and **Lucas** jointly run 57 Charter Street.

Edna, **Norma**, **Hilda**, children living at 57 Charter Street.

Mortimer Myluv, an outsider.

Jack and **Michael**, undergraduates at St Adelaide's, Cambridge.

'Sergeant' Brewster, Porter at St Adelaide's.

Professor Godfrey Masters, retired academic, philanthropist, collector of William Blake art-work and ephemera.

Dr Wheeler and **Dr Waller-Dixon**, Keepers of the Print Room at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

1

Visions

On a warm afternoon in 1960, Rebecca Meredith has a vision.

Time ripples slightly, something has risen and disturbed the surface. She sees the words *Songs of Innocence* in bright gold, shaking with intensity against a dark background.

And she hears a soft voice inside her head:

Piping down the valleys wild

Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child . . .

Rebecca does not have visions. *Ever!*

But *this* is authoritative and compelling. Then, having commanded her attention, it unaccountably vanishes.

Visions do that. And she's kneeling shakily on a dusty concrete floor, peering closely at the contents of a heavy wooden box. One of many.

Rebecca is studying for A levels. In her Art class she'd come across the wood engravings of Thomas Bewick. She immediately fell in love with the intense miniature clarity of those tiny perfect black-and-white illustrations. She has to write a long course-work essay on Bewick – and so when her art teacher told her there was an exhibition at the Laing Gallery in Newcastle, Rebecca decided to go there to see it.

She's done that – all of yesterday and the whole of this morning. Now, wandering in the streets around the Ouseburn, she's come across a huge old brick building where there's an auction sale going on. The big sliding doors are wide open and welcoming.

It's a sale of everything belonging to a local printer, whose business has closed down.

She's interested in printing. Her best friend's dad is the local printer in Stanton St Mary's, and she's spent a good deal of time in his workshop. Thomas Bewick was a printer too.

And she's familiar with auctions, though not on this scale. There are printing presses – some as big as a small car – paper guillotines, a book press, two or three proofing presses, cabinets stacked with trays of lead type, different sizes, different fonts.

Most of the large industrial stuff has already been sold, and the buyers will have to arrange heavy-duty lifting to take their purchases away. The bidding has moved on to smaller items. Compositor's sticks, rulers, galleys. Stacks of paper.

And there are about thirty or forty wooden boxes, with ancient tools of every conceivable kind. Scrap metal mostly, rusty, dusty, and cobwebby. The one she's been looking at is labelled *Lot 210*.

Lying among the tools in this box, there's a small rectangular parcel. It's wrapped in oily brown paper, and tied with grubby string. But the string has come undone and some of the contents have spilled out, small slim plates of metal. Rectangular, about half the size of a postcard, lying askew among the rusty mallets and adjustable spanners.

The top plate is grimy and discoloured, almost black with age. But this was the source of her vision. She can see the words in gold – *Songs of Innocence* – mirrorwise, for printing. No longer burning with dynamic brilliance, but still flaming and beautiful.

Settled in metal.

Melanie Bloom comes into her thoughts at that moment – Rebecca's A Level English teacher and lover of William Blake, fresh from college, barely four years older than her students. Passionate about William Blake's poems.

He had visions, she told them.

Carefully, Rebecca pulls clear the top plates spilling out of the package. She sees that lower down among the rusty tools there are three more small parcels, also wrapped in oily paper, and neatly tied in grey string.

Are there *more* copper plates? *Are* they copper?

The book they use at school is a small cheap paperback edition of Blake's *Songs*, with only the text of the poems. There are no flaming letters, no pictures at all. There is a frontispiece, she recalls, a black-and-white photo-reproduction, but it's so grainy that she's paid it no attention.

Now she wonders who made these copper plates. And are all the others similarly designed, with waving lines and letters that seem to be alive?

She tries to recover the vision, but it's gone. For good, apparently. And she wonders if William Blake's visions came and went with such randomness.

The auctioneer calls out: 'Lot 206, a box of miscellaneous tools and other items.'

Rebecca pays attention, and is surprised at how cheaply these items are being sold. Lot 206 – an entire box-full of old tools – goes

for only £3. The next for £4.10s.

She'd saved £15 for this trip. The hotel in Jesmond had cost her £6 for three nights, her rail fare another £2.10s. There have been a few other expenses, but she has a clear £7 left.

She gets to her feet and prepares to make a bid.

When she tells them later – the others at Cuckoo Farm – what she's done, none of them will be surprised. She is her own person, always has been. They know that. There have been many occasions in her life when she's made a quick decision, and acted on it at once. She is rarely indecisive.

The auctioneer's assistant moves about the space, accompanied by a small crowd that follows him from one lot to the next. Quite suddenly, Rebecca is surrounded by them.

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A few minutes later, she's the owner of a heavy box full of rusty tools and those four mysterious packages. She paid £6.00 for them.

I don't have a chance, she thought at first. There was another prospective buyer showing a good deal of interest in Lot 210. He seemed to be especially interested in a massive rusty monkey-wrench.

He and Rebecca had contested against each other, at ten shillings a bid. Until he dropped out, and she was left triumphant.

He comes up to her. 'Is it the tools you want, pet?'

She shakes her head. 'Just the packages.'

'How about: you take the parcels and I'll give you three quid for the rest?'

'*Four*,' she says.

'And how far were you planning to carry this?'

'Jesmond,' she says. 'The Blue Tulip Hotel.'

'Tha's a long walk, pet,' he says.

She concedes. 'OK. *Three* pounds,' she says.

He agrees, with an engaging smile. Rebecca packs the four parcels into her more-or-less empty rucksack, and leaves, very conscious of the metallic weight dragging on her shoulders. She's

happy to abandon the box and its contents. She could hardly have carried them out of the sale-room, let alone all the way to Jesmond.

She's glad to leave. She'd been aware all the time that she was the youngest person there. *Ana* the only woman. She never allows such situations to put her off her stride.

But that doesn't mean she likes them.

*

As she walks up the steep hill into the centre of Newcastle, she's wondering how many copper plates she's just bought. For she knows she has probably provided herself with a source of much future dissatisfaction.

If there are a few missing – say, four or five – she could live with that. *I have this collection . . .* she would explain. *I'm still looking . . .*

But suppose there is only *one* missing plate? That would leave her with a lasting frustration, a permanent *lack*, an impossible quest that might remain unfulfilled. That wouldn't be a collection. It would be a *set, with one missing*.

There's a book shop in the centre of town, and she hurries inside and finds a cheap paperback edition of *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. It has an Introduction, very short and not very helpful – but it does explain that the *Songs of Innocence* were printed in 1789 as a collection for children, and the *Songs of Experience* in 1793; later, in 1794, the two sets were issued as a combined work. Rebecca already knows this, from her A Level classes.

The Introduction also makes a passing reference to *the 54 plates*.

But what does that mean?

She buys the book and sets off back to her bed-and-breakfast in Jesmond. There's no table or desk in her room, just a meagre chest of drawers. So she carefully lays out on the bed the copper-plates from the damaged package. Small grubby metal objects, blackish and stained, each smaller than a postcard and about the thickness of

a coin. She finds to her surprise that the plates in all four parcels have been packed with great care, with small rectangular slips of paper – all four edges neatly torn against a straight-edge – between the plates to prevent rubbing.

54 is the magic number, apparently. She'll be able to live contentedly if there are 49, or 50, or even 51. But if there are 53, *what then?*

She begins to count them. It's more complicated than she'd expected because she finds that some of the plates – nineteen of them – have been engraved on both sides. There are 53 designs, on 34 plates.

But she needs to double-check. So she goes through all the poems in the book, and checks them against the copper plates. There are four extra plates, with designs but no poems on them.

She has all the poems – but one plate is apparently missing. She has no idea what could be on it.

But every poem is there! That's something.

And somewhere in the world, she thinks, there is an inspired illustrator who took it into his head to design pictures for William Blake's Songs. *He must have loved them as much as I do.* She corrects herself: it might have been a woman engraver. But she knows that's unlikely.

And I now own them, she thinks. *Well, 53 of them!*

She stacks the plates on the chest of drawers, carefully, replacing the small sheets of paper between them.

She will cherish them, she knows. And study them too. But how can she begin her search for the missing one? The itch of dissatisfaction is already coming upon her. A small pang of disappointment, lifelong, she thinks.

She decides to go for a walk, to clear her head. And to pass the time until she has to catch her train.

She locks her room and leaves. But downstairs, in reception, she meets someone coming in. It's the man from the sale-room. She feels a moment of anxiety, and anger. *Why has he followed me here?*

‘I found another of those copper plates,’ he says. ‘At the bottom of the box.’

‘Oh!’

‘It belongs to you, pet.’

She’s at a loss for words. Embarrassed, grateful, a little ashamed of her initial suspicion. She stammers a thank-you, and says something about wanting to repay his kindness.

‘Aye, well, you can meet me this evening for a drink,’ he says.

But that won’t do. She’s only seventeen, and anyway she has a train to catch, at 6.30, from Central Station.

The hotel doesn’t have a restaurant, but she remembers noticing a tea-room across the street. ‘I’ll treat you to tea and cakes,’ she says. ‘Now, if you have the time.’

Tea-rooms are not his scene, but he agrees, and a few minutes later they are facing each other across a tiny table, with tea and scones.

They exchange information. His name is Edward Coulson (*Everyone calls me Ted*). They have different backgrounds, they can almost be said to live in different countries. He speaks a different kind of English. He’s never heard of William Blake. And he’s at least ten years older than Rebecca.

But his kindness over-rides these considerations – because he’d found the missing plate. It would have been so easy to do nothing about it – but he’d taken the trouble to come to her hotel and hand over her property.

Afterwards, he insists on accompanying her back to town, to the railway station. He carries her suitcase, and she has the rucksack on her back. *All 35 plates!* she thinks, secretly exulting. *All 54 pages.*

While the train stands waiting to depart, she leans out of a window as he stands on the platform. ‘Have you got a boyfriend?’ he asks her.

‘Yes,’ she says.

‘What’s his name?’

‘Patrick.’

‘Do you love him?’

She's surprised by his directness. But she approves of it, and warms to him. 'Yes,' she says.

'Does he live in Norfolk? Where you live?'

'Not now. He's in the army. He's doing his National Service.'

And that's it. As the guard blows his whistle and waves his flag, Rebecca is slightly dazzled by the speed with which people can seek out – and *insist on* – a degree of intimacy, with such brevity.

Comfortably seated, she's tempted to open her packages and savour the joy of the copper plates. But she might drop one and lose it; someone might steal them; anything might happen. But she does study the extra one, the plate that Ted Milford had found. Above the weird swirling lines in the metal blackness she can clearly see the words *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Mirrorwise, reversed for printing. Unlike the first one she'd seen, which was headed only *Innocence*.

Was I telling him the truth when I said I loved Patrick?

Patrick is her first memory. From her earliest days she spent more time with Patrick than with her mother. Or any of the others at Cuckoo Farm.

They did everything together. They had no secrets from one another. They played together, they explored the local fields and woods together. They had baths together, slept together, read books together, went swimming together, told each other their thoughts, and their dreams.

Starting school had been a tragedy, a doom of separation. Patrick first, she a few years later. For hours at a time. But they turned it into a blessing, for at each day's end they talked together about what had happened when they were apart.

Talk, talk, talk!

So now – having found a set (a *complete* set!) of illustrations made by an unknown Blake-lover – what she longs for more than anything else is to tell Patrick about it. And to show him the plates and find out what he thinks. Nothing in her life revealed its meaning fully to Rebecca until she'd told Patrick about it. And now, everything that happens is diminished because she can't do that.

He knew her secrets. Even her guilty ones. He understood her wickedness. Her pride. He never judged her.

But she won't be able tell him about this. He's somewhere in North Wales, being a soldier.

But separation is not the only reason. Even if he'd been still living at the Farm, she knows she couldn't tell him now. And it was a lie, to tell Ted that Patrick was her boyfriend. And that she loved him.

It's not true. He's not – and she can never forgive him. But, contrariwise, his absence is always there, in her life.

She has enough money left for a meal. She's never done this before, so she walks along the train to reconnoitre. There *are* women in the restaurant car, waiting to be served, some already starting on their soup. But not many. And they're all accompanied by a man.

Sod it! she thinks – and takes a seat. By herself, at a table set for four.

Piping down the valleys wild

Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child.
And he laughing said to me.

Pipe a song about a Lamb:
So I piped with merry chear . . .

*

In a college in Cambridge, around two hundred students are waiting for supper in the great hall. At high table, places have been laid for twenty-seven people. The students rise to their feet as the Master sweeps in and walks grandly to his place, followed by the other twenty-six.

All but one of them are Fellows and Tutors of the college, wearing long sweeping gowns. But the last is neither a Fellow nor a Tutor. She is small, aged nine.

She runs a few steps to keep up. But she's not overawed by the occasion, she's done this before. Besides, she's hungry and wants her supper.

When all twenty-seven are standing in their places, the master says Grace. Then there is a great scraping of chairs on the floor, and a rising outburst of talk as the two hundred students at ordinary tables, and the twenty-seven people at high table, take their seats.

College servants hurry in, bringing soup.

Sitting next to the girl is old Doctor Dougal, a professor of mathematics. He leans sideways towards her and says: 'You seem very preoccupied tonight, my dear. May I ask what you're thinking about?'

She would rather not talk about it. Professor Dougal is often muddled, and sometimes he calls her Alice. But she's an open-hearted person and decides to be truthful. 'Mermaids,' she says. 'I was thinking about mermaids.'

'Oh! Do you often think about mermaids?'

'Yes!' the girl replies. 'I would like to see one. Have *you* seen one?'

‘Alas, no!’ Doctor Dougal murmurs. ‘But I once knew someone who did.’

They both turn their attention to the soup, lowering and lifting their spoons in perfect unison, each thinking about mermaids.

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Next day, a group of English students plans to take the college punt upstream to Grantchester in the heat of the afternoon. They’ll have a picnic on the river-bank in the cool of the evening, and punt back to town by moonlight.

‘Would you like to come with us?’ one of them says to Zoe. He’s called Michael. She knows him well. She knows them all.

‘*Oh, yes please!*’

‘Can you swim?’

‘Yes!’ Her father taught her to swim when she was three.

‘Go and get your swimming things then. And meet us down by the river in ten minutes.’

‘Will the others mind?’

‘They will not.’

There are seven students on the boat, cheerfully reaching up to take her hands as she jumps down into it. The girls are in bright summer dresses and the boys have taken off their shirts because of the heat. They all have bare feet. They are bright and happy – and *fun*.

They take it in turns to do the punting – even Zoe has a go, but she isn’t strong enough to lift the pole. They talk happily among themselves, shouting greetings to other punters on the crowded summer river.

There’s a beautiful girl called Jack, with long auburn hair. She takes off her dress, slips into the water, and for a short distance swims effortlessly beside the boat. Michael gazes longingly at her.

When they reach Grantchester and tie up alongside the bank, they all swim in the green silky water.

As the sun sets behind the trees, they sit on rugs on the prickly river-bank, and eat their picnic. There are cucumber sandwiches of

course, also cress, lettuce, marmite, jam, and fish-paste. What a feast! There is champagne too, and Zoe is allowed a small mouthful. Everyone cheers softly as she swallows it.

As darkness falls, someone asks Michael to tell them a story. In his soft Irish voice, he begins a tale about a poor farmer's son who lived on the bank of the River Liffey, and who fell in love with a mermaid. But their love was doomed because there was a cruel spell: if they touched each other, their love would turn to loathing instantly. They'd hate each other for the rest of their lives. The mermaid took off her necklace as a keepsake for him, but all she could do was drop it into his hands, taking care their fingers made not the slightest contact. One light brush of touch and he would hate her at once. And she would hate him.

Zoe shivers at that moment of fearful not-knowing. *Would* she touch him?

Everyone listens enthralled to Michael's sad soft voice. The moon in the sky leans sideways, listening closely. Then – as Zoe gazes dreamily at the polished silver-black surface of the water on the far side of the river – a head rises up in the shadows under the trees, with long hair floating behind.

'*Look!*'

Everyone looks where Zoe is pointing. She knows she will always remember the bare white shoulders, and the raised arm, pale and luminous in the darkening twilight. And how she shivers all over as she stares.

'The mermaid was never seen again,' Michael says. And the figure in the river lowers herself; first her shoulders disappear, then her neck and throat, then her head and the long dark hair, until all that's left is her raised arm, and at last only her hand, sadly waving goodbye.

'The farmer's son lived prosperously ever afterwards,' Michael says. 'But he never fell in love again, and he was *not* especially happy ever after.'

On the surface of the river all that's left is a tender swirl of water where the white hand has gone down, no more than a small curling ripple, quickly swept away on the quiet flow of the river.

They all hold their breath, watching the place where the girl sank. But she doesn't resurface.

'Where's Jack?' someone says.

There's the sound of scrabbling and scrambling at the water's edge by the punt, and there is Jack – naked – climbing onto the bank. Michael goes over to her and drapes her in a towel.

Jack sits down beside Zoe and starts to dry her long auburn hair with the towel. She's shivering and her pale skin is goose-pimpled. 'Did you mind that it was me?'

'No,' Zoe says. She'd known all along that the mermaid was Jack. Of course she had! They'd all known. And yet for a few magical moments there really was a mermaid in the river. She wonders how she can *believe* one thing and *know* something different at the same time.

But she knows with absolute certainty that she will always long to see a real mermaid. *It is my doom,* she tells herself.

In the darkness they pack up their things and punt back to town along the silent river. All the other boating people have gone home long ago.

At first, they sing songs. Then they talk quietly. Then they fall silent. That's where Zoe's memories stop, because she falls asleep on one of the big cushions, curled up like a child waiting to be born, dreaming of mermaids.

When they reach the college, the students lift her up to Michael. He ignores the notice that tells everyone not to walk on the grass and goes straight across with the sleeping Zoe in his arms – into the cloisters, and up the stairs to her father's rooms. Michael is a rule-breaker.

She doesn't wake up. He takes off her sandals and puts her to bed as she is.

She doesn't remember any of that. They tell her about it next day.

*

But a few days later, the students all leave for the vacation. The college is dull and empty, and Zoe feels a longing for Cuckoo Farm. And for her Aunt Polly.

It feels urgent.

This happens sometimes. Especially when all the students suddenly go away.

She speaks to her father, and he does what he's always done, ever since she was about five. He's never grumbled about it. He telephones Aunt Polly, takes Zoe to the railway station, buys her a ticket, ties a luggage label round her neck with her name and destination written on it, and hands her into the care of the train guard.

He will do that this time too, except for the luggage label. She's nearly ten years old, she reminds him. She doesn't need a label any more. She just has to make sure she gets off the train at Stanton St Mary's.

She knows her aunt will be waiting at the station. They will hug each other happily and set off to Cuckoo Farm. Sometimes Zoe goes for a weekend, sometimes for just a few days. And sometimes for the whole school holiday.

But this time she thinks she might stay. For good.

That evening, before supper, the Master – who has never once spoken to Zoe – makes an announcement to the remaining members of the College.

'Tomorrow, Zoe Whittaker will be leaving us to take up residence in Norfolk. As a mark of our affection, I am inviting her to say the College Grace.'

Not a word of warning. Typical!

Zoe does not lower her face, she lifts it high. And in a clear confident voice she speaks the words out – faultlessly – into the great cavernous space.

'Oculi omnium in te sperant, Domine. . .'

They all take their seats. The Master murmurs to Dr Whittaker: 'She's had a good Latin tutor. Who is he?'

'She hasn't had a Latin tutor,' he says, slightly stunned. 'Not as far as I know.'

At Stanton Station next day, Zoe asks her aunt if Rebecca will be at the Farm.

'I think so. She's been to Newcastle. But she's coming home tonight, I believe. Later.'

Good! Zoe likes Rebecca. She wonders whether she can talk to her about mermaids. *But what was she doing in Newcastle?*

'And Patrick will be home on leave,' her aunt says.

'Is he there now?' she asks.

'He's due to arrive tonight. By the last train, I think. Cressida's going to be here too, I believe. For the weekend.'

Zoe likes Cressida. She likes them all.

*

Rebecca, home from Newcastle, doesn't see Patrick until the next morning, walking up from his father's cottage, approaching the Farm.

He's wearing his army uniform. Already, he's been made a lance-bombardier, and he wants everyone to see the stripe on each arm. He's inordinately proud of them. And above each one are the crossed coloured flags that tell the world he's a trained signaller in the Royal Artillery.

Why is he in uniform? Rebecca dislikes the look of him as a soldier. The almost shaven head, the lines on his face sharper. *And who cares about his stupid stripe?*

In the good days, before it went wrong, he hardly ever slept at his dad's cottage. He spent all his time at the Farm. He and Rebecca had calmly taken possession of three rooms and more-or-less made them into their private suite, with its own gas-ring, and a toilet. And a notice in childish writing saying PRIVATE. The rooms weren't needed for anyone else. The Farm always had some spares. So nobody minded, nobody bothered them there.

Naomi is in the kitchen, with Rebecca, when Patrick walks in. Everyone else has gone to work and the other children are all at school. And there are no under-fives left now.

Rebecca smiles briefly at Patrick and says hello. He smiles at her and says hello back.

And that's all. Rebecca doesn't know what to say, or what to feel. Outwardly, they're two young people who don't know each other very well. She's been dreading this, and it's every bit as bad as she feared. She sits opposite him at the table – but they might as well be strangers.

And yet – once – for all the years of their lives, they'd been inseparable, *joined at the hip*, people said. It had nothing to do with *hips*, Rebecca thought. They were joined in *every way*. All their moments of contentment, of sadness, of fear even, had been felt together. Her desires were his concerns. His were hers. When they were apart, each was a voyager to a foreign place, an adventurer travelling to a distant outpost, to report back when they were together again.

Was it happiness they'd shared? Rebecca believes it was more than that. It wasn't innocence, that was for sure. She's under no illusions about *that*! They'd committed – she in particular – many acts of wickedness. Small crimes, one serious crime, and elaborate deceptions to protect themselves from consequences. Lies galore!

But they'd never lied to each other. There were no secrets, no deceptions. And no reticence. Total disclosure, total understanding, each with each.

They were not alike, it wasn't similarity that united them. But the differences between them were accepted, even savoured, matters of intense interest. *Difference* was the subject of their sentence.

If they'd stayed as they had been, the things they might have gone on to do! Until the day it stopped. *I couldn't forgive him. There was no way back.*

She has brought to the kitchen six of the copper plates, to show whoever is at breakfast. But only Naomi and Patrick are there, and then Rebecca's mum, Olivia, joins them, home for a long weekend.

And young Zoe arrives too. She's had breakfast with her aunt and is now in search of company. Naomi gives her a welcoming hug.

So it's not quite the way Rebecca had envisaged it. Not much of an audience, a bit of an anti-climax in fact. Naomi and Olivia know nothing about William Blake, except that Rebecca is studying him for A Level. They sense her excitement, but she knows they're interested only because she is. They don't understand.

'*How* much did you say you paid for them?'

Patrick reaches across the table and picks up each plate in turn. He studies them carefully, but says nothing. When Rebecca tells them about the auction, he feels jealous.

But jealous of what? The auctioneer? Is he jealous of Newcastle because she seems to have liked it there? He has surprised himself – because in the six months since he started his National Service, he's hardly thought about Rebecca at all. This is a shocking realisation. Yet now, he's in a state of secret outrage because she enjoyed herself in Newcastle, without him.

The muted response to her Blake plates is a disappointment to Rebecca. 'I'm going to cycle into Stanton and show them to Jessica,' she says. 'Her dad's a printer,' she explains in an aside to Zoe.

'Can I come?' Zoe asks eagerly.

Rebecca agrees at once. She and Zoe have always got on well, despite their age difference. Probably because all the other friends in Zoe's life have been undergraduates, not children her own age.

'Is Cressida here?' Patrick asks.

'Yes. She arrived late last night. She's having a lie-in.'

*

'What's wrong?'

Olivia always knows when her sister is unhappy. But she doesn't know why.

Naomi shrugs, and grimaces. Dismissive.

Everyone else has left, and the two of them have moved outside, in the morning sunshine.

'Is it because of Patrick and Rebecca?'

'They do make me sad,' Naomi says. But her tone makes it clear there's something else. Something bigger.

‘Did you ever find out what happened?’

Naomi shakes her head. ‘Neither of them said a word to me.’

‘Nor to me,’ Olivia says. *And I’m her mother!*

Young Rebecca – who never held back if she wanted to know something, or if she had something to tell – hadn’t breathed a word about what had happened that afternoon. They can both remember the first few days, everyone going about as if bare-foot on broken glass, without knowing why. And Rebecca dry-eyed, white-faced, and clearly heart-broken. Saying nothing.

Patrick was less of a talker, but even he usually said openly what was on his mind, eventually, either to Naomi or to Olivia. It didn’t matter which of them, they were both mothers to him. But on that occasion he went around in silence. Locked up in unhappiness.

And they’ve kept it up for five years!

‘Do you think it was sex?’

‘Rebecca was only eleven. Surely not?’

‘But he was fourteen.’

‘If they hadn’t fallen out, Rebecca would probably have had a baby by now. The way they were going.’

Oh, if only she had! Naomi thinks shamelessly. She’s briefly gripped by her old longing.

Neither of them would have shared these thoughts with anyone else. But Olivia thinks her sister is wrong about this. ‘No, I don’t think that would have happened. Rebecca knew all about sex and babies before she was eight! Don’t you remember when the vicar came to tea . . ?’

They smile at the memory. The local vicar had arrived one day, for tea. He was a little uneasy, there were rumours about odd things going on at Cuckoo Farm. Somehow, they started talking about babies, and Rebecca had asked him if he’d like to be told how they were made. Expecting to hear about storks and gooseberry bushes, the vicar said *Yes, please* – so Rebecca explained it all for him, in vivid and accurate biological detail.

It was funny at the time.

‘Whatever went wrong with them,’ Naomi says, ‘I hate the fact that it happened. They were perfect together.’

‘Yes. They were.’

That topic seems to have come to an end. But the other lies waiting. Deferred, still to be faced.

‘Nice to see little Zoe again,’ Naomi says.

‘Yes,’ Olivia says. ‘But she’s not especially *little* any more.’

‘Apparently, she intends to stay this time. Permanently.’

‘How does Polly feel about that?’

‘I think she’s very happy.’

They discuss Zoe and her aunt, gently adjusting to this slight change in the domestic and economic life of the Farm. One more room will now be occupied.

‘But she’s nearly ten,’ Naomi says – and there’s an almost undetectable lamentation in her voice. Only someone very attentive would pick it up. Or someone who has known her since childhood.

‘So there *is* something wrong.’

Naomi doesn’t reply. But her silence is the sort that says, yes, but you have to ask.

So Olivia does. ‘Why is Zoe’s age making you unhappy?’

‘Because she’s almost ten – and there’s only one younger person here now.’

Ah, yes. Now I get it! Understanding floods into Olivia’s mind. Naomi dislikes living in a house without babies. There aren’t even any toddlers now! And Naomi is bereft. Old age beckons, baby-less. Years of it, perhaps!

This is the well-spring of all Naomi’s energies, all her joy. Olivia knows this. Being able to give sanctuary and love to children who are unhappy, or scared, or lonely, has been the deep source of Naomi’s emotional life.

That was why she suddenly took off and went to join the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. That was over twenty years ago. Others went too, of course, thousands of them, but they went for political reasons. Or just because they wanted an adventure. But Naomi? No, *she* went because she was concerned about all the Spanish children caught up in the war.

It all comes back to Olivia, pouring into her thoughts in a fraction of a second. They’d tried to talk Naomi out of it, to convince

her she wasn't made of the right stuff for warfare. But she'd been determined. She hadn't argued – she just made her plans and went to Spain!

And we expected her to come straight back in a state of shock. But she'd stayed for a year and a half, until the war ended. And she was right in the thick of it!

The things she witnessed there! The things she had to do!

Eventually, the two sisters had children of their own, born during WW2. Olivia first, with Rebecca. And later Naomi had her two boys, Charles (already at secondary school) and little Edgar. *He* is a very self-sufficient little boy. He needs no-one.

Peter had turned up one day, during the War, in search of somewhere to live. He was stationed at a local RAF airbase. He had a small son, but no wife. The boy was Patrick. When he was demobbed, Peter became a Postman.

Other children, from the village and the surrounding countryside, came and went when they pleased. They liked the atmosphere at the Farm, and there was always someone to play with, and usually something to eat. And no-one ever got told off.

Grandfather had been there too. He used to read stories to any children who happened to be around. *There were children everywhere!* They both remember.

But time slips by so quickly, without being noticed, and Edgar will be moving into the top junior class later this year. And as for young Zoe – well, she's lovely to have around, but she can hardly be said to be in need of sanctuary.

'I'm glad Zoe's here,' Naomi says. 'But she doesn't *need* us!'

So that's it! I should have known. Olivia had assumed that Naomi's need had quietly died away over the years – but it clearly hasn't. It seems to have sharpened into an acute and chronic anguish.

She remembers once, when everyone was gathered for Christmas, someone had carelessly suggested they should all describe the single most significant moments in their lives. And there were a few who did that, though of course no one could know who

was telling the truth. When it was Naomi's turn, someone said: 'Well, it's obvious, isn't it. She doesn't have to say it!'

Naomi had looked startled. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, you're married. Obviously, your most significant moment was your wedding day.'

'Or wedding *night*,' someone had said.

Probably only Olivia noticed. The witticism, and the laughter that followed it, provided cover for Naomi. She was able to deflect the talk away from her without anyone noticing that she'd not answered the question. So Olivia doesn't know what her sister's most significant memory is.

But she'd wondered.

Naomi doesn't have to think about it. She *knows*. And she also knows that she wouldn't have hurt her husband's feelings. Not for the world.

*

The two girls arrive at Stanton, Zoe riding Aunt Polly's old bike, and Rebecca on one of the ancient creaking machines kept at the Farm for anyone's use.

Jessica's dad is the local commercial printer in Stanton St Mary's, and Rebecca's intention is to persuade him to print one or two of the plates. *All* of them perhaps. And Jessica agrees, Rebecca knew she would.

At the bottom of Jessica's backyard there's a long one-storey building, old and shabby. It's Mr Burnside's print-shop. It had been a busy place before the War, but in 1940 it closed down because all three of the men were called up. And afterwards it remained closed for another five years because Mr Burnside had been a prisoner-of-war on the other side of the world – and when he came home he was ill and close to death.

While he was away, the young Jessica had colonised her father's print-shop and made it her own, often sharing with Rebecca. Entering it was like going into an enchanted and benevolent fairy-

tale. Ancient cobwebs – weighted with dust – hung high in the corrugated roof-tiles. Some of the tiles were made of thick glass to let in the light. There were mysterious tools on dusty shelves, and enormous racks of type-trays with magical names like *Gill Sans Serif* and *Times Roman 14pt*. High on the walls were whole alphabets of letters made of wood, six inches high some of them. Rosy and polished with years of use.

Then there were the machines, silent like living creatures asleep. One was a small printing press that opened and closed when you treadled it. Next to it was a press as big as a car. This was their favourite, with its name on a brass plate – *WHARFEDALE*. They made up stories about a magical valley called Wharfedale.

A memory unfolds in Rebecca's mind. One wet day – she can't remember why – she'd been left alone in the print-room, waiting for Jess to come back. They were about seven years old, perhaps eight. She'd leaned softly against the enormous fly-wheel on the side of the Wharfedale. And as she leaned, the wheel shifted slightly, and the machine spoke to her.

Just a short-lived grunt of clunking metal. *Hello Rebecca*.

The world shivered a little. She spun round and stared at the wheel. 'Shall I turn it?' she whispered. Outside, the rain pattered into the silence, ran down the tiles, and dribbled softly down drainpipes. Inside the print-shop everything waited.

Shall I? she thought. *I don't see why not*, the Wharfedale said.

Rebecca faced the fly-wheel. It was taller than she was. She took a grip on it with both hands, and heaved. The wheel went round more easily than she'd expected and the inside of the machine came instantly to life.

A big flat-bed of solid steel grunted and slid inside the machine from one end to the other, and back again; the cylinder across the top went round; another cylinder above it went round in the opposite direction; and a drive-belt that connected the press to a motor high up on the wall started to move, rustling softly, and spilling delicate skeins of dust.

Tiny grey Northern Lights, floating down.

Hmphh! said the Wharfedale.

So Rebecca did it again, only this time she kept it going. Dozens of small mechanisms inside the machine greeted one another. They'd come back to life and were working together – clicking softly, clanking loudly, thumping, sighing, breathing. The Wharfedale murmured its song, with a deep-throated panting rhythm which Rebecca knew she would always remember.

Then Jessica came back and Rebecca confessed what she'd done. So they did it again, both of them. 'What did the Wharfedale say to you?'

'*I don't see why not.'*

Rebecca remembers that Jessica had shivered as if someone had walked over her grave. 'My dad was always saying that,' she whispered.

Something magical lives here, Rebecca thought. She felt she'd been given an invitation.

But where to?

Jessica's dad had recovered, eventually. And he'd come home and reopened his printing business. Rebecca likes him, and he greets her warmly.

'Dad! Becky's got something she wants you to see.'

So some of the plates are unwrapped, laid out on the board at the end of the Wharfedale, and Mr Burnside inspects them. His new apprentice and his surviving pre-War employee edge up close, to see.

Rebecca's question receives an emphatic *No*. Mr Burnside can't print them. He's a letterpress printer, and his machines are not designed to print plates like these.

'But you do print pictures,' she says.

Yes, that's true. *Blocks* he calls them, and there are dozens of them carefully stored in a chest of shallow drawers. They are pictures made of smooth metal, mostly copper, each mounted on a wooden base, type-high. Some of them are wood-engravings, carved in the surface of small blocks of hard wood. As youngsters, the two girls had spent hours looking at them.

But they're very different from the Blake plates. 'You would need a hand-press for plates like these,' he explains. 'And you'd have to

find a fine-art printer. But where did you get them?'

When he's told the whole story, he's incredulous. 'You have all of them?'

'Yes.'

'A complete set?'

'I think so.'

'But who made them?' Jess asks.

'I have no idea!' her dad says. 'How could anyone tell?'

An idea hangs in the air for a moment. 'Could William Blake have made them?' Rebecca says. She's never been afraid of outlandish thoughts. Or speaking them.

But he is dismissive. 'No, they won't be his.'

'But his name is on two of the plates.'

'That doesn't mean he put it there.'

'And he *was* an engraver.'

'Maybe he was. But the originals will be in a museum somewhere. Or a gallery. Not in a backstreet auction in Newcastle!'

'Do you think I could find out?'

'I don't see why not,' he says.

Afterwards, the three girls sit outside in the sun, drinking lemonade in the back yard. Mrs Burnside sits with them. From time to time a bell rings inside the house and she hurries indoors to serve a customer in her stationery shop at the front.

Zoe has remained silent most of the time. But now she speaks out. 'My dad knows about William Blake,' she says.

Jess knows nothing about Zoe's father. But Becky does. 'He teaches Shakespeare,' she says.

'Not just Shakespeare,' Zoe says. 'There's not enough Shakespeare to fill all his teaching – so he teaches other writers as well.'

'Including William Blake?'

'Yes.'

A trip to Cambridge then?

But that won't be necessary. Apparently Zoe's dad is coming to visit. Next week, to spend a few days with his sister and his daughter.

Zoe is very excited by this, Rebecca can tell.

*

On Saturday mornings the commune at Cuckoo Farm comes to life slowly.

People are coming down for breakfast in dressing-gowns, others going out for the day, shopping.

No children.

Cressida doesn't appear until around eleven, makes herself some toast and tea, and brings it outside to sit with the others, savouring the silence and the fresh warm sun.

At first, there's only Naomi and Olivia. The girls have cycled into Stanton.

They chat lazily, unhurriedly, in a desultory way. About her new house in London, and her new job. She'd worked in the local library from the time she left school, until about a year ago. But now she lives in London, trying something different.

But it occurs to Naomi that Cressida seems a little dimmed, a tad subdued, and this is unlike her.

Olivia loves Cressie, she's very pleased she's back. But Naomi? – well, what she feels is beyond pleasure. It's a kind of affirmation. Cressida has been her golden girl ever since she arrived one evening in 1940, at the start of the blitz, alone, only four years old. And unaccompanied.

I'm Cressida. I've come because of the bombs.

Naomi's memories of that day are never far from her conscious thoughts. Always within reach. The September sun had been setting, she recalls, swallows and martins gathering in the sky.

There'd been a label round her neck.

Cressida Elizabeth Wiseman

to
Cuckoo Farm.

On the back, Cressida's distraught mother had written:

Please take care of Cressida.

Tears were close. Naomi – overwhelmed with desire for this vulnerable and exposed child – had lifted Cressida from the ground and enclosed her in her body, stroking the back of her head. It was a revelation, an epiphany, a fragment of understanding about herself, exposed. *New* knowledge. Conclusive and uncompromising.

This is what I do! It's what I'm for!

'When will I see Mummy again?'

'I don't know, sweetheart! But we'll look after you. Everyone likes it here.'

The most significant moment of Naomi's life was not her wedding-day. Nor her wedding-night. Though they were both happily memorable.

'Cressie, you seem a little subdued. Is everything all right?'

'I'm fine!' Cressida says carelessly. But Naomi is not deceived.

They talk about other things. The morning moves on, until eventually Olivia asks about Mr Brackendale.

'How's your Mr B?' she says.

And *that* question – cast carelessly on the surface of the conversation – catches the truth.

'He's getting married,' Cressida says.

Once she's started, Cressida doesn't hold back. She rarely feels the need to be evasive or secretive with the sisters. These are the people she'd adopted as her family, especially Naomi.

They know why Mr B matters to Cressida. When she was nine the War ended and she'd gone back to London. It was the start of several years of almost relentless unhappiness. Her mother had died, and she was expected to run the household – *everything*. Her father – who later turned out *not* to be her father anyway – was useless, manipulative, and unkind.

But she'd been befriended by the man who lived next-door, a one-eyed, unmarried private detective. Most people would have thought he was an unpromising surrogate parent, a totally unsuitable companion in fact, but the two of them became close. He was her only comfort and support through those post-war years. She came to love him, and he certainly loved her.

His name was Brackendale. Mr B for short.

And he's getting married to one of his former clients, Cressida tells them. A young woman called Bradley.

'She's the manager of a local dress-shop. She's thirty-six.'

Olivia does the questioning. 'Do you like her?'

Cressida says yes, she does. And she apparently means it. 'Very much, in fact.' No one disbelieves her, Cressie is one of life's truth-tellers.

'But it's making you unhappy?'

'Well, I don't show it, I hope. And it's not what you'd call *serious*. I'm not *suicidal* about it.'

They wait. 'I just wish he wouldn't do it.'

She's a little guarded, watching Naomi for her reaction to this news. Naomi had known Mr B too, ages ago, in Spain, before she was married. No one knows how close they were.

'Are you jealous?' Olivia says. 'Unconsciously perhaps? It would be understandable.'

But Cressida shakes her head sadly, she has asked herself this already. *I don't want to marry him myself. And I certainly don't want to sleep with him. So why would I be . . ?*

She explains all this – and they know her well enough to believe she's telling the truth, at least as far as she's capable of understanding it.

'*But . . ?*'

'It makes me feel. . .'

They wait.

'*Lonely*,' she says. 'That's it! I'm lonely – as if I've lost him. I'm not the most important person in his life any more.'

She is satirical, self-mocking. 'I was the woman in his life!' she cries. 'It's so stupid – but I feel *rejected*. And *cast out*.'

'It's not stupid,' Olivia says. 'It's just plain *selfish*! Why shouldn't he marry someone if he's found the right one? What right have *you* got to want him not to?'

Typical of Olivia. She never minces her words. But her voice is always deceptively gentle.

'Didn't you tell him you'd chosen him to be your adoptive father?'

This is true. When she was sixteen Cressida told Mr B she'd adopted him to be her father. There was nothing legal, or even sensible, about such an arrangement, but he'd been immensely moved.

Cressida smiles a little at the memory of her 16-year-old self.

'Yes. Why?' *What's she getting at?*

'Any daughter might feel that way if her father announces he's getting married again.'

I suppose that's right. But Cressida doesn't see how it helps.

'Has Patrick arrived?' she says.

'Yes. He was up early. He went off for a walk – into the woods, I think.'

'*He* seemed a bit sad too,' Naomi says. 'About something.'

Rebecca joins them. She too is pleased to see Cressida again, but her mind is preoccupied, constantly reverting to the 35 copper plates that might, or might not, have been engraved by William Blake. She doesn't permit herself to fret with impatience about this, but she's counting the days until Zoe's father comes to stay. And she intends to show the plates to Cressida later.

Can a mother sit and hear
An infant groan and infant fear –
No no never can it be,
Never never can it be.

*

Patrick, home on leave, had spent most of the previous day in his room, sleeping a good deal of the time.

He'd considered visiting his school – he knows he'd be welcomed there. But they'd all be too busy to spend more than a moment or two with him. Their timetabled life would move quickly on – and then what would he do? Where would he go? The staff room? The sixthform common room? There'd be no place for him. And, anyway, most of his friends from sixth form have left; they're either doing their National Service too, or they've started a job, or they're at university.

So today he is at a loss. What he wants most is to *talk*. He wants to tell them – all the people in his life! – about being shut in hell for three months. What it was like, and how it ended! He hadn't known that's what he wants, but the moment his eyes fell on Rebecca – newly arrived home from Newcastle with her mysterious copper plates – the need had arisen in him to tell *her* about it. He wants her to know how cowed and wretched his shrunken heart had become in those first few months in the army. His desire is not just to tell her, but to *force* an understanding of this into her thoughts. Only her attentiveness and sympathy can assuage his humiliation and shame.

When he had something important to tell her in the old days, she would stop what she was doing and gaze into his eyes, serious and devotedly focused. Hardly moving a muscle until he'd finished. He felt that every inch of her – even her toes if he could have seen them! – was paying attention, refusing to be distracted until he'd done.

No one had such a capacity to *focus* as Rebecca! Mostly, that focus had been on him.

He has no mother to talk to, but he's never been conscious of that as a lack. He could talk to his father about it, he knows, but it would be a curtailed and clipped man-to-man account, insubstantial and unworthy, probably with jokes and laughter, somehow missing the main truth. His speaking self would appear erect and firmly in control – but the reality he needs to talk about is of a crouched and dwarfish version of himself. Intimidated, appalled, disillusioned.

So – at a bit of a loss, not knowing how to spend the second precious day of his leave – Patrick sets off in the late-morning sunshine to walk through the woods, to the small brick house where they had spent so much time. Years ago, when they'd been young.

He's surprised to find that the green-shadowed footpath through the trees, the long narrow footbridge over the disused quarry, and the overgrown little one-roomed house, are filling him with nostalgia.

What *is* this feeling? He's never had it before. He and Rebecca often longed for something in the future, some great private joy of their own, perhaps, such as a plan for the first day of the school holidays. But to long for the irretrievable past! It's totally irrational, he's amazed by himself.

A river flows close to the front of the little house. On hot days, they used to strip off and wade in. He, Rebecca, and Cressida, all three of them, lying or splashing in the cool freshwater. *And we fished here, too,* he recalls, *with jam-jars and nets*.

They'd been enfolded by – what? – innocence? No, he thinks, not that. He has no illusions about innocence. It was *safety* they'd enjoyed – a deep abiding sense that no harm would ever come to them. And nothing would change.

Well, he knows better now.

They'd been safe with each other, safe in the world, safe even in time. Cressida had been sixteen, and he was twelve. He'd gazed at her openly and joyously, without embarrassment, and she hadn't minded at first.

In the army he'd thought a great deal about her. She was his standard of loveliness. Privately and without shame, it was Cressida he thought about to arouse himself. He has some snapshots, black-and-white, creased and dog-eared. In two of them she has nothing on. He'd taken the pictures openly, here beside the stream. There'd been nothing surreptitious about it. She'd known and didn't mind. He wishes he'd taken more.

But he'd overstepped the mark, following her into bathrooms, bedrooms, everywhere he got the chance.

Later, he recalls, she took him to task about it. He cringes a little at the memory of her rage, an angry lesson in personal privacy. She'd been magisterial and controlled. Fierce beyond all resistance.

And then, a year or so later, he'd lost Rebecca too. He'd shut the door on her. Irrevocably.

I lost them both, he thinks.

He hears someone coming through the trees. He sees, with a sharp leap of his heart, that it's Cressida, her blue skirt swinging with each step.

She's followed me here. On the day he left to report for National Service, she'd been long gone, and was living in London. So he hasn't seen her for more than a year.

Her face is smiling and bright and joyous. She hurries eagerly forward and takes him in a wide-armed and generous hug. It contains everything they've been to one another, from when he was twelve. All those years! He knows that taking him in her arms shows her good nature, her pleasure at seeing him again. But he can detect no sex in it. Not the tiniest hint, and no promise of it, no offer.

Patrick is not affronted by this. He's never had assumptions about male entitlement. You don't, when you're brought up surrounded by intelligent women.

There's another thing! She's moved out in front of him now, way ahead. She's twenty-four, with a job and a house in London. *He's* at the start of his National Service, along with thousands of overgrown schoolboys.

He is alone in his world.

'You've taken your shoes and socks off!' she says gently. 'Were you thinking of having a dip?'

'Just my feet. It's freezing, believe me!'

He wonders what's going through her mind. Does she ever think of those days when they were young and unselfconscious? Is she recalling them *now*? *This minute?* Or has she set it aside as something of no importance? Or just forgotten it? And anyway, does any of it *matter* to her?

He wants to know because it matters to *him*. But he can't ask.

She goes into the little house, where there used to be a couple of old wooden chairs. She brings them out and they sit side by side, together, facing the sun.

Unexpectedly, she says: 'What happened between you and Rebecca?'

He flushes. And he knows she will have noticed.

'We fell out,' he says.

'Of course you fell out! We all knew that! But *what was it about*? What happened?'

But he can't tell her. He stammers a few meaningless words.

'Whose fault was it?'

'Mine,' he says at once. 'But she could have been more forgiving.'

'Was it sex?' she says softly. 'Did you try . . ?'

He flushes again. '*No!*' he says, almost shouting. 'She was hardly more than a child!'

Cressida knows when to stop. He can't – or won't – say more about it.

'Sorry,' she says. 'I care about you, you know. And besides, I'm very nosy. After all, think about the way we used to be. You and I and Rebecca. We had no secrets from each other then.'

So she *does* think about the past! But what does she know about his secrets?

She changes the subject. 'Tell me about the army, what's it like?'

But he can't tell her about that either. Of course he can't! He'd already known he would never tell the story to his father. And he will never tell Naomi or Olivia about it.

And – apparently – he can't tell Cressida either.

It has to be Rebecca.

Cressida's thoughts are moving along a different course, more homely. 'Come on!' she says. 'We need to get back for lunch.'

Lunch! It used to be dinner, now it's *lunch*. Everything changes, he thinks bitterly, nothing stays the same. Even words change their meanings!

And yet not everything is different. On their way back through the trees, she tucks her arm in his, and he briefly presses it against

his body. They share a sideways smile of recognition.

He was always a really lovely boy, she thinks. *She's glad to find he still is*.

*

Patrick had been called up for his military service the previous autumn. Within an hour of arriving at the training regiment, he'd known it was going to be purgatory. There were milling crowds of confused young men, shouted at, herded into squads, queuing for uniforms, for mess-tins, and blankets, bullied into barrack rooms, and allocated beds.

On the parade ground they were taught how to salute, how to march in step, how to halt, turn right, turn left. There was physical training in the gym every day. *Run by savage little sadists*, he recalls.

Patrick has only confused memories of the first two weeks. At the end of it they were allocated to different regiments for their main basic training. Eight more weeks of it. *Eight weeks!* He was posted to Tonfanau in West Wales, an anti-aircraft training regiment. It was November, wet, grey, depressing.

It meant eight more weeks of hell, he quickly discovered.

Hell on the square, where they refined their parade skills: presenting arms, dressing to the left or right, changing step on the march, eyes right, eyes left, eyes front. The forty members of his squad had to learn how to perfect each move in crisp synchronised unison. Forty metal heel-steps in one exact click. Every bloody step! Coming to attention required a precise crash of boots in unison. If it was muffled, or messy, there'd be some punishment for the whole squad.

And all the time shouted at, scoffed at, blamed. Usually with obscenities – *you're about as useless as a floppy prick! If you can't hold that fucking rifle properly I'll ram the bloody thing up your arse!*

But the ultimate sneer was always the one about clever posh boys. Boys with *school cert*. If one of the squaddies dropped his rifle, or turned left when everyone turned right, or fell out of step,

the instructor would stop everything. He'd go right up close, and push his face almost into the offender's.

'*School cert?*' he'd say. They all knew the routine.

Most of them had no qualifications of any kind, but there were a few who'd gone to university before they did National Service. They were graduates, older than the others – and there were two Ph.D.s. But it made no difference. There was always the same derision, the same sneer.

School cert? I thought so!

The school certificate had been abolished anyway, and replaced with GCEs, but the army didn't seem to have caught up with that information.

Endless humiliation. Marching for hours, standing to attention in the rain, a vengeful bombardier who marched his squad to the NAAFI for the morning tea break and made them stand to attention outside for twenty minutes, so that when they were allowed in they were at the back of the queue – and he would give the command to fall in again, outside. Immediately. *Now! Not next bloody Christmas! Move your arses!*

No tea break then. This happened almost every morning.

They had a few classes in wooden huts. And sessions on the rifle range, firing .303s, a terrifying and deafening experience. Sten guns too had to be fired, and dismantled, cleaned, reassembled.

They had a few sessions on the beach, where there were anti-aircraft gun-placements. An unlucky pilot from a nearby airbase had to fly back and forth along the coast, towing a target. Five trainees to a gun, each with a role to play. Then an enormous deafening explosion.

That poor bloody pilot is ***towing*** *the target, not fucking* ***pushing*** *it!*

The target never got hit. Nor did the plane, fortunately.

And there was bayonet practice – fixing the bayonet, running with it, aiming at the cartoon Nazi target-bag, sticking the bloody thing in. And because they all hated what they were doing, they hated the target too, and found unknown depths of savagery in themselves.

What is a soldier? Tell me someone, what is a bloody soldier?

Silence. No one was taking any risks.

I'll tell you then. A soldier is a HIRED ASSASSIN TRAINED TO KILL, MAIM AND DESTROY.

Now. Repeat after me. A SOLDIER IS A HIRED ASSASSIN . . .

But the worst of it was that there was no respite. Every minute of the day was controlled by the NCOs, a ruthless and relentless bullying that gave no peace. Patrick felt as if his mind had been penetrated and violent intruders were smashing through his secret spaces. His life so far had depended on hours of time for thinking, dreaming, watching, reading. But not any more. Every bit of mental space had been taken possession of.

And it exposed him to himself, his fears, his cowardice, his cruelty, his growing suspicion and cynicism.

The evenings were supposed to be free. But there was nowhere to go, and besides you had your bulling to do. Your brass cap-badge had to be polished and worn a little smoother every night, your buttons were all brass too, and they had to be cleaned. And woe betide you if you got brasso on your uniform. You had to learn how to make your boot-caps shine like French-polish, your uniform had to be pressed smooth, with creases as sharp as a knife-blade. The cap-badge took thirty minutes, the boots almost an hour. Every night, for the next morning's inspection, they sat on their beds and worked, with their cleaning kit spread about on the covers.

By the time they'd finished, they had no energy for anything else, and were thankful to get into bed. Every evening, he planned to have a read, but he was too exhausted and fell asleep straightaway.

He was banished from reading-land.

There were men from every walk of life. Most were barely literate, some completely illiterate. He was asked to write letters home for them: sometimes he took down their dictation, sometimes he was asked to compose the wording. There were six or seven public schoolboys too. They were friendly but uncomprehending. They took it all in their stride, they'd all belonged to cadet regiments at their schools. And, besides, they knew that at the end of basic

training they'd be off to the Officer Selection Board. They would become second lieutenants, and start running things and giving orders.

At around nine o'clock, quietness would descend on the weary barrack-room. There was one guy who always knelt at his bed and said his prayers. There was some subdued mocking, but mostly he was left alone. There would be another, writing a hurried letter home. And perhaps there'd be some desultory talk.

Then they slept, exhausted.

And at six o'clock next morning, it would all start again.

. . . And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

2

The Voices of Children

In the cool of the evening, old John Whitehead settles himself in the wooden armchair by his bedroom window. He watches the children playing – rounders, or tag, or just messing about on the swing. Until recently, he used to spend most of his summer evenings outside, sitting under the tree with a few elderly friends from the village, watching the children, and remembering his own boyhood.

Now he watches from an upstairs window, from a distance. He finds it hard to get about these days.

He's saddened by this. It's partly because he finds climbing stairs so difficult. He tells himself he'll go to the pub later, but he knows he probably won't.

There's one child missing. He's noticed. She's called Ellie Bassett. He used to watch her specially, he warmed to her for some reason.

He feels sorry for her because she's a bit of a loner, though her little brother sometimes comes out with her. But she doesn't seem to know how to play, or how to join in. The others keep clear of her most of the time, he's not sure why. If he'd been a youngster, he'd want her for a friend.

Someone – years ago – fixed up a swing under the big oak-tree. Just two lengths of rope and a wooden seat. It was there seventy-odd years ago, when John was a boy, but the ropes have been replaced a couple of times. The seat too probably, but he can't remember.

He'd enjoyed watching Ellie on the swing. It was her favourite thing to do. She had a rapt expression on her face as she swung on the upward rise into the fading light of the clear and innocent evening. And then, at the brief high point, she seemed to glimpse a different world. Lovely and bright, but lost in a second as her fall began. A world where you might just hear the distant horns of

elfland. He'd learnt that poem when he was boy, in the school across the green.

The village schoolmistress is crossing the grass and approaching his front door. She sees him up at his window and waves. A moment later he hears her knock. She doesn't need to do that, but she's polite.

He shouts 'Come on up!'

This has happened before. She's a nice young woman in her late fifties, and she's taken to calling on him from time to time. Sometimes she goes into the pub first and gets him a pint of Adnams. Women don't go into pubs on their own, as a rule. And he knows she never goes in for herself. But she apparently doesn't mind going up to the bar and ordering a pint to carry across the green to his cottage.

He used to be a regular there. Every night, for an hour or two. Then he'd come back to his empty widowed house at around ten. But that's all stopped now. His right knee keeps giving way, sending him headlong wherever he happens to be.

And if he does fall over, he finds if hard to get to his feet without help.

So he stays put most of the time. And watches the boys and girls on the green.

He's embarrassed by the commode in the corner. He knows Miss Babbington will have seen one before, she'll know what it is. But still he dislikes it being there.

He drinks a few sips. *She spilt some of it on the way over. But I'm not going to grumble, she's a good sort.* He stands the drink on his window-sill, looks thoughtfully out onto the green, and asks Miss Babbington if Ellie Bassett is ill. 'I haven't seen her for over a week.'

Her face clouds over. 'It's longer than that – it's nearly a month. I don't know what's happened to her. I usually hear if a child is ill, even when they've moved up to the Secondary. But no one's said a word about her. I have no idea where she is.'

A concern has come upon them, a darkness without words. They try to break out of it – the old-timer who spent most of his eighty years as a farm labourer, and the local teacher who came to

the village newly-qualified thirty-five years ago and is now the known and respected schoolmistress.

'Has this happened before?'

'No,' says Miss Babbington. 'She never missed school, at least not when she was with me.'

He knows what she means. He'd noticed. He knows Ellie is the third of four children. The two older sisters had each disappeared at around the age of eleven or twelve. One after the other, in their first or second year at Secondary.

The unhappy schoolmistress decides she will break the silence, though she never has before. 'And each time, the family was a bit better off for a few weeks afterwards. New clothes, new shoes, better fed. It never lasted, of course.'

He picks up his beer, takes another sip or two, puts it down again.

'Shame,' she says. 'I was fond of Ellie.'

After she's left, he walks carefully to the back window, opens it, and empties the rest of the beer into the back garden. He would enjoy the odd pint of Adnams but if he drinks it, he'll have to get up to use the commode three or four extra times during the night.

He can't tell Miss Babbington about this. It's partly because the subject is embarrassing, but really it's because he doesn't want to discourage her from visiting.

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still.

*

There's only one phone at the Farm, standing in the hallway, on a table outside the kitchen door. Edward has picked up, and Zoe has

been sent for. 'It's for you,' he says when she arrives, breathless from running.

'Zoe? It's Dad. I can't get away as early as I said. I won't be arriving until the 6.30 train.'

'I'll meet you at the station,' she says joyfully. She's relieved, she half-expected him to say he wouldn't be coming at all.

'Sorry I can't get there earlier but . . .'

'Doesn't matter!' she says. She doesn't want to hear him apologising.

'One of my students has a problem.'

Zoe is immediately interested. 'Which student?'

'Her name's Jackie – Jack Seaborne.'

An image comes instantly into Zoe's mind, of Jack scrambling out of the river at Grantchester, walking across the grass towards her, wearing nothing. And Michael, rising to his feet and wrapping a towel around her dripping body. She can – for a brief moment – smell the river in the gathering darkness.

'What's wrong with Jack?'

'You know Jack?'

'Yes.'

'I shouldn't be telling you about it really. She's written me a letter – a *long* letter. There's a boy she wants to marry. But they belong to different religions, and they can't . . . '

'Michael O'Dowd,' Zoe says.

'Lord, Zoe! Do you know *all* my students!'

'Yes, of course,' she says.

'Well, I have to answer Jack's letter and give her some helpful advice,' her dad says. 'I need to get that done before I leave, and I don't want to rush it. That's why I won't be able to get the earlier train. But I'll see you later.'

'Promise?'

'Yes, promise.'

Zoe is at a loss how to spend the afternoon until it's time to walk down to the village and get a bus to Stanton. Observing this, Aunt Polly says: 'You've never seen inside my studio.'

'No, I haven't,' Zoe says carefully.

‘Would you like to?’

Zoe nods emphatically. ‘Yes, please.’

The studio is on the second floor, acrosss the yard, above a row of disused stables. The door is in two halves, not locked. *I could have come in and had a look at any time*, Zoe thinks. And then she thinks *Aunt Polly is shy*.

She half-expects to see the walls covered with paintings. This makes her nervous because she won’t know what to say about them. She knows how to talk to Aunt Polly, she does it all the time. And she’s accustomed to talking to academics – with them, you mostly just have to listen.

But she doesn’t know how you’re supposed to talk to artists. This is why she’s wary.

There are easels, tables, boxes, and sketchbooks; paints in blocks, in tubes, and in small tins; old newspapers, tissues and toilet rolls; and brushes – mostly small ones – standing in containers of every imaginable kind.

There are paint marks too, some of it spilt or splashed, and some of it deliberately daubed to test new mixes – on the walls, on the floorboards, and on an old school blackboard, painted white.

There are complex smells in the studio too. Linseed oil, Zoe thinks. And there’s still a faint ghost-smell of horses and dry hay. And cigarette smoke. ‘Do you smoke?’ she says in surprise.

‘When I’m working,’ Aunt Polly says humbly.

There are objects on every surface. Some are ordinary things (a saucepan, a tea-strainer, a bicycle pump). Others are strange (a wartime stirrup-pump, a hole with a stone round it, and a giraffe-shaped tea-pot).

Zoe is confused. She’d expected to see large finished paintings of fields and trees, or bowls of fruit, perhaps. Even people. But, apart from a couple of water-colours propped on a wooden beam, she can see none of these things. No half-finished portraits, no landscapes, no canvases waiting.

Under a skylight, there is a long work-bench. And she begins to understand that she has to adjust her sense of scale. Aunt Polly is almost a miniaturist. On the work-bench there are numerous small

black-and-white sketches in pencil, ink, or charcoal, and small water-colours of people and animals. Dozens of them.

'I illustrate children's books,' Aunt Polly says, almost apologetically. As if it's a completely useless profession, almost childish. 'Other people's stories mostly. But I *have* done a series of my own books for very young readers. They're about a cat called Toddy.'

And Zoe remembers, blushing, that back in her room at her father's college she has a tiny book called *Hot Toddy*, by Pauline Chandler, given to her when she was four or five by Aunt Polly. And inside the author-illustrator had written *For my niece, with love, Pauline Chandler.*

She's ashamed now, because she'd never made the connection. She'd not understood that the author was her Aunt Polly. And if she had known, she wouldn't have realised it mattered. But her conscience is quietened a little because she also remembers that she'd loved that little book. So she can say so now, truthfully, and Aunt Polly looks pleased.

On a long dusty beam protruding from the wall like a shelf, she spots a row of small statuettes, carved in hard white stone and about six inches high. She goes across and gazes at them in delight. 'Did you make these?' she says.

'My father made them. Your grandfather. He was a sculptor.'

Zoe has never known her grandfather, and she didn't know he made statues.

'He made these?' she asks. Somehow, it makes a difference that her aunt is an illustrator and her grandfather made statues. She'll work it out later.

'Yes. They're statuettes. He made a lot.'

They are clean and crisp and smooth, and defined in every tiny detail. *Perfect!* Five or six of them are of animals; but most are of people, sitting, standing, kneeling, lying down. Three of them are nudes.

She picks up one that's lying on its side. She cries out in delight and amazement when she holds it in her hand. It's a statuette of a young girl, wearing no clothes and kneeling, with her hands resting

in her lap, and her head raised, looking upwards. She is about the same age as Zoe.

'Do you like that one?' Aunt Polly says. Zoe has fallen instantly in love with the little statue – the precisely delicate ears, the small straight nose, the comfortable way her hands are resting in her lap, and the perfect little curled-up toes, behind her bottom – upside down because she's kneeling.

'I was his model,' her aunt says.

The little girl is radiantly happy. She isn't actually smiling – but you can tell that she's *enraptured* by something.

Zoe looks from the statuette to her aunt, and back again. 'What had made you so happy?' she asks. The happiness on the face of that little girl is so intense that it almost hurts to look at it.

'I had a very happy childhood,' Aunt Polly says.

That answer is not enough, Zoe thinks.

'She's just like you,' Aunt Polly says. 'She could almost *be* you.'

'But you said *you* were the model.'

'Yes, I was. But she still looks like you.'

'But how can she? I wasn't born when this was made.'

'Well, she does.'

'Are you and I alike then?' Zoe asks. This has never occurred to her.

'Nieces often resemble their aunts,' Aunt Polly explains. 'It's biological.'

Zoe learns a lot of things in that short and unremarkable conversation. No one has sat her down and taught them in easy stages. But small unfoldings take place in her mind, new understandings have opened. About continuity and connectedness.

Does that mean I'll snore when I grow up? she wonders.

The little statuette won't stand upright like the others. Under it – under the little girl's folded legs – there's a projection, a little round stump about half-an-inch long and the thickness of a pencil. 'Why did your father carve this bit?' Zoe asks. It spoils the statue.

'That little stump fitted into something,' Aunt Polly explains.

'You mean there's a part missing?'

'Yes.'

'What *was* the other bit?' Zoe asks. 'You must have seen it.'

'I can't remember,' her aunt says. 'I've often thought about it. But I can't remember what it was. Perhaps I never saw it.'

Zoe suspects she's being evasive. 'You could cut off this little stump,' she says. 'And then she'd be able to kneel properly instead of lying on her side.'

But Aunt Polly says she could never do that. The hard little stump was *intended*, she says. It has to stay.

'Can I come in here again?' Zoe asks.

'Of course! You can do some painting if you like.'

But it isn't painting that Zoe has in mind.

Later, when her aunt has gone down to the village shop, Zoe goes back to the art studio with a lump of blue plasticene. She moulds it carefully into a small flat square and stands the statuette on it, with the small projecting stump pushed firmly down into the plasticene.

It isn't right, of course. But at least the little kneeling girl is held upright, as she's meant to be. Her face looks joyfully up at Zoe.

Afterwards, when Zoe has left to meet her father at the station, Aunt Polly wonders whether she should give her the statuette, to have and to own.

But no, she thinks. *They'll all be hers one day.*

*

That evening, when her dad has arrived and settled in, and is drinking wine in the evening sunshine with Aunt Polly, Zoe tells him about Rebecca.

'She's doing William Blake for A Level English. She has some questions about him, and I told her you wouldn't mind . . .'

Her dad sighs. The last thing he wants is an unofficial tutorial with some over-eager young sixthformer. But he's a kindly man, so he agrees.

Zoe wisely changes the subject before he can change his mind. 'Tell me about Michael and Jack.'

‘Well, they’re apart at the moment,’ her dad says. ‘They won’t see each other until next term – weeks away. She’s pining for him, and I expect he’s pining for her. Somewhere in Ireland.’

‘They fell in love at your lectures,’ Zoe tells him. ‘Did you know? You were talking about *Romeo and Juliet*.’

He stares at her in surprise. ‘No, I didn’t know,’ he says. ‘They should have been paying attention to *me*!’

‘I expect they were – but you were going on about love. That probably speeded them up.’

Her father thinks that’s a rather novel idea. *The English lecturer as Pandarus?*

‘How is Professor Dougal?’ Zoe asks.

‘He’s been a bit unwell lately,’ Dad says.

She’s sorry to hear that. ‘He sometimes calls me *Alice*, did you know?’

‘No, I didn’t,’ her dad says. He looks thoughtful. ‘I do know that he keeps waffling on about mermaids.’

‘He’s got a statue of one, in his room,’ Zoe tells him.

‘How do you know that? I’ve been in his room lots of times but I’ve never seen it. Have *you* seen it?’

‘No. He told me. He’s always wanted to see a real one.’

Her dad hadn’t known that either.

‘And Mister Pellegrini?’ Zoe suddenly asks. ‘How is he?’

‘Mister *who*?’

‘The college chef,’ she says.

Her dad looks battered by all these questions. ‘I don’t know anything about the college chef,’ he says. There’s a hint of irritability in his voice. ‘Except that he always looks pretty miserable.’

‘That’s because he’s homesick,’ Zoe says.

‘Homesick? Why?’

‘He can’t go back to Italy because his father was a Fascist during the War. In their village, his family is in disgrace.’

Zoe’s dad hadn’t known that either.

He looks closely at her. ‘Zoe, are you sure you wouldn’t like to come back and live at the college?’

She doesn't make an issue of it. She doesn't stretch it out into a great drama of indecision. She just answers him straight. 'No,' she says. 'I miss them, but I like it here.'

Sensible child, her aunt thinks.

Zoe has a sudden insight, a quick moment of understanding. Her father, she realises, feels both let down *and* relieved – at the same time, both feelings together. She can see it in his face, and hear it in his voice.

'But I intend to visit you,' she adds. 'A lot.'

*

There are darknesses that few people are aware of. Shadows where no knowledge takes root. In this darkness, there's a little boy.

Is it a crime? A wickedness beyond all others? Or a sickness perhaps? No one knows because there are no words, it is literally unspeakable. It can't be grasped, can't be articulated, can't be known at all in fact – except by the victim. So there can be no protest, no champion riding to his rescue.

He endures it with no understanding. Just submission. The weak, yielding in fear. He's not alone. There are thousands. And yet he *is* alone. They're all alone, they're all invisible. And most of them are solitary. And they know nothing about each other.

When does it take place? *Where* does it take place?

No one knows, no one sees, no one tells. Can such things be on England's shore?

No victim ever gets away. There's no escaping. He might run off but he'll take his darkness with him. A lifelong bewilderment. He'll carry it for ever, a shroud enclosing his life, a bitter cataract staining and darkening his vision.

But why? How was it that no one knew about him? We'd learned about rape. *That* was at least comprehensible, there were words for it, and laws relating to it. You could talk about it, provided you spoke in a low voice. There were serious imperfections in the ways it was dealt with. But there *were* words for it. But *this* remained unspoken because there were no words. Language had been allowed to fail.

Where there is no speaking, words die. Where the words are dead, understanding cannot take root.

If there had been words, they couldn't have been spoken through mouth and tongue. They're unclean and shameful, as if they've been secretly squeezed out of some unknown filthy orifice.

Were there organised communities of perpetrators? Powerful untouchable people? If there were, they must surely have *talked* to each other? Did they use riddles, or codes? How did they communicate?

Perhaps there were. But beyond them there were the loners, who did their invisible business in remote places. Alone and unseen. In towns, villages, woods. Nothing communal. Just solitary and secret, in darkened front rooms when everyone else had gone out. On disused mattresses. On bare wooden floors. In sheds, in outside toilets.

Even then, no words were spoken. A gesture would be enough. A sideways jerk of the head, the movement of a hand, buttons pulled open, hot breathing close to his ear.

He can hear the kids now, on the green, shouting, playing. *One, three, five, seven, All good children go to heaven!* He's not part of their world. They are on another continent, or the moon. They have all the words. He has none. They have all the laughter. He has none.

Is this what everyone has to do? Even that simple question hardly gets shaped in his mind. Is it wicked? *Wickedness? What's wickedness?* Without words, he has no understanding.

He has a dream that he's trapped in a small glass bottle. He can't get out, and there is disgusting stuff in there with him. Through the glass he can dimly see children playing. They are distant and grey, and silent. They are of no importance, and anyway they are vanishing afar, leaving him stuck for ever.

But when it's over, you're safe until the next time. This is what life is for – the hours between. But soon it will happen again. There will be the smell of him.

And afterwards the threat, every time. *If you breathe a word about this, I'll cut your fucking . . .'*

But everything is quiet now. The children on the green have gone home for bedtime. They know nothing, we knew nothing, no one knew anything.

Because there were no words.

In 1960.

But the little boy does know something. Mum is coming back. He can hear her opening the back door.

'You OK, duckie?'

The night was dark no father was there
The child was wet with dew.
The mire was deep, & the child did weep . . .

*

Zoe has arranged a meeting between her father and Rebecca on the second day of his stay. It's to take place in the kitchen so that the copper plates can be laid out on the big table. She's not told her dad about the plates. She wants to surprise him.

Dr Whittaker has been expecting a one-to-one encounter. So he's surprised to find there's a small crowd waiting for him. Zoe's there of course, with Rebecca. And Rebecca's best friend Jessica, along with Zoe's aunt, Naomi, (not Olivia, she's at work), a young woman called Cressida (he was introduced to her last night but doesn't understand how she fits in).

Patrick is there too, on his second week's leave. He's allowed two in his first year of National Service. There'll be no more until after September.

And there's a postman there too, chatting quietly to Aunt Polly. Is *he* planning to stay? Surely not! *The postman?*

Dr Whittaker has addressed hundreds of undergraduates in his career, as well as audiences of specialist academics. He thinks of himself as a super-confident lecturer. But in this situation he's feeling

unaccountably nervous. *I was expecting a one-to-one tutorial, not a full-on seminar in the kitchen!*

Rebecca has brought with her a shallow basket. She sits at the table facing him. Jess sits beside her.

His attention is immediately arrested. There's a compactness about Rebecca, a self-containment and gravity. She's heart-stoppingly lovely, he thinks, her hair tied loosely back in a pony-tail, her face framed by a couple of falling strands. Like a young seventeenth-century Quaker, he thinks.

He astonishes himself by greeting her with a quotation: 'When the voices of children are heard on the green, and laughing is heard on the hill . . .' His voice invites merriment.

Jesus! He's never done anything like that before! She leans forward a little, towards him across the table, and completes the quotation, in a low voice, almost a whisper: 'My heart is at rest within my breast, and everything else is still.'

Weird! My students would think I'd taken leave of my senses! Does this sixthformer know the Songs by heart?

Everyone is watching Rebecca, sitting straight-backed and serious at the table, her head up, looking gravely at the Cambridge lecturer opposite. *She's always like that,* Cressida thinks. There is a *demand* in her, an expectation of equal and open dealing. She faces whatever she's doing, and whoever she's talking to, square-on.

'I've something to show you,' she says.

Dr Whittaker is baffled. He'd come to the kitchen poised to explain William Blake for her. It's a powerful and familiar dynamic – the man who teaches and talks, the woman who listens and learns. But Rebecca, coolly and effortlessly, has reversed it: the teaching energy is flowing in the opposite direction.

They all watch as she places the basket on the table and takes from it the copper plates. All 35 of them. In small stacks, to be laid out singly, in order, with Jessica helping.

This takes two or three minutes. All that time Dr Whittaker stares, silenced and amazed. His heart begins to race.

Everyone presses forward, leaning in towards the table. Since Rebecca's return from Newcastle, some of them have seen five or six

of the plates, but only Jessica has been shown all 35, arranged in sequence. Even to those who know nothing about William Blake, it's a dramatic moment. They all feel as if they're in the presence of something substantial and uncompromising, demanding their serious attention.

Rebecca is watchful, possessive, keenly aware of everyone in the room, where they're standing, what their faces are showing, how they are holding their breath. Even Patrick, she observes, has pushed forward to see more closely.

Dr Whittaker whispers into the silence. 'Where did you find these?'

In three succinct and perfect sentences, Rebecca tells her story.

But it's not enough. He has to ask her more. He demands repetitions, clarifications, probing for details and background which might, he hopes, give him something firm to settle his thoughts on. He's feeling shaky, unsure of himself.

He never feels unsure of himself.

And Rebecca? The house shivers slightly, the hurrying clouds are shaken clear of the sky – and she can hear the *Songs* ringing melodiously and joyously around her head. And the distant sound of children playing outside on the grass, with birdsong.

For just two seconds, perhaps three, then it's gone.

They're all stooping, bending over the table, studying the plates. Except Naomi, who has a rapt expression on her face and is staring in wonder at Rebecca. *Had she heard it too? The children playing and singing?*

Zoe's dad begins to explain what he knows. 'These are relief-etched plates for printing illustrated copies of the *Songs*,' he tells them. 'Blake more-or-less invented this method because it best suited the way he wanted his designs to be read.'

He explains that he's always considered it an outrage that students in schools and universities have to study the *Songs* printed in plain letterpress, in ordinary black ink, without their illustrations and designs. 'But that's beginning to change,' he tells them, 'because there are now ways of making facsimiles, in colour. They're called electrotypes.'

‘Isn’t that forgery?’ Patrick says.

No, Dr Whittaker explains, because there is no intent to deceive. They are openly published as copies. ‘Trouble is, they are very costly to produce. They can only be printed in monochrome, and then hand-coloured, by experts. I’ve brought one for you to see.’

He reaches down to his briefcase on the floor, and brings out a slim handsome book, carefully wrapped in brown paper. ‘This was produced in the 1920s. It’s a facsimile of *The Songs.* I brought it with me so that you could see what Blake’s poems would have looked like in their proper context, as Blake intended.

‘ . . .though I wasn’t expecting *this* development!’ he adds.

‘Does this belong to you?’ Rebecca asks.

‘Yes. I bought it. It cost me a lot of money. This is what your plates were made for – a facsimile copy of the *Songs*. Almost certainly.’

But Patrick has spotted that Rebecca’s copper plates are very slightly different in size from the printed versions in the facsimile.

‘I can’t explain that,’ Dr Whittaker says. ‘I’m not a an expert in printing. Or engraving.’

‘Does this mean,’ Rebecca asks, ‘that I will have to give these plates back? To someone else?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘If you bought them, you’re the legal owner. But you ought to begin to think what you’re going to do with them.’

‘Have you ever seen an original?’ someone asks him. ‘A *real* one?’

‘I’ve never seen an original copper plate for the *Songs*. There aren’t any. No one knows what happened to the ones he engraved. But I *have* seen one of the surviving copies of the book. Printed by him.’

‘Where?’

‘In the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. There’s a big Blake archive there.’

Zoe points out that they’re still none the wiser about Rebecca’s plates. *Who exactly designed them?*

He doesn’t know the answer, but he knows what should be done. He suggests to Rebecca that she should let him take her

plates to the Print Room at the Fitzwilliam Museum. 'They are experts there, they'll be able to tell you.'

'You want to take all of them?' Rebecca says.

He senses her rejection of this plan and hastily back-tracks. 'No, not all of them. Five or six perhaps?'

'No,' she says firmly. 'No.'

Wisely, he doesn't try to persuade her. The others are aware that when she says no, she means it. Patrick thinks – half-consciously – *and nothing will make her change her mind.*

'If I could arrange a meeting with one of the Blake specialists at the Print Room,' Dr Whittaker says cautiously, 'would you be willing to bring some of them yourself? To show him?'

'Could you do that?'

'Yes. The Museum is part of the University. And I know the Keeper of the print Room. Even if these are nothing of value, Dr Wheeler will be interested to see them.'

So a visit to the Fitzwilliam is promised. Dr Whittaker will arrange it. And young Zoe – who hasn't fully grasped what has happened – is feeling proud of her father.

The kitchen seminar is beginning to break up, one or two people are leaving. But Dr Whittaker has some last words for Rebecca. 'Don't be tempted to put ink on them, or to print them. It would be understandable to want to try – but don't! *Don't even wash them!*'

A useful warning. Rebecca and Jessica had already talked about trying to print something from them – however imperfect it might be. They had access to printing-ink, rollers, a proofing press. But now they know they mustn't.

*

Afterwards, in her room, wanting to think privately about what has happened, Rebecca spreads out the plates again, on her writing-desk, where they lie, mute and compelling.

Someone knocks on her door. She knows immediately who it is.

Patrick hasn't visited her room since they stopped being friends. The opening and closing of doors has become Rebecca's metaphor

for what happened between them. *He shut me out and bolted his door.*

Nevertheless, she goes to her door and opens it. He's standing there – a little more gaunt in the face, she thinks. A little leaner. Skinny, in fact. He's cut a lonely figure while he's been on leave, spending most of his time walking and cycling in the countryside.

He asks if he might have a closer look at the William Blake plates. His voice is strained and selfconscious.

As they stand at the threshold, the coldness between them is palpable. He's not turning away, and she's not welcoming him in.

'Please,' he says.

'Are you interested in Blake?'

'I am now,' he says.

Rebecca is reluctant. But she can't face having a row with him because it would mean there's still something between them worth arguing about. And there isn't. He's not that important.

So she stands aside and he walks in. He looks all around him, taking in the room that was once so familiar. They'd done their homework together here, played games, read books, slept in the bed, done jigsaws, listened to *Children's Hour*, made models. Or they'd worked on different things, side by side at her desk. In his room as well, two doors down the passage, past the bathroom. They'd more or less commandeered these rooms when they were four or five.

In effect, they'd had their own suite, all to themselves – until it stopped, and he'd moved back to his father's cottage at the end of the drive.

He crosses to her desk and stoops to study the plates. He stays there for perhaps five minutes, asking questions about the poet, and the engravings, and how they were made. She answers the questions as fully and carefully as she can, as she might to an interested stranger.

She's not angry. Just unyielding, implacable.

'Thank you,' he says. It's time for him to leave. He can't think how, or why, he should prolong this uncomfortable visit. But at her

door he turns to her and tries to bring up the subject of their estrangement.

'About what happened . . .'

But he stutters and can't get any further. He stands there, faffing about with words and phrases that are getting him nowhere.

She cuts him off. 'Oh, that's all ancient history,' she says coldly – and begins to close the door, almost forcing him out.

Ancient history!

He yields, and she shuts the door. There is a bolt on it, but she knows he won't come back.

Afterwards she's angry with herself. She could have helped him a little, prompted him perhaps; or she could have asked him bluntly what he was trying to say. At the very least she might have waited to see if he'd eventually manage a coherent sentence.

But, instead, she's closed down all possibilities and *shut him out*.

Damn Patrick! She's very angry with him. One of the *Songs* comes into her thoughts – but she inwardly disputes with the its voice, so emphatic and confident. It's all very well for William Blake to talk about *telling your wrath*. But how can you tell something you don't understand?

She has never known what happened that afternoon. And ever since, her frustrated rage has turned back on itself.

Back in his room at the cottage, Patrick sits on his bed remembering the early years when he and Rebecca had been inseparable. In particular, he's recalling something he hasn't thought about since the day they fell apart.

It was something she did, something he'd loved. She probably wasn't even aware that she did it. When she said the word *us*, she always softened the consonant, and spoke it slowly, making it last. *Uzzz*.

'Naomi has made apple tarts,' she would say. 'Especially for uzzz.'

He hadn't dared to comment on this. She'd probably take it for a criticism, and stop doing it.

She pronounced *bus* and *fuss* like everyone else. It was only the word *us*. It was as if she gently caressed it in the saying of it. Patrick

had always found it touching in some way. As if she was caressing him.

Just the two of uzzz.

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

*

In Aunt Polly's room, Zoe is confronting her father. Dr Whittaker has just broken the news that he has to go back to Cambridge, the next day. He isn't, after all, going to stay for a week.

'But I've made a list of things for us to do . . .'

'I know, but . . .'

'You *promised* . . .' She feels bitterly let down.

He explains he's been asked at the last minute to give a series of summer lectures on Shakespeare. He has to go back and prepare them.

'But you know all about Shakespeare already!'

'I still have to prepare the talks,' he says.

Zoe – always practical – makes a suggestion. 'You can prepare them here,' she points out. 'And you could go back to Cambridge on the day of each lecture . . .'

'But I need my books!' He's in despair because he can't make her understand.

And he feels guilty, Zoe can tell. Another moment of new understanding.

'Will you remember to arrange the meeting you promised Rebecca? At the Museum?'

'Yes, of course I will,' he says.

There's no of course about it! she thinks.

Next day, when she comes back from the station where she'd been to see him off, she sits in the garden with her aunt.

'He does love you, you know,' Aunt Polly says.

Zoe answers in a hard-done-by voice, a feel-sorry-for-me voice. 'I suppose so!'

But she dislikes herself for doing that. So, in her ordinary voice, she says: 'Do you really think he does?'

'Yes, I'm sure he does. But, as a dad, he certainly leaves a lot to be desired.'

3

The Virgins of Youth and Morning

In summer and early autumn everyone at the Farm spends time sitting outside on the terrace, at the top of the meadow, looking down towards the river. The old house is lovely inside, especially in winter, and at Christmas. But the important things – discussions, decisions, revelations – seem to happen outside, in the sun.

It's not usually planned. And it often starts with the arrival of a visitor. On this occasion it begins when an elderly black Ford 10 is seen coming through the gate and cautiously bumping its way up the flinty track towards the house.

'That's Miss Babbington's car!'

Miss Babbington normally walks or cycles wherever she needs to go. She's used her car this afternoon because she has a passenger –

old Tom Whitehead, who lives by the Green and doesn't get about much.

Almost everyone in the area under the age of 30 has been taught by Miss Babbington. She's known, and much-loved. So there are warm and cheerful greetings. Only a few days ago Cressida had walked down to the village shortly after half-past three, to visit her.

Tea is offered at once, and there's a lot of general chat while it's made and brought out. But eventually – as everyone knows it will – the conversation gets itself focused on the reason for this unexpected visit.

'I was hoping to talk to you about a rather serious matter.' Miss Babbington hesitates, and when no one says anything she feels she has to add more. 'An *adult* matter.' Her voiced is hushed, almost a whisper.

She does this sometimes, Cressida recalls. She remembers once when one of the older girls unexpectedly started her periods in the middle of games – and Miss Babbington took all the bigger girls into her office and talked to them for about half-an-hour. All the time she spoke in that hushed half-whispered voice. There was a lesson in that, beyond biology.

There's almost a small contretemps at this point because Rebecca sees no reason for leaving. She's seventeen, and it's a very long time since she was excluded from any conversations at the Farm.

However, when it's clear she intends to stay, the schoolteacher has to continue.

'Mr Whitehead and I,' she says, 'have both observed something odd. And rather worrying.'

She tells them about the disappearance of Ellie Bassett. And how the secondary school has information that Ellie has gone to live with an aunt in London. The aunt is said to be ill, and in need of help.

'The worrying thing is this: her two older sisters disappeared in exactly the same way, just a few months after they'd left my school, to go to the secondary. This means that all three sisters went away

when they were eleven or twelve. The first two have never come back.'

There is a puzzled silence while they work out what this might mean.

Then Tom Whitehead chips in. 'That's right!' he says. 'All three of 'em! And what's more, for a month or so after each one of 'em had left, the family back home here were better dressed and better fed for a while. They had money – though the father spent a good deal of it in the White Hart at Stanton.'

They are slow to work out why this is significant.

'We have been wondering if . . .' Miss Babbington is embarrassed. But she's also courageous and determined. This has to be said. The words have to be found from somewhere, and spoken. 'Those girls might have been taken *for immoral purposes*. And paid for.'

'Paid for?'

She gets out her final declarative word. '*Bought!'* she says, as if the word were a bullet.

But it's clear to her that what she's suggested comes as a huge shock. They find it implausible. Even incredible. And yet Miss Babbington is nobody's fool, and she's unlikely to have made this up.

There's a short pause, and then Naomi asks if the police have been contacted about this. Yes, Miss Babbington says, they were told about the first two sisters. And they did apparently investigate, but with no success. 'I don't think they tried very hard,' she says sadly. 'They pointed out that it's not a crime for a child to go and live with relatives. It happens often, especially in large families.'

Cressida – who has switched families a number of times – admits that this is indeed true.

'Why have you come to *us* about this?' Olivia asks.

'Well!' Miss Babbington says, grateful to get to her main point. 'Cressida dropped in after school a few days ago and she told me . . .' She pauses to give her former pupil a look of teacherly pride and affection, '. . . that she's a *private investigator* now! So it occurred to me that she might be willing to *investigate this*!'

Typical of Miss Babbington! A mixture of goopy sentimentality – and then some hard-hitting practical realism. And a *purpose*. Direct, and to the point.

It's true. Cressida has been working for a private investigation agency for almost two years now. And, so far, she's told no one outside the Farm about it. She wishes now that she'd not told Miss Babbington.

She's distressed. 'I'm sorry, Miss Babbington. But I am *not* a detective. It's true that I work for an agency – but I am not qualified to do any actual investigating.'

For years, back in London from the age of nine until she was sixteen, Cressida had been close to Mr B, the one-eyed private investigator who lived next door. She'd understood his work, discussed his cases with him, did his accounts for him. And when she recently gave up her job in the library at Stanton St Mary's, she asked him if he would take her on as a trainee. He was overjoyed she wanted to do that, but it was impossible, and she'd known that really. His business was too small. He'd have to double his workload in order to pay her.

'But I could probably help you get a job,' he said. 'Put a good word in.'

That was when she discovered he was more than she'd realised. He was not a lone operator humbly working in the shadows, barely able to earn enough to hold up his head. No! Every private investigator in London knew Mr Brackendale. He was legendary. He had a longer memory than anyone else, he had more useful contacts, he was cleverer at sniffing out connections – and to top it all, people at MI5 consulted him frequently. Unofficially, of course.

'Every private dick in town knows Brackendale,' Alexander Zeppelin said on the day he interviewed her. 'So if he recommends you, that's gotta mean something!'

But Mr Zeppelin had taken a lot of persuading. 'Private investigating is no job for a woman!' he kept saying. It was a central conviction in his perception of his trade. *No women!* It's too bloody dangerous. And besides, they often cause more crimes than they solve!

So do men! Mr B thought.

'And women are *vulnerable*, Brackendale,' he growled. 'They're *weak*.'

'Not this one,' Mr B had said. He pointed out that Cressida had been going to self-defence classes since she was a teenager, that she had her own hand-gun (properly licensed), and that she went to a local range regularly to familiarise herself with new makes and models, and to maintain her accuracy across a wide range of weapons.

'*And* she's also got three A Levels. On her own, after she left school.'

Zeppelin was not especially impressed by Cressida's A levels, but against his better judgement he took her on. 'Only paperwork, mind!' he growled at her. 'Secretarial!'

'At first,' she said back.

He liked her style but he made no concessions.

Cressida explains some of this to Miss Babbington. 'So you see, I am not qualified – I'm not *allowed* – to do other investigating.'

This was another thing Zeppelin had insisted on. 'No employee of mine takes on any job on the side. Understand? The moment that happens, you're out of a job.'

'I can also do tailing,' she said. 'I'm good at that.'

He stared.

'I started practising when I was ten.'

'On Brackendale's clients? *For* his clients?'

'No. On ordinary people. I tailed one bloke all through the West End. All one Saturday! And at the game at Stamford Bridge. And he never spotted me.'

Zeppelin did allow her eventually to follow a couple of suspects. But most of her time is spent at her desk, using the phone, and visiting libraries and registry offices. Searching documents. She is good at that, but it's boring.

This is a dilemma for Miss Babbington. She'd not anticipated it. 'But couldn't you perhaps just give me some advice?' she says. 'Please. Surely *that* wouldn't break any rules.'

So Cressida agrees to that. She suggests getting an address for the aunt the girl is supposed to be living with. 'If you could find out where she is supposed to have gone, I can perhaps find out if Ellie really is living there. And if the aunt really is so ill that she needs three young girls to look after her.'

And she thinks immediately: *Why did I say that?*

It turns out that Miss Babbington has already thought of this. When the second of the girls disappeared, she'd asked Ellie if she had her sister's new address – 'just for my school records,' she said.

Ellie did remember part of the address. *57 Charter Street*, she said. She thought it was in Hackney.

'So I went to London last Saturday, and I traipsed all over Hackney searching, and asking people. I even went to the police station. But it was a waste of time – there's no Charter Street in Hackney!

'I felt rather silly at the police station,' she admitted, 'because they told me there's a book with maps covering the whole of London. I could have saved myself all that by just looking up the street in the index. I was *so* tired after all that tramping about!'

Cressida considers she will not be breaking her agreement with Mr Zeppelin if she looks in the *London A to Z*, and searches for a street. As long as that's all she does.

The afternoon has worn on. Tom Whitehead is tired and Miss Babbington is all gratitude. It's time for the visitors to leave. Standing beside the black car, Cressida has a new thought. 'Have you a photo of Ellie? That would help.'

'Oh, yes!' Miss Babbington cries. 'I probably have two or three school photos of her. Her parents never collected them.'

'Good!'

'One more thing before we go,' Miss Babbington says.

'Yes?'

'Young Zoe. I've seen her around lately. If she's going to stay for a while, she's welcome to come to school again. In fact, she *must* come to school.'

'I'll have a word with her aunt,' Naomi says.

‘It’s a very disruptive form of schooling, you know. This frequent chopping and changing – it’s not good for her. Her father should consider these things before he . . .’

‘Oh, it’s not her father who makes these decisions,’ Naomi says.

‘Who is it then?’

‘It’s Zoe! *She’s* in charge! But I think this time she plans to stay here. *Live here*, I mean.’

‘Well, either her aunt or her father needs to write to me so that I can get her properly enrolled.’

Every inch a headmistress.

Since the substance of Miss Babbington’s suspicions had been made clear, Naomi has been white-faced and silent, almost stunned. Only Olivia has noticed. They exchange glances as the teacher climbs into her car.

As the black Ford Ten bumps its way slowly down towards the road, Olivia says to Cressida: ‘And how is a photo of the girl going to help if you’re only looking for a street in the *A – Z*?’

Cressida shrugs, ruefully.

In the hours that follow, each of them finds it impossible not to think about the missing girls. The ways in which they understand the possible meanings implicit in this situation vary from one to another, according to capacity. But Naomi had seen at once, with an immediacy that was like a vision. She *saw* these frightened children, taken away, forced to live with strangers, made to do who knows what unthinkable things.

> *Then come home my children the sun is gone down*
> *And the dews of night arise . . .*

*

Rebecca, travelling home from school on the village bus, is thinking about William Blake. She thinks about him a lot, every day, and when she gets home she’ll check the copper plates are safe. It’s the first thing she’ll do.

As the bus drives away and the afternoon silence falls around her, she sees the humble village green as she imagines it would appear to William Blake – the grass in love with the sun, the shadows asleep under the trees, and the echoing voices of children playing on the swing.

There are no children on Codling Green at this moment. But she knows there was a whole school-full an hour ago, at three-thirty. And many of them will come out again later, in the cool of the evening.

But *not*, she thinks, young Ellie Bassett. Where is *she*?

As she adjusts her portfolio case under her arm, Rebecca realises there's a stranger sitting on the bench in the shade of one of the trees.

No one else, just a man sitting there.

She realises with a jolt that she knows him! For a second or two she can't recall his name. But it comes to her. It's Edward Coulson. Ted from Newcastle. Two worlds, which she has kept separate, are about to collide.

Her heart is pounding. She's bewildered at first, and a little excited. But the feeling that dominates is *irritation*.

He rises from the seat and sets off across the grass towards her. There's nothing she can do to avoid this encounter. But she won't go forward to greet him. Not a single step. She lowers her portfolio to the ground, and waits.

'Hi,' he says.

'What are you doing here?' she says sharply. She *intended* to speak sharply.

'I came to see you, pet.'

How am I meant to respond to that?

'How did you know where I lived?'

'I didn't. But you mentioned Cuckoo Farm, and you told me you had to change trains at Peterborough. So it had to be either Cambridgeshire or Norfolk.'

She remembers his dialect, reassuring and gentle. In Newcastle, she'd found the words of strangers soothing. All the time she was

there, Newcastle seemed to be saying to her *Everything's ganna be all right, pet.*

'There aren't many Cuckoo Farms. It wasn't difficult.'

'But . . .' She has so many questions that she finds it hard to decide which to ask. 'Have you come from Newcastle just to . . .'

In Newcastle, she'd found him good-looking – clean, bright and clear-cut. But now he seems a little grubby round the edges, and slightly shifty. And there's another thing: he can hardly take his eyes off her chest – but she hadn't noticed him doing that in Newcastle. She knows her school uniform emphasises the fact that she's a young woman – which is strange, because its role is to remind the world she's still a schoolgirl. This thought confuses her, adds to her irritation. And there are things about him that she's forgotten, or hadn't even registered. He is taller than she remembers, broader across the shoulders.

He is a full-grown man. This is unknown territory, Rebecca has nothing to guide her through it.

'I had a week's holiday due,' he says. 'Usually, I go to some seaside place. Whitby, or Blackpool. On me own, like, or with a couple of mates. But . . .'

He explains that he'd decided to spend a week in London because he'd never been there. 'Just to visit the usual places, like. *You* know, Buckingham Palace. The Tower.'

'So you've interrupted your holiday in London just to come here?'

'Aye. I did.'

But she says nothing, and Ted is obliged to add more. 'I wanted to find out about those printing plates. Have you found out what they are, pet? Are they worth anything?'

The plates! Are they what he's come for? She frowns, but his directness has disarmed her, a little. As it did before, in Newcastle.

'Probably not,' she says. 'I'm taking them to an expert at a museum in Cambridge. He'll be able to tell me.'

They seem to have settled on friendly ground at last, or at least neutral. But he ruins it by asking if there's anywhere he can get a

drink. 'The pub over there won't be open till six. Can we go to Cuckoo Farm? You could p'raps rustle up a cup of tea and a biscuit.'

Rebecca is horrified. She doesn't want him anywhere near her home. She doesn't want any of her family, or her friends, to see him, or to know anything about him. In her accounts of her trip to Newcastle and the buying of the Blake plates, she'd made no mention of Ted Coulson. For him to show up at the Farm would be too embarrassing. *Overwhelmingly* embarrassing!

'Howay man!' he says. 'It's not far up the lane!'

'How do you know? Have you been there already?'

He has! When he arrived at the Green, he'd asked directions to Cuckoo Farm.

It wasn't hard to find. He'd ventured half-way up the drive and then decided against knocking at the door. The landscape was so strange to him, and the size of the house was intimidating. There was nothing grand about it, like a mansion. Quite the reverse. It was low and humped, just a collection of old dwellings huddled together. But it spread so widely, with sheds and barns all around it, and a huge and shining East Anglian silence embracing it. You could almost feel the several hundred summers that had warmed the tiles on those steep gabled roofs.

And no sign of life at first. Then a young girl walked across a yard at the side of the house, carrying a loaded tray. She looked about nine, he thought. Perhaps ten. He took a small pocket-book from inside his jacket, and made a note in it. Alongside the names of other young girls.

'It was obvious there was no one there,' he says.

She doesn't contradict this. But she knows he's wrong. Polly would have been working in her studio over the stable, and Naomi was probably having an afternoon nap somewhere in the sun before starting on the evening meal. And no arrangements have been made yet for young Zoe to begin attending school, so she too must have been there somewhere.

It annoys Rebecca that this man has been inspecting her home. She's feeling hostile again. But the problem is that he's thirsty. *Why should it be **me** who has to find him somewhere to get a drink?*

‘There’s a tea shop back in Stanton. It’ll be open until six.’

‘Where’s Stanton?’ he asks.

‘You went through it on the bus coming here.’

She explains that the bus she left ten minutes ago will shortly return, on its way back to Norwich. ‘You can get on that,’ she says. ‘And then get off at Stanton.’

‘But you’re coming with me, pet?’

She agrees, reluctantly and with surprise, inwardly planning ahead, calculating with the astonishing mental speed of a very clever person learning to be devious, against the grain of her character and the whole of her past. Will she be seen by anyone? Is old Mr Whitehead watching her at this very moment from his bedroom window? How can she explain all this? What will she say when she arrives back late at the Farm?

The bus-conductor – an old friend since she was eleven – looks askance at her when she gets back on his bus, still with her portfolio, and now accompanied by a stranger. She hates this. She hates it more when he speaks in a broad Norfolk dialect, accentuated deliberately for the stranger’s benefit. ‘Your season ticket is intended for *skewl*, not gaddin’ about whenever yew feel like ut!’

But he doesn’t insist on making her pay. She takes her seat, feeling a weird fluttering conflict. It is exciting to have a man sitting beside her in the bus. But she wants no one to meet him, or to see her with him.

So when he asks her – over a pot of tea and a small plate of sandwiches in the Lavender Tea-room – if she’s angry with him for coming to see her, what can she say? And *if* he were to ask her if she minds the fact that he still keeps staring at her chest – which, of course, he *won’t*! – what would she say to that? Would she say she’s singing inside with baffled excitement at the fact that he’s come all this way to find her? Or that she’s raging with fury at this intrusion into her life?

It’s not that she wouldn’t want him to know which it is. It’s that *she* doesn’t know.

He plays safe, asking her questions about the William Blake plates. But she's unsure about this too. Is he just reminding her of the only link between them? Or has he some sinister interest in the plates themselves?

So it goes on. Until, eventually, Rebecca can tell him that the next bus through Stanton will be the last one of the day. And if he intends to get back to Norwich station tonight, he'd better be on that bus. It occurs to her that he might consider taking a room at The White Hart, but apparently he doesn't think of this. And she's relieved.

However, he does suggest she might like to go up to London and spend a day with him. She turns him down emphatically. 'It's a ridiculous idea!' she says. 'I can't miss school. And besides, I hate London!'

That's not strictly true. She's recently arranged to meet Cressida and spend a day with her there. *Next week, in fact!*

She has to allow him to pay for their tea. She has no choice, because she never has money with her on school days. At the bus stop they stand in awkward silence, side by side. The bus draws up at the stop, a different conductor opens the door, and Ted Milford turns towards Rebecca and hesitates before stepping aboard.

She calls out gaily: 'Bye!' and walks swiftly away, without looking back.

She's had enough of buses and decides to walk home. She's done that before. If she goes by the footpath, it's a short cut, more direct than going through Codling Green. It passes along the bottom of back gardens, between hedgerows, alongside an allotment – and eventually, after a few fields, it arrives behind one of the barns at Cuckoo Farm. The folio case is a nuisance crossing stiles and jumping dry ditches. But she arrives home, breathless, just in time for supper.

*

Cressida, back home for the weekend, is helping with the serving out. It's a Friday, when everyone eats together. Always a bit special.

When the meal is nearly finished, someone announces that he wants to make a complaint. His name is Larry, he's a newcomer. He arrived with his wife in April, planning to stay until the autumn.

Naomi doesn't hesitate. She asks him to tell them about it.

'I was hoping to talk to *you*,' Larry says.

'No. You have to tell everybody. That's what we do here.'

It's clear that he's embarrassed. But he speaks out boldly into the sudden silence. 'It's happened twice!' he says, clearly outraged.

'What has happened?'

'I wouldn't have said anything if it was only the once. But . . .'

'Larry, *what* has happened twice?'

Larry is looking now as if he's already regretting that he raised the issue. But he carries on stubbornly. 'It's those two!' he says, indicating with his look the couple on the opposite side of the table.

Poppy and Paul! Everyone knows at once what the complaint will be. It's happened before, several times.

'My wife and I were walking in the orchard, yesterday evening. And there they were! On the grass! *You know – doing it!*'

Naomi sometimes reveals a desire for mischief. 'Doing *what*?' she asks. And yet it's not entirely mischief: she believes that if someone wants to grumble they should have the guts to say clearly what they are complaining about. They should find the words.

She knows already, of course. So does everyone else. It's a sad story.

The young newly-weds had moved into the Farm several years ago and announced with pride that they were trying to make a baby, and they wanted their child to be conceived in the open air, in God's good daylight.

But several years had passed and there was still no baby. Yet Poppy and Paul – with a little less *joie de vivre* now – were still bravely making love in the gardens, or in nearby fields and woods, trying to conceive their baby. But their confidence was shaken, their unashamed sexual delight a little cowed after so much time.

Almost everyone at the Farm has come across them. The two of them would be spotted, walking into the wood, or a nearby pasture,

one of them carrying a rug. It had been amusing at first, now it brings tears to Naomi's eyes.

'They were both completely naked!' Larry's wife says, nodding eagerly.

Once, either Poppy or Paul would have explained, with a frank and disarming mixture of innocence and pride. Almost like a couple of delighted children. But now they just sigh, because it seems they have to do it all again, to say it all afresh, to justify to another objector something they believe is sacred and simple. And very very straightforward.

'Sex shouldn't have to be done in hiding,' Poppy says, in a sad whisper. 'Why should it always be a secret, like something furtive and shameful?'

'What do you in winter?' Larry asks.

This makes Poppy cross. 'We do it indoors, of course! Do you think we're *idiots?*'

Rebecca is reminded of that day's English lesson, with Melanie Bloom.

Does the sower
Sow by night?
Or the plowman in darkness plow?

'What's *that* all about?' one of the boys had asked. It was Nigel Wayward, a clever boy, but a bit too keen that everyone should know it.

'Why, in the middle of this poem,' Nigel went on, 'does William Blake suddenly start going on about *farming*?'

'It's not about farming,' Melanie said sweetly. 'It's about sex.'

Nigel had stared at her, waiting. The others know that he likes to get Melanie Bloom talking about sex.

'Think about it. A ploughman or a seed-sower is creating new life. It would make no sense to hide what he does by night, in the dark. Well, the act of sex creates new life too – so why should it have to be hidden away?'

Sex at Cuckoo Farm is never a matter of shame. Or sin. Naomi settles this dispute by asking for a show of hands. She always does this when there's a disagreement. 'Hands up those who think that Poppy and Paul should be asked to stop making love outside.'

Only Larry and his wife put up their hands. Larry is disgruntled, and he says nastily to Poppy and Paul: 'Does that mean we're all allowed to come and *watch*?'

This time it's Olivia who intervenes. She can be stern when the situation calls for it. 'Larry, that's not an appropriate thing to say. It was unkind. You have to accept that no one agrees with you. You're outnumbered.'

The others know that if he can't accept the result of the show of hands, Larry and his wife will be told to leave. It has happened. The sisters can be very firm.

But he subsides into a grumpy acknowledgement. Poppy leaves the table and hurries inside, in tears. Paul follows her, looking distressed.

*

Cressida stands up, grabs Rebecca by the hand, and says 'Come on!'

'Where are we going?'

'Those two need a morale-boost!'

They follow the unhappy couple through the kitchen and a long dog-legged passage, and out into a small enclosed garden. It's called the rose garden, but now it grows vegetables.

Cressida is unsure about her motivation, except that she feels unaccountably sad. And a little ashamed – because she's always thought that Paul and Poppy were rather ridiculous. *But ridiculous people can be hurt*, she thinks. They often are – and she's struck by the injustice of it.

The two of them have sat down at a small metal table. On the ground nearby there are flower pots, and a sieve, and some gardening tools.

Cressida sits down, facing them. Rebecca – feeling very uncertain about the wisdom of this – sits down too.

Cressie doesn't offer consolation, or solidarity, or sympathetic rage. She just asks them if they've been to the little brick house on the far side of the wood. 'It's the other side of the old quarry.'

But they shake their heads. They don't go so far afield.

'It's lovely there. You'd like it, I think.'

They stare at her, uncomprehending.

'There's a hut, built of brick,' Cressida says. 'A bit damp, with a few cobwebs. But it's nice. And outside there's a lovely grassy spot, surrounded entirely by trees, and a small river running by. It's a very private place, almost magical.'

'But why . . ?'

'I was conceived there,' Cressida says.

There is a long pause. 'How do you know that?' Paul says. 'Are you absolutely sure?'

'Not absolutely, no. But I'm as certain as it's possible to be. I know my parents loved that place, and went there a lot. It was special to them, they carved their initials in the brickwork. And the dates match.'

Poppy is interested now. 'Have you asked them about it?'

'I can't. My mother died when I was young, and I'm not in touch with my father.'

'You said it was *magical*. Do you mean the place might somehow *help us*?'

But Cressida is emphatic about this. 'No, I don't believe that!' she says. 'But I know that it's a lovely place, and no one goes there now. So you wouldn't have your heads full of fear of being interrupted. All you need think about is each other, and what you're doing.'

Rebecca is very impressed. She's always known Cressida can be impulsive and generous, but she hadn't known she was up to dispensing sexual advice. *Are there things in Cressida's life that none of us know about?*

Cressida has finished her advice now. She says a short goodbye to Poppy and Paul, and sets off back to the house. Rebecca, following, says sadly, 'We used to go there all the time, the three of us.'

'Yes,' Cressida says sharply. 'Until you and Patrick broke up and spoiled everything.'

There's nothing Rebecca can say in reply to this. She's silenced completely.

'After that,' Cressida goes on, 'if I went there with Patrick, *you* wouldn't be there! And if I went with *you*, *he* wouldn't come. So! It all stopped!'

Rebecca is still unable to say anything. She's astonished, abashed.

'You were hopeless if he wasn't there – and he was useless without you! They were the happiest days of my life,' Cressida says.

This is the first time she's had that thought. *Were they? Really?*

When they arrive back, there are still a few people seated around the table. So much has happened! – *which is why,* Rebecca thinks, *no one noticed I was late for supper*.

But she doesn't entirely escape. Naomi leans towards her and says softly: 'Nice-looking young man, by the way. Who was he?'

*Can't a girl have **any** privacy?* Rebecca thinks crossly.

Can delight
Chain'd in night
The virgins of youth and morning bear.

*

Ellie Bassett is standing in the hall at number 57 Charter Street. It's a small cramped space, with brown lino on the floor, and a mirror on the wall – *mirror, mirror, on the wall*, next to a couple of coat-hooks. There's a coconut door-mat. And two large bolts on the door.

She's left the house only once since she arrived. Auntie has given her a shopping-bag and told her to go to the shops at the end of the street, for some soap-flakes, and a packet of tea. She's wearing Edna's high-heel shoes, deep pink, and several sizes too big. She has on a grubby white summer dress. And a bra, stuffed with rolled-up tissue paper. The other girls had put it on for her.

There'd been a good deal of giggling. Yes, there *is* laughter at number 57, sometimes. She's not used to that – there wasn't much laughing back at home.

The woman who runs number 57 is occasionally indulgent. But who is she? Everyone calls her Auntie.

'If there's any change, buy us all a tube of Smarties. And don't hang around! I want you back here in twenty minutes.'

Outside in the street, Ellie hobbles uncomfortably in the high-heeled shoes. It's a long straight road. The Edwardian houses are mostly terraced, some rebuilt after the bombing. Similar style, new bricks.

She sets off towards the shops at the far end.

She could run away if she chooses, she knows that. But she's scared. She has no idea where she is – and if she had known, she wouldn't be able to find her way through London. Besides, she hasn't any money. She could find a policeman, but that thought doesn't occur to her. And she doesn't want to go home anyway. Except that she misses her mum sometimes.

She knows what they would do to her if they caught her. She's seen what happens. It's not Auntie who deals with that, it's one of the men. The house is very quiet while it's happening.

She's frightened of the men. There are lots of them, coming and going. They don't say much, and when they do say something she rarely understands. The one in charge is called Lucas. He makes her watch things sometimes. But nothing new. She'd done them before – sort of – at home. With *him*.

There are three other girls at the house. Older, but not by much. *They've* all done it, and they've told her what happens, so she already half-knows what to expect. Men go upstairs and stay in the rooms for half-an-hour. Or longer. But the girls don't say much about it afterwards, they have their own taboos.

There are no sounds, though once a girl called Wallace screamed so much that Auntie had gone in the room to intervene. There'd been a lot of shouting that night. And a short fist-fight. Lucas had dealt with it. Next morning, Wallace had gone.

Ellie's been shut up for so long that being in an ordinary street – with people coming and going about their normal business, and the sun shining in a clear sky – requires a recovered focus, her former way of seeing. It's a bit like a trance. In the street there are two young women approaching slowly from the other direction, behaving strangely. They're looking at house numbers.

She doesn't register them at first.

But she begins to think she recognises one of these two, the younger one. She looks like someone from back home. Ellie can't remember her name but she's sure she's right. What's *she* doing here? And who's the young woman with her? A proper grown-up.

Then she remembers! *That young one, she's from Cuckoo Farm! I saw her sometimes, on the Green.*

What are they doing? Why are they here? They've slowed down now, and the young one is speaking urgently to the older one. They're both staring at Ellie as they draw close.

'Ellie? You're Ellie Bassett, aren't you?'

She shakes her head, angrily. She wishes passionately that she'd accepted the sun-glasses Auntie had wanted her to wear. But one of

the lenses was cracked and she'd refused. She was too proud to be seen wearing cracked sun-glasses.

'Yes, you are! You live at Codling Green.'

Should she admit the truth? Would it help? Does she even *want* help?

'I've never heard of Codling Green!'

The older one speaks, gently. 'Where do you live then?'

'Back there. Number 57.'

'Listen! We can get you out of there, you'll be safe. Come with us – now.'

'What do you mean, *safe*?'

'Is your aunt really ill?'

'Yes. I'm looking after her.'

'Dressed like that?'

Ellie is suddenly aware that she looks ridiculous, with the stuffed bra and the high heels. But she hates these two nosy buggers! *Why don't they just piss off? I just want to be left alone!*

'You're not fooling anyone!' one of them says. But Ellie just stares, she's out of her depth.

She's anxious to get as far away from number 57 as she can. Because if anyone there looks along the street and sees her talking to these two, God knows what will happen to her when she gets back. She hurries on towards the shops, but the two young women turn and walk with her. And there's nothing she can do to stop them.

So she changes tack, tries to reassure them, put them off the scent. Yes, she *is* Ellie Bassett, she admits. But she's just staying with her aunt, cos she's ill.

They ask her how long she is likely to be staying there. 'Another couple of weeks,' she says. Then she adds grandly: 'Then I'm going up north.'

A place for proper whores, Edna had said. And Auntie had laughed.

'Or it might be Leeds,' Ellie says. 'Or Bristol.'

'How do you know?'

'Cos three went last week. The rest of us at 57 are all waiting to be shipped off somewhere.'

‘How many are there, for God’s sake?’

‘There are six of us now.’

‘What do you mean, *waiting to be shipped off*?’

She doesn’t reply. All three of them go into the shop, and Ellie purchases soap-flakes, some tea, and a tube of Smarties, and stows them in her shopping-bag.

On the way out, she hesitates. ‘Is my Mum OK?’ she says. Different voice, different posture, different gaze. Suddenly and briefly she’s someone else.

‘Yes, as far as I know,’ Rebecca says. ‘But I haven’t spoken to her.’

‘What about my little brother? I suppose my dad’s still . . ?’

Cressida makes a mental note of this unspoken question. But she doesn’t know what it means.

‘Listen!’ Ellie says. ‘Stay away from here. If you start meddling it’ll be worse for me!’

‘But we can’t just leave you . . .’

‘Yes you can! I’m all right, honest! And I shall be going away soon anyway.’

They let her go. They have to, what else can they do? They can’t man-handle her down the street. As she leaves, Ellie says over her shoulder, ‘Anyway, what makes you think I’d be safe at home?’

They don’t know what to make of that remark.

But they don’t give up. ‘In for a penny, in for a pound!’ Cressida says to Rebecca.

They follow at a distance and watch as Ellie goes in and closes the door behind her. There’s a neighbour planting pansies in a pot outside number 55. Cressida – with great charm and complete unselfconsciousness – gets chatting with him.

‘I don’t know what goes on in there,’ he tells her. ‘Some kind of fostering, I think. Children come and go. No one’s there for long.’

‘Only girls?’

‘Mostly girls, one or two younger boys.’

As they walk back towards the end of the street, Cressida takes Rebecca’s hand and tucks it under her arm. It brings them physically closer, so that she can speak quietly into Rebecca’s ear.

'I'm going to tell you something now,' Cressida says, 'which will make you – want – to look – behind you. But you *mustn't*! – *No! Don't!* However much you want to, *don't look back!*'

Rebecca obeys. 'But why?' she asks.

'Because we're being followed,' Cressida says. 'We've been followed ever since we got to Charter Street. A man, I don't know who he is. I need to get a proper look at him.'

When they reach the shop they were in earlier, they go inside. Cressida leads Rebecca over to a display of Ladybird books where they can stand and look through the window into the street.

'He might follow us into the shop.'

'No, he'll walk on by,' Cressida says. *As if she can read his mind.*

He does walk by, not even looking into the shop as far as they can see.

Cressida is gratified. She has several seconds in which to study the man's face – and everything about him – so that she can recall him later.

Rebecca on the other hand doesn't need to memorise him. She knows who he is.

That night at number 57, when the lights are out and the curtains are drawn, Hilda starts tapping her fingers on the wooden bed-head. *Tappetty tap-tap, tappetty tap . . .*

The bedroom is quiet – a peopled silence, four schoolgirls, who know more than they have the capacity for. Two of them in one bed, Ellie in a camp-bed, and a girl called Norma on a mattress on the floor.

Tappetty tap-tap, tappetty tap . . .

A bedtime ritual, full of girl-mischief. Edna whispers the words, and the others join in, whispering in unison.

Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree-top,
When the wind blows the cradle will rock.
When the bough breaks, the baby will fall –
Down will come cradle, baby and all.

A lullabye. A nursery rhyme.

For solidarity perhaps? Or comfort?

Who knows?

'Night, night!' Hilda says. It's always Hilda who says it.

Everything is quiet now, except for the footsteps of a solitary passer-by walking in the dark street.

4

Girls in Action

They are seated at a large table in a small room. Four of them. They're in the Print Room at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. The walls are lined with large brown books with tooled bindings, on handsome light-oak shelves. The lighting is almost shadowless.

Rebecca, her mother Olivia, and Zoe's father.

And Zoe herself, of course. Someone had told her that a young child wouldn't be allowed in, but she pointed out that *she* had set up this meeting. She saw no reason why she should be excluded. And Rebecca had agreed.

The two girls and Olivia had travelled by train. They'd met Dr Whittaker for lunch at the Copper Kettle, and at two o'clock he took them to meet his friend, the Assistant Keeper of Prints at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Dr Jeremy Wheeler.

Zoe's dad introduces them, including his daughter. 'The last time I met you,' Dr Wheeler says to her, 'you were five years old. A garden party or something – at your Dad's college.'

Zoe is used to academics bending down towards her, and speaking in that kindly avuncular way.

The Assistant Keeper is doing his friend a favour. He has no expectations that these copper plates will prove to be of any interest.

Rebecca has brought ten of them and she lays them out on the table. There are three title-pages – for *Innocence*, *Experience*, and the combined title for the complete set; two frontispieces; and five other plates, two of them engraved on both sides. Dr Wheeler examines them carefully with a magnifying-glass. He spends about a minute on each plate, saying nothing.

He stares, wide-mouthed. The hand holding the magnifying glass is shaking.

'And you have more?' he asks Rebecca. He is suddenly breathless, as if he's been running hard.

'Yes. The other 25.'

‘I think the Senior Keeper needs to see these,’ he says. It’s not just an utterance, it’s almost a gasp.

Carefully, he transfers the plates to a tray covered with soft dark-blue felt, and hurries out with them. And they’re left there, wondering. After twenty minutes, he returns, accompanied by a white-haired older man.

There are more introductions. ‘This is the Senior Keeper of the Print Room, Dr Waller-Dixon. He is a Blake specialist.’

The story of Rebecca’s discovery of the plates has to be told again (but with no mention of Ted Coulson’s part in it).

Dr Waller-Dixon doesn’t approve of schoolgirls being allowed into the Print Rooms, but this one is giving a clear and intelligent account. He doesn’t know Dr Whittaker, but he’s heard that he’s a rising star in the English Faculty (*not that that means much, they’re a cantankerous lot!*). He finds himself addressing his remarks to the girl’s mother, who has hardly said a word so far. In her early fifties, he guesses. And he also thinks, *She’s very beautiful, tall, voluptuous*. *With an air of mystery about her*.

‘I’ve had a cursory look at these plates,’ he says eventually. ‘But they need to go through processes of thorough investigation, using the best and most up-to-date technology. Advanced magnification, chemical analysis, and so on. We have all the facilities here – but it takes time.’

Rebecca is on her guard.

‘I will be frank,’ the Senior Keeper says. ‘I expected to see some plates made by experts for printing facsimiles of the *Songs*. They’re called electrotypes. They’d be worth a little money, but nothing much. But after a preliminary look, I am prepared to say that these are probably *not* electrotypes.’

He knows he must choose his words carefully. Hopes must not be excessively raised. ‘These are a mystery. They just *could* be the original plates.’ He shakes his head, chuckling a little. ‘*But I very much doubt it.*’

‘And if they are,’ Olivia says, ‘what would that mean?’

‘If they are – and I repeat, I *doubt* it – but if they are, the consequences for us – and for *you* – would be considerable.’

'What makes you certain,' Zoe's dad asks, 'that they're not modern electrotype copies?'

'I didn't say I was certain,' the Keeper says sharply. 'But two things are interesting. One is that if a collection of electrotypes had gone missing anywhere in the world, we would have heard about it. We have sixteen electrotype plates here, at The Fitzwilliam. And we know of only three other sets in the world. But we've heard nothing. The world of Blake scholarship is very small, and we all know each other.'

He has brought in a small acid-free cardboard box. He opens it and takes out a small book. It is an original copy of the *Songs*, he tells them, dating from between 1795 and 1808, printed and then coloured by hand. He puts on gloves and carefully opens the book, turning the pages gently.

'The other interesting thing is that facsimiles are never the exact size of the originals.'

'But what does that mean?'

'It's complicated,' The Keeper says.

It's young Zoe who says what everyone is thinking. She speaks in the hushed and excited voice she uses when she's reading aloud a fairy-story, with magic. 'So these plates might be *the very ones that printed the pictures in the book*?' Many an imagined mermaid has been brought forth in that voice.

The Senior Keeper winces a little at the use of the word *picture.*

He turns the pages, pausing to let the visitors study each of them briefly.

But when he reaches 'The Blossom', Rebecca asks him to pause. This mysterious little poem is one of her favourites. Now, lost in the perfection of William Blake's original print, she's seized and taken away, her whole body and mind clenched in amazement and joy. She's studied this illustration in the facsimile copy that Zoe's dad had lent her – she'd loved it – but it's a thin and anaemic version, she now realises. Slightly *misty*. But the colours of the original are rich and luminous, bright as a mid-day in summer, as fresh and vibrant as if William or his wife Catherine had finished them only a couple of hours ago. No wonder they're called *illuminated* texts – they shine

with their own golden radiance, as if the artist had dipped his brush or his dauber in coloured sunlight, and laid it naked on the pages.

She is enkindled. She hears William say something to Catherine, and her murmured reply. She catches the words *yellow ochre*. But the vision is gone in a moment, irretrievably vanished. But she'd *heard* them, talking!

Dr Waller-Dixon, looking directly at Olivia, says: 'These plates could be very important, Mrs . . ?'

'Haughton,' Olivia tells him. 'Miss Haughton.'

He seems not to be troubled by the fact that Rebecca's mother is *Miss* Haughton. 'These plates,' he continues, 'need to be in a place of security from now on. And the other 25 must be handed over to us at once so that we can arrange and carry out proper processes of investigation.'

There is no immediate response. So he adds: 'You do understand?'

Olivia understands perfectly. But she indicates with a slight movement of her head that the decision is not hers to make. She's looking at Rebecca.

'No,' Rebecca says.

She's emphatic. '*No!*'

The Senior Keeper takes a deep breath. 'Whether these plates are genuine or not, word of their existence will inevitably get about – and there are unscrupulous people who might attempt to steal them, or buy them from you at a ridiculously low price. If you retain them, you will be . . ' he hesitates ' . . . *troubled*.'

Rebecca protests. 'But no one knows about them.'

'No one? Are you sure? How many people have you spoken to about them? Or shown them to?'

This silences Rebecca. She does a rapid counting-up in her head. *Almost everyone at Cuckoo Farm knows about them, and Jessica, her dad and his two employees, and his wife, and Ted Coulson. Who else?* It's already up to around thirty people.

'It only needs one of them to mention it. Then word will spread, exponentially, like a virus.'

Zoe’s dad looks abashed at this. He has told one or two university colleagues about the plates.

‘Isn’t there also a possibility that they are an elaborate forgery?’ he says.

It's the younger scholar who takes up his point, Dr Wheeler. 'But it's hardly possible,' he says. 'If there were a single plate, it could perhaps be a forgery. But 35 of them? A complete set? Surely not!'

He explains. 'A forger would have to possess a scholar's knowledge of Blake's work. That in itself takes a lifetime. Believe me, I *know*! For example, he'd have to know that nineteen of the plates were engraved on both sides – and which nineteen they were. But he'd also have to be an engraver of outstanding skill – and that's *another* life's work. Blake's method was a new one, which he was developing all the time, and a forger would have to understand it in every detail. He'd have to know all about his printing processes too. Someone might perhaps be tempted to forge *a single copy* of two or three plates – but 54 illustrations and poems, engraved on 35 copper plates? I think not. It's inconceivable! It would require two lifetimes!'

Zoe's dad is persistent. 'But you could have a situation in which a Blake scholar and a fine engraver collaborated.'

'And is this engraver also a printer? With the appropriate skills and a lifetime of experience behind him – not to mention a hand-press, and all the other equipment that you'd expect to find in a fine-art print-shop!'

'There's something else,' Dr Waller-Dixon says. 'people sometimes talk as if Blake had *one* printing technique. He didn't, it was evolving and developing all the time. Many of the plates for *Experience* were printed and coloured in ways that were significantly different from the plates in *Innocence*. A forger would have to know all about that too.'

'They aren't forgeries,' Olivia says. 'They're not fakes either.'

What is that quality Olivia has? She has only to begin speaking and everyone is arrested at once. There's no rhetoric, there are no verbal flourishes, no oratorical cheats, no presumption of academic authority. Her words just step forward in sequence, bringing clarity.

'A fake is a spurious copy done in the style and manner of a great artist, in order to deceive. These are not new designs made *in the style of* William Blake. They are apparently *identical* to the surviving original prints. But they can't be forgeries either, because a

forgery is a false copy of an original. If these are fake plates, *where are the originals?*'

'What makes you so sure of that?'

'If you owned an original set, and you wanted to get rich, you'd just sell the set – not spend thirty-odd years making a collection of fakes.'

They digest this in thoughtful silence.

'So, if Rebecca's plates are definitely not perfectly legal modern facsimiles – what you call *electrotypes* – they must be William Blake's original work. Nothing else makes any sense.'

'But,' Dr Wheeler says, 'Newcastle remains a difficulty. As far as we know, Blake himself never went further north than Hampstead Heath! We know that in the last few weeks of his life Blake printed off a new set of the *Songs*, in the summer of 1827. So how in God's name would the plates have later ended up *in Newcastle*?'

'Anyway,' the Senior Keeper says, 'we would come to no decision about authenticity without consulting other authorities.'

'Which authorities?' Zoe's dad asks.

'Well, ourselves, of course. We can compare these with our own electrotype copies. And there's the Bodleian. And the British Museum. And there are some excellent people at Yale.'

Olivia says, 'Yale?'

'Yes, it's in the United States.'

Olivia smiles. She knows where Yale is. 'I've been to America,' she says.

'So have I!' Dr Wheeler says joyously. He's very proud that he's been to America. 'Where exactly did you go?' he asks Olivia.

'Well, *not* to Yale! I was at the White House.'

A young Cambridge academic learns quickly never to be surprised by contact with greatness. It goes with the job. 'How did you come to be there?' he asks casually.

'I was accompanying someone.'

'May I ask who it was?' Then he blushes, realising he might have asked a personal question.

'I'm afraid I can't tell you that,' Olivia says.

'When was this?'

‘During the War. It happened a few times.’

‘Wasn’t it very dangerous? How did that come about?’

‘Sorry. It’s classified,’ she says. She’s smiling, very slightly. And perfectly composed.

It could be true, Dr Wheeler thinks. But he’s not sure.

There were several such trips, and Olivia remembers them well. No one could forget those long terrifying night-flights across the Atlantic, with everyone on board fully aware of the danger. Whenever Mr Churchill felt the need to travel on some secret wartime mission, she was always sent for. She’d also accompanied him to the heart of Paris when the advancing German armies were already at the edge of the city. Later Casablanca, Cairo, Moscow, Yalta. And long after the war was over, to France again, this time by the Night Ferry from Victoria, making an unscheduled stop to pick up the Great Man at Sevenoaks before proceeding to sea.

Dr Waller-Dixon is keen to get to the matter in hand. ‘My dear child,’ he says to Rebecca, ‘you have to hand them over to us. Really, it’s the only thing to do.’

There is a slight pause. Perhaps he’s waiting for her mother to reply.

But Olivia again defers to her daughter.

Rebecca is not accustomed to being addressed as *my dear child*. ‘The plates belong to me,’ she says.

The two scholars sigh unhappily. It always comes back to ownership in the end.

‘Have you proof of that?’ Dr Waller-Dixon hadn’t intended to speak as aggressively as these words sounded.

Silently, Rebecca produces a small folded piece of paper, the receipt she was given when she paid for her purchase at the sale-room in Newcastle. Nothing is itemised. It simply records that she paid £6.00 for Lot 210, ‘a box of sundry tools and other items’.

‘I got £3 back,’ she says. ‘Someone bought the tools from me.’

‘I think,’ Olivia says carefully, ‘that we should go back to Norfolk, with these plates. And *we* will keep them in a safe place, for now. I suggest that you . . .’ she addresses the two academics ‘. . . write to

us, outlining precisely your proposals. We'll consider them, and Rebecca will decide what action she wishes to take.'

It's clear there is going to be no more progress today. The meeting comes to an end.

Outside in the street, opposite Addenbrookes, Olivia, Rebecca and young Zoe say goodbye and thank-you to Dr Whittaker, and set off to walk to the station.

They are disconsolate and confused, all three of them.

*

The Keepers are true to their agreement. And two days later Rebecca receives a letter. It thanks her for showing them the plates and sets out their proposals.

> In order to deal with the uncertain situation we find ourselves in, there is, we believe, only one possible course of action.
>
> We ask you to let us have 18 of the copper plates (we will provide legal protection, insurance and guarantees, of course) so that we can distribute them – three plates to each – to institutions with proven and state-of-the-art research, and rigorous standards of academic probity and excellence. They are:
>
> Ourselves, here at the Fitzwilliam Museum

The British Museum

The Bodleian Library in Oxford

The London College of Printing

Yale University

And a private collector (Sir Godfrey Masters), who is acknowledged worldwide as a specialist in William Blake, and has donated much of his highly valuable collection to this Museum.

This will ensure that the view we finally come to with regard to these plates will be informed by the best intelligence and research in the world.

Re-reading the letter in her bedroom, Rebecca sits and studies the plates – which she has rearranged together in sequence, on her writing-desk.

*

Alexander Zeppelin is not pleased.

Eight people work for the Zeppelin Detective Agency, and there are at least a dozen freelancers who are called in for their specialisms. They're all men. Cressida is the only woman in the set-up. The receptionist is male, and the two cleaners who come in at night.

Cressida is in Zeppelin's office now, facing him. There's a chair, but he'd told her to leave the door ajar, so she knows she is required to remain standing. And people working in the outer office will hear every word.

'I made it quite clear to you – it's in your bloody contract! – what would happen if you took a job on the side.'

'I didn't take it on,' Cressida says. 'It took on *me*!'

She's told him everything. Except Rebecca's name, and where she lives.

'Bloody women! I *knew* it was a mistake. I should never have allowed Brackendale to persuade me about you! By the way, I suppose you've told him about this?'

'Of course I have.'

'And what did *he* say?'

'He said I should tell you.'

Zeppelin sighs deeply. '*Well*! You are right about this. It *is* a crime. But it's a matter for the cops. We are not the police. We work for clients, privately, for a fee. *Who is the client in this case?'*

'I am the client,' she says. This idea has only just occurred to her but she decides to run with it.

'How can you be the client? You work here!'

'But I have a problem – and there's nothing in my contract that says I can't consult your agency about it, just because I work here.'

'And the fee? What about that? Can you *pay* – for a long-term investigation into trafficking?'

'No.'

He waves his arms angrily from side to side in front of his face, as if he is trying to obliterate Cressida from his sight.

'Then stop talking bollocks! You are right – this whole thing *stinks*! But it's a matter for the cops. Private eyes – if they've got any sense – do not get themselves involved with dirty old men who enjoy touching up schoolgirls!'

The casual cruelty of this appals her – and the phrasing that slips so easily from his tongue. He sees that her face is white, frozen.

'I've been here for more than two years,' she manages to say. 'Have there been any complaints about my work?'

There haven't. He sits back in his chair, folds his arms across his chest, and waits.

But she has nothing else to say. She senses that she has gained a small advantage, but only just.

'Ok,' he says. 'This is what is going to happen. No arguments! You're owed some holiday, right? – so you can have a week now, to sort this out . . . '

He sees her dismay. 'A *week*?' she says.

But he knows cases don't get solved in neat packages of time. They stop and start, and the investigator has to work with that.

'This is Friday morning and I want you back here on Monday week, at work. For *me*. Understand? And you can take off another fourteen days over the next few months, as and when you need.'

She is taken aback, and says nothing.

'And I want to see a written record of *every bloody minute* you spend working on that case. Understand? You can come into the office if you want to, you can use the resources – *but you are not to involve any of the staff*. You're on your own. Is that clear?'

Cressida tries to smile in gratitude. But she can't quite manage it, she's still in the grip of shock, and anger. 'Can I use the firm's name if necessary?'

'No you bloody can't! Now piss off out of here!'

When she's left the office, Zeppelin calls in one of the men. His name is Toby, so naturally everyone calls him Jugg.

'I want you to keep an eye on her,' Zeppelin growls.

'I'm on the Smithfield case.'

'Hand that over to young Bob. I want you to keep an eye on *her*.'

'D'you mean *follow her*? No one can do that, unless he's invisible. We've all tried!'

'No one's invisible! She just knows all the bloody tricks! But she'll get herself into deep water, sure as shit. She'll need a *man* – a man with some sense!'

As Jugg is leaving, Zeppelin thinks of something else. 'You don't go in for feeling up schoolgirls yourself, I hope?'

Jugg just waves one hand airily, and leaves, grinning.

*

Early one evening, the phone rings in the porter's lodge at St Adelaide's College in Cambridge.

The porter's name is Brewster, but everyone calls him *Sergeant* because he'd been a sergeant in the army during the War. Sergeant Brewster picks up the receiver – and immediately recognises the voice speaking to him.

'Zoe!' he says. His heart sinks and he sighs – because he knows the date, and he knows why she's phoning. 'How are you?'

'I'm fine,' Zoe says. 'How are you?'

'Very well, thanks.'

'How is Mrs Brewster?'

'She's as lovely as ever. And how is your aunt?'

They go on like this for a while, but he knows why she's phoned, and she knows he knows. It's the Sergeant who finally faces it, head on. 'Happy Birthday,' he says. 'How old are you now? Twenty-five, is it?'

Zoe laughs. It's an old joke. 'Ten!' she says.

'It's time you were married,' he says. 'I was married before I was ten.'

Another old joke.

'He forgot, didn't he?' Zoe says. '*Again!*' she adds, because he'd forgotten last year too.

'Yes, he did,' the Sergeant says. 'But he's a very busy man, and you have to remember that.'

'Is he in college now?' Zoe asks.

'No, sorry. He's taken a coach-load of his students to Stratford. To see a play. It'll be after midnight before he's back.'

'Oh.'

'I'm sorry, Zoe.'

Zoe doesn't want to talk any more, so she says goodbye and thanks, and ends the conversation.

The Sergeant doesn't tell her that he'd reminded Doctor Whittaker about his daughter's birthday. That very morning.

*

Later that week, Dr Whittaker's long black gown sweeps the steps of the lecture theatre as he makes a dramatic entry and paces down towards the front. He lays out some books on the table and arranges his notes on the lectern.

He casts his eyes over his audience, ranged above him on the tiered seats of the theatre. About two hundred, he guesses. When they are quiet, Dr Whittaker takes a deep breath, and begins.

'A licence to publish a book called *Shakespeare's Sonnets* was issued on the 20th May, 1609 . . . '

There is the very slightest pause then, for Dr Whittaker has seen that someone very small is sitting at the back. A *child* – watching him closely, eye to eye.

But he is a professional, and not easily thrown off his stride. So no one in the audience would have guessed that the lecturer has just spotted his daughter, aged ten, sitting in the back row. *Or is she eleven now?*

Zoe had decided that if her dad found it so hard to visit her at Cuckoo Farm, she would visit him instead. Better still, she would go to one of the extra summer lectures that he always made such a fuss about.

'Would you like me to come with you?' Aunt Polly said.

But Zoe had made the journey to and from Cambridge dozens of times. She didn't need anyone with her. And she knew Aunt Polly didn't want to watch her brother give a lecture.

In Cambridge, she takes a bus into the centre of town and buys herself a notepad and a pencil in case she wants to take notes. She knows that's what students do.

The Sergeant at the porter's lodge told her where the lecture is being given. She has chosen a seat in the back row because she wants to watch the students as well as her father. But she doesn't know any of them. They are summer visitors, mostly from the United States. She knows that, because they speak like people in films.

Dr Whittaker reads one of the Sonnets aloud. It begins ~

Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,
And make me travel forth without my cloak . . ?

She doesn't understand the poem with any precision, and would have found it hard to explain it. But she does recognise its sadness and reproach. William Shakespeare, she thinks, had been let down by someone. She knows what that feels like.

When the lecture is finished (almost an hour of it!) the audience applauds. She doesn't think her father's undergraduates do that.

Afterwards, she walks with her dad to his rooms in college, and he orders afternoon tea to be brought up. He isn't cross with her for coming to his lecture. In fact, he seems pleased.

Sitting in the sunny window-seat that looks down upon the college lawn, Zoe says: 'You forgot my birthday.'

'I didn't really. I got you this.' He opens a drawer in his desk and takes out a small flat parcel, neatly tied and wrapped, with her name on it.

'The Sergeant reminded you,' Zoe says. It is part-question, part-statement.

But he shakes his head. 'I got this before the day. I just forgot to send it.'

Zoe unwraps her gift. It is a book, of course, but not the kind she'd expected. It opens into a big map of East Anglia.

'Because you're the sort of person who likes to know where you're going,' he says.

She's pleased with it, and says so. 'Next to mermaids and reading stories, maps are my favourite things,' she tells him.

Mentioning mermaids has reminded her of the day on the river and the picnic at Grantchester. 'Have you heard from Michael?' she asks. 'I've had a postcard from him.'

He stares. 'My students have been writing to you?' he says.

'Only Michael. Well, Jack too, actually.'

'*Jack?* She's sending you postcards too?'

'No. She added a bit to Michael's.'

He doesn't seem able to comprehend this. 'You mean they are together?'

'Michael went to Paris – and Jack followed him there. She wasn't happy in Dublin, because she missed him. I expect they're married by now.'

'Well, if they are,' her father says slowly, 'they'll find their lives rather complicated when they come back. What do you think about it?'

'I think they've found their heart's desire,' Zoe says. She has imagined them walking hand in hand beside the River Seine.

Then her father changes the subject – and the expression on his face. 'Zoe, something has happened. It's sad, but I'm afraid I have to tell you about it.'

Zoe senses at once what this news might be. 'Professor Dougal?' she says.

'Yes. He was taken ill – and he . . . well, he died last week. It was all a bit sudden.'

Zoe doesn't want to know the details. 'He kept calling me *Alice*,' she says. 'Did you know that?'

'No, but I'm not surprised. In the last few weeks he went around asking people where Alice was. "What's happened to Alice?" he would say. "Where has Alice gone?"'

But she can see he's already thinking of something else. 'Actually, he left me a job to do.'

'What sort of job?'

'Well, he left a will, of course. That was all about his money. His lawyer is dealing with that. But he also left a letter for me.'

'A letter?'

'Yes. With a list of all the things in his college rooms. He asked me to give them out to his friends. Books, mostly. And his typewriter. And I think there's a rather handsome old clock. And a few other bits and pieces. A couple of paintings. Everything is listed, with a name beside it.'

'Perhaps one of the things will be for you,' she suggests hopefully. 'The clock, perhaps.'

'I haven't had time to go through the list yet. I'm going to make a start tomorrow.'

Zoe feels sad about Professor Dougal. But she sets her sadness aside because there's something she wants to ask her father. It's something she's been upset about. 'Why didn't you tell me my grandfather made statues?'

'I never thought about it,' he says. 'I didn't think you'd be interested. *Are* you interested?'

Zoe is emphatic. 'Yes, I am. Aunt Polly showed me some of them. He was *your father* and you never thought to tell me he was a sculptor! You've never told me anything about him!'

It is beyond his understanding that she might want to know about an old man she's never met. Zoe is equally surprised that it

has never occurred to him that she might be interested in her grandfather.

He steers the conversation in a slightly different direction and hopes for the best. 'Since we're on that subject, old Professor Dougal and your grandfather knew each other. In fact, they were friends – when they were young men. I think they were in the War together. You know – the First War. Are you interested in that too?'

There is a hint of bad temper in his voice. Zoe knows he can be sarcastic when he's cornered.

'Yes, I am. *Very!*' she says.

He changes the subject. 'Do you still believe in mermaids?'

She suddenly – but very definitely – doesn't want to talk about this.

So she says: 'I've got to go now, to catch my train.'

He walks with her to the station, and she holds his hand because she isn't cross with him any more. Quite the reverse, in fact – she's very happy.

But alone on the train, as it passes over the water-meadows at Ely, she considers her father's question. *Do you still believe in mermaids?*

Why did he say *still*? – as if it was only a matter of time and eventually she'll grow out of it? To him, Zoe realises, her belief in mermaids is similar to believing in Father Christmas. She *had* believed in him until she was six, then she pretended she still did until she was eight – then she admitted to everyone that she'd stopped altogether. Fairies were completely different. They were a kind of game that you could play, or not, depending on what you enjoyed doing. *Believing* didn't enter into it.

But mermaids are different. They're more substantial, they are somehow grown-up. She remembers – vividly, lucidly – Jack climbing out of the river and walking towards her, wet and very beautiful, as Michael had wrapped a towel around her.

I don't believe in mermaids the way my father means, she thinks. But mermaids are not like Father Christmas. *He* matters to very young children, until they no longer need him. But mermaids are not especially for children. They matter to grown-ups too.

They're everywhere – in stories, in paintings, in sculpture, and in people's thoughts. Why is this?

She can't answer that question. But *of course* she still believes in mermaids!

*

Melanie Bloom has invited her small A Level English group to her house one Saturday afternoon, for tea, and to have a look at Rebecca's copper plates. Jess and Rebecca accept at once, and five others, including Nigel Wayward.

Melanie has prepared a picnic tea in her small garden. But first she shows them round inside – the tiny kitchen which they'd all filed through to reach her back garden, the small upstairs bathroom, her bedroom, and the second bedroom which she's made into a study.

On her bedside table, there's a framed photograph of a nice-looking young man, casually dressed, smiling affectionately at the viewer.

'My boyfriend works in London,' she explains. 'He comes down most weekends.'

They all immediately think of the bed upstairs. Nigel – pruriently and shamelessly interested in Melanie – gives them all a significant look. They disapprove of him, of course, but they'd all had the same thought.

But surely not? She's a ***teacher****! If the school governors knew . . . ?*

Outside, eating scones and drinking lemonade, Rebecca and Nigel are seated on a double swing-seat.

She's always a little mystified by Nigel. She knows he can't stop talking about sex. He's obsessed by it, always trying to re-direct conversations in a sexual direction. As she sits beside him, she's aware he is looking at her bare knees.

Yet she's never worried by him, or frightened. He's no threat. She's often *irritated* by him. But never troubled. And she wonders why this is.

It's a joyous afternoon at first. But when they settle down to look at the plates, Rebecca begins to feel a disappointment creeping up on her.

She'd expected to be asked some questions – about etching perhaps, or engraving, or copper plates. But no one asks her anything. They're all (except Jess) fundamentally indifferent and uninterested. Possibly even a little resentful – as if they believe ordinary people from Norfolk have no business making important artistic discoveries.

And there's so much they don't know. Melanie has made sure they have a good understanding of the *Songs* – but they know nothing about Blake the man, or that he wrote his poems on copper in an acid-resistant resin, and illustrated them himself, and printed them himself, and made them into books. And that he combined the text with the designs in a completely new way.

Melanie is as much out of her depth as her students. She knows nothing about the *Songs'* composition and publishing. It's clear to Rebecca that she's never given a thought to how Blake printed them – slowly, with Catherine's help, one set at a time, all through his life, whenever a potential buyer visited his workshop.

Rebecca doesn't mind about her classmates. They've been her base, her familiar context since she was eleven. She is used to them. Fond of them.

But she's saddened and puzzled by her teacher's response. Still fresh from university, Melanie Bloom has been a shining beacon of inspired and radiant teaching, entertaining, challenging, provocative, always responsive to her students, unafraid of tackling difficult subjects, often sharing laughter with them.

But she has no idea what to make of the illustrations. Rebecca also shows them Dr Whittaker's facsimile edition of the *Songs* – but Melanie, frowning over it in the afternoon sun, is at a loss. Adrift. Almost embarrassed. She can find no hold on these decorations, the swirling passionate colours, the flowers, the birds, the trees.

And all those *sheep*!

And the human figures – are they dressed? Or naked? Are they male? Or female?

A wave of new thinking is currently sweeping through English teaching, at schools and universities. Melanie is part of this, along with entire cohorts of newly-graduated English teachers, mostly educated in a Leavisite tradition – exclusively word-based, text-based.

Practical criticism of the words on the page. *That* is central now – the sacredness of the Word.

Change *was* sorely needed. For generations, poems had been valued for their magic, nobleness, and beauty, so fragile and insubstantial that they would disintegrate under analysis.

But this post-Romantic approach is now seen as old-fashioned and lazy. Melanie's students have learned that contextual knowledge never has more than a tangential relevance. As for the writer's intentions, *they* are not relevant at all. They can only distract or mislead – as do biographical details, early drafts, and manuscript scribblings. A serious reader should apply an analytical and cool intelligence only to the words printed on the page.

Just the text.

Everything else is guesswork. She is evangelical, fired by the precision and focus of the task.

But this view of literature does not know how to welcome pictures.

Publishing history has played a part in this readerly blindness. Generations of A Level English students have studied the *Songs* using editions printed in plain black letterpress, with no illustrations. Except for a few wealthy collectors, academics, and archivists in well-endowed libraries, hardly anyone has ever seen Blake's *Songs* as he published them. It's 1960, and this has started to change. Affordable editions are at last being published. But they're not widely known, they're not yet found in public libraries or in schools.

So Melanie is at a loss. She doesn't scoff, she would never do that. But she shows little interest in the plates, and she has nothing illuminating to say about them.

'Thanks for showing us these, Rebecca,' Melanie says. 'But when we're back in class on Monday, we must put aside these distractions and focus on the poems.'

As a man is, so he sees.

*

'I wonder if Poppy and Paul have been visiting the brick house,' Cressida says to Rebecca one warm evening in September. 'Why don't we go and see?'

'How will we know?'

'Of course we'll know! Everyone who goes there leaves a sign.'

Enigmatic, to say the least. But Rebecca agrees, gripped a little perhaps by memories.

There's an autumnal enchantment in the air. They move effortlessly through the trees, among towering immensities of light and shadow, like wading through a new variegated type of water, with no resistance. All around them the trees stand motionless, rooted in their ancient impenetrable darkness.

The footbridge over the quarry spans an entire landscape. Rebecca sets off resolutely, gripping the rails all the way. They are high and lofty in the evening air, soaring above the overgrown shadows below them.

But at the little house, some instinct stops Cressida. She puts her hand on Rebecca's arm and they stand, poised for flight. The enchanted strangeness of the evening intensifies.

What's happening?

Cressida whispers: 'Back away, quietly! They're in there now!'

'How do you know?'

There's a sound from inside, a woman's voice, and then another, inarticulate and cryptic. Then silence. The door of the hut is firmly closed.

Rebecca doesn't understand, and Cressida is unsure whether to explain.

Olivia and Naomi had taught Cressida everything she knew about sex. They hadn't given her lessons, just the quick to-and-fro of chat – anecdotal conversations, quick volatile gossip, questions,

oblique replies, small enigmatic remarks, sometimes explained, sometimes not.

Most of these exchanges had taken place outside, on summer days. So Cressida's understanding of sex has been touched for ever with sunlight, visionary, always in brightness and warmth.

'What was that?'

'It was Poppy – a *cri de joie*,' Cressida says.

'A *what*?'

'A moment of helpless delight.'

Rebecca is very thoughtful, briefly lost.

They set off back through the wood, slowly, side by side. Cressida takes Rebecca's arm and tucks it through her own. It's a companionable thing to do, something they often did when they were younger. *Patrick too*, Cressida recalls. They're in no hurry as they saunter back through the horizontal sunlight, still shining modestly through the branches. And as the sun imperceptibly sinks, the shadows rise higher in the trees, unnoticed.

As Cressie observes the light wavering on Rebecca's hair, and on her young challenging face, it occurs to her – not for the first time – that she has a touch of faerie about her, mercurial and capricious. Remote, mysterious.

Attitudes to sex are beginning to change, especially in London. A contraceptive pill will soon be available, and there is concern about the liberating effects of giving women control over their own sexuality. Cressida has observed how this publicity has freed up social discussion, even before the pills are available. Men and women now talk about sex, openly, in mixed company, using words that would have been unthinkable only two or three years ago. The old silencing taboos are beginning to fracture. The *Lady Chatterley* obscenity trial has contributed to this. Everyone talks about that too.

Naomi and Olivia, always frank and honest about sex, used to be much more radically advanced and liberal than the wider culture. But now the world at large – at least in London – is beginning to catch up.

So Cressida feels able – *allowed* – to say to Rebecca: 'Tell me what happened between you and Patrick.'

It's a command. *Tell me what happened . . .*

But it's risky, giving orders to Rebecca. Faerie-like she may be, but she's by nature a queen, never a courtier. She says nothing at first, then she takes a deep breath.

At last!

The shadows are darkening now, only the tops of the trees are still in sunlight.

'I *can't* tell you – because I never understood it.'

'OK. So just describe what happened.' It's surprisingly easy to make big dangerous utterances in a low and casual voice.

Rebecca takes a deep breath. 'I'd been into Stanton with my mum, I don't remember why. When I got back I went straight to his room. I knew he'd be waiting for me. Or there'd be a note telling me where he was. So I went there, we *always* did that! We found each other, it was *always* the first thing we did.'

Cressida hardly needs to be told this; she was there at the time. She knows how inseparable they were.

'I pushed open his door, but suddenly he was there on the other side.'

'What do you mean, *suddenly he was there*?'

'I don't know! I can't remember anything in detail. There was a sort of wild movement and there he was, pushing the door shut, with me on the outside of it.'

'Did he say anything?'

'Yes. He said *Go away*. He was so *angry*!'

'And you went?'

'Yes. He slammed the door against me. *And bolted it*.'

'And afterwards?'

'There was no *afterwards*,' she says sadly. 'At supper, he wouldn't look at me. And that was the end.'

The luminous enchantment of the evening has melted away now. If any magic is still upon them, it's the spell of remembered distress. There's nothing illuminating about it.

Back in that enchanted time, Patrick had been a lovely, kindly boy, especially with his two best friends. Cressida fully understands what this rebuff must have meant to the young and passionate

Rebecca – a desecration, a betrayal, a rupture so catastrophic that no healing was possible.

And Patrick's *anger* – sudden, extreme, out of the blue. Totally unexplained.

Poor Rebecca!

Cressida believes she knows what had happened, but she's unsure how to explain it. Or even if she should try. But she's still impulsive, on occasions.

'He was probably masturbating,' she says.

Rebecca frowns. 'What's that mean?'

The sisters had been open and frank about sex. But there were boundaries even they wouldn't cross. They had their own taboos. Masturbation was one of them. It had never been mentioned.

'Tell me what it means.'

So Cressida explains. Coolly, in simple statements. Everything she says is in terms of boys and men – it's 1960, and she's only recently discovered it's not exclusively male. She's still astonished by that. To have not known!

But there's a more immediate difficulty: as she explains, she's aware of words lying ahead, queuing up to come out into the light – erection, orgasm, ejaculation, wet dreams. And she knows she can't introduce such words and thoughts to Rebecca. She disapproves of taboos, she disapproves of *herself*! Because she simply *can't say them* to her.

They've stopped walking now, where the path comes out of the trees. But instead of going up to the house they walk down to the river and sit on the grassy edge, above the shallow water flashing quietly past their feet in the deepening twilight.

It's getting chilly, summer is over.

'How do you know all this?' Rebecca asks.

Cressida starts to tell.

When she went back to London at the end of the war, she'd shared a bedroom with Arthur, her older brother.

'I realised eventually what he was doing,' she says.

Cressie remembers her brother, a surly and incommunicative boy mostly. He'd been furtive and secretive, of course. But it was

Cressida who changed the bed-sheets.

Women have all manner of small shards of knowledge, sharp and secret. Cressida started early.

'Why are you telling me this?'

Cressida composes her answer carefully. 'When boys do that, it's biological. They can't help it.'

'Is that what you think Patrick was . . ?'

'Probably.'

'I don't believe you. He would never do a thing like that without me!'

'Well, I think he *did*.'

'Anyway, why couldn't he just choose *not* to do it?'

'Choose not to?

'Yes! Why not?'

'When your periods started, could you choose *not* to have them?'

Cressida is fleetingly aware that this analogy is a cheat. But it's not good enough for Rebecca anyway. 'If we'd still been best friends when they started,' she says firmly, 'I would have told him everything. He would have wanted to know.'

I doubt it, Cressie thinks.

'We were interested in everything about each other! So why couldn't he . . ?'

'You probably caught him unaware. He wasn't ready – and he *needed to be private*. Boys just *do*.'

There's a long thoughtful pause.

'They really can't help it?'

'Well, I'm not absolutely sure because I'm not a boy! But I don't think they can.'

'Why not?'

'It builds up. It would spill out at night, when he's asleep.' One of her lovers had explained all this – how he'd hated it, and why. Masturbating had started as a means of control.

This is a big concept for Rebecca. She's not disgusted by the sexual facts. But she's been brought up in a commune – and all her thinking, all her sense of integrity, her perception of people and how

they treat each other, her vision of the world even, is based on notions of trust and openness. That a long habit of sharing everything had been set aside by a biological need is not easy to accept. Rebecca's understanding of sexual realities is far wider than that of most seventeen-year-olds in 1960 – but still it is rooted in ignorance.

She's still a little under the earlier spell, yearning perhaps to get it back – the warm evening air, the innocent sunlight, Poppy's *cri de joie*. 'Have you got secrets?' she asks Cressie sadly.

Cressida too is depressed. She believes that national and cultural taboos are nationally and culturally corrupting. They are the roots of mystery and confusion. But now she knows there are taboos that she also can't bring herself to break. The words and the concepts are too personal, too embarrassing.

'Not secrets exactly,' she says. 'But there are things I prefer to keep private.'

Rebecca wonders about Cressida's secrets, the private experiences she won't share.

'Have you heard about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*?' Cressida asks.

Rebecca has. Everybody knows about it. There's been a lot of publicity about the coming obscenity trial.

'It won't teach you anything about what we've been talking about,' Cressida says. 'But it's about sexual passion, and an intelligent girl like you ought to read it. I'll send you a copy if it gets published.'

When she was nine years old Mr B – next-door in London – had given Cressida her first book. And dozens of others as time went on. When she moved to Cuckoo Farm at the age of sixteen, he sent her a new one every month. For her, sending and receiving books through the post are normal and essential features of life.

From Worzel Gummidge to Lady Chatterley.

Youth of delight come hither.
And see the opening morn . . .

*

Inside 57 Charter Street, there's a good deal of distress and concern.

And shouting.

Four girls are crouched in the dark at the top of the stairs – Ellie is one of them, with her are Hilda and Wallace, and a girl from the front bedroom. Norma was too scared to join them. She's lying stretched on her mattress on the floor, stiff with terror, staring up at the ceiling in the darkened bedroom. And wanting it all to stop.

One of the older girls is downstairs. She's called Averil, she's been tearful for days. It's because she thinks she's expecting, and that always means trouble. The others don't believe her – *she's always making a fuss about something*.

Well, she's certainly making a fuss now.

There's been anger and violence. Somebody has been struck, or kicked. There's a cry of pain. A chair or a table has been smashed, fallen on, or thrown against a wall. Some glass has been broken too. The girls have heard all this, terrified it might spread upstairs to where they are.

Ellie's home life in Norfolk had included a lot of *stuff*. But it had not included physical violence. It's true, her dad had repeatedly threatened to cut her throat if she breathed a word. But he'd never actually hit her. And her mother never had bruises on her.

So – even to a girl with Ellie's past – people being beaten up is a violent shift of gear, a great screaming speed-move into a world of new terrors.

But she still wants to know what's going on. She hates not understanding. The others seem not to mind about that, living their lives from one unpredictable moment to the next, without caring much. But Ellie always wants to know: *What is the plan? What is going to happen?* ***Why*** *is it happening?*

The plan! That's what seems to be the issue downstairs. Either there is no plan, or the plan they had is now being changed. There's been talk of abandoning the arrangements for sending the girls to

places like Bristol and towns in the north. It's no longer safe, apparently.

Someone has been bloody careless, and the cops are onto us!

They hear the front door opened and slammed shut. Someone has left the house.

It grows suddenly quiet downstairs and the girls strain their ears. They can hear Auntie sweeping up the broken glass, grumbling. Someone seems to be taking away the bits of smashed furniture.

The talking resumes in the kitchen. The girls pick up one or two words. There are towns mentioned – Exeter, Cambridge, Cardiff. Possibilities are being considered, that much they can tell. Then someone mentions Paris.

*Paris? That's in **France**!*

'None of them have passports,' Auntie says, clear as a bell. They all hear.

But that difficulty is swept aside. Passports can be dealt with.

Are they going to send us to France?

There is the banging of the iron door-knocker on the front door. *Knockety-knock-knock, knockety-knock.*

Silence falls downstairs. Someone – Auntie probably – goes to the door and opens it. A man's voice, one they don't recognise.

Auntie leads the visitor into the sitting-room. They hear him say something about 'a young one'. Is that what he wants, one of the younger girls?

They are called downstairs, summoned for inspection. Even Norma – she's dragged from her mattress and made to go down with the others. She's visibly shaking with terror.

What sort of face do you put on? Should you look eager and pleased? Sulky and resentful? Hostile? Or – like Norma – just plain terrified!

The visitor is a new client, a stranger. He's a tall man, and he looks strong. There are several days' growth of stubble on his face. He says his name is Griff. And he talks funny.

'How old is she?' he says, indicating Norma.

‘She’s *too* young,’ Auntie tells him. *Look at the state of her!* Two of them are holding her upright!

He considers, moving his eyes from one to the other. ‘That one then,’ he says.

‘She’s called Ellie,’ Auntie tells him.

Ellie has learned some of the lessons already. She must have, because in spite of everything she feels a tiny spurt of pride that she’s been chosen. *Selected. Honoured above the others.*

But mostly it’s fear she feels.

‘Off you go, Ellie,’ Auntie says. ‘Take this gentleman upstairs and do what he says. The rest of you – down here, with me.’

In her bedroom, the visitor bolts the door. There have to be bolts, Auntie had explained. The clients don’t like unexpected interruptions.

‘Listen, Ellie,’ he says. ‘Don’t be scared. I only want to talk to you.’

She’s heard about them. Apparently it’s quite common to have a client who just wants to talk, to say dirty things. And some only want to look at you. They don’t do anything, they don’t say anything. They just want to watch. *Talkers* and *lookers.*

‘I want you to lie down on the bed.’

Ellie does that, feeling stiff with selfconsciousness. He tells her to move over so there’s room for him beside her.

‘So I can talk quietly, and no one will hear. Only you.’

He lies on his back, nudges up close.

‘I’m going to play a little game,’ he says. ‘And you have to join in.’

*

Half an hour later, he’s done. He hurries down the stairs in a hurry. They hear the front door bang itself shut as he leaves.

‘What did he do?’ the others ask, clamouring to know.

‘Nothing!’ Ellie says. ‘He just wanted to talk.’

They’ve started to learn their lessons – they’re full of contempt for a man who can’t *do* anything, but just wants to talk.

‘What did he talk about?’

But Ellie just shrugs. She doesn’t want to discuss it.

Lucas comes in. ‘Weird!’ he says. He pushes past the girls, on his way to the front door.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m gonna follow him, that’s what I’m going to do.’

‘Christ! What an idiot!’ Auntie says.

Lucas leaves the house – but a few moments later he’s back.

Charter Street is long and perfectly straight. In its entire length there was no one to be seen in either direction. ‘He’s bloody disappeared!’

Auntie is contemptuous. ‘He probably came by car.’

But Lucas looks at her furiously and goes back to the kitchen.

‘Come on, you girls. It’s bedtime! Get off upstairs. Now!’

Bedtime.

Tappety-tap-tap, tappety-tap.

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear

How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear . . .

5

The Darkening Green

Rebecca has left school and has high grades in her A Levels. But she's not interested in university, and she's not looking for a job.

As autumn darkens into winter, she goes back repeatedly to the *Songs*. She has no need to do this – she's got her A Level English now, and there are no more exams ahead. But she wants to find out if Blake has anything to say about what Cressida told her, back in the summer. Especially about boys.

At first she tries the plates themselves. But although they're not corroded, many of them are discoloured and stained. Not impossible to read, but very difficult. *And anyway,* she thinks, *Blake designed them to be printed, not read.*

There's a good deal in the *Songs* about free love, Blake clearly loathed a society in thrall to the belief that sex is shameful and sordid. But she knew that already, from her A Level classes. She'd written an answer about it in her exam.

Poetry rarely provides convenient lessons, so she fails to find what she's looking for. But she discovers something else. Re-reading 'The Ecchoing Green', she observes for the first time that the images and the words tell different stories. The words say nothing about *older* boys and girls, only the little ones, crowding round the laps of their mothers at bedtime; and the old people, watching the youngsters at play and reminiscing about their own childhoods. But what about the two adolescent boys in the illustration? – there are no words about *them*. They're clearly not interested in their mothers! And they have no intention of going home to bed. They are climbing a grape-vine and picking grapes. And one of them is handing down a fat bunch to a girl below. As he passes it down, he's keeping a wary eye on the old man, in case he should look back as he leads the younger ones home.

The girl, though, what about her? She's intent upon the boy, reaching up to take his bunch of grapes. But the words say nothing

about this. Nothing at all.

It's a significant moment for Rebecca. It leads in the following days to a complete re-reading – and a new understanding – of the *Songs*.

The illustrations, she realises, do not just *illustrate*.

> *. . . And sport no more seen,*
> *On the darkening Green.*

*

Feeling restless and fidgety one cold blustery afternoon, she goes for a walk into the village. *I need to think this out!*

There are no voices echoing on the village green at Codling, no crowds of children playing. They're all in school. There is just one mother, gently pushing her baby boy backwards and forwards on the swing. He's never out of her hands, always protected.

Rebecca is not thinking about the little boy on the swing. Nor the older girl who once used to swing there, until she was taken away to London. And she's not thinking about adolescent boys either, or what Patrick might have been doing in his bedroom when he was a teenager.

She's thinking about the Blake plates – and what will become of them.

She knows now – she has accepted it – that if they're genuine they will end up in a museum, inevitably. Or a private collection. She's not happy about this. But she understands now that her role is to find out for the world whether they *were* made by William, with Catherine at his side. She is sure they are authentic. But while the academic authorities remain sceptical, the plates themselves will be of little interest.

However, if their authenticity is established, she'll never be able to keep them safe, and at the same time accessible to visiting scholars. So – if they remain unknown and unacknowledged, she'll

be able to keep them. But if they are authenticated and publicly acclaimed, she will lose them.

If I win the battle, I forfeit the prize. I'll be able to keep possession only if they're hardly worth having.

The academic experts have discounted a single professional forger, they know such a thing is almost inconceivable. So they stop at the possibility, grudgingly conceded, that two or three mischief-making mad people – an academic and an engraver *and* a printer! – might have devoted years of their lives to a careful collaboration to perpetrate a gigantic and completely pointless hoax, down to the smallest single micro-mark, stippled invisibly by an engraver's burin, or minutely etched by a molecule of acid.

It is ridiculous – but how can she convince them?

But she knows now what she must do. Her mind has come to an unexpected decision. Authenticity must be validated – for William Blake's sake, not her own.

And I mustn't leave it to the experts.

She decides to write to Patrick. For advice, nothing else. She will make no reference in her letter to their falling-out. She will certainly say nothing about sex or free love in Blake's poems. Back at the farm, in the warmth of her room, she describes – fully, over ten sides of Olivia's best Basildon Bond writing-paper – the confusions and contradictions of her situation, and of ownership. Her account is clear and impassioned, her handwriting almost like calligraphy.

I need provenance, she writes.

As she composes, she begins to ask herself: what is it about these plates that compels my attention? – and has even released fleeting and joyous moments of vision and understanding?

What is the source of it all? she wants to know. *What lies at the heart?*

The answer comes to her as she's reaching the conclusion of her letter. It's to do with the making of the image, she thinks, the quiet printing of the page. The creative act. Just imagining it makes her shiver.

Yes! Yes!

It starts in the placing of the paper on the plate. The white of the one on the ink of the other, the making of an image. Even if it's only a sheet of paper laid on one of Jessica's father's commercial copper blocks, a simple miniature landscape, perhaps, with a distant church, or a tractor. Even then, it's still the making of an image. She and Jess have done it themselves, using her dad's proofing-press. She remembers the faint sticky sound of unloosening and release as the paper is gently peeled away from the inked plate. *I can hear it now!* The sheet of paper was white and clear when laid down but if you're skilful enough when you take it off, the image will be there, crisp and sharp and new.

She's like a young passionate schoolgirl, newly in love. The object of her love is the making of those images. Her new passion has the power to enkindle every atom in her body, filling the entire universe of space, and the whole great container of all time, with possibilities of infinite joy, physical, mental, imagined, and savoured. Everything – in the most cosmic sense of the word – *everything* in creation is fierce and vibrant and luminous, singing with joy – not just with hope but with certainty, clarity and absolute conviction.

She *sees* this. But what should she do? Will Patrick help? Will he even want to?

She and Patrick used to go with Olivia to local auctions when they were little. Olivia collected antiques, so Rebecca knows that Patrick will remember the importance of *provenance*.

She's never written to him. So she has to hunt for his army address in the book kept in a drawer in the kitchen. ~~Gunner~~ (crossed out) L/Bdr P. Cuthbertson, C Battery, 57 Training Regiment . . .

The address is strange to her, almost alien. She doesn't know what some of it means.

Well, it's done now! Will he reply?

Three days later she receives a letter.

'Go to Newcastle.' That's all it says. *Go to Newcastle*.

Typical of him.

But she knows why he thinks she should go back.

*

When Patrick received Rebecca's letter, it had set off all manner of thoughts.

It was a long letter, she'd taken a lot of trouble. But it was exclusively about the Blake plates and the contradictions of ownership.

Nothing about Patrick. Nothing about the two of them. No hint of any possible reconciliation.

She just wanted advice.

*But she turned to **me**!* he thought. He felt a surge of joy, and hope.

He knew exactly what she should do. She should go to Newcastle in search of provenance.

Go to Newcastle.

But he was torn. He'd thought a lot about her since that first unhappy leave he'd spent at the Farm. It's no longer Cressida who occupies his mind these days. He knows she's still his friend, and very fond of him, but she's way ahead of him in her life, almost out of reach. Rebecca on the other hand . . . he'd started to see her differently.

But he couldn't tell her that. And he couldn't tell her the story he longed to tell. She'd turned to him for help, that was true. But that didn't mean she'd be interested in his tedious narrative of military misery.

So he kept it brief. He advised her to go to Newcastle. And signed off, leaving his own story untold.

*

Rebecca makes her plans.

First, she needs to know the name of the printer whose equipment had been sold at the auction in Newcastle. She finds it, printed on the receipt she was given there. *Tristram Steadman, Printer & Bookbinder*.

She goes to the central post office in Norwich where there's a set of every telephone directory in the country, all of them chained to the counter. She finds two numbers, one for the business (which is now closed down), the other a home number for an address in Bewick Avenue, to the west of Newcastle, where he probably still lives.

She catches the bus home, and phones the number. The Farm at that time in the afternoon – as she'd expected – is empty and quiet.

A man answers, and she asks if she can speak to Mr Steadman.

'I'm Mr Steadman. How can I help you?'

Rebecca explains who she is, and gives him no opportunity to interrupt until she's completed the most important part of this conversation. 'I'm researching the history of printing businesses in the Newcastle area,' she says.

Well, that's true, in a way.

'And I wondered if you'd let me interview you.'

'Is this to do with your school work?' Mr Steadman asks.

Rebecca was hoping to avoid that issue. 'Well yes,' she says. 'Indirectly.'

But he's not satisfied by that. '*How* indirectly?'

She doesn't say she's left school. Instead, she tells him she's spent a lot of time in the workshop of a local printer.

Well, that's true. Sort of.

'And . . ?'

'He has in his workshop a lot of very old stuff. Printing blocks, for example – he has lots that are almost a hundred years older than he is himself. And he still uses them. One of his presses is Victorian. I got interested in this – the continuity of it.'

Quick thinking! she tells herself.

'Why Newcastle? Why not Bristol? Or Carlisle? Why not Norwich, since you go to school there?'

She thinks quickly. 'It's because of Thomas Bewick,' she says.

*That **is** true*. It had all started with Bewick.

But she's aware of an unexpected embarrassment. It hadn't occurred to her until now that she is consulting – almost *befriending*

– the man who once owned the Blake plates and sold them without knowing what they might be. And then she thinks *No, I'm not befriending him. I'm encouraging him* ***to befriend me****!*

She dislikes this shiftiness and decides abruptly to be as clear and truthful as she can be. 'I have become interested,' she says carefully, 'in how printing worked in Newcastle at the time when Bewick was working there – and for a few years after that. I chose you because your firm was obviously an ancient and well-established business that goes back a long way. Perhaps as far back as the time of Thomas Bewick.'

There! That is the best she can do, without actually telling him about the copper plates.

'My family has owned the business since 1861. It does go back a long way.'

But not far enough, she thinks.

There is a slight pause, while he considers. Then he says: 'Certainly you can talk to me. Tell me which day you're coming up, and when your train arrives, and I'll meet you at Central Station. You can come and have tea at my house and question me as much as you like.'

Rebecca is on her guard. 'How will I get back into Newcastle afterwards?'

'We have buses in Newcastle,' he says. 'And taxis. But I'll drive you back when we've finished. Where will you be staying?'

'In Jesmond,' she says. 'At the Blue Tulip Hotel.'

He probably understands her need to have the arrangements clearly stated. So he adds: 'My wife makes a very nice lemon drizzle cake.'

With her anxieties allayed, Rebecca makes the final arrangements, and they ring off. She is thoughtful. Triumphant, of course, because she's got what she wanted. But she also thinks to herself: every sentence I spoke involved moral questions. Every single one! And the ethical criteria were hopping about like birds in a bush.

And then she thinks: *I never mentioned William Blake!*

Naomi appears, walking sleepily down the stairs after her afternoon nap. *She's started doing that a lot lately. She used not to.*

'I couldn't help overhearing some of that.'

'It doesn't matter. It wasn't confidential.'

'Have you told your mum about this trip?'

'Not yet. But I will.'

Naomi has a different take on Rebecca's ethical shiftiness. 'You were flirting with that chap on the phone. You do know that, don't you?'

Rebecca does know it. She'd not actually *thought* the word. But that's what she was doing. Flirting.

And when she gets to Newcastle, she'll flirt with him again. If that's what it takes to find out more about the plates, that's what she'll do.

*

Later, she takes out the Blake plates and arranges them in sequence in her bedroom. She studies each one in turn, touches them lightly with her finger-tips, imagines the hands engraving them, inking them, placing them in the press, and laying the paper on them.

She's been reading about engraving on copper and new questions have arisen. Did William Blake buy large sheets and cut the plates to size? Did he smooth the rough edges? And the sharp corners? Did he polish the surfaces to the required mirror-like smoothness? Or could he afford to buy them cut and ready for immediate use?

Does anyone know the answers to these questions?

Her task today is to select the eighteen plates that the Museum has asked for.

She rearranges them into a neat pile, with their squares of paper carefully interleaved, for protection.

She has an illogical feeling of tenderness for those humble paper sheets – each one a soft tiny safeguard, like a doll's-house blanket. They have, she supposes, protected the plates from damage since

around 1830 – in a small workshop in Central London, on a rough-handed passage to the north of England, and then for more than a hundred years lost in the lumber of a big printing business in Newcastle. From an artistic point of view, they are just valueless scraps of paper. But to her they're personal: they were probably bought in sheets, and neatly torn to size against a straight-edge, by William or Catherine.

She's not going to send these to the Fitzwilliam. From a few large sheet of blotting-paper she cuts some new ones.

The people at the Fitzwilliam Museum have been meticulous and swift. They've written to four other institutions and one individual, telling them briefly about the discovery of the plates and why they think they are worth investigating. Copies of every letter, and all the replies, have been sent to Rebecca. Agreements have been made.

She has in front of her a small stack of papers – contracts, indemnities, insurance in case of theft, loss or damage – and copies have to be signed, witnessed, and sent back.

> We will send a car and two members of our staff to check and collect the plates on a day and at a time that is convenient for you . . .

But Rebecca said *No*. She intends to take the plates to Cambridge herself, and hand them over in person. She won't compromise on this.

They wrote letters, spoke to her on the phone, appealed to Olivia. But Rebecca was adamant.

'If you don't let her hand them over in her own way,' Olivia told them, 'she won't give them to you at all.'

For them, this was an improper and amateurish way of doing things and it caused them genuine anguish. But they had to agree. And the only thing left to do was to settle whether Rebecca will make the journey alone, or with a companion – her mother perhaps, or Jessica.

*

Next morning, at the railway station, Rebecca takes a dutiful look around her in search of suspicious characters. But none of her fellow passengers seems to be interested in her, or the leather handbag she is clutching tightly in her lap.

Just before the train pulls out, her friend Jess hurries into a carriage at the rear. She too takes her seat, placing her shopping-bag carelessly at her feet.

No one shows an interest in either of them. On arrival at Cambridge, Rebecca takes a bus into the centre of the town and walks to the Fitzwilliam Museum. All the time she carries her handbag over one shoulder, with her hand resting on the bag, in case someone tries to snatch it.

When she's reached the top of the steps at the entrance she turns and waits for Jessica to catch up. Jess grins at her, and they swop bags – so that Rebecca now has the shopping-bag containing the plates, and Jess has the handbag with four small books in it.

'A beautiful plan!' Jessica says. '*Wasted!* – because no one could be bothered to snatch them!'

Jess is going shopping, and they make arrangements to meet later. Rebecca goes inside the Museum and has to wait at reception for Dr Wheeler to be sent for. She has wondered if she is going to face disapproval, or even anger. She's braced for this. But he greets her with a welcoming smile, shakes her hand, glances at her bag – and takes her to the Print Room, where Dr Waller-Dixon, and two other museum staff, are waiting.

It's very civilised and discreet. There's no indication that they realise Rebecca might be upset at having to hand over the eighteen plates, that she might be indignant, or even grieving. No one acknowledges that *feelings* are involved in this. It's just an exchange of objects, with suitable safeguards and guarantees legally defined on paper.

Do they think I'm going to give way to some kind of hysterical outburst?

'You haven't washed any of these?'

'No.'

‘And you haven’t inked them at all? Tried to print from them?’

‘No.’

‘Has *anything* happened to them that might have an effect on . . ?’

‘They’ve been touched,’ she says. ‘By quite a lot of people – including you.’

She’d not intended to be as abrupt as that sounded. But they don’t take it amiss.

‘Have you any questions for us?’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘When these tests are over, what will happen?’

‘The findings will be written up, in detail. And we will send copies to you, of course.

‘What will happen to the plates?’

‘They will be returned to us.’

‘And you’ll return them to me?’

There is the slightest pause. It’s clear they’d hoped they wouldn’t be forced into conceding this. Rebecca knows her rights, and the documentation has made everything clear. But these two academics have been secretly hoping that, somehow, they would not have to relinquish these eighteen plates. *Well, you’ll have to sell them eventually, my dear, so we might as well keep them here, for security.*

When the papers are completed and exchanged, the plates are taken away, and there’s a change of mood. She finds that Dr Waller-Dixon and Dr Wheeler are not angry with her after all. Perhaps there is the tiniest understanding of how an intelligent young woman might feel when she’s made what might turn out to be one of the most significant discoveries in art and literary history for years; and for many months has had in her possession what might turn out to be the original copper plates engraved, printed, and hand-coloured by William Blake himself.

They don’t talk about her feelings. That would be too much. But they unbend sufficiently for her to see that they’re excited too. And all they want, she has told herself repeatedly, is to ensure that the plates are in good hands – preferably *their* hands – for safe-keeping.

Coffee is brought in, and the three of them sit at the table and chat. Rebecca finds that she quite enjoys this. In a place like this – where she's surrounded by silent bookshelves and writing-tables, and where interruptions are discouraged and rare – she is surprised to realise that she feels very much at home.

I like it here!

'If only we knew,' Dr Wheeler says, 'how they could have ended up in Newcastle.'

Dr Waller-Dixon agrees. But neither of them – both experienced scholars – has thought beyond *if only we knew.*

'I'm going back to Newcastle,' Rebecca says.

'Really? Why? Do you think . . ?'

'I intend to find out how they got there.'

'Do you think that's possible?'

'Well, it's worth a try,' she says.

And just for a fleeting three seconds, *she* is the researcher, the grafter, the worker in the field, and *they* are amateurs full of sound and theory.

There's some kind of signal – she doesn't know what it is – but somehow all three of them know that this is over now, and it's time for her to go. But there's one more thing before she leaves.

'We have something for you,' Dr Wheeler says, smiling. He produces from a drawer a package, lightly wrapped in white tissue paper. 'It's for you.'

It's a facsimile copy of *The Songs of Innocence*, published in 1926, printed and hand-coloured, following Blake's techniques. It's a beautiful quarto book, it feels good to her hands, it looks good to her eyes, it speaks of patience and craftsmanship, and probably years and years of work.

'It's for me?' She can't believe it.

'It's a facsimile,' one of them tells her. 'Only 51 copies were made.'

On the flyleaf, very lightly in soft pencil, is written: *For Rebecca, with affection & appreciation, from the Print Room at the Fitzwilliam Museum*.

'In pencil, so that it can be erased without damaging the paper. A future owner, you know . . . He might want an unmarked copy.'

'We thought it might *cheer* you a little. You know, when you feel . . .'

*

Walking unhurriedly along the Strand, muffled and wrapped up against a cold March wind, Cressida observes a large black car turning into the forecourt of the Savoy Hotel. A tall good-looking man steps out of the rear off-side door, while the chauffeur comes round to open the other one. A woman steps out, smiles at the chauffeur, and tucks her hand in her partner's arm. Together, they approach the entrance.

The commissionaire walks forward to greet them, smiling.

They enter the Hotel, in style.

Jasper is Olivia's secret lover. Also Rebecca's unknown father.

He deals in diamonds and is extremely wealthy. But he's neither extravagant nor exhibitionist. Always discreet and generous.

They'd met during the war and had a passionate affair. She was working for Secret Intelligence, and he had some useful and mysterious links with high-ranking diamond-loving Nazis. For him, this was a dangerous business; for her too for a while. He was betrayed, and found himself in a concentration camp. Fortunately it was 1945, the collapse of the German military had already begun, and the camp was liberated.

When Rebecca was born, their affair had finished. But they liked each other and they made an affectionate and companionable deal. They meet twice or three times a year and spend a night at the Savoy in London. In return, he has agreed never to interfere with Olivia's life at Cuckoo Farm. She's always been open with him – so he knows about her relationship with Peter the Postman, and he doesn't scoff. He knows Rebecca is his daughter and he likes to keep

abreast of her progress. Olivia suspects he has other lovers but she's never asked, and she knows he wouldn't tell if she did.

He has never attempted to make contact with Rebecca, and Olivia knows he never will. She trusts him absolutely. And she can't take him to visit the Farm because he so closely resembles his daughter that everyone would know immediately.

Socially, he's suave and restrained, always polite to taxi-drivers, waiters and bar-tenders. He likes people, rich or poor, and is genuinely interested in them. But there is always that air of assuredness and authority that can come from the possession of wealth.

But when they're naked, a change comes over him. He becomes boyish in his love-making, almost naïve. He is unashamedly joyous and celebratory. Olivia knows she no longer has the clear skin, or the slim-waisted suppleness of her youth, but Jasper openly and joyously explores every inch of her, and rhapsodises about the full statuesque beauty of a mature woman in her early fifties.

And he is good at sex. They have a very enjoyable time, then they chat in a companionable way until they fall asleep. In the morning, they do it again, before breakfast. More quickly this time.

She trusts him completely. But as she leaves the hotel in the morning she puts him out of her mind, and she'll hardly think of him at all for several months – until the next time. Peter knows nothing about Jasper. He has always understood that Olivia has a separate classified life in London from Monday to Thursday, and that he must not ask questions.

She always returns to him with love in her heart. And that's enough for Peter.

But how much does she owe Jasper? How much truth should she tell? What about those copper plates? He is Rebecca's father, should she tell him about them?

Do I owe him anything at all? she thinks. And she wonders if she's just a courtesan, one of those sexual escorts that she's heard about?

*

Cressida – having watched them entering the hotel – tightens the thick woollen scarf around her throat and imagines a future conversation. 'I saw you the other night, in London. Going into the Savoy,' she might say to Olivia.

'No, you didn't. That was someone else.'

But she knows the words will never get spoken. The possession of a secret gives you power – not much perhaps, but you'll be able to make use of it only if you keep it to yourself. She knows this because she's been associated with detection since she was ten years old, and now she works for an agency.

Or perhaps this understanding is just part of her nature.

So she says nothing about Olivia's assignation at the Savoy Hotel. Meanwhile, she's working out how she can get a look at the hotel's guest-book.

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.
The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.
The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.
The nakedness of woman is the work of God.

6

Investigations

At Cuckoo Farm the following Friday evening, when the kitchen is full of the clamour that always happens when the meal is being served out, Poppy buttonholes Naomi and tells her something.

'What did you say? I didn't catch . . .'

Poppy raises her voice, and at that precise moment there is a lull in the racket around them. Quite by chance. A sudden and complete quietness.

So everyone hears Poppy's raised voice: '*. . . have a baby!*'

A brief pause, then a loud volume of delight! There are congratulations, sighs of anticipation. *There'll be a baby here again!* Naomi thinks. *At last!*

'But it won't be born here.'

Everyone waits. Naomi has blenched.

'Poppy! You're not leaving us?'

'No,' Poppy cries. 'Of course not! The little house in the woods – you know, the one where . . . We want the baby to be born *there*!'

Olivia and Naomi share an eye-message: *We'll put a stop to that!*

And Naomi – relieved, reassured, filled with emotion – puts her finger-tips lightly on Poppy's forehead, and says 'Bless you, my child!'

Why in the name of goodness did I do ***that***?

Poppy gazes around at her friends, full of joy, a little mystified.

*

Later, Cressida strolls down to the river with Rebecca.

Working from the office, it had been easy to confirm that Ellie's mother has no sisters. She does have a brother – but he and his family live innocently in Diss, where he works at the railway station.

‘So,’ she tells Rebecca, ‘the woman who lives at number 57 is definitely not Ellie Bassett’s aunt! *There is no aunt*.’

Rebecca absorbs this – and then asks a question: ‘That afternoon in Charter Street, how did you know we were being followed – without even looking back?’ she says. She’d been very impressed by that. It seemed uncanny.

‘Hours of practice,’ Cressida says. ‘Olivia told me you’re going to Newcastle? Again?’

‘Yes. There are things I want to find out.’

Cressida is puzzled. ‘Did William Blake have some connection with Newcastle?’

‘No, that’s the difficulty. I want to find out how the plates got there.’

‘When are you going?’

‘On Wednesday.’

‘Where will you stay?’

Rebecca tells her. ‘Where I stayed before. It’s called a hotel, but it’s just a b-and-b really.’

There is another matter troubling Cressida. Rebecca had recognised the man who’d been tailing them. It’s unlikely. And baffling. But Cressie is sure of it.

Rebecca knew who he was.

So she’s decided to confront her, carefully observing her response.

‘That man who followed us in Charter Street,’ she says casually, ‘– who was he?’

Rebecca is startled. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

She’s a terrible liar.

‘Yes, you do. You recognised him. You knew who he was.’

‘How did you . . ?’

‘Never mind how I knew. It’s true, isn’t it?’

Rebecca hesitates.

‘You have to tell me,’ Cressida says. ‘This could be serious.’

So, reluctantly, Rebecca tells Cressida how she came to know Ted Coulson – who’d been kind to her in Newcastle, and then showed up in Norfolk, apparently because he wanted to see her.

'He came to visit you in Codling Green?'

'Yes. And then, there he was again,' she says, 'in Charter Street!'

This final detail is astonishing. It's an anomaly, beyond all coincidence, all randomness, all hazard.

'Why didn't you tell anyone?'

Rebecca snaps back: 'Why should I tell everyone everything?'

'OK! Don't look so distraught! It's not the end of the world. Everyone has a secret or two.'

They're standing at the river-edge now, staring without awareness at the shallow water sliding softly by.

'But what does it all *mean*?'

'I don't know. Finding out where you live, and then coming all the way to Norfolk to see you, that seems *weird* to me. A bit creepy, if I'm honest. But then to see him again, showing an interest in 57 Charter Street – *that* is . . .'

'What are you getting at?'

'Don't you see?' Cressida says. 'This guy might be some kind of pervert who likes having sex with under-age girls. With *children*.'

'But I'm not a child!' Rebecca cries out. The same thought occurs to both of them: *that was a very strange thing to say*.

But neither of them takes it up.

Evidence, Cressida thinks.

Significant. But incomprehensible.

Arm-in-arm, they walk slowly up to the house.

*

Cressida thinks of him as Mr Newcastle-Man. He's her best lead. He has appeared in Rebecca's life three times.

She imagines the village green that afternoon – with Rebecca getting off the bus and finding him there.

Was there anyone else around? she wonders. *Any witnesses?* She knows from her years living there that the green is usually deserted in the afternoon, except for about half-an-hour at around half-past three. So probably no one was there to see what happened that day.

But she remembers Mr Whitehead – who spends several hours a day at his bedroom window, watching. It is probably his entire social life, except for Miss Babbington's occasional visits.

So, on Saturday afternoon, unnoticed by anyone at the Farm, Cressida sets off down the lane to Codling Green, where she approaches Mr Whitehead's cottage and knocks firmly on his door. There's silence at first, and then she hears a sound from upstairs. He's at his window, looking down at her, beckoning her to come in, and up the stairs.

Inside his front door, she calls out: 'Hello! It's Cressida! Are you decent?'

'Yes, I am! Come on up.'

He's dressed, sitting in an ancient Windsor chair beside his bed.

'Hev you come to report progress?' he says.

'Yes and no,' she replies.

Keeping the client happy is the second-most important part of the job, Mr Zeppelin had told her.

What's the most important part? she'd asked him*.*

Doing *the bloody job! Obviously!*

'I have made some progress,' she says. 'I've come because I think you might be able to help me.'

He is astonished by this. 'Aren't you going tell me what you've found out?'

'No,' she says firmly. 'It's better if I don't.'

'Hmm. I'm not sure I like that. But what can I do to help?'

'You spend a lot of time at your window.'

'I spose I dew!'

'I want to know about something you might have seen out there.'

'The house where young Ellie lived?' he says. 'There's nothing to tell you about that! – nothing much has happened there, not since she went.'

'No,' Cressida says. 'It's something else. It's about a young man who visited the village one afternoon.'

'What's *he* got to do with it?'

So he ***did*** *see him.*

'I'm not sure yet,' she says. 'That's what I want to find out. Can you describe this man?'

'Not very well. He was out on the green, and my eyesight een't what that used to be.'

Cressida waits.

'I reckon he was in his late twenties, early thirties maybe. He was smartly dressed. He certainly weren't no schoolboy.'

'What did he do?'

'I'll tell you what he did. He started off by going into the pub. For a drink and a sandwich, I reckon. Then he come outside and walked up the lane towards Cuckoo Farm, and after about half-an-hour he was back again. He sat on the Green for a bit, then he went over to Mrs Bassett's house and knocked on the door. She let him in, and he stayed there for quite a long time. Almost an hour, I should think.'

'Are you sure about that? He talked to Ellie's mother?'

'Yes, thas what I said! '

'Was Mr Bassett there?'

'Course not! He works on the land and he don't git home till around four.'

'And then?'

'Well, nothing much. He comes back out and sits on the bench over there until the bus from Norwich comes in. Young Rebecca got out and the bus pulled away. Then they both got on the next bus back towards Stanton St Mary's. And that was the last I saw of 'em!'

'Well, I can tell you what happened next,' Cressida says. 'She took him to a tea room in Stanton, and saw him onto the next bus back to Norwich. Then she walked home across the fields.'

Mr Whitehead is thoughtful. 'I can tell you one thing – she weren't best pleased to see him. She looked like she was going to burst, she was so angry!'

Cressida spends some time in conversation with Mr Whitehead. He's a lonely man and doesn't get many chances for chatting. *It's the least I can do*, she thinks. Besides, she likes him.

Outside on the green, she sits for a few moments on the seat under the tree and watches the donkey grazing a few yards away.

She remembers when she was in Year Six and did her duty as donkey-monitor, leading him to the paddock behind the school, removing his chain, checking the gate was securely shut. And arriving at school next morning ten minutes early to take him out again, to graze another circle of fresh grass.

In her mind an idea has arrived. She knows what she's going to do next.

But she hesitates. *Never act on impulse! It's dangerous. You are an impulsive young woman, it will get you into trouble.*

Good advice. But she has her doubts because Mr Zeppelin's other advice is: *Always trust your hunches. They're often smarter than you are!*

But, Mr Zeppelin, how can I tell the difference between an impulse and a hunch?

She recalls her most recent impulse, a couple of days after she'd seen Olivia and her lover walking into the Savoy Hotel. It had taken no longer than three, or perhaps four, minutes to walk coolly into the Hotel and up to an empty passage on the first floor, set off a fire alarm and activate an extinguisher – and hurry back down looking worried and scared like everyone else. Guests and receptionists alike were preoccupied and frightened, and it had been the work of just a few seconds to grab the guest-book from the desk and walk out of the confusion clasping it stuffed inside her coat.

*Nothing wrong with **that** impulse, Mr Zeppelin!*

She gets to her feet and sets off across the green to the house where Ellie Bassett used to live. She has no plan, nothing worked out. She's going to wing it. Unlike Rebecca, she's good at improvising.

Why had Mr-Smart-Guy-Newcastle-Man – who'd come to see Rebecca –also wanted to talk to Mrs Bassett?

*

When the front door is opened, Cressida has two surprises. The first is that Mrs Bassett is neat and clean and motherly in appearance.

Around forty probably. A little subdued perhaps. Or preoccupied. But nothing about her suggests an over-worked intimidated wife.

The other surprise is that she recognises Cressida and invites her in for a cup of tea.

'*He* won't be in for ages,' she explains. 'He always goes to Stanton for a drink with his dinner on Saturdays. And when he comes in he usually falls asleep in that chair. He does that most work-days too.'

Cressida, following her through to the living-room, murmurs something meaningless.

'Well!' Mrs Bassett says sadly. 'He goes out every morning at around six, and he works on them fields all day! In all weathers! Of course, he's tired when he gets home! Who wouldn't be?'

Cressida carefully avoids sitting in the master's chair.

'I wouldn't want to do what them land-workers have to do. I *did* do it for a couple of years after I left school. But that wasn't the life for me! That's not the life for anyone, in my opinion!'

She's talking a lot. Is she nervous?

But Mrs Bassett doesn't seem to be nervous. From the kitchen she calls out: 'I don't know your name, but I know you used to live at Cuckoo Farm.'

'Yes, that's right. My name's Cressida.'

Cressida is thinking fast. *First impressions?* This woman is friendly and sociable and at ease with herself. It's not going to be possible to ask her directly who her gentleman visitor was that day, and why he'd come. *I work for a detective agency, and I've come to question you about . . .* Impossible! She'd be suspicious, on her guard at once.

The tea-pot is filled, cups and saucers are brought in, a bottle of milk, and some sugar in a saucer. A plate of home-made apple tarts is placed on the table.

They spend several minutes exchanging harmless chat – about the weather, last year's harvest, the difficulty of getting your washing dry when it keeps on raining.

'Now!' Mrs Bassett says. 'What can I do for you?'

In other words: *Let's get down to business! What do you want?*

'Well, I talked with Ellie on one occasion,' Cressida says.

True, but seriously misleading.

'And I just wondered how she's getting on. In London.'

There is the first sign that there might be some anxiety in Mrs Bassett's life. A sense of trouble, or doubt.

'It's kind of you to ask! I think she's all right,' she says, with less assuredness than before.

'Have you seen her?'

'No. I wish I had. I miss her – a lot.' Her voice is sad, gentle.

'Yes, I'm sure you do! Does she write?'

'Well, no, not so you'd say *write*. She hasn't sent me any letters, she never was one for writing, as such. But she sends me postcards from time to time.'

'And she's OK?'

'Well, she says she is. How can you tell, from a postcard?'

'I suppose her sisters write to you . . .'

Mrs Bassett's reply is very softly spoken, almost inaudible. 'No, I haven't heard from them for a long long time. I've been worried, really.'

'Ellie hasn't seen them then?'

'No, I don't think so. She would have said.'

'Your sister . . .' Cressida begins. And then: 'Or is it your husband's sister? Hasn't she written?'

Mrs Bassett is momentarily baffled. 'I haven't got a sister. Nor has he.'

'But I thought Ellie went off to stay with an aunt?'

'Huh! There's *aunts* and *aunts.'*

Cressida knows this is true. Friends of the family are often called *Auntie This* or *Uncle That*. Everybody does it. Most children's radio programmes when Cressida was a child had been presented by Uncles and Aunts.

'Why did you let her go?'

'That was *his* idea. He knows someone in London. He could get good jobs for them there, apparently.'

Cressida waits.

‘*And* there was a sort of fee. Not much, but that helped to keep us going for a couple of weeks.’

Mrs Bassett knows the streets of London are not paved with gold. But nevertheless, it is to her as exotic and mysterious as Shanghai might be, or Vladivostok, or a mythical city in Atlantis – immense and faraway, a place of power, riches, danger. Who knows what else?

‘Do you think the two older girls are still in London?’

Mrs Bassett screws up her hands together and holds them in front of her mouth. It’s her personal sign of anguish.

‘No, I don’t,’ she manages to say. ‘And I don’t think Ellie will be there much longer.’

Her eyes are wet. ‘Her last postcard said she’s going to be sent away soon. To some big city. Somewhere! I don’t know what to make of it.’

Cressida thinks a change of subject is necessary. ‘How’s your little boy?’

Mrs Bassett brightens a little. ‘He’s all right,’ she says.

But then, since she’s apparently being frank, she adds: ‘Well, he is OK. But he don’t say much.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well . . .’ – as if she’s not formulated, let alone talked about this thought before – ‘. . . when he was little he ran around chattering all the time. You couldn’t shut him up! But he’s grown out of that now. He’s a serious little chap these days. Like his dad, I suppose.’

There are things that Cressida knows nothing about. So she doesn’t pursue this. Even if she’d wanted to, she wouldn’t have known how.

Mrs Bassett abruptly changes her mood and tells herself off for not being an attentive hostess. Another cup of tea is poured, another apple-tart offered.

Cressida takes her chance. ‘Do you get many visitors?’ she asks.

‘No. Who would want to come and visit us? I see my folks in Diss every year around Christmas. But there’s no one else . . . ‘

She’s not bitter. There seems to be no resentment about her situation in life. Just a quiet and patient acceptance.

Cressida waits, uncertain whether to prompt.

'There again,' Mrs Bassett says, 'I did have one visitor a few weeks ago.'

'Oh! Who was that?'

'I don't know his name.'

'What did he want?'

'He did just what you're doing. He got me talking about my girls.'

Now Cressida is troubled. Has Mrs Bassett worked it out? Is she knowing? Or naïve?

'I'm sorry,' Cressida says. 'I am nosy by nature. I'm interested in people.'

She stands up ready to leave. But Mrs Bassett hasn't finished. Despite her patient resignation she was able to produce a small embittered barb. 'He asked me if I'd got any more girls. Would you believe it? And I said, no, only a little squit of a boy.'

*

Cressida now faces a dilemma. She knows Rebecca has arranged to visit Newcastle on Wednesday to meet the former owner of a printing business. There's probably no risk of danger there – but is she also planning to meet Mr Newcastle-Man? Would Rebecca agree to a secret meeting with him? If that's what she plans to do, how has she accommodated the fact that they'd also seen him in Charter Street?

It seems unlike her, she's not a devious person. And yet there is some connection between them.

Should she be followed? For her own safety?

Cressida has tailed a number of people and she knows she could do it without being spotted. And she's been given time off work for this.

But she will never be forgiven if Rebecca finds out.

I'll be cast out. Like Patrick.

*

Something about Mr Steadman makes Rebecca uneasy.

He met her at Newcastle Central Station, as he'd promised. He'd driven her to his house on the western edge of the town. And there is tea with lemon drizzle cake, exactly as he'd said. His house is not palatial, but it's large and spacious. Very quiet, and not very welcoming.

Where is Mrs Steadman? she wonders – someone must have baked that cake. But she can hear no sounds from inside the house, she feels almost sure the two of them are alone.

He hasn't asked if he might call her Rebecca. He addresses her as Miss Haughton. He seems to be treating her visit as some kind of business meeting, or a radio interview perhaps, for publicity.

Tea is poured, a slice of cake has been cut. And he asks her what she wants to know.

She explains that her main object is to find out as much as she can about the history of the Steadman printing business. How far back can its history be traced? And was there any connection with London?

These questions are quickly answered: his grandfather bought the firm in the 1860s, and it passed to his father, and then to Mr Steadman himself. As far as he knows, there was no connection with London.

Cressida writes down the details in a small pocket notebook.

They're seated facing one another across a low tea-table in his drawing-room. But although they are physically close, he hasn't engaged with her at all. He just watches her, his eyes shifting from her head to her feet. This makes her anxiously aware of her skirt. It's not especially short, but she wishes it covered her knees. He's very still, his only movement a barely perceptible rubbing together of the thumb and finger-tips of his right hand.

And there's something strange about the look of him, which she can't identify or locate.

'So the business already existed?' she asks him.

Yes. His grandfather had bought it as a going concern in 1861, from a man called Ebenezer Whetstone.

She makes a note of the name, and the date.

'Did your grandfather buy everything?'

Rebecca is one of those lucky and privileged people who for some reason are almost always treated kindly by others. So his manner puzzles her. She'd assumed, without giving it much thought, that a man of his age and position would treat her in a slightly grandfatherly way. That there would be some geniality. A hint of good will, at least.

She begins to feel that he's concealing something. Some troubling mystery, some hidden source of anger, or disapproval.

And she wishes she could identify that odd facial look he has.

'Yes, of course – the business, the building, the presses, stacks of paper, dozens of different fonts and type-faces, *everything*.'

'Even trivial things?' she says. 'Old tools, bits of metal . . . Everything?*' Is that what happens when you buy someone's business?*

He is impatient. 'Yes,' he says. 'Everything! But why do you ask?'

'I don't know anything about business,' she says. 'I'm trying to imagine it, that's all. Buying a whole business.'

That's her first lie. It's true she knows little about business, but it's not true that it's her reason for asking the question. Rebecca rarely lies, she's no good at it. It always confuses her purpose.

Mr Steadman is still observing her in a way she doesn't understand. It's not that he looks at her oddly, it's that he seems not to have registered that *she* can also see *him*. As if he were hidden behind a screen.

Perhaps he's irritated by her digressive questions, she thinks.

'There was a lot of ancient paraphernalia that we inherited from Ebenezer Whetstone,' he says. 'It was just stacked away in corners, gathering dust. It was still there when I was a boy, I don't think anybody ever looked at it.'

'All that stuff in wooden boxes?' she says.

There is a pause in which time seems to slow down. Rebecca, waiting, realises she has blundered.

'*What* wooden boxes?' he says softly.

Against the grain of her character, Rebecca has made this journey without thinking through what she wanted, and how honest she should be about it. She'd never made up her mind whether she was going to tell him about the Blake plates. It was a difficult issue – so she'd decided to play it by ear.

She's facing the consequences of that indecision now.

'So,' he says slowly, 'a schoolgirl from Norfolk spends a good deal of her money to travel all the way to Newcastle, and stay in a hotel – and all because she's interested in *my printing business*.'

What can Rebecca say?

'And she contrives to get herself invited to my house.'

Pause.

'Where she shows a surprising interest in *wooden boxes*.'

Another pause.

'It's all very unlikely, don't you think? A little *implausible*. Now, I dislike having dealings with people who try to pull the wool over my eyes. However, I tell myself this young woman is too young to be a crook. But she *has* been devious and manipulative. *So who sent you here?*'

'No one sent me,' she says. 'I came because I'm interested in printing.' – *and that is true*, she thinks.

'But only if it is in Newcastle apparently,' he says. 'Why not Worcester? Or Birmingham? Presumably there are printers in Norwich, your home city? And there are other printers in Newcastle, so why specifically *me*?'

He is sitting bolt upright now, tense, on the edge of his chair, watching her. And then she realises what is so strange about his face. He hardly ever blinks. She doesn't think he's blinked at all since she arrived. His gaze is fixed on her without those fleeting interruptions to normal sight.

She is very uncomfortable now, and never takes her eyes off him.

'This person must be acting on someone's orders, I tell myself. Perhaps she is some kind of decoy? Trying to lead me into a trap, perhaps?'

These suggestions are so implausible, even crazy, that she can't believe he's taking them seriously. Again, she has that thought that he's scared of something.

'But of course not!' he says. 'This young intruder has nothing to do with entrapment, or thieves. And probably not much to do with printing either! She has – amazingly – an extraordinary interest in *old wooden boxes*. Why, I ask myself.'

Rebecca feels now that her own ill-defined purpose has combined with his wild suspicions into such a lunatic tangle of errors and misunderstandings that she'll never be able to explain herself out of them.

'I'll tell you something else. This young woman was present at my auction sale. I was present too. For God's sake, it was all *my stuff* that was being sold! So of course I was there! *And I saw you there*.'

She is dismayed by this – for that possibility has never occurred to her. Is *that* what he's so worried about?

'I recognised you at once, at the station. And I knew where I'd seen you before. You were the *only female* there!'

He waits. But there's nothing she can say.

'And I watched you bid for one of those boxes. And I saw you with that smart young man who bought the box-load from you.'

Will it all stop now? Has he finished?

'But you kept something from the box. You packed it away in your rucksack and you walked out with it.'

Does he know about the plates?

'Or perhaps you didn't buy anything from him at all! Perhaps he passed you something, that dapper-looking young man – something in those little packets which you put so carefully away.'

She could just tell him the truth. But his anger has disqualified him. She no longer trusts him, and she has her pride. And anyway, if she tells him about the plates, it might make the situation worse.

I should never have come.

Rebecca is clear-headed and methodical in everything she sets out to do. It's her default mode of operating. But for once in her life she has failed to think through the details of her plan, what she

hoped to gain from this interview, how she should proceed, what questions she should ask, and – most important of all – how open she should be about why she's come. The result is muddle – and she's no good at muddles. They make her panic.

'I would like to go now,' she says, rising from her chair.

He pauses, long enough to make her apprehensive. Surely, he won't try to keep her by force.

'Of course you would!' he says, with heavy sarcasm. 'Well, I said I'd drive you to your hotel. So let's go.'

She'd earlier told him she was staying at the Blue Tulip Guesthouse in Jesmond. She wishes now that she'd kept that information to herself. She's already wondering if she will be safer in his car, or in greater danger.

*

In the road outside Mr Steadman's house, there is a solitary pedestrian, walking slowly on the opposite side.

Cressida had had no difficulty on the journey. She'd taken a train from London to Peterborough, and waited on the platform for Rebecca to arrive there from Ely. That was straightforward. At Newcastle, she'd watched as Rebecca was greeted by Mr Steadman.

Outside there were taxis. She enjoyed this, it was like films she'd seen. *Follow that car!*

But suburbia is always a challenge. In Mr Steadman's part of town the roads are quiet and empty, and there are few walkers. Cressida has to wait and watch, trying not to be conspicuous, on a wide avenue of large houses built back from the road.

And what will happen when Rebecca comes out of the house? There are no taxis nearby. If she catches a bus back to town, Cressida might be able to deal with that. But if this man gives her a lift, what then?

*

Rebecca gets into the back of Mr Steadman's car because the thought of sitting in the front, intimately next to him, is repugnant. Throughout the drive they are silent – and still she suspects she hasn't yet had the worst of him. They travel through the city centre and out into Jesmond. It's a busy main street, with shops and traffic and lots of people. He stops the car outside the guesthouse and switches off the ignition.

Her immediate plan is to get out of the car, quickly, and make a dash up the steps and into Reception. But he's stopped on the wrong side of the street, and she'll have to open her door into the traffic, and cross the road. A large removal lorry is slowly passing the car, very close. He meanwhile has got out onto the pavement and has had time to walk round.

As the lorry moves away, she makes it across the street – but he's beside her, almost pressing against her. She hates this, and wonders helplessly how she's going to get rid of him. *What's he going to do?*

On the pavement, he turns to face her, and grabs hold of her shoulders. 'Who is he?' he says, with a terrifying intensity.

What's he talking about?

'Who was that man in the sale-room? I've seen him before, he's been sniffing around lately. I would like to know why.'

She can't speak. She's mesmerised by those tense unblinking eyes. And she doesn't know why he's so concerned about the young man at the auction.

'I don't know what your game is, Miss Haughton,' he says. 'But I can tell you this: *you have not heard the last of me*.'

It is a threat, as if each word is punched into her face. There is menace in it. Afterwards, thinking back, she tells herself there was nothing he could have done to hurt her, openly, in a crowded street in Newcastle – because she would have made a dash for the entrance into the guesthouse. If the worst came to the worst, she could scream.

She sees from the corner of her eye a young soldier standing on the steps. A National Serviceman, they're everywhere these days.

On trains, on roadsides, hitch-hiking. Ten a penny! All over the place!

But this one – *It's Patrick! How can Patrick be here?*

In the British army, there is a great and powerful hierarchy, from brigadiers and generals downward. At the very bottom are lance-corporals and lance-bombardiers, whose rank carries only the very smallest shred of authority. And yet, a young lance-bombardier in full uniform, standing straight, with his shoulders back, his cap properly on his head with its clean shiny brass badge, a single stripe on each arm, a spotless white lanyard through his epaulette, a smart wide belt holding in his waist, and standing loftily in army boots and gaiters – such a soldier has a *presence*, so long as he carries himself with confidence and with his head held firmly erect. Even if he is only a lance-bombardier in a training regiment.

Patrick steps down, closer. 'Are you threatening this young lady?' he says to Mr Steadman.

It is a confrontation – between a newly-retired older man, with years of commercial power and influence in local politics, and probably very wealthy – and a nobody, a twenty-year-old National Service man, with the contemptible rank of lance-bombardier. Youth *versus* age.

It helps a little that Patrick is on the steps, looking *down* at Mr Steadman.

'I'll be off then,' the older man mutters. And he turns away, towards the street.

Patrick's sudden appearance opens a new layer of confusion for Rebecca.

'What are *you* doing here?'

'I thought you might like some help.'

'How did you know where I was staying?'

'Who was that man?'

'And why are you wearing that awful uniform?'

'What had you done to make him threaten you like that?'

'Are you staying here, at the *Blue Tulip*?'

'Yes. I've booked a room. And I'm wearing uniform because I didn't have time to change. I phoned home this morning and Olivia

told me where you're staying. I had a train to catch, so there wasn't time to change into civvies"

'She'd no business to tell you that.'

'When did you last eat?'

'A sandwich at Peterborough,' she says. 'Ages ago!' There was also Mr Steadman's lemon drizzle cake but she'd only had one mouthful of that.

'The guesthouse hasn't got a restaurant,' he says.

'There are lots of restaurants in Jesmond.' She knows, she's stayed here before.

'Or the city centre,' he says.

'I'm not going anywhere with you wearing that uniform.'

'Well, you've no choice. There wasn't time to pack any other clothes. I've told you, I was in a hurry to get a train.'

'Even the boots?'

'We'll find a shoe-shop, I'll buy some shoes. But I'm not buying a whole new set of clothes! Just because you don't like my army uniform!'

His heart is singing. He is happier than he's been for years, he realises. Joyous, relieved, hopeful. That's the longest exchange they've had for six years.

She's more cautious. She's not at all sure this is what she wants. Her feelings are all provisional, waiting for a development of some sort. She needs *clarification*.

Once, she would have sorted out confusions with Patrick himself. Now, she's become used to doing it on her own. And he's the confusing factor.

*

When Cressida saw Rebecca getting into Mr Steadman's car, her heart had sunk. She knew the name of the guesthouse but how was she going to get there? There were no taxis to be seen, no bus-stop even.

At the end of the road, there were some shops – and a middle-aged woman was coming out of a pharmacy, walking across the

pavement towards her parked car, facing into town. Cressida went up to her and asked how long it would take to walk to Central Station.

It was important to select someone whose car was facing in the right direction. And that Cressida should use the word *walk*.

The woman hardly hesitated. 'It's much too far to walk, pet,' she said. 'But I'm going past the station. I'll give you a lift, if you'd like.'

At the station, there were plenty of taxis, and in no time Cressida was on her way to Jesmond, to the Blue Tulip Guesthouse.

Osborne Road in Jesmond is a busy thoroughfare. Diagonally opposite the guesthouse there is a small open space, left over from World War Two bombing. It's been cleared and made into a tiny garden, with some grass, three flower-beds, and a bench. Here Cressida sits, hoping Rebecca will not look in that direction, across the busy street.

By the time she's sat down and taken her bearings, she's missed Rebecca's arrival in Mr Steadman's car. But then she sees Patrick at the top of the guesthouse steps!

What is he doing here? She never expected him to have any part in this. *Patrick?* She is dismayed and confused, almost physically shaking. It isn't Mr Newcastle-Man that Rebecca is meeting, it's Patrick. What could have happened in their strange non-relationship to have precipitated a meeting like this?

They seem to be arguing, certainly Rebecca is angry. She can see them firing words at each other.

But she realises she's no longer needed. She doesn't understand what is going on, but it's clear that Rebecca will be in no danger with Patrick around.

They'd become friends immediately, the three of them, way back when Cressida returned to Cuckoo Farm at the age of 16. They'd been inseparable, inviolable. And that lasted three years – or was it four? There'd seemed to be no measuring of time then, and certainly nothing to indicate the rupture that was to come.

That was partly why she'd left to find a job in London. It wasn't the only reason, of course – but after Rebecca and Patrick split

apart, nothing was quite the same at Cuckoo Farm. Certainly not for Cressie.

And here they are again, the three of them. Reunited – only this time they're together, and she is spying on them.

She doesn't want to know how they plan to spend their evening, or what they plan to do next day. It will be something to do with the William Blake copper plates, she assumes. She has wasted an entire day, and her rail fare. And two taxi fares.

I'm not wanted here, she tells herself. *It's their business, not mine.*

She finds a bus-stop and stands there, disconsolate, unhappy, waiting for a bus to take her back to Central Station.

7

Newcastle

After a long, long day researching in Newcastle Library, Patrick and Rebecca are seated in a restaurant, facing each other, considering the menu.

As the waiter walks away, Rebecca addresses the main issue. They've avoided it all day, but now – 'Why did you come here?' she says. '*Really* – why?'

The tension between them is palpable.

'I told you last night. I wanted to help.'

That is true. He *had* told her.

Rebecca doesn't know what this means to him, she certainly hasn't worked out what it means to her. But here he is! In his army uniform. Facing her, barely two feet away.

'I didn't ask for help,' she says.

'You wrote me a letter.'

'I asked for *advice*. Not help.'

'Which I gave you.'

'Yes, you did. But – again – why did you come here?'

'To help you, if I could.'

'No other reason?'

'Does there have to be another reason?'

'There are always other reasons.'

'OK. I've become interested in William Blake.'

She's suspicious. '*How* interested?'

'I've read a biography.'

She believes she knows more of what goes on in his head than he knows himself. She always did! When they were little, she'd often anticipated what he was going to say before he'd thought it. But now she's not so sure. He keeps slightly wrong-footing her.

She concedes a little. 'Well, you *have* been a help. Thank you.'

'What were you planning to do if you'd been on your own?'

'I would have gone to the Library.'

‘And what would you have asked in the Library?’

‘Do you think I’m a complete idiot?’

‘Not a *complete* idiot, no. Do you think we’ve done well today?’

She’s not sure what this question means. *Done well* in their research? Or in their personal life?

‘Well, we haven’t actually had a fight.’

He frowns. That wasn’t what he’d meant, clearly.

‘I’ve never wanted to fight you,’ he says.

But you slammed the door on me.

She repeats her original question. ‘Do you think we’ve done well?’

‘Yes, I do. What we found out today is very important. Decisive!’

‘*Decisive?* It doesn’t prove the plates are William Blake’s.’

‘No, it doesn’t. But it accounts for how they came to be here. And it creates a connection with London.’

‘A *possible* connection.’

‘Think of it the other way round. If we hadn’t shown there was a plausible reason why a set of copper plates made in London might have ended up in Newcastle, it would have closed down this line of research.’

‘You’re entitled to feel triumphant – it was your idea that I should come here.’

‘I’m not triumphant. But I’m pleased. And so are you.’

‘I haven’t said I’m pleased.’

‘But you are. Whenever you think about it, you can hardly contain yourself.’

This is true. She’s kept it to herself, but she feels as if she might at any moment explode with delight and amazement. Like the joyous young god in *Glad Day*, legs and arms wide-stretched, greeting the amazing universe.

So he still knows what I’m feeling.

He senses that she has softened towards him, a little. ‘Let’s go through what we know,’ he says.

All day, they’d worked contentedly together as if there’d been no rift between them, like they used to when they were young, whenever they had embarked on some project.

But now Rebecca says: 'Why did you shut me out of your room?'

This is the fundamental question, focused and exact. His face turns white, then he flushes. *So Cressida – explaining the sexuality of adolescent boys – had been right*.

'You slammed the door in my face,' she says. 'Why?'

'It was embarrassing,' he says. 'It's *still* embarrassing.'

'You used to be embarrassed about all sorts of things – but *you always told me*.'

'I know.'

'And I told *you*. Everything!'

'That's true,' he says.

'Was it to do with sex?'

This is an invitation to be open. A challenge perhaps. But he's not bold enough, he can't deal with this directly, it's beyond him. Instead, he asks her a question. He leans forward across the table. He has to, because he can't say these things in a loud voice, in public. She leans towards him too, frowning a little.

'When you got to the age when you began to – you know – change into a woman,' he says slowly, 'would you have told me about it? – if we'd still been friends?'

Only Patrick could say something like that, she thinks crossly. *I wouldn't have had to tell him about it! He would have* ***known****!*

'And you called *me* idiotic!' she says. 'You're asking me to compare whether I *might have* opened up to you, with the fact that you *actually did* slam your door against me. You can't measure a hypothesis against a fact! It's a category error.'

'I would have been interested.'

Yes, he would have.

'We told each other everything. Showed each other everything.'

It's true. Everything he says is true. And yet . . .

The waiter arrives, with their first course. They shift on their chairs, and address their meals, shamelessly greedy. They have the keen hunger of the young, intensified by not having had a proper meal since their guesthouse breakfast. So conversation gives way to eating, covering the awkwardness they'd talked themselves into.

‘So you think what we found today is important?’ she asks him eventually.

They’re both relieved she’s changed the subject. ‘Yes. Very!’

‘But not conclusive.’

They’d spent the whole day at the central library in Newcastle, where a librarian guided them to nineteenth-century newspapers and almanacs that he thought might be relevant. He’d been a great help – but it took hours. There were registers and directories of local trade, and they were quickly able to establish that what Mr Steadman had told her was correct: his grandfather had taken over the printing business from a man called Ebenezer Whetstone, the son of Joshua Whetstone. Names had changed – from Joshua to Ebenezer, from Whetstone to Steadman, but the continuity of the printing business was maintained – on the same premises, for around 130 years. So there was a possibility – even a likelihood – that the copper plates had been hidden away there, all that time, among the forgotten clutter of a long-established printing business.

They’d both found themselves repeatedly having to drag their attention away from absorbing material that led nowhere. Every new detail pointed them to a dozen other lines of enquiry – outwards, away from their purpose. They discovered, for example, that Newcastle had become a centre for the production of Prussian Blue. That led them to the fact that this had been a new colour, and that its discovery had dramatically transformed painting. And it led them into details of where it was made, and how it was made. But was it relevant to their search? Blake was a printer and an artist, so had he too been excited by this new colour? Everything was connected, but the relevance was dissipated the further you searched.

By the end of the morning they both had such busy mental pictures of life and trade beside the River Tyne in the 1820s and 30s that their minds were overcrowded, distracted, and tired.

They didn’t break for lunch, just a coffee. Then back they went into the archives again.

Hours passed. By late afternoon, they both wanted to stop. Rebecca was reading through the pages of *The Newcastle Courant* when her weary but sensitized eyes were drawn to a small cramped

paragraph where there was a reference to 'the printer and bookseller Joshua Whetstone, newly arrived from London, with presses and types.' The newspaper was dated September 1833.

Newly-arrived from London with presses and types. And probably with a set of copper plates too. Five years after William Blake's death, and two years after Catherine's.

That was enough for one day. They thanked their helpful librarian – who had confessed to them that he'd volunteered to deal with their query because he shared Rebecca's original interest in Thomas Bewick.

'It's not conclusive,' Patrick says. 'Discovering that Joshua Whetstone had moved from London to Newcastle shortly after Catherine Blake died doesn't prove that he brought the plates with him. But it does open up a possibility.'

'Define it.'

'Blake died in 1827,' Patrick says. 'He printed a copy of the *Songs* in the last few months of his life. By the way, you've never told me how you knew that.'

'It's mentioned in one of his last letters. William and Catherine printed off a copy of the *Songs* in the early summer of 1827, shortly before he died.'

'It makes it likely,' Patrick says, 'that the plates came into the possession of Joshua Whetstone *in London*, at some point between William's death in 1827 and 1833, when Joshua moved his printing business to the north of England. The plates were transported – along with all his paraphernalia – to Newcastle, where they stayed forgotten and ignored until the business was taken over by the Steadmans. They continued to lie there, neglected, all that time. Until you spotted them at the sale.'

This was how it used to be. He would patiently and clearly explain, untroubled by the fact that she'd already worked it out. And she'd listened happily – not just happily, ***joyously****.*

'There is a weakness though,' Patrick says. 'Is it really likely they could be there undiscovered? For almost a century-and-a-half?'

'Yes, it *is* possible,' Rebecca says. 'The tools in that box were old too. There was a rusty wrench which had a date on it. *Sheffield,*

1802.'

'But why do you think Ebenezer decided to shift his entire business to Newcastle? Why would anyone do that?'

Rebecca suggests he'd married a Tyneside girl and she wanted to be nearer her family.

But he thinks it had something to do with the price of coal.

She stares at him, waiting. And Patrick begins to explain something she does *not* already know about.

'Any industrialist in that period who used heavy machinery would have known that the future was in steam power. Bigger printing presses would have the power to go faster, and print more copies, at less cost. *Everyone was getting excited by steam!* It was the future, and for that you needed *coal*. Coal was the thing!'

William Blake would not have been interested in steam power, she thinks. He wouldn't have wanted to turn his private domestic workshop into a dark satanic mill. But Joshua Whetstone might. As she always used to be, she is enkindled by Patrick's context-making, and his factual knowledge. 'And Newcastle was entirely surrounded by coal-mines,' she says eagerly. 'There's coal everywhere!'

'Yes,' he says. 'But there was no coal in London. It had to be brought more than 300 miles down the North Sea.'

'Coals from Newcastle,' she says, ' – which must have made it expensive for factory-owners in London who wanted to convert to steam.'

'Including printers,' he says.

It's guesswork, they know. But it is plausible. A possible history.

'But the roads would have been terrible then. And railways had not got going. So *how* did he move all that heavy equipment?'

'We could go back to the Library tomorrow morning and find out.'

She is filled with eagerness now. She always felt like this in the old days, when they had a plan, and a clear day ahead of them – or a whole school holiday sometimes. Undisturbed by grown-ups, fearless in themselves, comfortable in the world. Surrounded by things that could be *found out* if you knew where to look.

So she forgets to hesitate. And they still have another half-day together in Newcastle.

*

There's a big green park near Jesmond, wide and flat, with scattered trees. To Patrick and Rebecca, it's a village green, multiplied a hundred-fold. As the day darkens into evening, they sit side by side on a wooden bench. They're feeling companionable. As she watches the dog-walkers, the joggers, and a group of boys kicking a ball about, Rebecca admits to herself that she dearly likes being with Patrick again.

Not far from where they're sitting, a couple are lying on the grass, embracing. They are so aroused and impassioned by each other that they've almost forgotten all notions of restraint.

Rebecca watches them in puzzled fascination.

But Patrick wants to tell her about the army. Specifically, he needs to recount those first three months of hell – the casual sadism, the bullying, and his own private confusion and outrage that such things could make him feel so belittled. His *misery-story*.

The small humiliations of that time pour out of him and he begins to experience the release and relief of telling this story at last. He's told it to himself often enough – but he's never attempted to tell his father, or Naomi, or Olivia. He'd thought once that he might tell Cressida, but that hadn't happened. The only audience he has ever seriously wanted is Rebecca.

And at last he has her, beside him, attentive and concerned.

And she *is* concerned. It appals her that he – or indeed anyone – should have had to endure the kind of life he's describing.

Patrick thinks there are two poles in this encounter, the speaker and the listener. But he's wrong. It's a triangular moment, because Rebecca can't tear her eyes away from the two lovers, whose hands are hardly hiding what they want to touch, where they want to go.

An old lady walks past, with a little dog galloping slowly along on its tiny legs, no bigger than a cat. She cannot fail to see the shameless lovers; she also sees the young soldier talking urgently.

And the girl beside him, attentive and composed. Listening to the soldier, watching the lovers.

Patrick's misery-narrative has taken about half-an-hour. The weary lovers get to their feet, dust down their clothes, walk away into the gathering darkness. *Have they somewhere to go?* Rebecca wonders. *Have they somewhere private?*

She turns to Patrick. She knows how his story-telling works. There is a point where you can make him stop.

'How did it all end?' she says.

'In the final week of basic training, we were going to be told where we'd be posted – Aden, Malta, Gibralta, Singapore or Hong Kong, they were all possibilities. But most of us would go to bases in Germany. There's a massive British army there. The army of occupation.'

They'd heard stories – apparently life would at least be bearable when they had their permanent postings. 'We didn't care where we were going. Anywhere would be better than that hell-hole!'

One evening, about a week before the end of basic training, he'd been sitting on the edge of his bed, trying to burn off the roughness of his cap-badge. Word had got around that this would make it more smooth, easier to polish. You were supposed to pour a small amount of Brasso into a tin-lid, put the badge in, and put a lighted match to the Brasso.

So he tried it. There was a hiss and a brief flare.

'And then like an idiot I picked up the badge and it burned my fingers. So I dropped it on the floor.'

The squad's second-lieutenant happened to be passing through the barrack at that moment on an informal visit. 'Hot, gunner?' he said.

A harmless remark, even friendly – for an officer.

'But I was angry, and my finger-tips stung. So without thinking, I snapped back: *No, it was fucking heavy!*'

Sarcasm was not appreciated. Swearing at an officer made it worse. Insolence – insubordination even – could not go unpunished. So Patrick was warned for office, and put on a charge. And two

mornings later he was marched at the double into the battery-commander's office.

'Gunner Cuthbertson,' he said, 'I'm not going to reprimand you. I'm going to do better than that. I'm going to *get rid of you*.'

They'd received a request for a squaddie to be sent to Kinmel Park, near Rhyl, where there was a shortage of trainees, apparently. There were two enormous training regiments there, and thousands of recruits. It was like a small town. But for some reason they wanted an extra one, someone with school cert – and there was a final malicious touch.

'So you'll be starting your basic training all over again. Another fourteen happy weeks for you to look forward to.'

Patrick has anticipated a profound satisfaction in the telling of this story, an achieved contentment. His story, her attention.

However, Rebecca gets to her feet, ready to return to the hotel. She's tired, it's been a long day. She has little interest in what happened to Patrick when he arrived at Rhyl. He ought to have said: *I haven't quite finished.* But he doesn't, he sets off beside her, in silence.

Without its conclusion, the story has no point. The telling gives *him* no ultimate relief, *her* only an incomplete understanding.

But she, on the walk back into Jesmond, and later getting ready for bed, can't stop thinking about it. She hates that he had to go through that. She's shocked by his use of that word, too.

Later, she lies in bed, deep in thought, wondering about those two lovers. Did they wait for darkness and finally have their way? In some bushes perhaps? Where no-one could see.

And sport no more seen,
On the darkening Green.

*

That same night, in Norfolk, young Zoe slips out of the Farm, unseen and unheard. On her way through the kitchen, she quietly invites

Bridie to come with her. Untroubled and fearless, she sets off down the lane that leads to Codling Green. Ahead of her, like a faerie shadow moving between the hedgerows, Bridie pads silently along in the pale light of the full moon.

This is a midnight mission. Since the conversation with her father about mermaids, Zoe has been restless and troubled. She fears a change is coming.

She's done this before. Always alone, and always at night. And there are usually strange things, as if they've been waiting for her to be there – and then they happen. Once she heard, on the other side of a wall, someone digging a garden. *Just after midnight! In the dark!* And once she saw a man lying flat on the grass in front of his house. *Is he dead?* she wondered. But he wasn't dead: he coughed. But why was he there, and what was he doing? *Star-gazing?* On another occasion she was passing a house where two elderly sisters lived; from their open bedroom window she heard one of them say clearly: *Our mother was a meat-hook!* It was baffling! There was a murmured reply, but she couldn't hear the words. *A meat-hook?*

She likes things that are not quite explicable. There are different rules for night-time.

There are comfortable homely things too. A front door being bolted. A man anxiously calling for his cat in a kind of whispered shout. A woman's voice coming from an upstairs window, sweetly singing a lullabye – and when she's finished, there's a wide-awake child demanding to hear it again. *Rock-a-bye baby on the tree-top.* Zoe shivers with pleasure as she passes quietly by, outside.

Ordinary things, touched with magic.

Bridie seems to know where they're going. She leads the way through the village, and beside a field of new barley, until they reach the river. Here the water is deeper and wider, shadowed on the other side by tall poplars, and on this side open to the moon-drenched midnight sky.

The only sound is the soft scything hiss of Zoe's sandals in the grass as she walks along the river's edge.

The big dark river flowing slowly towards the sea is popular on hot summer days. People come here to swim, sometimes long after

sunset. But there's no one here at this time of year. It's too cold for swimming. Zoe has it all to herself. It is her secret. She breathes deep, tasting the strangeness, feeling the cool air on her arms.

All nature has fallen into a dream, and the moonlight holds the river in a spell. The trees are enchanted too, silent and still. Zoe knows that if she stands motionless for a few moments and concentrates, all manner of quietness will become clear to her hearing.

Bridie is standing on the edge of the bank, with her handsome feathery tail waving slowly from side to side, and her ears raised. She looks intelligent and alert, and above all *interested*.

Downstream, there is a movement in the river. She hears it approaching, then she sees it – a blunt boat-shaped wave, but with no boat making it. It moves through the shadows, coming closer, upstream, against the flow of the river.

A flicker of excitement runs up Zoe's back and neck. Something is swimming just under the water. Something *strong*. Too big for a river fish.

Zoe knows that fish sometimes push their mouths up to the surface, or arch their backs above the water – but they always go straight back under.

So this is not a fish. Could it be an otter?

The movement stops and a human head and shoulders rise above the surface. A bare arm waves.

Her first thought ought to be that she's come across a young woman swimming. She knows it would be unusual to find someone in the river after midnight. And even stranger to find someone with nothing on. Nevertheless, what else can it be? – a young woman taking a midnight dip.

But her thinking by-passes that sensible explanation. It takes a short-cut – and she *knows*, immediately and with absolute conviction, that this is a mermaid, at last. With equal certainty, the mermaid seems to know that this girl on the river bank is the one she's looking for. There is a recognition.

The mermaid breaststrokes to the river's edge. When she's close, she raises her upper body out of the water and looks up at

Zoe.

Zoe gives a little stifled gasp of delight and wonder. 'Oh! You're real! You're here!' she says, as if she's known all her life that this arrival, and this meeting, would one day happen.

She stares with shameless curiosity at the mermaid's long dark hair, streaming over her bare shoulders.

But can mermaids talk? And if so, will she speak English? 'Why have you come?' Zoe asks.

'Swim with me,' the mermaid says.

Should she? *Dare* she? Zoe is a good swimmer, but she's read stories about mermaids and she knows they can be dangerous.

'I know what you're thinking,' the mermaid says. 'But it's only *men* who get themselves drowned because of us. You're a girl, so you're half-mermaid anyway – and men never are.'

Zoe throws caution to the wind. There are times when you have to. Quickly, so that she has no chance to change her mind, she takes off her clothes.

The mermaid is inviting, smiling, holding out her hand. Zoe stands at the edge of the bank, her toes curled to get a grip on the soft grass.

She jumps. She's good at diving too but she doesn't know how deep the water might be. So she jumps. And it's not at all cold!

Bridie enters the water on foot, somehow managing to walk straight in. The next moment she's swimming out to join them, low in the water, with her head raised, full of determination.

Rebecca has swum in a river before, in Cambridge, with her father. Everyone does it there in the summer. At Grantchester too, with the students. And the memory of that comes briefly back to her, along with the familiarity and greeting of the soft velvety river embracing her body. The mermaid takes her hand and together they swim upstream, Zoe using her legs and one arm, and the mermaid gently raising and lowering her tail.

In the stories mermaids are usually cold-blooded like fish. But this one isn't. Her grasp is firm and her hand feels human. 'Oh!' Zoe gasps. 'I wish we were sisters.'

The river is warm and she grows more confident. When the mermaid lets go of her hand she swims on her own, and the mermaid drops smoothly underneath her, and rises on the other side. They plunge and dive together, and loop around each other in the black flashing water. Once or twice, Zoe feels the mermaid's fish-tail brush against her body. A strange shivery sensation.

There's no temptation, no danger. Bridie joins in too, occasionally giving little snappy barks of excitement.

It seems to last for ages, but it might only have been a few minutes. The mermaid leads Zoe back to where she's left her clothes, and they climb out of the river onto the bank. Zoe does it on all fours, the mermaid with a swift leap and a twist of her body.

'You see?' she says. 'I told you! You're a *girl* – you're half-mermaid!'

Now Zoe can see all of her. She stares in delight, especially at the beautiful iridescent tail. Surprise too, because the mermaid is full-grown and strong. That tail, when they were swimming, used only a fraction of its strength! And her arms and shoulders and upper body are not those of a girl. They belong to a powerful young woman.

A human girl is as strange and interesting to the mermaid as the mermaid is to Zoe. So Zoe is also studied closely, and with great interest.

'Will you tell me your name?' Zoe asks.

'We're not allowed to do that,' the mermaid says.

'Mine's Zoe.' She speaks hurriedly, wanting to get it said in case that's forbidden too.

'Zoe,' the mermaid says. And again: '*Zoe!* It's the sound of a baby ripple reaching the beach.'

When I put my clothes on, Zoe thinks sadly, *this will be over.* She wants it to last as long as possible. They sit side by side on the river bank and talk quietly.

'Have you got babies?' she asks the mermaid.

'No!' the mermaid says. 'Not yet.'

'Anyway,' Zoe says, 'how do mermaids have babies?'

She has thought about this, often. The difficulties are obvious. *Do they lay eggs?*

But the mermaid just says quietly – and with some dignity – 'That's private.'

'Why did you come?' Zoe asks.

'To see you. Why did *you* come?'

'To see you!'

But what happens next is very confusing for Zoe. Irritating too.

They hear someone approaching along the river-bank, and turn their heads. It's *Patrick!*

What can *he* be doing there? She thought he was away somewhere, being a soldier. He'd never been part of her plan.

He is an unwelcome intrusion.

Patrick is troubled. Zoe can see that, and in spite of her irritation she is sympathetic. She knows about his rift with Rebecca – everyone knows about that. But her understanding is very limited, she's hardly ever spoken to him. They're almost strangers. So why . . ?

How has this been allowed?

Drawing near, Patrick sees the mermaid's bare shoulders and breasts. He's almost overwhelmed with an unbearable confusion of feeling that's quite beyond Zoe's understanding.

'Come in and swim with us,' the mermaid says.

Patrick shakes his head. Zoe knows he wants to. But he's too shy.

But she has no doubts for herself. She slips quietly into the water again and swims confidently into the middle of the river. Looking back, she sees that Patrick has changed his mind. Like Zoe, he has no swimming things. But unlike her, he strips to his underpants and stands at the water's edge, slim and pale in the darkness, with his arms held straight down and his hands clutched together in front of him for extra modesty.

Zoe approves. He bends his knees and does a neat shallow dive into the water, almost horizontally in case there's not much depth close to the bank. She approves of that too. It's a sensible dive.

So far, so good. He swims out to her, and she takes his hand to give him confidence.

They are little more than strangers to one another, and yet it seems all right to do that – in the river, after midnight.

'Will he be safe in the water?' she says to the mermaid. 'Swimming with you?'

'Oh, yes!' she says. 'His thoughts are full of someone else, not me.'

How does she know that? Zoe thinks.

They swim side by side, in silence. Small private ripples stir sweetly around them like melted silver.

Then the silence stops, and they play. They splash each other, chase each other, swim under one another, ducking and plunging.

Zoe has never been so happy. Not even when she swam with her father.

The mermaid tells them to take a deep breath. She takes Zoe's right hand and Patrick's left, and together they dive to the bottom. There's a dark brown murk down there, and the mud lies hard and firm and slippy. There are fishes too, turning hastily away into the gloom.

The surface of the river is like a roof, made of shifting silk, waving and shimmering above their heads. Zoe looks up and sees Bridie's four feet paddling above them. Silver bubbles stream from her body, bobbing and trailing behind her like escaping jewels.

But when Zoe needs to rise for air, something worrying happens. The mermaid – despite what she'd said – turns to Patrick and pulls him to her in a tight embrace. She holds him hard, and they plunge down again, even deeper.

At first, Zoe treads water for a few seconds, feeling left out. Then she grows alarmed.

She ducks her head and plunges into the depths. She finds them there, midstream, in the deepest and darkest part. The mermaid is holding Patrick tightly against her. Her eyes are closed and she is concentrating on an intense and private ecstasy. But Patrick's eyes are wide open with terror, and he is struggling to get free. Silver bubbles of air escape from his mouth, hurrying and wobbling to the

surface. His underpants have slipped off, and they're settling on the bed of the river, moving a little, like the ghost of a jelly-fish, trying to get away.

His longing for Rebecca has not been proof against the mermaid. Or is it Cressida he longs for? Zoe has never been sure.

She knows at once what she must do. She touches the mermaid's shoulder to attract her attention. But the mermaid is oblivious, lost in sexual bliss. So Zoe grabs a length of her hair, and pulls it – hard. *Really hard!* The shock of it makes the mermaid release her grip, and Patrick shoots like a rocket to the surface.

Zoe rises too, and she finds Patrick gasping for breath, and looking dazed and confused. *As well he might!* Zoe thinks. It had been a near thing.

The mermaid has come up too and is beside Zoe. 'Sorry!' she says. 'Something came over me. He's such a lover!'

'But lovers need to breathe,' Zoe says.

They swim slowly back to the bank. Zoe and Patrick scramble out of the river. The mermaid jumps out like a salmon, arches and twists her tail, and lies back on the grassy bank with her upper body raised on her elbows. Bridie goes off to a decent distance and shakes herself vigorously, spraying a gallon or two of rainbow-water around her in the moonlight.

Zoe looks round for Patrick. But he's not there. He's gone! His clothes too. Vanished!

'I must go now,' the mermaid says.

'Will I see you again?' Zoe asks sadly. She'd known this moment would come.

And she knows too what the reply will be. The mermaid shakes her head. Just a brief shake, but implacable. 'But you'll never forget me. And something will happen, for sure.'

She bends the upper part of her body forward, stretches her arms down towards her tail, and somersaults smoothly into the river, headfirst. She reappears a moment later in midstream, just her head and shoulders. And then there's only a hand, waving goodbye. It disappears, and all that's left is a sweet curl of water spiralling on the surface, quickly swept away by the current.

But where's Bridie? She's gone too, disappeared. Along with Patrick! Zoe is philosophical about this. Unpredictable things always happen when you go in search of mermaids. She knows that.

Something will happen, for sure.

The water in the river had been mysteriously warm, but now she's shivering uncontrollably. Her clothes provide little comfort for her wet skin. She warms up a little as she jogs towards home, but when eventually she snuggles into bed wearing dry pyjamas, her hair is still damp.

Every thing possible to be believed is an image of truth.

*

Patrick is not in Norfolk, by the river.

He's with Rebecca, in Newcastle. They have one morning left for further research at the library.

They are joined again by the helpful young librarian – whose name they now know is Anthony. He is interested in the same historical period because of his own passion for Thomas Bewick

They're puzzled by how anyone would move an entire printing business – with several items of heavy machinery and numerous trays of lead type – from London to Newcastle in the 1830s. So Anthony introduces them to an almanac of trade and industry on the Tyne, which provides a vivid record of travel and transport in the north-east in 1827.

They discover that the Royal Mail Coach had established services from Newcastle to London and Edinburgh in 1786, and by 1827 there were two coaches running daily to and from the south, as well as many services to other towns in the north of England.

'So Joshua and his family could have travelled by coach from London to Newcastle?'

'Yes. But what about his machinery?'

Their source explains that 'a waggon sets out for London from the general waggon-yard every day, Sunday excepted, and conveys

goods to all the intermediate places on the north London road.' So the printing presses might have gone by road.

'But very slowly,' Patrick says. 'On horse-drawn carts?'

They are doubtful about this. But it would have been possible, perhaps.

But Anthony comes to their assistance. He points out a section in the almanac devoted to sea-faring vessels. There were at that time 862 ships registered at the Custom-house in Newcastle. There were also eighteen packets and other vessels employed in the conveyance of goods and passengers to and from London. 'They are all excellent vessels, and well-manned; and clear from the London wharfs regularly twice a week,' the author wrote.

'Such a vessel,' Anthony points out, 'would be comfortably able to transport printing presses.'

'People too,' Rebecca says. 'It says: goods *and passengers*.'

'If only we knew for certain,' Patrick says.

Over coffee – with Anthony, on his mid-morning break – they discuss what they know. 'Well, you know for certain,' he says, 'that it was perfectly possible to transport machinery and equipment by sea. It doesn't prove that's what happened. But it could have.'

Anthony – aware that Rebecca first came to Newcastle to see an exhibition of works by Thomas Bewick – shows her a specific reference to the engraver in the 1827 almanac. 'Perhaps there is no place in England,' the writer says, 'except the metropolis, where printing is more accurately and tastefully executed. The various editions of Bewick's works printed here prove the truth of this observation.'

'And if Joshua Whetstone knew that Newcastle was known for high quality printing,' Patrick points out, '*that* probably convinced him this was the place to move to.'

Anthony adds an intriguing detail from his own research. He'd discovered that Hannah Bewick, who had married a Londoner, had died, leaving a young baby, newly orphaned. Jane Bewick immediately set off to London to bring her back to live with them.

She went by sea.

Rebecca is illogically heartened by this. It has no direct connection with Blake's copper plates. But it gives context and substance to their research. She can *imagine* it happening. She is stirred to the excitement that serious researchers feel, a joy in the connectedness of things, finding and explaining it.

A couple of hours later Rebecca and Patrick are on the train, seated facing one another, at window-seats. Patrick will have to change at York, Rebecca will stay on the train. They don't talk much because the compartment is full. Anyway, he's used to that – in their early years they were content to be silently together for hours. But he thinks a lot, and by and large he's happy with his trip to Newcastle. She might have rejected him completely, shutting the door against him, finally and for ever. But that hadn't happened. They'd been happy together, working on something they both found interesting.

He feels he's taken the first few steps back to where they used to be.

He had considered appealing to her openly to cancel everything that had happened since he shut his door on her, and renew what they'd lost. But he daren't confront her with such a proposal for fear of an outright – and final – rebuff. She was good at rebuffs.

She is thinking too. She thinks about Mr Steadman. She's no longer frightened of him, but she gives the incident a lot of thought, and she wonders what would have happened if Patrick hadn't turned up. At the forefront of her mind is the admission that her own carelessness had led to what happened. And it occurs to her again – as it has done many times – that ownership of the Blake plates is proving difficult to manage.

She also thinks about Anthony, the librarian. He has, she believes, the perfect life, with his work at the library and his passion for Bewick beautifully interpenetrating, defining and energising his existence. Eventually, it would lead to a triumphant climax – the publication of a book which he intends to call *The Life and Work of Thomas Bewick*.

As the train draws to a stop alongside the crowded platform at York, Patrick gets to his feet and takes his bag from the rack, heavier

now because it contains his army boots and gaiters. He secretly hopes Rebecca might leave her seat and go with him to the door. But she just thanks him again for his help and murmurs something not quite audible about seeing him soon, when he has his next leave.

On the platform, he watches the train draw away, accelerating soundlessly alongside the hurrying passengers.

There she is! At the window.

Will she wave to him? Will she even look in his direction?

She does wave, just a light acknowledgement with her left hand. Like the queen, waving from her coach.

Then she's gone.

Patrick has been happier in those few days than he'd been for six years. He has at last told his misery story – except that she'd stopped him before he could recount what happened when he arrived at a different training regiment.

The happy ending, the important part.

Still untold.

*

'Sergeants are bastards! Right?'

Patrick, bemused, had lowered his kit onto the floor, and straightened up.

He is being addressed. '*Aren't* they? You are required to agree with that statement. *Sergeants are bastards!*'

Patrick agreed. 'Absolutely,' he said. '*All* of them.'

Everyone cheered.

The magic had started on the morning he'd left Tonfanau, but he'd assumed his freedom would be short-lived. Misery and humiliation would resume when he arrived in Rhyl. Fourteen weeks of it.

He'd been driven to the railway station at Barmouth, where he caught a train to Portmadog and Bangor, and changed to a mainline service to Rhyl. He'd savoured every moment of that trip and fell in love – even on a dank grey day in December – with this new

landscape of mountains and valleys and distant darkening perspectives. And from the other side of the train, he could feast his eyes on the dark-grey melancholy sea. How full of possibilities this seemed to a boy brought up under the huge skies and wide flat horizons of East Anglia.

And he was *alone*! Left blissfully to himself, for a few precious hours.

When he arrived at Rhyl Station, the midwinter darkness was closing in. The Army – with characteristic efficiency – had provided a jeep to meet the train and take him to Camp.

There were about thirty of them, young men in uniform, all looking disorganised, and slightly dishevelled. Some had begun to unpack, some had only just arrived. They found their allocated beds, and dumped their stuff to be sorted out later. But they didn't know each other; they didn't know why they'd been pulled out of their training and posted to this place; and they didn't know how to find the cook-house and get a meal.

Yet, somehow, they all seemed to be able to sustain their good-humour.

One of them was declaring himself a leader. 'And *sergeant-majors* are worse!' he declared cheerfully.

A few were the same age as Patrick, because they'd left school with their A levels. But most were three years older, having opted to defer their National Service until after university. So they still radiated the lingering tone of their undergraduate lives. From the way they spoke, he knew they were mostly from the north of England.

A young bombardier entered. They all stopped what they were doing and faced him. But all he had to tell them was that they could have weekend passes if they wanted them, so long as they were back on Monday morning, in time to be on parade, in uniform, at 7.30 prompt.

And then they'd be briefed.

Weekend passes? They all knew exactly what to do. They seemed to possess an immediate familiarity with train-times and train-routes. And most of them had families, girlfriends and drinking

mates, just round the geographical corner, in Lancashire and West Yorkshire. So in a matter of minutes the barrack-room was empty – except for Patrick, bemused.

He had no understanding of the certainties that come from being one of the tribe. He was left standing, alone, unable to believe that for the first time since it all started, he was free to go where he pleased. And do what he liked.

He could hardly believe it was happening.

He concluded (wrongly) that it would not be possible to travel from North Wales to Norfolk on a Friday evening – and not worth the effort anyway since he'd have to start the journey back again on Sunday morning.

Being slow to decide is not the same as being indecisive. He knew exactly what he would do. He'd get a train to Chester, where he could mooch around on his own, go to the pictures perhaps, have a couple of good meals in cafés, and get a train back to Rhyl on Sunday night.

He'd never imagined such joy – a whole weekend in which to think his own thoughts – as slowly as he pleased – and not to be endlessly hurried and hassled, shouted at, and humiliated, without a moment to himself.

When Rebecca had separated herself from him, Patrick had partly filled the gap by buying a new bike, a handsome Humber Clipper, with drop handlebars and a four-speed gear. It cost him £26. He hadn't allowed it to join the collection of ancient machines used in common at Cuckoo Farm. It was an aristocrat. He'd cherished it, polished it, oiled its parts, dismantled and reassembled it, found it a place in the dry, and cycled almost every day.

And he joined the Youth Hostelling Association. He'd never stayed in one of the hostels, but he liked their maps, and he'd brought his YHA Handbook with him, in the army.

So he knew there was a Hostel in Chester, the next mainline station to Rhyl.

*

He enjoyed his solitary weekend, in his own private and rather melancholy way. He liked the double-decker streets and the city walls, and he quickly adapted to the life-style of the YHA and enjoyed meals there at the beginning and end of each day. In the city, he found a café which served cheap massive fry-ups, and he saw films at two different cinemas.

The weather matched his mood. It was drizzly, bitterly cold, and half-dark all day, both days. On Sunday afternoon, enjoying a cup of tea in a café, he wrote postcards home, telling them about his sudden move and change of address. One to his dad at the gatehouse, and a joint one to Naomi and Olivia, his two mothers.

Back in the barrack-room on Sunday evening, his new companions were more subdued. Like Patrick, they'd all been plucked out of basic training from other regiments – and sent here for an unknown purpose. One claimed to have been told they were going to be taught Russian, and afterwards they'd spend their time tuning into Soviet radio networks. Another believed they were going to be trained as military mountaineers, for under-cover work in Eastern Europe.

On Monday morning, after parade, they were marched to a lecture-room where two sergeants and a bombardier were waiting. One of the sergeants explained the plan, and its background.

He was quiet, lucid, reassuring. He was a good teacher, a good lecturer. Patrick felt that he *recognised* him. He reminded him of his dad, who rarely said anything intimate or surprising, but who was always reliably kind and practical.

The sergeant told them the Royal Artillery had realised there was going to be a surge of new recruits in the next year or two – but there was a shortage of instructors. So an urgent order had gone out to other training regiments for around thirty bright trainees to be picked out and posted to Rhyl, for immediate training to be signals instructors. In drill, in small arms, and in field telephones and wireless.

So Patrick's previous C.O. had been correct: they *were* going to start their basic training again. But, because they were all supposed to be exceptionally bright, this would be concentrated and

completed in only two weeks. If they passed the test at the end, they'd all be sent to Larkhill on Salisbury Plain for a three-month instructors' course.

'Any questions?'

Patrick had no questions. His happiness was complete. Or perhaps it was just relief. For the first time, he could look ahead to the immediate future with pleasure. He'd been handed back his life, his sense of himself as a person.

And he was beginning to feel at home with his companions.

And then – the crowning amazement! – they were each given a set of single stripes, with instructions to sew them on the sleeves of their shirts and their uniforms, that evening. They were being *promoted!* They had *rank*! Lance-bombardier, the meanest and least honoured rank in the Royal Artillery. But at least they were no longer squaddies – even if they were only *acting unpaid*, still at thirty-two shillings a week.

Patrick felt happy, the first time for months.

So, he thought hopefully, *perhaps not **all** sergeants are bastards.*

8

As Darkness Falls

From time to time at the Farm, one or two of the residents offer to cook the big evening meal on a Friday or Saturday. To give Naomi a break. So, when Poppy and Paul volunteer one warm summer afternoon, she accepts gladly. She'd like to go for a walk across the fields, she says.

In holiday mood, she sets off towards the back of the farm and spies young Zoe leaning out of a window high in one of the barns. *She's in her aunt's studio*, Naomi thinks.

Zoe waves cheerily.

'I'm going for a walk,' Naomi shouts. 'Want to come?'

'Yes please!'

They don't talk much at first. Naomi explains to Zoe the differences between swifts and house-martins. And Zoe tells Naomi about her trip to Cambridge. She tells her about her dad's lecture too – and some of the things that happened afterwards.

Naomi likes Zoe, a lot. How could anyone *not* like her? But she's very self-assured, very independent, beyond her years in confidence. Naomi also knows that Aunt Polly is a good surrogate mother. A shade too trusting perhaps, but otherwise perfect.

Zoe is not in need of mothering, I mustn't meddle. And yet Naomi longs to take her over, to take charge, to protect her. Inwardly, she mocks herself for this.

She has wondered about her belief in mermaids, her apparent longing to see one? *Surely, such an intelligent child ought to know . . ?*

'Zoe, why do you like mermaids so much?'

Zoe considers. 'They make me happy.'

'Have you ever seen one?'

This is a dishonest question. It rules out nuances and excludes every answer except a plain *Yes* or *No*.

Zoe recognises it at once. 'Have *you*?' she asks.

‘No,’ Naomi tells her. ‘The nearest I ever got was on the other side of this wall.’

They’re in a narrow lane that skirts the wood. On the opposite side there is an apparently endless flint wall, with wallflowers and toadflax growing in it, and mosses and lichens. The eighteenth-century mortar is so soft that anyone could dismantle a section simply by lifting off the flint-stones, one by one. The wall has crumbled disastrously in places, easy to step over.

‘There’s an old house in there,’ Naomi says. ‘And a big neglected garden. In the garden, there was supposed to be a *mermaid’s pool*. When we were little, we heard stories about it and the three of us wanted to go in and see. Olivia and I were too scared, but Jan wasn’t. Nothing frightened Jan. So she went in on her own. When she came out, she said she’d seen mermaids there, but we didn’t believe her.’

Naomi had expected Zoe to pick up on the idea of mermaids. Surely she would! But she didn’t.

‘Who was Jan?’ she asked. Zoe had never heard of Jan.

‘Our youngest sister.’

‘I didn’t know you and Olivia had a sister. Where is she now?’

‘She lived here with us until a few years ago. Then she fell in love with a New Zealander. She married him and went back with him.’

Naomi smiles fondly as she thinks about Jan. ‘She was the youngest and bravest of the three of us. Now she spends her time growing Sauvignon grapes.’

Acres and acres of them! Jan has sent pictures.

But the mermaids have eluded capture. And Zoe ensures their escape by changing the subject again: ‘How many rooms are there at Cuckoo Farm?’

What an extraordinary question! Naomi has no idea. She knows she must have provided a number for the last Census, but she can’t remember what it was.

‘It’s hard to be sure,’ she says to Zoe. ‘Some of them are so small they’re no bigger than walk-in cupboards. I don’t count

anywhere as a room unless there's sufficient space for a bed and some furniture. And a window, of course.'

They walk on in silence for a while. Then Naomi says: 'Why did you ask?'

Zoe hardly hesitates. 'There are twenty-one empty rooms,' she says. 'I counted them.'

'Really? *Twenty-one?*'

'Yes. You could fill them with children.'

What an extraordinary thing to say! Naomi says nothing in reply. But for the rest of the evening – and most of that night – she is preoccupied, silent and absorbed. Zoe's words repeat themselves in her mind. *You could fill them with children.* Like a prophecy. Or a command from the gods.

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings . . . Young Zoe is not exactly a babe or a suckling, but she does have astonishing perceptions! How did she know?

Twenty-one children?

That night Naomi has strange vivid dreams, not nightmares exactly, but not entirely pleasant either. In one of them, she is pouring liquid babies from a jug into a cardboard box.

Nevertheless, she wakes up in the morning, filled with excitement.

*

Cressida has returned to London from Newcastle, disconsolate and dispirited. But she knows what she should do next. *You'll never make a good detective unless you can shrug off setbacks* – one of Mr B's many aphorisms.

She decides to have another look at Charter Street. Time is passing, fast.

She makes no attempt at disguise or concealment; she just walks the length of the road, and then back again. There's no sign of life at number 57. The windows are closed, the curtains drawn.

A neighbour tells her they've all moved out. He's the same man she spoke to before, when she was with Rebecca. 'They've all scarpered,' he tells her.

Does he know where they've gone?

'No! They never talked to us. They just cleared off.'

'Walking? In cars?'

'It was a van.'

'Do you remember what kind of van?'

But he doesn't. He thinks it was dark blue. 'They all crammed into the van and it drove off, he said. 'They weren't going far.'

'What makes you think that?'

'The driver was telling them to get a move on – because the headlights weren't working.'

She waits.

'It was already getting dark. So they were probably only going a few streets away.'

Number 57 is not a crime scene, there's no copper on duty at the front door. Just the house, silent and abandoned.

This is a setback. *Another* setback! She's lost the person she is supposed to be concerned about.

Worth a look inside, she thinks. *They might have left something, some kind of clue.*

There's no side door, no passage leading to the back, and the front windows are all securely shut. So not a daylight job, she thinks.

Don't give up, Cressida. Just come back after dark. With a torch. There's bound to be a back alley, for bins, if she can find it.

Further along the street, beside number 49, there's a side-road. And a few yards along that is the entry to the back alleyway. She doesn't need to search along it; she can see there'll be a clear path for her, even after dark. There are bins, a bike or two, a couple of prams. Lots of things she might trip over but nothing to bar her way, no traps of any kind. And there are wooden doors built into a high brick wall, one door for each backyard.

Come back later, after dark.

*

But she doesn't waste the rest of the day. She switches her energy to her private interest in Olivia's mysterious lover, Jasper Travis. This takes her into the City, so different from Charter Street that it's hard to believe they both exist in the same world – and that she can travel from one to the other in less than thirty minutes.

But there it is! In St Martin's le Grand, a massive eighteenth century building which escaped the bombing and stands solid, clear, and proud, with large symmetrical windows, and a huge stone portico. Eight or nine storeys high, an architectural statement.

She goes inside, into a wide echoing reception hall, wood-panelled and lofty. There are lifts, and beside the lifts there is a highly-polished brass plate, with the names of the companies on each floor.

And there he is, there is Jasper! *Travis, McCaulay, and Longstaff, Financiers & Diamond Merchants.* On the top floor.

It occurs to her that you'd never see Jasper visiting 57 Charter Street. Why would he? He has Olivia, he can go to bed with her any time he likes. St Martin's le Grand is a long way from Charter Street. But it's even further, she thinks, if you're trying to travel in the other direction.

The memory of Olivia and Jasper as they'd walked together into the privacy of the hotel, fills Cressida with a sudden sexual longing, startling and intense. It's not the hotel she desires, not the hotel

room, nor the welcoming commissionaire, none of the props. And she certainly doesn't want Jasper Travis.

*

After dark she sets off, back to Charter Street, with a torch. She has no difficulty finding her way along the alley at the back of the houses. And it's simple to work out which one is number 57. The door in the wall is not locked, and lets her into a small backyard, with two bins, a washing-line, a large empty flower-pot, and not much else – except an outside toilet, from an earlier generation, probably disused, built of bricks, damp and mossy.

The back door is locked. But she bends her elbow into a strong blunt weapon and poises it about six inches from the largest pane in the kitchen window. The move is not unlike one she's learnt in self-defence classes. A sharp decisive thrust of the elbow is all that's needed to smash the glass from the centre. There's a noise, of course. But she stands motionless and quiet for several minutes, knowing that as long as the sound of falling glass is brief, and not repeated, probably no one will investigate.

Carefully she pulls away a few shards of glass still loosely stuck to the putty in the frame – leaving a clear rectangular entry. She reaches in and round to the catch, opens the entire window, and climbs inside. She's agile and supple.

Inside, she first secures her escape. She unbolts the kitchen-door, and unlocks it with the key the previous occupants have left in the key-hole.

They haven't taken the furniture because they left in a hurry. It was not a full-scale house-move.

She switches on the light in the kitchen. It probably won't be seen from the front. It's a risk, but not much of one. She moves slowly from room to room. Downstairs, there's nothing to suggest this was not a normal family home. It was a big family, you could tell. And there's a lot of untidiness.

She goes cautiously upstairs. You might find anything in one of the rooms up there – a corpse, an intruder with a gun. Who knows?

What Cressida finds is a long rectangular mirror on one of the walls. It puzzles her: full-length mirrors have their uses if they're vertical – but why would anyone want a horizontal one, waist-high?

There is something strange about the glass too. The room is in darkness, so it's a few moments before she understands that there's no reflection of herself. It's a mirror that doesn't reflect. Her heart is suddenly racing and she feels sweat on her forehead – because she's realised that she can see through into the next bedroom. Only faintly, because of the dark.

But what is it for?

Seeing perhaps? *Watching?*

A window?

It dawns on her slowly. It's a large one-way window, carefully fitted into the wall. Three or four people could sit there, in a row, watching.

Unexpectedly shaky, she feels her way out onto the landing and round into the next bedroom – where she finds the other side of the window. But, here, it is a mirror. It reflects. So whatever was happening on the bed in this room could be watched by a small concealed audience in the one next door.

This realisation makes Cressida feel a little sick. Other details assemble in her thoughts as she takes it in – they were *children* being watched, girls of eleven and twelve perhaps, men doing things to the girls. Or girls made to do things to the men.

Watched!

Perhaps new girls were made to watch the older ones?

An understanding of this new kind of darkness is flooding into Cressida's mind. It's like a disgusting rising tide in the middle of the darkest night. It makes her grimace. She feels such dismay, such outrage, that denial and disbelief inevitably follow hard on its heels. Such things *can't* – surely – happen? They *don't* happen! She needs time to accommodate this, and someone to talk to about it.

But there's no chance of that. For at that moment there's a great hammering on the front door.

Cautiously she switches off her torch and walks into the front bedroom. Immediately below her she can see a dark foreshortened

figure in the dim light of a streetlamp, standing on the doorstep. Not standing exactly, he's slumping against the door-frame. Slowly – as if he's having to work out how to do it – he raises one arm and thumps again on the door. His whole body lolls, as if even his leaning is not secure.

He's drunk! Very drunk.

She could just wait until he goes away. Or she could let him in and find out if he knows anything.

Cressida has not been in the trade long enough to have had a lot of experience in handling people who are drunk. But she knows enough – and one thing she knows is that there comes a stage when a drunk man cannot control his movements and cannot think clearly. A man in that state, she knows, might be a nuisance, but he's unlikely to be a danger.

But she also knows that someone very clever might put on a convincing act of drunkenness – and then suddenly turn deadly sober. So she must not turn her back on him, she mustn't be taken by surprise.

This is another of my impulses, she thinks. *But I can handle him. If I'm careful.*

So she goes downstairs and opens the front door. Immediately he collapses inside, on his knees at her feet, swearing obscenely. She offers no help, and after a moment or two he manages to haul his bulk into a standing position, swaying dangerously from side to side. He's not an attractive sight: his hair is greasy, his clothes are unkempt, and he's unshaven and sweating. He smells unwashed.

He stares at her. He doesn't seem to have noticed that the house is in darkness, except for the kitchen at the back.

'Who the bloody hell are you?'

'I'm Augusta.'

Mr Zeppelin had ordered her to create a fictitious identity to use in a hurry, in situations like this. If you have to make up a false name on the spot, he'd told her, there will be a tiny hesitation while you think of one, and it will be noted. So *Augusta Crabtree from Potters Bar*, was created, ready to be introduced at short notice.

Young Augusta has an entire life-story, well-rehearsed. But this is her first public appearance.

He steps inside, falling over the sill of the door. She catches him as he stumbles, props him up long enough for him to regain what little balance he has.

'You look nice,' he says. His voice is thick, his breath foul.

'I like to think so,' she says. She finds to her surprise that she's not scared. The see-through mirror was way beyond her capacity, but *this* she can deal with.

'Are you up for it?'

'It's you who's not up to it,' she says. 'You're too drunk.'

But he refuses to accept this verdict.

'What do *you* know? You some kind of expert? Anyway, where's Norma? I want to spend some time with my little Norma.'

'Why?'

He's sarcastic: 'She's my *niece*, ain't she?'

'She's not here.'

'Well, you'll have to do instead.'

'It's my night off,' she says firmly.

He becomes plaintive, pathetic. Wheedling her. 'You don't have to do nothing with me! I only want to watch.'

'Not a chance,' she says.

'Is there anything to drink?' he asks.

'Tea,' she says. She hopes there's a packet of tea in one of those cupboards in the kitchen.

She has to help him along the hall, and on to one of the kitchen chairs. He sprawls, with the top half of his body slumped over the table.

Danger? Not on your life!

While she busies herself boiling a kettle, and finding a tin of loose tea, she engages him in talk.

'Who's in charge here?' she asks him.

'Bloke called Lucas. He *thinks* he's in charge.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning he's a complete fuckwit.'

Cressida waits for more.

‘He’s cruel too. The girls are scared of him.’

‘Why?’

‘If they misbehave . . .’

‘What? *What* if they misbehave . . ?’

It’s not what she expects to hear. ‘He locks ‘em in the outside toilet. He did that to Norma once. Two days and nights she was locked up.’

‘What had she done?’

But he’s tired of questions.

She pours a mug of tea and passes it to him at the table, but at a safe distance. He’s incapable of suddenly leaping to his feet and attacking her. *But always stay clear of their reach,* Zeppelin told her. *They can grab you by the wrist.* But this one can hardly raise the mug to his mouth with any steadiness. Tea slops onto the table-top.

She pours tea for herself and changes the subject. ‘Are you married?’

He thinks about it, and then admits to having a wife. She’s called Rose, and apparently she won’t have anything to do with him because she’s sick. And it’s *his* fault.

‘What do you mean?’ Cressida asks. ‘Why is it your fault?’

‘Something *down there*,’ he says. He jabs his forefinger down towards his groin. ‘Got it from one of you lot, I reckon. Fucking whores!’

He pronounces it *hewers*.

‘Norma?’

‘Yeah! Probably. Still, I *like* Norma.’

He’s sad. There is a desperately shrunken human life breathing obscurely in his consciousness. Cressida has a fleeting perception of this.

‘Do you know where they’ve moved to?’ she asks him.

He glares at her, suddenly aggressive. ‘Now listen to me, Augusta. They haven’t *moved*. They’ve bloody *pissed off*, that’s what they've done. They’ve fucking *scarpered*!’

‘How do you know that?’

‘When I was here last time . . .’ But he forgets what she’d asked him.

'What about when you were here last time?' she snaps. 'What happened?'

There's an immediate change in him. It's suddenly clear to Cressida that he can't bear a woman to be angry with him. He puts up his hands as if to ward her off. And he frowns in concentration, trying to please her. 'Someone said something.'

'Said something about *what*?'

'Something about Newcastle.'

'*What about Newcastle?'*

'An address.'

'*What* address?'

'I memorised it.'

She is incredulous, and shows it.

This makes him truculent. 'I'm not stupid,' he says. 'And I'm not always pissed.'

'So you memorised the address? In Newcastle?'

'Sort of. I wrote it down.'

He starts a long and infuriating search of an inside pocket, his hands feeling around, unable to find or get a hold on the scrap of paper.

But he does find it, in the end, and he passes it to Cressida. It's not much of an address: *~~Stranrear~~ Street, ~~Stanrare~~, Stranroar Street.*

It seems unlikely, but it's all she's got.

But there's something else. He's troubled, and at last he gets it out. 'They had a couple of little kids.'

'Little? *How* little?'

'I dunno. About eight. Or nine p'raps.'

Cressida is staring at him.

'They were brothers,' he says.

Boys? Little *boys?* This is too much for her to process immediately. But in any case he's finished. He's exhausted, falling asleep. Or perhaps he's about to pass out.

She desperately needs to get out of this place now. But can she just leave him there?

She knows she can't. She shakes and thumps him into some kind of consciousness. He is awake enough to cooperate with her as

she forces him to his feet and staggers him into the front room, where there's a sofa. She lets him collapse onto it, then she lifts his feet up and over one end. He is asleep – or unconscious – immediately. In the dim light of a streetlight, she manoeuvres his upper body sideways in case he vomits.

He wakens briefly. 'Why didn't you go with the rest of 'em?'

She ignores his question.

In the kitchen, she locks the door and pockets the back door key – just in case she needs it – switches off the light, and exits by the front door, leaving it unlocked and ajar. In no time at all, she arrives at the end of Charter Street, where there is a main thoroughfare, with people, and buses.

*

But her night adventure is not quite over. As she walks the last half-mile to her house, she becomes certain of what she suspected on the bus. Someone is following her.

In daylight, it's easy to contrive a way of looking at your follower, if you know how. But in the dark it's almost impossible.

So she makes a detour, turning into a side street. Here, there's a large modern block of smart new apartments. She knows this because it's where Mr Zeppelin lives, and she'd once been sent there to deliver a package. It has one of those new-fangled security fitments on the door, with a code that has to be tapped into a small keyboard. It's a lifelong habit to memorise strings of digits; she does it effortlessly, all the time. 1NC1067. Easy to remember: *Norman Conquest plus one.*

The door opens, and she slips inside. In the dimly-lit interior she presses another button to close it again. She makes herself do this without hurrying.

She walks through the gloom to the back of the building. *There's always a back exit.* She finds it almost at once. She has walked straight through, in at the front and out at the back.

Ten minutes later she's letting herself into her own house. No one has followed her. She locks her door, and puts on all the lights

and her smart new electric fire. She checks her bedroom, sits on the edge of her lovely wide double-bed, and takes off her shoes, knowing she's safe.

But who was he? Who'd tried to follow her?

*

Olivia and Jasper, in one of the best rooms at the Savoy, lie back side by side, tired, contented, their bodies flushed in the rosy light of a bedside lamp. Darkness has fallen outside, the sounds of London are muffled by the curtains. They are remote, private, safely enfolded in the great metropolis.

Time to talk. They always talk, afterwards.

Olivia tells him about the William Blake plates. She's thought about it, and she concluded that Jasper must be told the full story. To her, it is extraordinary, a once-in-a-lifetime event – possibly a major art discovery. And she's full of admiration for her daughter's coolness and control throughout. If the plates are authenticated, and the set is complete, it will be worth an enormous sum of money.

Jasper has never heard of Thomas Bewick, but he knows about William Blake. He's read the *Songs*, and he's seen an exhibition at the Tate. Nothing in Olivia's narrative surprises him. Rebecca is his daughter, he expects her to handle situations calmly and decisively. It's in her genes. There's no one in his life who doesn't do that.

And as for the plates' commercial value, he's a diamond merchant! *He probably exchanges sums like that several times a day*.

Olivia had half-expected him to interfere. He might want to help, to arrange deals, or security. But all he says is that he'll be able to advise the best way of placing the money, if she sells them. Interference doesn't seem to have occurred to him.

She changes the subject. She tells him about the night, recently, when at about two a.m., passing a window on her way to the bathroom at Peter's cottage, she'd seen young Zoe turning into the drive, and walking up towards the house.

‘She’d been for a walk in the middle of the night?’ He isn’t especially surprised about that.

‘Not just a walk. She’d been for a swim!’

‘How do you know?’

‘Her hair was wet. There was a full moon, I could see. And she wasn’t carrying any swimming things.’

He’s impressed by that. He brushes aside her suggestion that Aunt Polly should be warned, and that night-time adventures like this ought to be put a stop to. He believes children should find their own dangers. ‘That’s the only way they’ll discover their courage.’

Jasper had hardly stirred the smallest mental muscle in response to her accounts of Rebecca and the Blake plates, and Zoe and her midnight swim. But when she begins to tell him about Naomi, he kneels up beside her and listens with new attentiveness.

‘A *foster-home*?’ he says.

‘Yes.’

‘That’s what she wants to do? Start a foster-home?’

‘Yes, at Cuckoo Farm.’

‘For very young children?’

‘For *orphaned* children. And children waiting for adoption.’

‘Has this idea just come out of the blue?’

‘Yes. Well, *no*. Naomi has always believed her life’s work is to look after children.’

‘Her mission?’

‘It’s more of a *passion* than a mission. It has surfaced a few times in her life. And when it does, it completely takes her over.’

Olivia recalls her sister’s teenage preoccupation with Brownies and Cubs. Later her involvement in the Spanish Civil War – because she’d met a group of children evacuated from Guernica. And then, in 1940, her concern for evacuees fleeing London.

‘When this happens, she always acts on it. She’s unstoppable, like a force of nature.’

‘Is there space for an orphanage?’ Jasper has never been to Cuckoo Farm.

‘Oh yes! According to Zoe, there are about twenty empty rooms.’

‘This is the young girl who has midnight swimming adventures?’

'Yes.'

'How old is she?'

'She's ten.'

'Is she some kind of confidante?'

'I don't think so.'

'Where's Naomi going to find the money for this venture?'

'We already have the rooms and the space. So she doesn't think she'll need much money.'

'She will need money,' he says emphatically. 'The rooms will have to be furnished, and there will have to be bathrooms and toilets installed. And a play-room, or common room. Extra staff to employ – and pay.'

Where has this interest come from? Why is he so concerned?

'She doesn't plan to start with an entire cohort of twenty kids. She'll start with just two, or even one. That way, we'll all get used to it, gradually.'

'That's sensible.'

'Naomi gets these ideas – but they don't make her idiotic. She's a practical person.'

'What about the other residents?'

'If we take one child at a time, or two at the most, the residents will have time to get accustomed to it. If they don't like it, they'll leave.'

'Will Naomi accept help?'

'What sort of help?'

'Money.'

'Do you mean a loan?'

'I mean a donation.'

'*Jasper!*'

'I'm serious.'

She waits, aware that something is going to come.

'I grew up in a foster-home.'

She stares in surprise. She'd never known that.

He tells her his parents lived in Ukraine. He can't remember them, they were killed during the anti-Jewish massacres of 1905, when he was hardly more than a baby. After that, he was looked

after by his grandfather, whom he adored. The grandfather and the little boy escaped to England when Jasper was five, but the old man died three years later.

'I had no family in England. I was only eight, and I had no knowledge of any relatives in Europe. My grandfather had destroyed all our papers, for safety. I was totally alone. So I was taken into care – placed in an orphanage.'

Olivia has never heard any of this story. She blames herself, and wonders why she'd never asked him about his childhood.

'I was very happy there. It was an amazing place! I was loved, and I learned to love. I know there are stories of cruelty in such places – but I saw none of that.'

'Where was it?'

'In Wales. Near Llangollen.'

'So . . . ?'

'So, if Naomi plans to start a foster-home, it could be a transformational thing. A *wonderful* thing! She deserves support.'

'Transformational?'

'Yes indeed! For the children – and for her too, almost certainly. It will transform lives!'

They're both silent, lost in thought.

He is kneeling up in his excitement. She stares at the small scar just above his pubic hair. Shaped like a comet, where the bullet had not quite missed.

'You are very enthusiastic about this,' she says to him.

'It's a wonderful idea! A foster-home run by someone like your sister deserves every support. I would help in any way I could.'

'With *money*?'

'Yes, if necessary.'

He's more excited about her sister's plan to start a foster-home than about his daughter's possible discovery of William Blake's original copper-plates. But they both know a large donation of money will be difficult to arrange, anonymously.

Later, when the room is dark, and the distant sounds of London are still there, but more subdued, Jasper and Olivia are lying close,

she on her back, he on his side, facing her with one hand on her breast.

But she is awake, wide-eyed, her mind racing among collapsing certainties.

In the morning they make love again. Pre-breakfast sex is pleasant but quicker, more businesslike. This time it's almost perfunctory. He seems absent. Her mind too is full of other matters.

She thinks it's his money that troubles her, that offer of a donation for Naomi's foster-home. If she refuses it, her sister's dream might never come to anything. But if she agrees, it would be impossible to maintain the secret relationship with Jasper. Naomi would insist on knowing – she'd be entitled to know – where the donation came from.

It's this that has troubled her all night. She finds the idea of excluding her sister from the truth – not just any truth, but *this* particular truth – repellent, indecent somehow. But she can find no logic in that, no sense of any kind. It would just be *money*!

So why can't she introduce Jasper to Naomi, and allow him to offer the donation in person, face to face, confirming it with a signature and a handshake, like proper business people?

She knows the answer, of course. They'd made their bargain, the two of them, at the end of the War, fifteen years ago. Her side of the deal was that, if she ever revealed their relationship, he would end it. His was that he would never intrude in her life at Cuckoo Farm.

As they say goodbye on the steps of the hotel, Olivia feels as if she's standing on a cliff edge. She has no idea if he too is aware of imminent danger. Perhaps he is, perhaps he isn't, perhaps it will come to him later.

Perhaps he doesn't care. Perhaps he learned when he was a child that catastrophic life-changes can happen at any time. Perhaps there is never a moment in his life when he's not expecting such a thing. Ready for it. Poised to face it.

Olivia on the other hand prefers permanence, and trust, and regularity. She leaves the hotel, deeply troubled.

*

Mrs Alice Mummery is several weeks into her new job. She's a waitress in a snack bar at Newcastle Central Station. She's surprised one morning to see Mr Steadman in the café, approaching her, asking to speak to her, in private.

My previous boss.

She observes him carefully. She's on her guard, suspicious of what he might want from her.

He'd hardly ever spoken to her when she worked for him; she always assumed he was unaware who she was. And when he closed down the printing business, there was no thank-you for her 20-plus years of service. No goodbye even. Just a final pay-packet.

So what can he possibly want with her?

There's not much space – and certainly no privacy – in the kitchen at the back. So she leads him to one of the tables.

'Isn't there somewhere quieter?'

'No.' She says. She's very short with him. He's not a person she ever warmed to. But she's curious to know what he wants.

Coffee is ordered. Mrs Mummery folds her arms and waits.

Not much to look at, he's thinking*. Just a small round woman, in her mid-fifties. Insignificant. Of no interest*.

'How long did you work for me?' he asks her.

'Twenty-six years.'

'In accounts?'

'Yes.'

'I've been informed that you were present at the final auction sale.'

'Aye, I was.'

'I didn't notice you there that day.'

You never noticed me at all! Ever!

'Why were you there? What were you doing?'

'I'd made an inventory of every item in the sale. I sat beside the auctioneer, so that I could keep a record of what was sold, and how much it went for.'

‘Among the sundries at the end of the sale, there were lots of boxes of old junk – did you make a note of every item in those boxes?’

‘No. Most of it was just tools, like. And bits and pieces of old type. Lead spaces, and rules. One or two compositors’ sticks. I only made a note if there was anything unusual.’

Mr Steadman takes from his briefcase a stapled bundle of pages. It is, she sees, her list, her inventory, neatly typed in advance, with her hand-written notes added on the day of the sale.

He selects the page he wants, folds it back, and turns it round so that she can read it. He points at one item in the list.

‘Lot 210,’ he says.

Ah! So that’s it.

‘You recorded in your inventory that there were various bits of *printing paraphernalia* and four small packages in that box. Is that correct?’

‘You can see it’s correct,’ she says sharply. ‘It’s there – in the list.’

He seems not to have noticed that she’s irritated. Or perhaps he doesn’t care.

‘When you made this inventory,’ he says, ‘did you open those packages to see what was inside?’

‘There was no need to open them,’ she says. ‘One of them had been torn, and some of the contents had spilled out.’

‘Which were . . ?’

‘Some copper plates.’

Mr Steadman frowns, draws a deep breath. ‘Did you see who bought this box?’

‘Aye. It was a young woman, hardly more than a schoolgirl.’

Mr Steadman has convinced himself that he’s been the victim of some kind of fraud. He doesn’t know what it was, or who committed it. This dumpy and rather hostile woman might even have been party to it. He stares at her with his unblinking eyes.

‘Did you see what happened next?’ he asks her.

*He **knows** what happened next, he was there, he saw it.*

'Yes, I did. A young man approached her and they made a deal. *He* took the sundries and the box, and *she* kept the packages.'

Well, she's telling the truth. I saw that happen myself.

'Did you recognise the man? Had you ever seen him before?'

'No.'

'When you were making your inventory, did you take a look at those plates?'

'Only the top one.'

'Was there . . ?'

So he doesn't know.

'There was a design on it,' she says.

She volunteers nothing else. She intends to make him ask for every detail.

'What kind of design?'

'Floral.'

'Any words?'

'Aye.'

'Well, *what* words?'

'A title.'

'What was this title?'

'*Songs of Innocence.*'

He frowns. *He's never heard of them.* Mrs Mummery experiences the private pleasure of one-upmanship. Unlike him, she knows a little about William Blake and the *Songs*. Only because her son is doing A Level English, and this is one of his set books. *But still . . .*

Mr Steadman has decided he's had enough of this woman. He finds her unappealing, with nothing to interest his unblinking gaze. His next step, he now knows, is to find out what these songs of innocence were – and whether those plates were worth anything.

He takes back the inventory and rises to his feet. He doesn't thank Mrs Mummery, he just sets off towards the door.

But the other waitress, Maisie, is having none of it. 'Oi! Were you planning to *pay* for that coffee, pet? Before you scarper, like?'

When he's left, Mrs Mummery tells Maisie all about it.

‘She was such a nice-looking girl. I don’t suppose those copper-plates were worth anything – but if they are, I’m glad *she* found them and had the wit to buy them. But most of all, I’m glad that *he didn’t!*’

9

Hear the Voice of the Bard

Rebecca is lonely.

It’s been creeping up on her, ever since she bought the plates. Now it has overtaken her.

At her school in Norwich, she’d been one of a group of friends who’d grown up together. The group was never static, people came and went. It had grown organically as they matured from first-years to sixthformers. Around the time of their O Levels they started to meet on Saturdays, in town, for coffee and shopping, seven or eight of them usually. Mostly girls, one or two boys.

But they’ve all gone now. Two of them have jobs. The others left school with their A Level grades and now they’ve completed their first year at university. Three of the boys – including Nigel – are doing their National Service.

But Rebecca has done nothing. For a whole year.

No wonder I’m lonely!

She especially misses Jess, who is at Durham, reading English.

Most of the girls have boyfriends, the two boys have a succession of girlfriends. One of the girls has been having sex for more than a year, but the others have not admitted to such

wickedness. It's still only 1961. If you do it, it has to be done furtively. And you probably feel ashamed, or at least embarrassed.

You don't talk about it.

When one of them comes home for a weekend, a meeting is usually arranged. But Rebecca has nothing to tell them. Their lives are fast-moving, full of new discoveries, excitements, anxieties. And new friendships. But Rebecca's life hasn't moved at all. She is not at university, she's not working, she's not living in a new place, and she has no boyfriend.

I am defined by negatives.

She's just *waiting*, and unsure what she's waiting for. In some ways, she prefers it this way – hugging her life to herself.

But there's something else. She's intellectually solitary too. There's no one who knows anything about the passionate life she has inwardly allowed to grow around her love for William Blake. All her friends – especially Jessica – know about the plates, and they understand her quest to establish whether they were engraved by Blake himself. Whenever they meet, they ask her questions and listen properly.

But their interest is always short-lived because she has nothing to tell. It's sixteen months since she bought the plates – but she still has nothing. So they move quickly to other topics – and Rebecca feels abandoned. Every time.

They don't understand! They don't know! They mean well but . . .

Jessica is much better company – but Durham is too far away and she only comes home for the vacations.

At the Farm, it's worse. There, everyone knows that some of the plates have been distributed to experts, for authentication. But there's been no progress, nothing has happened. So people forget to ask.

Even Naomi and Olivia – the two people who love her most and monitor her emotional well-being – can't talk to her at length about this. They don't know enough. They see her enthusiasm, but without understanding it.

Then there's Patrick. She admits she'd enjoyed being with him in Newcastle, despite her initial anger. Something of their old companionship had been restored. He'd been a big help in her research, sharing her excitement and frustrations, making careful notes. They'd had fun together. And she admitted to feeling pleased that he'd taken the trouble to read about Blake, to try to understand what it was that so gripped her. All through that time in Newcastle, he'd been kind and good-humoured.

But . . .

Why was there a *but*? And what was it?

But . . . she doesn't want him pressing her, inveigling her into something new and unknown. She senses that she doesn't want from him what he desires from her. All this wanting and needing is a *distraction* from her main business.

What Rebecca desires is to be rooted in a different community. She's had glimpses of what it might be like – in the print room at the Museum. She too wants to join in conversations, on-going and lifelong, always slightly unfinished, with scholars and researchers who have work-in-progress of their own. She can't have that conversation with Patrick – he wants something else. It does not involve research.

And besides, he's not available. He's away in the army.

The plates are more than engraved sheets of copper. They're more than four small packets that have spent 130 years in an old forgotten box of rusting tools. They have become an *idea*, dynamic, alive, and growing into the centre of something.

But Rebecca feels lonely and lost because there's no one she can talk to about this.

William had Catherine, she tells herself, repeatedly. *And Catherine had him.*

*

The SICK ROSE

O Rose thou art sick.

The invisible worm

That flies in the night
Through the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:

And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

Rebecca doesn't have to read this, she knows it by heart. She doesn't know whose voice is whispering these words – but she recognises the sorrow and dismay in them. Most of all, the terrifyingly close intimacy.

'Who is *Rose*?' someone had asked in one of their classes.

'Probably,' Melanie said carefully, 'she's a loving young wife, infected with syphilis.'

They stare. *Syphilis?*

'It's a venereal infection, women died of it.'

'Infected by their husbands?' someone had asked.

'Yes. Sometimes babies were born already infected with the bacteria.'

Rebecca had felt a rush of admiration for Melanie – this new young teacher, bravely obliging her students to confront the words of Blake's poem.

They'd been shocked. And silenced. Even Nigel Wayward was too embarrassed to say anything.

'How do you know all this, Miss?' someone asked.

'My boyfriend is a medical student,' Melanie said.

Jessica said: 'So the *bed of crimson joy* is not just a flower-bed full of red roses, then?'

People think Jessica is shy. But she's not, she just doesn't say much. So that remark evoked surprise and the relief of laughter. But not for long, for Nigel rediscovered his customary sexual impertinence and asked Melanie directly: 'What is it then? What is this *crimson joy*?'

Melanie flushed. And knowing they were all watching her face, she flushed some more.

But she recovered her teacherly self and changed the subject, a little. 'What's the difference,' she said, 'between *found* and *found out*?'

Cleverly, she nudged them into another small unnoticed detail.

Rebecca remembers thinking to herself that the bed of crimson joy was private. Just too private to come into the open during an A Level English class. The only place where such an image could be allowed to exist and have meaning was *inside the poem*.

Melanie Bloom – in spite of her openness with her A Level students – was *not* going to say the word 'vagina'.

She did, however, stick with her theme. She reminded them of the last verse of 'London'.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear

How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

And by the end of that lesson, Melanie Bloom's A Level students understood with a new and intense clarity what a *youthful Harlot* is, why she does not want to find herself pregnant, how marriages are blighted by her, and why the poem ends with the word *hearse*.

Privately, Rebecca experiences 'The Sick Rose' in a warm dark place, like hiding under tented bed-clothes. Inside the poem, she can *hear* its passion, its rage, its pity. And she can *see* the colouring of the infected bloom, and *touch* the satin tenderness of the petals. *I don't simply* ***read*** *this poem,* she thinks. 'Reading' is not adequate for such a choreographed and complex dance of images and thoughts.

She thinks unexpectedly of Nigel Wayward, the boy virgin, who knows almost nothing.

*

Not all the poems are like this. She thinks of one that's performative and public. Reading 'A Little Girl Lost' is very different, it's as if she's one of a large crowd, all young like herself. An audience listening attentively to William Blake.

There's nothing intimate or private in this, nothing *whispered*. Nor is he declaiming, he's just explaining, in firm clear words to incredulous future generations. He's talking to her, to Jess, and Nigel, and Melanie Bloom even. Teenagers, students, young lovers everywhere.

He's talking to *us*.

Now.

Children of the future Age
Reading this indignant page;
Know that in a former time

Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime.

Then he tells a love-story, a simple account of a boy and a girl discovering sexual happiness – until she tells her father about it.

To her father white
Came the maiden bright:
But his loving look,
Like the holy book,
All her tender limbs with terror shook.

*

Then there's the 'Laughing Song', which they all thought was embarrassingly foolish and silly. Childish, even.

When the meadows laugh with lively green
And the grasshopper laughs in the merry scene.
When Mary and Susan and Emily
With their sweet round mouths sing Ha, Ha, He.

They couldn't keep straight faces. Melanie admonished them, of course, though she was laughing too.

'Remember,' she said, 'this is a poem for very little children. Almost a nursery rhyme.'

But still they mocked.

Jess said, 'But what have we been doing for the last few minutes?'

A brief pause in their merriment.

'What have we all been doing?' she said again.

'*Laughing*,' someone said.

'Exactly.'

Nigel is almost a teaching-aid in some of the classes.

Ah Sunflower! weary of time.
Who countest the steps of the Sun:
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travellers journey is done.

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:
Arise from their graves and aspire

Where my Sunflower wishes to go.

'That's what will happen to you, Nigel,' someone said, 'if you don't get a girlfriend soon.'

'What?' Nigel demanded.

'You'll pine away with desire, that's what!'

'And all the time,' someone else said, 'there might be a needy virgin in the next street, pining away unnecessarily.'

Ruby Miller lives in the next street – but she was having none of this. 'I'm not pining for anyone,' she said sharply, rolling her eyes. 'Especially Nigel!'

Laughter again. And Melanie Bloom – the youngest and least experienced teacher in the school – had the good sense to allow it, because she saw how it enabled understanding, and provided a measure of protection at the same time.

But when Rebecca reads the poem alone, in private, her eyes prickle with tears, always. In those eight simple lines, she thinks, Blake has loaded whole volumes of human unhappiness, deprivation, frustration, self-denial.

She knows that one particular word triggers her tears. It's the word *my* in the last line that does it, defying analysis. She doesn't know why.

Behind the kitchen at Cuckoo Farm there's a stand of five or six sunflowers. Every year, Naomi buys a packet of seeds. The tall kind, with each huge bloom turning slowly as the sun moves across the sky.

Ah! My sunflower!

*

Melanie Bloom believed that for every literary text there is a pure academic reading. She was always going on about it. It was her role to seek it out, and approach it as closely as possible, taking her students with her. They'd absorbed this: they knew they should aim for a clean intellectual grasp of what a poem says. What it *means*.

Small variations and doubts are permitted, but nothing that obscures or distorts the *pure definitive reading*.

Not even the illustrations.

Rebecca was bemused by this. She'd found no such definitive version of any of the *Songs*. Her readings were different every time!

Once, she tried to confront this difficulty in class.

Melanie had said that reading should be a straightforward binary act, a reader face-to-face with the words of the text. Just that. The poem provides a meaning and the reader brings intelligence, reflection, and understanding. If you allow anything to get in the way of that exchange, the result will be irrelevance and distortion.

'Those sunflowers you have at home,' Melanie had said, 'have *no bearing on the poem*.'

But Rebecca disagreed. She didn't believe there was a single definitive reading of each of the *Songs*. Those sunflowers back at the Farm were part of her reading.

She recounted an incident that had happened when she and Jessica were in the top junior class at Codling Green. They were ten or eleven. Miss Bassett was planning to send her class to spend an afternoon with the pre-readers in the infants. She did this every year, and it was always a bit of an occasion.

In preparation, she'd sent her class into the library to find the picturebooks they remembered enjoying when they were infants. They could also bring their favourites from home. There was a lot of excited chatter and laughing as they rediscovered the picturebooks they had liked when they were little.

But one of the boys began to cry. Tony Weston – a big brave boy who ruled over the rights and wrongs of the playground – had rediscovered a book that was his favourite when he was about five. It was called *Merry Days*, by Anthony Crabtree. Rebecca remembers it. It was the story – with minimal text, multiple pictures – of a little boy and his happy sunny holidays at his grandmother's house in the country.

But in the final picture the grandmother was not there. And the little boy was shown, staring blankly at a cake that he'd helped her

to bake the previous day. But the words of the story said nothing about dying, or death.

There was just that picture.

So Tony Weston was taken by surprise. He was unexpectedly and helplessly in tears. The class went quiet, and everyone paid attention while Miss Bassett patiently encouraged him to explain. He'd loved *Merry Days* when he was little, he told them, it was his favourite book. He'd not given much thought to the much-loved grandmother's absence from the final illustration.

But a year or so ago, he tells them, his favourite uncle had died.

'That,' he said, 'was what made me cry.'

'Why are you telling us this?' Melanie asked Rebecca.

'The story didn't make that little boy cry when he read it at the age of five.'

'And . . ?'

'Well . . . The second time he came across it, he was ten. The story hadn't changed, the pictures hadn't changed. A text remains what it is, every time it's read. *But readers do change*. They change all the time. There was no pure definitive reading for Tony Weston. He read the book with a five-year-old's understanding – then he later read it as a ten-year-old who'd experienced a family death.'

'But they were just kids,' someone said.

And Rebecca's point was lost.

Only Jessica understood. They talked about it later.

She wishes she could talk to Jess *now*, and every day. But she's away, in Durham. Unavailable.

*

The Divine Image

. . . For Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
Is God our father dear:
And Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
Is Man his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face:
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine
Love Mercy Pity Peace.

This is the school hymn, sung in assembly on the first and last day of term, and on Speech days. It's sung to the tune of *There is a green hill far away*. Rebecca had always loved it, long before she knew anything about Blake. But then she noticed that the school hymn omitted the final verse, and she was outraged.

And all must love the human form
In heathen, turk, or jew,
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.

The school has links with one of the many churches in Norwich, and Rebecca understood that at some stage in the past this uncompromising stanza had been too much for the governing authorities to endorse.

So they left it out.

There is a School Council, more or less democratic. It has ten elected members, all sixthformers, and everyone has a vote. The teaching staff, the dinner ladies, all the way down to the tiniest ten-

year-old fresh from primary school, can submit a complaint or a proposal for consideration at the next meeting.

And it works. Many of the suggestions are unrealistic, even foolish. Rebecca recalls one of the youngest pupils in the school who'd proposed that, to relieve overcrowding on the school buses, the girls should all sit on the boys' laps. All proposals are considered but only some are acted on.

Rebecca raised with the Council the issue of the school hymn. She was invited to attend the meeting, and she explained with some passion how shameful it was that Blake's final verse – with its unequivocally benevolent and inclusive meaning – should have been excluded.

After some discussion Mrs Marston, the headmistress, asked a question: 'Blake believes that non-Christians are as capable of Mercy and Pity, etcetera, as Christians?'

'Yes.'

'And that *all* human beings have a touch of God in them?'

'Yes.'

'I have to confess,' Mrs Marston said, 'that I was unaware of this missing verse. And it does raise some issues. For example, I can tell you that we have around forty Jewish pupils in the school. No Turks, as far as I know.'

It seemed to Rebecca, for several minutes, that she was going to carry her point. No one spoke against her.

But Mrs Marston had a right of veto.

'The word *heathen* troubles me,' she said. 'Whatever connotations it might have had in Blake's time, today it is associated in many people's minds – quite *wrongly,* I know – with African natives indulging in barbaric practices of one kind or another.'

They waited.

'We have seven children in school whose families are West Indian. They are black, almost certainly with an African ancestry. There will be more.'

Rebecca had not considered this.

'How will those seven children feel when they are expected to sing the word *heathen*? And what will all the others do with that

word? What unkind use might they put it to? I'm sorry, Rebecca, but – whatever William Blake intended – it is no longer an innocent word, if it ever was. I cannot countenance its inclusion in the school hymn.'

Mrs Marston did not have to veto the proposal. Rebecca withdrew it.

So much for Melanie Bloom's single perfect reading, she thought. *A single word can lose its innocence. Let alone a poem.*

*

Jessica is home for the long summer vacation.

Sometimes her father asks her to deliver a parcel of printing to a customer in Norwich. And sometimes Rebecca goes with her. They've done that since they were around twelve.

As they cycle slowly along Unthank Road one Saturday morning, Jess says: 'Your copper plates. What was the name of that expert some of them were sent to?'

'Sir Godfrey Masters,' Rebecca says, remembering instantly. He has become a man of myth in her mind, unknowable, powerful. A resolute and implacable judge. She imagines him sternly speaking to her. *These engravings are well done. But they're* ***not*** *by William Blake.*

Jess stops, dismounts, takes the parcel from the basket on her handlebars, and shows it to Rebecca. '***250 Parish Magazines***' **i**s written on the package, in black crayon. And then '***Sir Godfrey Masters***', and an address.

'It's a small cul-de-sac off this road,' Jess says. 'He lives there.'

'Sir Godfrey lives in Norwich?' Rebecca can't believe it! She does not believe in fate, or significant coincidences, or that random facts are in some way full of meaning. Nevertheless, she feels an immense and irrational surge of excitement that three of her plates have been here, in Norwich, a few miles away from where she lives, all this time!

'I recognised the name,' Jess explains.

They cycle on, and into a side-road, gravelled and private. It's a big house, rather grand in fact, with a porticoed front door. Jess has been here before, with parcels of Parish Magazines. Rebecca watches as she tugs at the doorbell, hands over the parcel to a maid, and returns to her bike.

She considers this situation for a few days, then makes a decision. She does not want an encounter with another angry and deeply unpleasant man. But, she tells herself, that's unlikely to happen twice. *In any case, I'll be on my guard this time*.

A few days later, she's there again, alone this time, pulling at the bell, and the moment the door is opened she knows everything will be fine. It's not the housemaid this time, it's a nice-looking well-dressed woman in late middle-age. She has a kindly, almost grandmotherly, look about her. *Is she Lady Godfrey?*

'Hello?'

'My name is Rebecca Haughton.'

The woman frowns. 'I'm sorry, I don't recognise your name,' she says. 'I'm afraid you'll have to explain . . .'

Three minutes later, Rebecca is facing Sir Godfrey across a huge pedestal desk, in his library. He is wary, a little guarded, taken by surprise. She apologises for interrupting him.

'None of the people at the Fitzwilliam told me how young you are,' he says.

'I'm eighteen.' She's not apologetic about that, or defensive. Just stating a fact. 'Nearly nineteen.

He invites her to sit down, which she does, facing him across the desk.

'I am very interested to meet you, Miss Haughton. But there are one or two things I need to say. First, is it true that you're the owner of this newly-discovered set of plates, purportedly by William Blake?'

'Yes, I am.'

'I understand it is a complete set?'

'It is.'

'May I ask how you come to possess them?'

'I bought them.'

He raises his brows in mild surprise. But he accepts her answer.

'I have to make it clear at once,' he says, 'that if you've come in the hope of talking to me about the plates . . .'

She's appalled at the very idea. Her sense of innocence is outraged.

Perhaps he sees this in her, for he continues before she can speak.

'So if we're going to talk, we must agree to some rules,' he says. 'Well, *one* rule.'

'What is it?'

'I've been asked to examine three of the plates and give my opinion as to their genuineness. So the rule is that you must not ask me about that.'

'I didn't come here to do that,' Rebecca says. She doesn't want him to think she's angry, or insulted. She is beginning to sense the truth of this man, and she sees already that he likes straightforward statements, and is prepared to take them at face value.

'And I'd prefer you not to tell me where and how you came across the plates.'

'I agree to that too,' she says, '– but I don't understand why it should be a rule.'

'It's not a rule that has any bibliographical authority. It's *my* rule. I've been asked to authenticate many objects – and usually they've been found in the backroom of some recently deceased art collector, in an obscure and dusty box. Or among some neglected papers which have been in a family for generations, in a long-forgotten archive, in some multi-millionaire's library perhaps.'

'I still don't understand.'

'Well, you see, I think I've become a bit of a snob. I mean, if it turns out that that is *not* how these were discovered – if, for example, you found them stuffed in newsprint at the back of a toilet – I might be influenced by that. Not consciously of course, and I would try to resist such an inclination.'

'OK. I won't mention it.'

She finds him rather endearing.

'Let me show you something,' he says.

From a drawer in his desk he takes a single illustration and places it carefully on the desk, facing her. There are five verses of poetry in small hand-coloured script, and at the bottom a tail-piece – a long coiling serpent, with three young children astride and seated, naked, a girl and two smaller boys. The girl is closest to the serpent's head and is holding the reins. The huge curling monster is content to allow her to control it.

'That's from *The Book of Thel*,' Rebecca says at once.

'You recognise it!' He's surprised.

'Yes, it's one of my favourites.'

'Have you read it?'

'Yes,' she says. 'But I don't entirely understand it, and I've only seen the illustrations in black-and-white.'

'This is an original print. By Blake himself. It's been trimmed by someone, and mounted on a stretcher. I've just authenticated it. It was probably sold at his premises, by him or perhaps Mrs Blake.'

She is wondering why he's showing her this.

'It was found tucked inside an eighteenth-century work of fiction about courtesans, a work that is explicitly and outrageously obscene. It had been in very bad company and I found it quite difficult to be fair to it. But I managed to overcome my prejudices.'

He's laughing at himself, she thinks. *Admitting his own snobberies.*

'I didn't find my plates in a toilet,' she says.

'Why is this illustration one of your favourites?' he says.

'Because that's what children should be allowed to do,' she says. 'Go a bit wild and take risks. Even though everything in the world is bigger and stronger than they are. And dangerous.'

Rebecca knows about danger. And she's known about a child's need to be quickly and physically decisive, since she was ten.

'That serpent could destroy those children with one twist of its tail.'

'Yes. But the children are fearless and trusting. They'll probably be OK.'

She changes the subject at that point. Something has been bothering her and she needs to settle it. 'I've never met a *Sir* before,'

she says. 'How should I address you?'

'Most people call me *Sir Godfrey*, or just plain *Sir*. Old friends call me Godfrey.'

'What about your wife?'

'Oh, she calls me all manner of things.'

He's teasing her again, he knows that's not what she meant.

'She's *Lady Alice*,' he says. 'She's a *Lady* in her own right, not just because she's married to me.'

'Why . . ?'

'Services to medical science.'

As if on cue, Lady Alice arrives with a tray of tea-things, followed by a young woman, grinning, with a plate of angel-cakes.

'This is Marilyn,' Sir Godfrey explains. 'She's my assistant.'

Marilyn and Rebecca smile and nod in acknowledgement of each other.

'Her work is not restricted to serving cakes. She's been helping me with cataloguing. It's an enormous job but unfortunately she's leaving shortly – which is a great shame, because she's been invaluable.'

'What are you going to do?' Rebecca asks Marilyn.

'I've got a job at the British Museum,' she says. 'I am a book-conservator.'

Marilyn leaves but Lady Alice joins them for tea, and they talk. Sir Godfrey wants to know which school Rebecca went to, and why she's not applied for a university place. His wife asks her about her family life. Rebecca tells them she has no father, but it doesn't matter because she has two mothers.

They're intrigued by this, and want to know more. She answers all their questions, and in time the conversation comes back to Blake. Sir Godfrey leaves his desk and takes her on a tour of his room, opening smoothly silent manuscript drawers, taking out boxes and wrappers made of acid-free paper, in which there are original illustrations, prints, and correspondence, carefully wrapped. And books, *lots* of them.

On the wall over the mantle-shelf hangs a large William Blake colour print – an original, not a copy – which Sir Godfrey proudly

tells her he found in an antiquarian bookshop near Charing Cross Road, and bought for just ten shillings. In the recesses on either side of that there is a pair of original pencil drawings, also by Blake.

The big spacious room has an atmosphere unique to itself. It has its own light, its own smell, its own quietness, and its own sounds – *especially* the sounds, almost churchlike, or monastic. They are the voices of intelligent devotion, hushed in-drawn gasps of pleasure and admiration, the modest rustle of tissue-paper, a closed manuscript drawer softly sliding into place.

There are so many artefacts that Rebecca is bewildered.

And silenced.

'And also,' Lady Alice says, 'there's a huge amount of Blake material that Godfrey has given to the Fitzwilliam.'

'I know about that,' Rebecca says.

'I assume you've met the people who work in the Print Room?' Sir Godfrey says.

'Yes.'

'Never underestimate them,' he says. 'They are meticulous and passionate people.'

But not quite passionate enough, she thinks.

He shows her two small exquisite wood-engraved blocks. 'These are by Thomas Bewick.'

She gives an unselfconscious cry of delight and recognition.

'You know Bewick?'

'I was interested in him first. He led me to Blake.'

She's been wondering if it would be a breach of etiquette to disagree with this man, an internationally respected Blake collector. He has, several times, spoken of the artist as a highly skilled craftsman, meticulous and methodical, patient and unhurried. As if that is taken for granted.

'I don't think I see William Blake quite the way you do,' she says cautiously.

He is not affronted by her challenge, but he's taken aback.

She's returned to her chair now, and he's behind his desk again. Lady Alice is still with them.

‘Of course he was a highly skilled craftsman,’ Rebecca says. Then, carefully, she continues. ‘But I’m sure he didn’t allow caution to control his genius. He took risks and made mistakes.’

‘*Mistakes!*’

‘Well, different versions are *very* different from one another. Different colours, different pressures in the printing. One or two illustrations are even slightly lop-sided! In some, the text has been printed badly and seems to have been over-written afterwards.’

‘So?’

‘If he was so methodical and unhurried in his work, he wouldn’t have been able to endure those discrepancies.’

‘You’re saying that William Blake was *slapdash*?’

‘No!’ she says. ‘But I think he worked fast and furious, taking risks, and enjoying the fact that the results were unpredictable.’

She knows that many scholars see him meticulously working and re-working his craft, patiently trying new methods and discarding them as not good enough. Faithful always to the best traditions of his trade.

But Rebecca sees someone quite different. Hurried, passionate, trying out new mixes of colour, new methods for inking the plates, more pressure on the paper, or less. And his workshop would be a mess, as he impatiently experimented, with no two printings identical, and the hand-colouring equally unpredictable.

She knows because she has *seen* him at work. She’s been there! With Catherine calming him, steadying him, always faithful to his vision. And she’s heard the soft hiss of the acid doing its work. For only a few visionary seconds – but uncompromising and authoritative.

She’s tempted to tell Sir Godfrey about this. But she knows he would think she’s a bit mad. He’d probably lose interest, and dismiss all further thoughts of her.

However, he is not offended, or angry. ‘That was a very spirited rejection of my perfectionist view of Blake,’ he says. ‘You seem to know a lot about how such a person might be. Are *you* like that?’

‘No. But I know someone who is. If he were printing sets of books and they came out different from one another, the

discrepancies would drive him crazy. They would *physically hurt* him.'

'Your boyfriend?'

'No. Just a friend.'

'There's a question I would like to ask you,' she says. 'What happened to the plates after Blake died? I've read biographies, but no one quite seems to know.'

He considers for a moment. 'It's a good question. There were several people involved. Friends of his, younger than he was. And Mrs Blake, of course. It seems that, between them, many items – prints mostly – were sold off. Some have resurfaced and have been traced back. But there must have been many others. And there are no records of what happened to most of them.'

'That's what I thought,' she says sadly. 'I imagine stacks of old copper plates too. Including the *Songs*.'

'Yes, probably,' he says. 'Copper was expensive, so they wouldn't have been thrown away. Perhaps Catherine Blake sold them. She probably had to – there was no money.'

Rebecca has been there for more than two hours, she has probably out-stayed her welcome. So she gets up reluctantly to leave, thanks them both for the tea, and says how much she's looking forward to his final verdict.

'Am I allowed to ask you how much longer I'll have to wait?' she says.

'Only about three weeks now, probably.'

Her heart suddenly begins to race, that the long-awaited verdict will soon be on its way.

'There's one thing you haven't asked me,' he says. 'Something I would have expected you to be curious about.'

'Money?'

'Yes. You haven't asked me how much they might be worth – if, of course, they are authenticated.'

'Well,' she says. 'I have thought about it. Obviously.'

'I wouldn't be able to tell you, even if I wanted to. I am qualified to authenticate art objects, but I'm not a valuer. If your plates were to come onto the open market, the auctioneer or dealer

would have them independently authenticated again, probably. And that decision might contradict what the academics decide.'

'And then they'd decide on a valuation?'

'Yes. The academic world is separate from the commercial world. Any person wanting to sell an art object needs to understand that.'

Something hangs in the air, unsaid.

'I have a rule too,' she says.

'What is it?'

'No one's allowed to ask me what I intend to do with the plates.'

He smiles and they shake hands. As she's leaving, she says: 'I've been wondering why my friend has been delivering church magazines to your house. For several years, apparently.'

'I'm a church-warden at St Laurence's. I arrange the printing of the monthly magazine.'

'Then you probably know my friend's dad – he prints your magazines.'

'Ah, I see! I *do* know him. We get on rather well, he and I. There is something very mysterious about printing, don't you think? Whatever kind of work it is. Your friend's father understands that.'

*

Standing at the bus stop in Unthank Road, Rebecca is elated. The last two hours, she thinks, were the best time of her life! She feels she's been given a *purpose*. She's still not sure exactly what it is – but it's there, waiting for definition.

She feels authenticated.

In about three weeks Sir Godfrey will send his report to the people at the Fitzwilliam Museum Print Room. They will receive verdicts from all the bodies who'd been consulted.

But none of them would have been able to consider the plates' provenance.

As the bus pulls up at the stop, she knows what she must do. No one else can do it. And in the time it takes for the bus to reach

Stanton St. Mary's, Rebecca has composed in her head a more-or-less concise and lucid narrative of the plates, and how they might have come to be in Newcastle.

As she steps down from the bus at Codling Green and begins the walk up the lane to the Farm, she accepts the fact that this provenance is still seriously incomplete.

In her room, she writes up the story she has composed in her head, making improvements and clarifications, taking care to distinguish facts from speculation. She quotes, and provides references for each. She reads it through and feels pleased with it. But nothing can disguise its weakness: she can demonstrate that the plates were in Newcastle for around 130 years, and she can show who is likely to have taken them there. She can plausibly speculate upon how they were transported, and how they came to remain there, unseen and forgotten, for all that time.

But that's where certainty and assuredness stop: she can't explain how they came to pass out of William Blake's hands – or, more likely, Catherine's hands, after his death – into the possession of a printer called Joshua Whetstone, who decided soon afterwards to move his business to Newcastle.

She types up a neat copy.

By the time she goes downstairs to join the others for supper, she's decided that more research has to be done. *I need to go to London*, she thinks. This is the first time for many weeks that she's had a precisely defined purpose. She feels fired and excited, suddenly bursting with energy and impatience.

The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.

*

Jessica comes to the Farm, to spend a day there. She used to do that often, when they were at school.

It's like old times. And when Jess asks Rebecca what progress has been made with the Blake plates, Rebecca hands over her account of the provenance and waits for her to read it.

Her reaction takes Rebecca by surprise.

'You haven't written anything about those small bits of paper . . .'

'What . . ?'

'Those small rectangles of paper that someone had interleaved between the plates. To stop them rubbing against one another. You haven't even mentioned them!'

– and Rebecca has to confess that the omission is deliberate. 'I was planning to keep them for myself.'

Jess stares. And Rebecca protests. 'They belong to me! I'm entitled to do what I like with them!'

'Of course you are! But *why*? They're just bits of . . . padding.'

'Come with me!'

In her room at the Farm, Rebecca takes two envelopes from a drawer, and in one of them there are eight of the small rectangles of soft paper – a bit grubby, a bit creased. They have all been torn neatly against a rule. Carefully, she lays them out on her table, and stands back for Jessica to look closely at them.

'Oh, my gosh!' Jess whispers. 'How wonderful!'

The low evening sun shining aslant into Rebecca's room has highlighted what is there. On each of the eight tiny pages there's a perfect outline of one of the plate-designs, pressed into the paper, so shallow that it's hardly visible. Turn the paper over, and the stamped image becomes an embossment. There's no ink, no colour of any kind. They are imaged in sunlight.

Rebecca explains. 'They were pressed against the surface of the copper for more than a hundred years – and in that time they must have received the imprint of the plates.'

Jess agrees. 'They've been accidentally embossed.'

'But I don't know why it happened only to these eight. There's nothing on any of the others. I've checked.'

Jess is a printer's daughter. Her father is a different kind of printer from William Blake but, still, she's grown up surrounded by the practices of a print-shop.

'I think I know,' she says. 'William and Catherine wouldn't have wasted brand-new paper for this. It was too expensive. But in any

print-shop there's paper all over the place, that's got marked, or creased. One of the sheets they used must have been a little damp – or perhaps it got damp while they were in storage. Just enough to soften the paper and receive the image.'

Rebecca can't explain to Jessica how much she loves these faint ghost-prints, which are so elusive that she can see them clearly only when the sunlight comes obliquely into her room.

'Can I see the others?'

'Yes, but there are no embossments on them.'

Nevertheless, Jessica insists on looking closely at each one, with Rebecca's magnifying-glass.

'Look!' Jess says.

'What . .?'

'See!'

On one of the others the letters **J. W** can be clearly seen, colourless, in the fabric of the paper, at the very edge.

'It's part of a watermark,' Jess tells her. 'Each paper-manufacturer had his own watermark.'

They search through the other slips of paper – and, sure enough, they find another, this one with the complete mark: **J. Whatman**. **1824**.

When these two talk about Blake, it's mostly Rebecca explaining to Jess. But this time it's the other way round: Jessica is instructing Rebecca.

'First of all,' Jess says, 'you *must* include this in your Provenance. You *have to!* You can be absolutely certain that among those Blake scholars that apparently exist all over the world, there will be one or two who know all about paper-manufacturers – what their names were, where they made their products. And they'll know what kind of paper Blake used. They probably already know what paper he used for the *Songs* – and they'll see at once that *the date is right!*'

'But it won't *prove* . . .'

'No, it won't. But it will *strengthen.* It will add to the accumulating evidence.'

Rebecca is downcast. 'I was planning to keep these for myself.'

There is an admission in those words. 'Are you going to sell the plates then?' Jess says. This subject has never been mentioned. Forbidden ground until now, deeply private.

'I haven't quite made up my mind,' Rebecca says. 'But if I do, I'll keep those slips of paper for myself.'

'Well, you can do that!' Jess says. 'If you eventually sell off the plates, that doesn't mean you're obliged to sell these too.'

'But . . .'

'Certainly, let the academics have a look at them – but make it clear that you don't intend to sell them.'

Rebecca is thinking it through.

'– And go back to your Provenance statement and add a sentence or two about the watermarks. *Now!*'

'You can be very bossy!' Rebecca says.

Jess supervises while the additional sentences get written. She provides some of the printerly vocabulary.

'Becky?'

'What?' Jessica rarely calls her *Becky*. Only when she's about to say something personal or intimate.

'Will you come to visit me in Durham? For a weekend perhaps.'

She is shy about this, and Rebecca – eagerly accepting – wonders why. She hopes she's not about to hear about a boyfriend.

'There's something there I'd like to show you.'

'What is it?'

So Jessica tells her about the university societies, especially the woodworking society, and its classes for beginners.

'There's a really lovely workshop. We meet one evening a week, but you can go there whenever you want. To work on something. Or teach yourself how to use the tools. There are always one or two others, working away on something. It's *lovely*! It really *is*! I sometimes spend a whole weekend there. I feel so – I don't know – *safe*.'

'Have you made things?'

'Yes. The first proper thing I made was a wooden mallet. Then a miniature set of bookshelves. And a few other things, including a

window-frame – which has been fitted in, and is in use. I'd love you to see . . .'

'What are you working on now?'

A short pause, for effect. Jess has always had a slight touch of the theatrical, a cover for her quietness. 'I'm building a replica of William Blake's printing press,' she declares.

Rebecca feels her face flushing and her heart racing, she doesn't know why. It's a *Glad Day* moment. But she can't express it.

'Isn't that going to be very difficult?'

'Yes, but I'm learning fast. And there's always someone around, willing to help, or give advice. I've already constructed most of the frame.'

It's clear to Rebecca that her friend has fallen in love with the workshop, and the people who go there.

'But I've seen pictures of Blake's press,' she says. 'Surely there were parts that were made of metal?'

'Yes, there were. But Tyneside is just up the road. There are engineers and metal-workers everywhere! I'll find one.'

'Could those parts be made of *wood*?'

'It would have to be a tough enduring wood. But I don't want to do that. I want it to be *strong* – a working printing press. Blake's press lasted him all his life.'

'You want to *use* it?'

'Yes. I want to use it for printing. And it won't be any good if parts of it break, or begin to work loose at the joints.'

'*Did you know . . ?'* Jess says later.

This was a game they used to play when they were at primary school. They would seek out unusual facts from an encyclopaedia. *Did you know . .?*

'Did I know *what*?'

'How William Blake etched his plates?'

'Of course I do!' Rebecca says. 'He painted his design and text on the surface with acid-resistant resin, then he plunged the plate in an acid bath.'

'No, he didn't!' Jess cries in triumph. 'That would have been a very wasteful way of using acid. *And* the acid would have eaten its

way into the under-side as well.'

'What he did he do then?'

'He would have moulded some beeswax until it was soft, and then embedded strips of this along the edges of each plate to make a tiny wax wall around it. Probably about half-an-inch high. The plate was like a tiny tray, with four wax walls. Then he poured acid into that. Just enough to do the job.'

Alone in her room later, Rebecca studies the plates. Sure enough, each has a margin, a little uneven, raised and un-etched, along all four sides. *But*, she thinks, *there are no printed margins in my facsimile copy.*

Why is that? she wonders. She resolves to ask the experts at the Fitzwilliam Museum when she next sees them.

In her room that night, she re-reads the paragraph she's added to her *Provenance* document, about the watermarks.

But she's made no reference to the accidental embossments. They're her secret. She just loves them. She feels protective, possessive.

They're like Catherine Blake, she thinks. Necessary and complete, unobtrusively making their marks, unnoticed unless you look aslant at them, sideways.

*

Infant Joy

I have no name
I am but two days old. –
What shall I call thee?

I happy am
Joy is my name. –
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old.
Sweet joy I call thee;
Thou dost smile,

I sing the while
Sweet Joy befall thee.

What is this tiny scrap of poetry about? Rebecca asks herself.

A new-born baby? Or newly-conceived perhaps?

And whose baby is it? Whose words are they? Words of welcome, greeting, naming, and finally a blessing.

For a new life.

'But *whose voice* is it?' she asks Jess one day. Who dare claim to have spoken these words, or thought them?

Is it possible that a *man* – even William Blake – could have found such images and words in himself – so tender, intimate, and feminine? It seems to Rebecca that they must have been distilled inside a woman's body.

They study the illustration, their heads together. There is a minutely-imaged baby, and an adoration scene of the mother with a winged visiting angel. They're enclosed within a womb-like flower, coloured in a deep and passionate red.

The design is beautiful beyond words. But there's nothing masculine in either the Song or its illustration. *There's nothing **male** anywhere!*

Again Rebecca thinks of Catherine – and it occurs to her that it was probably she who did the colouring. Perhaps the design too. And her heart leaps – for she conceives the idea that perhaps they are *Catherine's words*. William might have taken them from her – strung like tiny beads on invisible lace, fleetingly luminous between them. And he caught them somehow, quickly, in a moment so transient, so intimate and secret that her very voice, and her motherly joy, were captured too.

'How different this is from 'The Tyger',' she says to Jessica – which she thinks of as a long unanswered question from beginning to end, served by the thumping drumbeat of its rhythm.

When *the* ***stars*** *threw* ***down*** *their* ***spears***

*And **wat**er'd **heaven** with their **tears**:*
***Did** he **smile** his **work** to **see**?*
*Did **he** who **made** the **Lamb** make **thee**?*

This is unrelenting, aggressively challenging the whole of Creation. Implacably masculine.

They turn to another of the *Songs*, 'The Blossom'. And it occurs to Rebecca that Catherine might have written this one too. Both poems are uncompromisingly feminine. Or perhaps she and William shared an emotional intimacy so close and so volatile that he could live in her thoughts, and she in his. Briefly perhaps, for just a few moments.

But there are mysteries in this one: why is there *sobbing* in the second verse?

And the speaker seems to be a blossom, in a hedgerow?

Then suddenly, she understands. These too are a woman's words, a mother's words. They have come out of Catherine, out of her heart, her belly, her womb.

The poems are a pair.

Had there been a miscarriage? Rebecca finds herself unexpectedly shaking. Perhaps Catherine had conceived a baby that died before it lived. She knows this happens to thousands of mothers.

She imagines Catherine's thoughts darting like small secret birds in a hedge, from her to William, the two of them, sorrowful, grieving. And they'd found between them an elusive word-melody, and the faltering beat of a dying baby's heart.

The Blossom

Merry Merry Sparrow

Under leaves so green

A happy Blossom

Sees you swift as arrow

Seek your cradle narrow
Near my Bosom.

Pretty Pretty Robin

Under leaves so green

A happy Blossom

Hears you sobbing sobbing

Pretty Pretty Robin
Near my Bosom.

Jess is not sure about this. But Rebecca knows she's right. She also knows she can't be certain, so she *doesn't* know really.

But she does, all the same.

10

Introducing Mr Myluv

On a Wednesday afternoon at their new home in Mark Street, a television is being installed.

At last!

Ever since they moved here, there's been no TV.

But Ellie isn't sharing in the general joy. Tonight Punto is due to visit, one of their most notorious clients. He's known for his drinking, and he's known to like beginners. And his visits don't last for half-an-hour or an hour, he stays all night.

Ellie is not worried by drunkenness, she was used to it at home. But she is terrified of the all-night stay. She knows Punto by reputation.

She's next in line.

While the man works on the television set, there's excitement and distraction. So no one notices when Ellie slips quietly out of the back door, down the side passage, into the street, and away.

It's the easiest thing in the world! But where should she go? In this enormous sprawling city, she has no sanctuary, no destination. And no idea where she is.

The only place in London she's familiar with is number 57. It can't be far away, it took only five minutes in the van. She'd memorised the route as they drove – the small row of shops at the end of Charter Street, a war memorial at a corner, a tall church with a spire by a cross-road.

There's a police station opposite the memorial and she briefly considers going in. But she hasn't the courage. What would she say? What would they do to her?

She finds her way safely to Charter Street, breathless and relieved. A little proud of herself, to tell the truth. Both the doors are locked. But someone has broken a window at the back of the house, and it's easy to reach in, pull the window open, and climb inside.

So far, so good.

She finds some old digestive biscuits, and a tin with a small dry ginger cake.

Back in Mark Street, Lucas is furious and – unlike her usual placid self – the Aunt is frantic.

Where is Ellie?

'That bloody girl! She's been nothing but trouble . . .'

'If we don't get her back . . .'

But the Aunt thinks she knows where Ellie might have gone. It's the only place in London she's familiar with.

Lucas doesn't take the van. He knows he wouldn't be able to drag Ellie into it in broad daylight. So he sets off on foot, unhurried, and purposeful. He's good at that. He takes with him a coil of washing-line.

This has to be stopped. Now. For good.

At number 57, he unlocks the front door and opens it.

Ellie has heard the key in the lock, and she's already escaped through the back-door in the kitchen. Lucas doesn't need to search the house. He stands for a moment, looking out into the backyard.

He knows where's she's hidden herself. A few steps take him to the outside toilet. The padlock is hanging open on a hasp fixed into the door-frame.

He opens the door. She is crouching on the seat, glaring at him.

He takes a handkerchief from one trouser pocket, and the coil of washing-line from the other.

He doesn't speak. Not a word.

He knots her wrists together behind her, tight.

She's paralysed, hurting, terrified.

He takes a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and squeezes it into a ball. He pushes it into her mouth. She clenches her teeth against it, but he forces them apart, and pulls it so tight that she cries out in pain as her mouth is stretched to its limit. Then another length of cable holds the handkerchief in place. She feels him knotting it at the back of her head. It's so tight that she chokes.

He passes the loop of the lock through the hook on the door, and snaps the padlock shut.

Lucas is not a deliberate sadist. He doesn't enjoy this. Neither does he *not* enjoy it. There is nothing in him to give him pause, nothing to put a bar on this. Nothing to make him even hesitate. There is no long-ago parental voice of conscience in his memory, saying *Stop!* He's decided to do it – so he does it, with no concern for her, no awareness, no empathy, no imagination. No thought at all.

And anyway *decided* is not quite right. He doesn't *decide* anything. He just does it.

He is stupid and cruel, *casually*.

He has promised to meet Punto at the Dragon Inn, about a mile away. Afterwards, he's supposed to bring him back to Mark Street, to spend the night with Ellie.

They pass the evening drinking, Punto uncontrolled and helpless, hardly able to remain upright at the bar, Lucas sober, watchful.

'That bint,' Punto says eventually.

'Ellie?'

'Ellie, that's the one.'

'She's not at our new place,' Lucas says.

Punto takes a long time to digest this. 'Where is she then?'

'She's back at number 57,' Lucas tells him. 'She's on her own there. You can do what you like there, and have the whole house to do it in.'

There's a lengthy pause while Punto thinks about this. Anticipating perhaps. It's more likely that he's too drunk to take it in.

'You'll need these,' Lucas tells him.

He hands him a key to the front door, and another for the padlock.

How Punto gets to number 57 is a mystery. Afterwards, it's never made clear.

All that is known is that Ellie – at some time around midnight – sees through the gap around the toilet door that the backyard is suddenly illuminated by light spilling out from the kitchen.

She assumes it's Lucas, she *wants* it to be Lucas, anything so long as she's released.

But nothing happens. The hours of the night pass, the kitchen light remains switched on, there's no sound coming from the house.

There's no one in the world. There's no one coming to let her out. No one who cares about her at all.

*

Cressida, in need of help, phones Mr B and they arrange to meet for lunch, in his apartment, near Oxford Street.

However, before she can tell him about her difficulties, he has something to say about his. He seems to want to get it done with. 'The wedding's off,' he says.

'What?'

'Bradley – she's pulled out.'

She waits for him to tell her about it in his own way. Emotionally clumsy, verbally succinct: when he'd mentioned children to Bradley, she'd looked alarmed. She didn't plan to have children, she said. She was definitely *not* going to have children. And him? Somehow, he'd never made clear to her that having children was his main desire.

They were outraged with each other. 'You just want a breeding cow!' she'd said. This comment appalled him.

'I've always wanted a daughter,' he tells Cressida. '*You* know that. Or a son.'

She could have said *But you have me!* And it's true, she told him when she was sixteen that she'd chosen him to be her adoptive father. He'd loved that, he'd been deeply moved.

But they both know it's not the same. That was a game, an agreeable pretence. It meant something – but not that they were father and daughter.

Cressida's immediate feeling when he tells her he's not going to marry Bradley is a wicked joy – followed by a deep and sincere sadness for him, that his lifelong desire is probably not going to be realised. Two contradictory emotions, not warring with one another, each accommodating the other.

He changes the subject. 'Tell me about your child-trafficking case. Is there a problem?'

Successes, mistakes, and strokes of luck. All investigations are composed of those three, he'd once told her. Often *bad* luck, sometimes catastrophic.

Cressida's situation was almost catastrophic: she'd located her missing person – and then lost her.

He makes her list everything she can be sure about.

'Well . . .' she says.

There *are* certainties, but they're all shadowed by uncertainty.

She knows now that 57 Charter Street is a place where young girls were taken to be turned into prostitutes. She herself has met one of the clients who'd gone there, hoping for sex. But she doesn't know if the girls were physically forced to go there.

She knows that, once part of the group, they would have been encouraged to watch what went on, at a see-through mirror.

She also knows there is an unknown man who's been seen in Charter Street. Strangely, he has also met Rebecca, twice – at an auction in Newcastle, and later when he visited her in Norfolk. So what is *his* connection with Charter Street? This is the biggest uncertainty – she can make no sense of it.

'And I also know they've abandoned the house and left – probably to a place a few streets away. *But I can't find it*. And I don't know where to look.'

'You *have* to find it. You won't be able to make any progress until you do.'

Cressida sighs. 'I had located the girl – and now I've lost her. And I have no leads. I'm not much of an investigator, am I?'

'Would you like me to help?'

'I would like some advice.'

'Go on.'

'There's something else,' she says. 'It's not part of the Ellie job – but it's crept up on me. It's connected, and I don't understand it.'

And she tells him, stumbling over her words in a way she never normally does, how Ellie had hinted once that her father did things to her little brother. But *what* things? *What* had she meant? And why had two young boys been taken away in the van? She suspects

something awful, but doesn't know what it can be. It is – literally – unthinkable. And therefore unspeakable.

He chooses his words carefully. 'I don't understand it myself. At least, I do understand what goes on. I *think* I know that, more or less. But I can't understand why they . . . It's beyond my grasp. Entirely beyond my comprehension.'

Again, he's caught up in his own inability to explain.

'But I can tell you this. The police won't be interested. It's beyond their understanding, beyond their remit.'

Beyond all knowing? she wonders.

'They will see it as a *domestic* issue,' he says.

She tells him she has evidence that two little boys had been brought to the house in Charter Street. This fact links itself with what Ellie had said, when they briefly spoke to her – *How's my little brother?* she'd said. *I suppose my Dad is still . .?* Something like that, a question left unfinished. Hinting at more than it asked.

He manages to tell her what the little boys are probably made to do. She stares at him in disbelief, disgusted, outraged.

She's frustrated by a total inability to *comprehend emotionally* that boys should be in this scenario at all. Teenage girls? Just as bad, but understandable. But *little boys*! *Little girls* too, perhaps? There is insufficient knowledge in her head to shape a context for this shadowy and repellent thing. So her reaction is visceral, not conceptual. It's located in her gut.

This is what happens to the general understanding if natural private sexual reticence is allowed through the generations to harden into rigid social taboos.

'Is this widespread?' she says in hardly more than a whisper.

'I don't know. There's no way of knowing.'

'Surely it's a crime?'

'I don't know of any cases,' he tells her sadly.

In fiction, and in fact, crime is often organised. There's a hierarchy of command, with a master criminal at the top. He (it's usually a man) is super-intelligent, coldly considering all outcomes and risks, and ruthless in disposing of anyone who stands in his way. He might be a genius – but there's only one of him. So what an

investigator has to do is find him, and get him locked up. That is usually an almost impossible task – but if you succeed, the whole criminal edifice will probably be exposed, and all its intricacies of power, will – if you're lucky – fall open to scrutiny.

And there are, Mr B tells her, such organised groups. National, perhaps even international. Certainly regional, in towns and cities. He doesn't tell her how he knows this.

But Cressida is beginning to understand that's only a part of the story. She's been working at Mr Zeppelin's agency long enough to have learnt that his cases are hardly ever connected with organised power structures. Most of the perpetrators are unfaithful husbands, or small-time fraudsters. They have no bosses, no organisers, no networks – which means there's no criminal trail that an investigator can latch onto, and track to its source. The bad people do what they do privately, out there somewhere in a nationwide darkness, telling no one.

There's no mastermind in charge of Ellie's father. Perpetrators like him are solitary, hidden away in remote domestic corners, and with no sense of belonging to a community. So it can't be destroyed by plucking out the super-boss. There isn't one. If you managed to dispose of a few of them, the rest would just breathe on quietly in the dark, until it was safe for them to resume.

'I'm sure you're right about Mr Bassett. He is almost certainly on his own. As are many others. Thousands of them, probably.'

'He doesn't have a boss,' Cressida says, 'but there is a system of sorts, and some kind of co-ordinator operates it – the man he handed his daughters to – or woman.'

Mr B has never investigated any such thing, and he admits he wouldn't know how to do it, if asked. 'There would be all kinds of difficulties,' he says. 'Obstruction – *official* obstruction even.'

He dislikes talking about this, she senses. It upsets him.

'They swop photos,' he tells her.

But he reminds her of *her* situation. He points out that her investigation should be entirely focused on Ellie. That's what she's undertaken to do. 'Find the girl. You should concentrate on that. And if you find she was trafficked, *that* is a crime – and you'll have to

report it. And if you can prove that she was forced to take part in under-age sexual activities, that's a crime as well.'

'Even just watching?'

'Absolutely it is.'

'But what about those little boys?'

'They're not part of your enquiry,' he says.

They speak in low voices now. Almost whispering. As if *they* are part of a conspiracy.

'But it is a crime, it *must* be a crime! And if I stumble on one crime while investigating a different one, surely I have to report it.'

But he's doubtful. 'The police are very busy,' he says. 'And under-staffed. You should define for yourself your immediate difficulty. What must you do next?'

He's insistent, rounding up her scattered thoughts, corralling the chaotic issues rampaging around in her head. 'You have *no concrete evidence*.'

Finally she concedes. 'I must find out where they've taken Ellie.'

'Yes,' he says. 'Concentrate on that.'

*

Afterwards, Cressida walks slowly through the afternoon crowds in Oxford Street and finds a small public garden on the edge of Soho. Mr B. had given her a book which he said might be helpful. It's a book of pictures. He apparently knows the photographer, and he suggested she should get in touch with him. He's called Myluv.

'*Myluv?* You must be joking.'

'Mortimer Myluv. His patch is the south bank of the river, mainly Southwark and Lambeth, and as far east as Rotherhithe. There's not much going on there that he doesn't know about.'

Sitting in the sun, Cressida takes out the book. It's a collection of fifty black-and-white photographs, urban, taken at night. It's called *Chartered Streets*. Since Rebecca showed her the William Blake plates, Cressida has made it her business to familiarise herself with the *Songs*. So she recognises the quotation.

There is an epigraph on one of the prelim pages. It makes the connection clear:

> *I wander thro' each charter'd street,*
> *Near where the charter'd Thames does flow*
> *And mark in every face I meet*
> *Marks of weakness, marks of woe.*

The quotation declares a theme and defines an approach to it.

People and streets. Woe and weakness.

The contents of the book make no further reference to Blake. There are no other words at all, not even captions. Just fifty black-and-white photos.

All the pictures are dark, with blocks and sloping shafts of shadow, with sometimes just one fading source of hopeless light – a single lit window, a half-opened door, or a pale despairing streetlamp in the distance.

There are human figures in the obscurities of line and shadow. They are not *in* the dark, they are part of it. But there's no-one posing, these are not models. In one, an indeterminate figure is lighting a cigarette; in another someone is bending to adjust a shoe, or pick up a fallen coin; another has a woman with both legs wrapped round the man who is holding her weight, their faces hidden in shadows. There's no way of knowing whether this is the snatched and desperate relief of an urgent passionate need, or a brief money transaction duly made and completed without regard for witnesses. The darkness provides only a meagre privacy. There's a child nearby, squatting on a doorstep, not interested, staring out of the picture.

There are few planes or corners to give the viewer a grasp, no horizons, no sky. Perspectives recede into an impenetrable gloom. In one, there's an empty street, curving away into the dark, with a solitary distant streetlamp. The paving is wet, there are puddles, a tall brick wall is slicked and gleaming with rain. There are railway viaducts crossing streets, lofty and dark, soaring over roofs and chimney-stacks. There's an upward perspective, a wall of blank

windows. One of them is open, with a figure barely visible, looking out.

A man? A woman? A child? Was someone expecting a visitor? Anticipating? Scared? Indifferent?

In one heart-breaking picture there's a little girl running, alone in a long dark alley curving away behind her, her face wide open in a grimace of grief, or terror. In another, there is a young boy intimately close to a man, imperfectly lit by a streetlamp. Just blocks of darkness, with human form. The man's face is lowered, looking down at the boy. There is a woman in close-up, watching, her skin like a leather purse, her expression implacable.

On one of the final pages there's an extra, with no number and no caption. A country landscape, with a village huddled alongside a medieval castle, with battlements, turrets, and a tower with a flagstaff silhouetted in black against a distant flat horizon.

Cressida eventually sees the connection. Mr B must have seen it too. It's a photograph of a long straight street, with identical front doors opening directly onto the pavement. It's unlike the others because there are no people. There are dustbins standing out, a faraway cat gazing up at one of them, boot-scrapers projecting onto the pavement, two parked cars and a lorry. These are all signs. If they could be deciphered, you could read a thousand lives.

At the far end, a distant road crosses at a T-junction. There's a street-sign, faintly lit. It's tiny in the far distance, but she can just read part of it: *Charter St . . .*

*

According to Mr B, Mortimer Myluv is a strange shadowy figure.

No one knows where he lives, he doesn't seem to have a family. Or friends. He frequents the pubs along the south bank of the Thames, and one particular pub on Saturday nights. *The Purple Anchor*.

Afterwards, he goes out with his camera.

'He's best described in negatives,' Mr Brackendale told her.

He never takes off his scarf.

He never answers a question.

He doesn't speak to the people he photographs.

They never object. Even dangerous gangsters tolerate him.

He never takes full frontal portraits, faces are mostly obscured or turned away.

He's never been seen in daylight.

He never sells his pictures to newspapers or magazines.

He never leaves London.

In pubs, he never orders; the pub staff know what he likes.

Mr B warned her not to seek him out on her own. He never speaks to women.

'In fact,' Mr B said, 'he hardly ever speaks at all.'

'If he won't speak, how can he help me?'

'It's worth a try.'

'Is he dangerous?'

'Probably not. But the people he sometimes mixes with . . . '

Mr B tells her about one young private detective who tailed Mortimer Myluv all night, hoping to find out where he lived. He followed him until the small hours, when he disappeared inside what looked like an office block. The investigator waited outside until daylight, and all through the morning. There was no sign of his quarry, but at around midday he was approached by two heavies.

'Did they hurt him?'

'No. But they spoke to him. He left at once – and nothing would tempt him to try again.'

'I need to find this Mr Myluv,' Cressida says.

'Take someone with you.'

'Are you offering?'

'Not me. I owe him favours, he owes me none. Better to find someone else – someone younger, who is *not* a private detective. And someone he doesn't know.'

Who can she turn to? One of her colleagues from Mr Zeppelin's agency? But no, he'd forbidden her to make use of them.

Rebecca? Unreliable! In anything involving Mr Newcastle-Man, she can't be trusted.

Patrick then?

Yes! Patrick. Why not?

She's been so preoccupied that she's almost forgotten she's sitting on a bench in a small public garden, in Soho, with life around her, charged with energy, and summertime. It dazzles her slightly, as if she's just emerged from a dark cave, containing an entire city. A chimney-sweeper's van drives by; the strapline on the side says *Keeping the Nation's Chimneys Healthy*.

Ridiculous! she thinks, and cheers up.

She wastes no time. She finds the nearest post office and sends a telegram. She has his army address. She's never written him a letter, but she carries the address in her diary, everywhere.

Then she goes home and waits.

*

Naomi and Olivia live in the same house and share much of their lives. But months sometimes pass by in which nothing they say to each other goes beyond the commonplace. But from time to time they feel the need to be alone, just the two of them. Then amazing things get said, shared, laughed about. They have few secrets from each other.

They've been talking for more than an hour, two sisters in middle age, on a shopping expedition, tired now, and sitting on a bench in the precincts of Norwich Cathedral. They've been discussing knitting patterns, and then – with no change of tone and no sense of the inconsequential – Olivia changes the subject, and says: 'Are you going ahead with the fostering?'

It wouldn't be possible to say exactly when Naomi stopped being undecided. But at some point that summer, her eager enthusiasm has turned itself into a fixed and determined purpose.

So she'd checked the twenty or so empty rooms that Zoe had identified. She selected two, and asked a local builder and decorator what it would cost to paint, re-plaster, and generally up-date them.

'You'll need to replace those windows,' he tells her.

'The wiring will be ropy too, probably unsafe.'

‘And there’s damp in that ceiling, so the roof probably needs re-tiling.’

The old furniture would have to be replaced. And a new toilet would have to be installed, if not an entire bathroom.

But where could she find the money for such changes? She’s not had a job since the War. Her work has been the running of the household. It has always paid its way – just – but with little to spare. Olivia has a job and a salary, their sister Jan too, when she was living there. But not Naomi. She has a Post Office savings account with around £10.00 in it, for Christmas and birthday presents.

Edward suggested she should turn Cuckoo Farm into a business, pay herself a proper salary, and borrow from the bank for necessary improvements.

But no, she wouldn’t do that. ‘The whole point is to take these children into a *family*, not a business.’

She knows there’ll be an allowance for any fostered children, but it won’t amount to much. And it won’t start until the children have arrived – she can’t borrow on the strength of it. The rate for the third and subsequent children was recently increased to ten shillings a week. The payments continue until the children leave school.

She is reassured by this provision. But she’s not under any illusions. And she wakes every morning with a sense of energy and excitement, ready for a new day and new possibilities.

So she’s been expecting her sister’s question. ‘Yes and no,’ she says. ‘I’ve made up my mind. I’m *not* going to get the builders in – because I can’t raise the money. So I’m going to offer to foster just two children. *Now, straightaway!* Re-building will have to wait.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. There are two spare empty rooms, next-door to each other. I’m going to re-paint them myself, next week. Rebecca and Zoe are going to help. Rebecca needs something to occupy herself. The furniture is old, but perfectly serviceable – except those ex-army metal bedsteads.’

‘I remember them,’ Olivia says. ‘Dad bought them after World War I.’

'Well, I'm going to find the money somewhere to buy a couple of new ones.'

'You were talking of having a new toilet put in.'

'It's not necessary, just for two extra people. There's that bathroom, the big one. Just along the passage. The plumbing is ancient, but it's still functioning. Cressida told me she loved it when she first came to the Farm.'

Olivia sees her sister's face – beautiful, delicately wrinkled, and soft. But it suddenly hardens into something bleak, very slightly haggard, as if she's mentally changing gear, and preparing for a stiff uphill effort. 'This is not really what I wanted!' she says, her meaning clear, her frustration suppressed and cramped into a fierce miserable whisper.

She leans towards Olivia. 'There are women coming forward,' she says, 'telling how their babies were forcibly taken away when they were too young, or too exhausted, to come to a considered decision. It's *appalling*! They were given no choice, they were abused and shamed and humiliated. *And it's still happening! In Mother and Baby Homes, now! In 1962!* Every year, there are illegitimate and unwanted babies handed over to religious agencies for adoption or fostering.'

'Adoption?'

'I'm too old to adopt. I don't mind that, I accept it – and I hope there *are* changes. They are needed. But there's a government enquiry going on right now, and new regulations are certain to come in. If I delay, they might put an age-limit on fostering too. So it's a reminder that I can't hang about.'

'So what is upsetting you – *precisely*?'

'I am offering myself as a foster-parent . . .'

Olivia corrects her. 'You're offering *all of us* . . .'

'Yes, that's true. I've offered to take two children in need of a home and a family.'

'So . . .?'

'Don't you see? Just *two*! We have space at Cuckoo Farm for *twenty*!'

Olivia draws breath for a reply – but she's forestalled by Naomi. 'Yes, I *know*! I *know*! I realise I could never cope with twenty kids. It would be like a small school! But I *could* manage nine or ten.'

'So many?'

'Yes. A proper foster-home – with some that stay until they're grown up, and some who get adopted and leave, children coming and going.'

'That would change everything,' Olivia says.

'Well, it won't! Because I can't do it!'

'Because you haven't got the money?'

'There are those two rooms that I can get ready now – but *there aren't ten, let alone twenty*. There would have to be a complete re-decorating on a big scale. And I'd have to get in builders and plumbers to install at least two new bathrooms.'

'And a play-room? Or games room?'

'Yes. And ten extra children eating with us would be impossible! I'd have to find another big space. There would have to be a new dining-room, close to the kitchen. A new kitchen too, probably.'

'You would need to employ people. To help with cooking and cleaning.'

'And I'd have to buy some kind of small bus.'

Olivia remembers the old Naomi – her uncompromising certitude, her confidence in her motives and purpose.

'So I'm settling for second-best,' Naomi says.

She continues, speaking quietly. 'But it goes against the grain. There are so many unwanted unhappy kids in this country, and I have the will and capacity to take in at least ten of them. All they want is for someone to open their door and welcome them in – but I can only offer this to *two*!'

As she speaks, she opens her hands and holds them out, miming a welcome.

'I have a well-paid job,' Olivia says, 'and I've saved a good deal . . .' *And there's also Jasper's offer of a donation.*

But Naomi puts a stop to the coming offer. She can't accept a big gift of money from her sister. And she won't take a loan, because she knows she'll never pay it back.

Olivia knows that Naomi always accepts reality in the end. She'd wanted to fill the whole of Cuckoo Farm with evacuees during World War 2 – but they'd ended up with just one. But what a joy that one had been! – four-year-old Cressida, much-loved, who'd become a daughter to both of them.

So it comes as no surprise to Olivia that Naomi has already started on her second-best plan. 'I've been looking into adoption societies, and I've settled on one called the Multi-Faith Child Protection Society. I've already met the liaison officer, an absolutely *lovely* man! I've had to name two referees.'

'Who?'

'Miss Babbington. As the headmistress of the local primary school, she's eminently suitable.'

'And . . ?'

'Our GP.'

'Is that all you have to do?'

'No. The county council has recently appointed two Children's Officers. I went to County Hall and did a bit of nosing about.'

'And . . ?'

'I don't think it's seen as a very important job. One of them is only part-time, a retired midwife – well, that makes sense. But the other one's main job is supervising the county's war memorials! Being a Children's Officer was just tacked onto his current job.'

'What about Edward? Is he OK about this?'

'Yes, fully.'

Olivia knows Naomi will put everything into this new scaled-down plan. But she also knows she'll still be holding on to her bigger idea, playing for time, hoping for some way to remove the obstacles confronting her.

*

In North Wales, Patrick is marching his squad down the hill from their billet to the central Battery area. His men are close to the end of their fourteen weeks of basic training, and they're marching

easily, with confidence, in perfect unison, with that easy swing of the body which Patrick finds so deeply gratifying. The beat of their metal heels is synchronised to perfection.

The sun is shining. And it's a Friday, the last day before his final leave. After that, there'll be only a month until his demob date.

His squad is well-trained and comfortable with marching, prompt to his commands.

Left, right. Left, right. He doesn't have to keep speaking the pace, once they've started. He just has to march beside them.

Forty-eight young soldiers, marching in ranks of three. When they march well, it's like driving a big vehicle. When steering large groups of men in traffic – which he's had to do from time to time – he needs to have confidence that the squad will respond to instructions, as one, immediately and correctly.

An officer approaches, a major. Not a National Serviceman then. Patrick gives the command. *Eyes **right**!*

As forty-five left heels hit the ground, forty-four heads are snapped to the right. Simultaneously, Patrick salutes the major, who responds laconically but correctly. The lead squaddie on the right does not turn his head. His role is to keep them marching straight. If he too turned his eyes right – and marched them all into an obstacle – confusion would ensue. The army dislikes confusion, and invents proper procedures to avoid it.

*Eyes **front**!*

He steers his men past a squad of novices, newly arrived, two or three out of step, many shambling, with their berets awry and anxious troubled looks on their faces. Their lance-bombardier is embarrassed and enraged by them. But Patrick's squad is immaculate, radiating confidence.

He steers them into a space outside the NAAFI, and halts them. *Squaaad . . . **halt!*** – on the fall of their left feet.

They count a single further pace, then their forty-five right heels crash to a stop in perfect unison. If one of them is a half-second late, they will all feel a little let down.

He turns them left to face him, and stands them at ease.

*Stand at **ease**!*

‘Tea break,’ he says. ‘Back on parade in thirty minutes.’

As his men hurry into the NAAFI, Patrick goes into the Battery Office in search of his sergeant.

Sergeant Bristow is a huge shambling joke of a man – but not much of a joke if he’s your boss. Patrick suspects he was given his second stripe and promoted to full bombardier because of the skilled and tactful way he keeps his Sergeant out of trouble. His swearing is notoriously foul, even when compared with the others. His temper is vile and unpredictable. It’s not clear to Patrick whether the sergeant realises how much he’s come to depend on his young national service bombardier.

One of the clerks behind the counter waves across to Patrick. ‘There’s a telegram for you. Arrived ten minutes ago.’

Telegrams are used more frequently these days – but they still remind people of the grim messages of wartime.

NEED HELP SATURDAY IF FREE STOP URGENT REPEAT URGENT STOP CRESSIDA.

He considers a moment. That’s something else he’s learned in the army. Give yourself time to analyse the situation – and then decide what to do about it.

Staying in London to help Cressida will cost him the first couple of days of his leave. But he doesn’t mind that, there’ll be the rest of the week at Cuckoo Farm to do what he plans. But he will need to set off on Saturday earlier than expected.

Sergeant Bristow is seated with two other sergeants and the Battery Sergeant-Major. Patrick, speaking firmly, asks for permission to leave Camp at eight in the morning, instead of mid-day. He knows that Sergeant Bristow’s natural instinct is to refuse.

‘Lance-Bombardier Wilson can take over the squad for the morning.’

The Sergeant looks on the edge of one of his bursts of foul temper. But he thinks better of it. He knows he needs to keep on the right side of this smart young Bombardier – whom everyone seems to like so much. Besides, he’s overweight, marching a squad of men up and down that hill makes him breathless.

So he agrees.

At the desk, Patrick asks if he can send a telegram from there. He's given a form and composes a reply: SATURDAY NELSONS COLUMN 2PM STOP ROOM BOOKED AT UJ CLUB STOP QUERY CIVVIES OR UNIFORM.

That evening, just as the office closes for the night, another telegram arrives. One of the office clerks brings Patrick the reply to his query.

UNIFORM.

He packs his bag for a week's leave, wondering what he's let himself in for. Why does Cressida need him? Is she in some kind of trouble? Since she left home and went to work in London, he's never seen her there. And not often at Cuckoo Farm.

He finds he's looking forward to it.

*

'I think,' Olivia says carefully, 'Jasper and I are finished.'

Naomi – the only person who knows about Jasper – doesn't express concern, or surprise.

'But I don't understand it,' Olivia continues. 'What brought it on is that *he told me about his early life*!'

What for twenty years she's taken for granted now seems absurd. Bizarre! Insane even! How has this happened? How has she *allowed* it? She tries to make her sister understand, frowning her unhappiness across the inches between them, willing Naomi to see.

When she takes the train to London every Sunday evening, Olivia cuts herself off from everything in Norfolk. Her thoughts, the people she loves, her anxieties, fears, anticipations – they're all set aside. Until the end of the week she will live and breathe a different world, a parallel universe. Her thinking, her planning, her imagination, her clothes and make-up, her needs, her nights asleep, her wakings in the morning – everything she does belongs to a world of professional secrets, and she feels at home there. State secrets. Government secrets. Personal secrets.

At the weekend, when she returns by train to Norfolk, she finds her other life, waiting faithfully for her return – her other personality,

her other lover, a different toothbrush, a different face-towel.

And Rebecca, her daughter.

When she was interviewed way back, before the War, she was warned about this. In her naivety, she'd never even heard of the SIS, or MI5, or MI6. And when they told her – and warned her she would have to make it clear to everyone in her life that none of them must ever ask questions about what she did in London, *ever* – she'd agreed gladly, unsuspecting. They told her this secrecy must be lifelong, until the very moment of death – but she was too careless to take it in, too gaily debonair, too confident that she could cope with anything.

Just too *young*.

No one had warned her this division would calcify through the years into something that now confuses her, and cramps her, and hurts.

She feels *crippled*.

She'd known Jasper was Jewish, from the start. No secrets there. But she'd not known he'd been a child refugee. Or that he was orphaned, and then orphaned again at eight years old when his grandfather died. And that he'd spent the rest of his boyhood in a foster-home.

So why should these things make a difference?

She's always believed that she and Jasper share a close and intimate understanding. *Of course we do!* She has vivid memories of the two years when they worked together for the secret services – especially the shimmering skin-touch of sex. But what she mostly remembers is the unbearable heart-stopping terror – of immediate capture, a gun at her head – the gun silenced, she about to be. Or *his* head, a sudden bloody execution. Then those transient moments of relief – the unsure reassurance of a coded message, or a hurried telephone call, the sigh of thankfulness at every safe border-crossing.

And when they were in each other's arms again, naked, their urgency, their breathlessness, the smell of him, her overwhelming desire for a child with him, and her feeling that she was rising to the stars in the night. And then what people used to call the little death.

Yes, she has memories of all that. And she concedes to herself that sex with Jasper is still pleasurable and satisfying, sometimes even needed. But it's not the same as it was.

She could live with that, she thinks. Perhaps it's a function of getting older anyway. *But how have we managed to have a love-affair for almost twenty years – and I know nothing else about his life? How could I not have been interested?*

And she knows nothing about his current life either. Except his job.

'Is he married?' Naomi says. *Why have I never asked her before?*

'I don't *know*!' Olivia replies. It's almost a cry of distress. 'I think not – but I've never asked.'

Why *did I never ask?* She knows he wasn't married at the beginning, when she was expecting Rebecca. But now?

As they walk slowly back to the city centre, Olivia says bleakly: 'I feel now as if the whole thing has been phoney. Including the sex.'

She's becoming clearer, it always happens when she talks to Naomi. 'Those experiences we had during the War, they were so intense.'

Death, or sex? – which would it be? Everything else seemed trivial in comparison.

'Why does this matter so much?'

'Isn't intimacy supposed to grow on a knowledge of each other's lives? This one has lasted since 1940! I had his baby! But how did I do that without any interest in his life? *All of it*, not just a couple of forgotten years in the War! Two decades ago!'

'Does Peter know about any of this?'

Olivia replies without hesitation. 'I don't think he even suspects.'

'Do you love Peter still?'

'More than ever.'

She senses what Naomi is really asking, and explains. 'I didn't meet Peter until after the War,' she says. 'But if Jasper had presented the tiniest risk to Peter and me, I'd have ended it at once. I made that clear to Jasper – and he accepted it.'

She has an unexpected vision then – she and Jasper, secure in a hotel bed, with the door locked and the curtains closed. They are private, and secret, and safe. There's no danger of the door being smashed by men bursting in with grey faces and sub-machine-guns. *Perhaps that's it*, she thinks. Perhaps the source of their joy in one another was not the sex – but the great gift of *being safe at last*. In a securely locked room. And perhaps, through so many years, the private wonder and luxury of that emotional comfort has worn away, unnoticed, with the passing of time.

She knows she's on a precipice. But does it all have to finish? Nothing has changed outwardly. She could go on, saying nothing to anyone. Yet she's almost certain that she'll never again feel the weight of Jasper in her arms, lying on her.

'I do know,' Naomi says, 'that it's a favourite male fantasy – *sex without strings*. Lovely free sexual pleasure, without any emotional complications.'

'Yes, I know that too,' Olivia says. Then, for the sake of truthfulness, she adds: 'But it's not just male – I liked it that way too – until now.'

They're approaching Jarrold's, for afternoon tea. Arm in arm, walking slowly, heads down, concentrating.

'You have to talk to Jasper, openly and frankly.'

This makes Olivia's heart race in fear. 'Why must I?'

'Has he ever hurt you?'

'No.'

'Hit you?'

'For God's sake, Naomi! *No!*'

'Forced himself on you?'

'*No!*'

'Does he sneer at you?'

'No.'

'Belittle you? Patronise you?'

'Never.'

'Has he lied to you?'

'How would I know?'

'Disagreed with you?

‘Yes. Often.’

‘Shown an interest in Rebecca?’

‘Yes, all the time.’

‘Well. There’s no need to feel frightened of him, is there? Talk to him – just do it.’

‘I don’t think . . .’

‘Olivia, he’s entitled to know.’

‘But . . .’

‘Olivia . . .’ She’s speaking very firmly now. ‘ . . . you’re entitled to end the relationship if that’s what you want. Of course you are! But you should say goodbye – *and tell him why*.’

‘I don’t think I can.’

‘Yes you can – it would be cowardly not to.’

Naomi – who’d witnessed close-up brutal military action in the Spanish Civil War – is accusing her sister – who’d made almost a dozen trips into Nazi Germany, under cover – of *cowardice.*

Inside Jarrold’s, shopping takes over. They need a new kettle.

11

Into the Dark

On Saturday, Cressida is sitting on a stone step in bright sunshine on the north side of Trafalgar Square, with the National Gallery at her back and Nelson’s Column in full view.

She’s decided she must tell Patrick everything about the Ellie Bassett case, with no inhibitions, nothing held back. She plans to

take him to her house for an evening meal (all prepared). And after dark they'll head for *The Purple Anchor*, near the Albion Dock, in Rotherhithe. She knows the way.

But what will happen when they find Mr Myluv? *Improvise!* One of Mr B's favourite words. *You always have to improvise.*

She's grateful to Patrick for arranging his accommodation at the *Union Jack Club*. *Tactful,* she thinks, and gives him credit.

She sees him before he sees her. And she experiences an unexpected quickening of her heart as she watches him approach. He's in uniform, with his two stripes, every inch a soldier – but slightly wary, finding his way. He's not familiar with London. And of course, she thinks, he doesn't know what he's let himself in for.

Should I confess that him I saw him with Rebecca, in Newcastle?

She rises to her feet, and runs down the steps towards him. When he spots her, she waves joyously.

They're in each other's arms for a greeting hug, both grinning broadly. There's nothing virginal about Cressida, but her fullness of knowledge recedes, leaving her exposed and seventeen again, blushing, and wanting to laugh out loud.

'I'm starving!' he says. 'Is there anywhere . . ?'

'Yes, come on,' she says. They set off towards the nearest Lyon's Corner House, in the Strand. She tucks her hand in his arm, defining who they are. Mates, best friends. Relaxed and companionable together.

'I'll be cooking later,' she tells him as they study the menu. 'Leave some space.'

'I'm *always* hungry,' he says joyously.

She'd never known anyone with an appetite to match his, she recalls.

Seated at a table, facing him, she says on an impulse: 'I saw you in Newcastle. I don't like you not knowing.'

'What? How . . ?'

So she tells him about it, and he's astonished. 'But why did you . . ?'

‘I thought Rebecca might be putting herself in danger. For all I knew she might have been planning to see that mysterious man she’d met there before, at the auction.’

Patrick doesn’t know anything about Edward Coulson, Mr Newcastle-Man. And he doesn’t know he’d shown up in Codling Green – and later followed Cressida and Rebecca in Charter Street.

‘I didn’t know she was going to meet you in Newcastle,’ Cressie says.

‘Nor did she,’ Patrick says.

He’s unsure whether to be worried or jealous about this unknown stranger. He questions Cressida: how old was he? What did he look like? Hair colour? Eye colour?

‘She was also going to visit that older man too, to interview him. He struck me as a nasty bit of work.’

‘I exchanged a few words with him,’ Patrick says. ‘He was very angry. He *was* a nasty bit of work – but I don’t think he was a serious threat.’

‘She hadn’t arranged to meet you there?’

‘No. I just rang home that morning. Olivia answered the phone and said Rebecca had just left for Newcastle. And she told me the name of the hotel. I think she was relieved when I said I’d go there. I got an emergency leave of absence and – well, you know the rest. Why didn’t you come and join us?’

‘Rebecca would have been furious with me.’

‘Well, yes, she would’ve. She was furious with *me*.’

‘Besides, I thought the two of you had arranged to meet . . .’

He looks ruefully at her. ‘No such luck.’

We’re talking intimately, she thinks. *After barely ten minutes.*

‘You went all that way for nothing,’ he says. ‘You must have felt pretty fed up on the train back to London.’

Having eaten, they walk to the *Union Jack Club*, near Waterloo Station. ‘It’s a hotel for military personnel,’ he tells her. ‘A bit basic, but comfortable enough.’ He checks in, and rejoins her in the street without his bag, and they walk together to her house.

She shows him round. It’s small, but all hers. To a National Serviceman – who shares a small wooden cabin attached to the end

of a big communal nissen hut for 40-odd trainees – it is spacious, glamorous, and *private*. He loves it.

'Are you hoping to spend a lot of time with Rebecca next week?' she asks him.

'Yes, of course.'

'Do you think she'll let you?'

'I don't see why not,' he says. 'We got on well in Newcastle – once she'd got over her irritation.'

'What did you do all the time?'

'We did research in the central library. *A lot* of research!'

'Was that all you did?' she asks him. She's surprised she can ask such a question.

But he's not embarrassed.

'Afraid so,' he says.

He tells her what they'd found out – that William Blake's plates had probably been in Newcastle since 1833. But for him the main point is that they'd enjoyed being together and had worked well. He regards that as deeply significant. 'You don't have a relationship with someone just through having a relationship,' he says. 'You have to *do* things together. *That's* how you make a relationship. It's not enough just to love each other – you have to have a shared experience of each other. We did that, in Newcastle. She had a project, and we worked together on it.'

How naïve he is! And yet there's a cleverness there too. But there's something he ought to know. She'd been unsure whether to mention it, but now she's made up her mind. 'When you slammed the door on her all those years ago . . .'

He's on his guard at once. She can see.

'I think I know why you had to shut her out, and what you were doing.'

He is white-faced, staring at her.

Be careful now, she tells herself.

'Am I right?'

But he can't say. It's beyond his capacity. He can't produce the words, he can't even nod his head. He's frozen, the whole world will fall in on him if he even hints an acknowledgement.

'The point is,' she says slowly, considering her words ahead of speaking them, 'Rebecca and I had a long chat about sex, and fourteen-year-old boys.'

Still he has nothing to say.

'And I told her what I believed you'd been doing. And why you had to shut her out.'

He does manage to speak now. 'Why are you telling me this?' His voice is husky.

Yes, why am I? 'Because, when you see Rebecca tomorrow, you need to bear in mind that she knows and understands a lot more about these things than she did before. She understands more about boys – and more about *you*.'

He changes the subject. 'Shouldn't we get down to business. I need to be briefed.'

She's relieved. She finds it's almost unbearable to witness his embarrassment. *But I've helped him,* she thinks. *The advantage won't be all on Rebecca's side.*

They settle down then, and she begins to tell him about Ellie Bassett. On her kitchen table are her own notes, a *London A–Z*, and a type-written copy of the 1956 Sexual Offences Act.

'Now,' she says. 'This is going to be embarrassing! It will probably shock you. But I can't be bothered to go pussy-footing around it. After all, we know each other pretty well.'

'I've probably heard all the words,' he says. 'In the army.'

'It's not the words,' she says. 'It's the concept that's shocking.'

Cressida knows he has a systematic and forensic mind, good with multiple facts and the connections between them. He calmly considers what might have happened to Ellie Bassett. He asks questions from time to time, always relevant, the kind of queries that move things forward. The only thing that shocks him is when Cressida tells him how she'd been solicited for sex by a client at number 57. He is seeing her anew, and the world she now lives in. He's amazed and impressed that she's so cool about it, not traumatised, or in a state of shock. But there's no muddle in his mind – and he's wondering when the embarrassing details are going to become apparent.

'That,' she says, 'is the case I'm *officially* working on.'

She explains her suspicions about Ellie's father, what he might be doing with her little brother, and why there were two little boys living at 57 Charter Street. She tells him – bluntly – what she thinks very small children, both boys and girls, are required to do, or have done to them.

He is deeply shocked. He stands up and paces around the room, stops to stare out of her window. It's not embarrassment exactly, it's *disbelief*. He has learned a lot in the army, from a wide variety of other people's experiences – their stories, jokes, choice of words. But none of it has prepared him for this.

He understands her difficulty at once. 'Trafficking girls is surely against the law, and if it's in any way organised there'll be other people involved. You should be able to get a line on one of them. In fact, you already have.'

He's impressed, and she's pleased.

'But this other – if you're right – happens in private. So how can you ever prove anything? There will never be any witnesses.'

'That,' she says, 'is precisely my problem.'

Then she corrects herself. '*One* of my problems. The other is the whereabouts of Ellie. That has to come first.'

'After you located her, they all moved out? Correct?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think they cleared out because of you?'

'No. They would have left straightaway. But there was a time gap. So something else must have scared them, later.'

'Do you believe,' he says slowly, 'that what is happening now to the little brother also happened to Ellie when she was little?'

'Probably,' Cressida says. 'Training for what was to come.' She has not yet come across the word *grooming* in this context.

She turns to her copy of the recent 1956 Sexual Offences Act. The language here takes him sharply by surprise – as it had done her too. 'It is felony for a person to commit buggery with another person or with an animal.' He finds it extraordinary that the word is there, in print, as a legal term. So discreetly blunt. With *animals*?

She has underlined a few key sentences –

> ‘It is felony for a man to have unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of thirteen.’
>
> ‘It is felony for a person to take or detain a girl under the age of twenty-one out of the possession of her parent or guardian.’
>
> ‘It is felony for a person who is the owner or occupier of any premises to induce or knowingly suffer a girl under the age of thirteen to resort to or be on those premises for the purpose of having unlawful sexual intercourse with men.’

. . . and so on.

It’s becoming a bit too much for Patrick. Attentiveness has turned into tension. There comes a point where it is too much for her as well.

> ‘Where, on the trial of any offence under this Act, it is necessary to prove sexual intercourse (whether natural or unnatural), it shall not be necessary to prove the completion of the intercourse by the emission of seed, but the intercourse shall be deemed complete upon proof of penetration only.’

He’s reading this aloud, but when he reaches *the emission of seed* he snorts and splutters with sudden astonished laughter, an uncontrollable outburst. ‘Like a packet of lettuce seeds!’ he gasps. She can’t help joining in. The laughing is so intense and acute that it hurts their stomachs. But the shared pleasure of relieving their embarrassment is joyous and unstoppable.

> *‘Innocence dwells with wisdom, but never with ignorance.’*

*

Rebecca and Jess are in London too.

Rebecca is on a mission. Her local Library has advised her that the Guildhall Museum would be the best place to start.

There's excitement in her heart. *This might lead nowhere,* she reminds herself. A researcher invariably has setbacks, or finds herself in a cul-de-sac.

She had wondered if she should invite Patrick to meet her in London. She remembers how eager he'd been in Newcastle. And indeed how helpful. But she knew he probably wouldn't be able to take another last-minute day off.

So she asked Jessica instead. She's the only person in Rebecca's life who understands her passion for Blake. Jess is an ally.

At the Guildhall Museum, they are treated kindly and efficiently.

'We need to know about a man called *Whetstone*, a printer or bookseller,' Rebecca says. 'He almost certainly lived in the Westminster area.'

'Period?'

'From around 1770 to 1830. Can you help us?'

'I think so. You should have a look at the poll books.'

He explains that poll books were published lists of voters made at every parliamentary election, for individual constituencies. And twenty minutes later the two of them are sitting at a table with a selection of them – printed records of every citizen in Westminster who had voted at parliamentary elections.

So this is how it's done! Rebecca thinks. She's learning about historical research. And she likes the feel of it so much that she almost laughs with joy. Jess maintains a more dignified demeanour.

Rebecca chooses the earliest of the poll books, for 1774, skims the pages and gets a feel of the heft of the volume. Head to head, shoulder to shoulder, chairs drawn close, they study the title-page together.

A

CORRECT COPY

OF THE

P O L L

FOR ELECTING

Two Representatives in Parliament,

FOR THE CITY AND LIBERTY OF

W E S T M I N S T E R

T A K E N

Oct. 11, 1774, and the Fifteen following Days,

B E F O R E

T H O M A S C O R B E T T, Esq.

HIGH BAILIFF,

And Published by his Permission.

Five candidates are listed – an earl, three lords, and an Esquire. And columns on the right of the page indicate which two candidates each voter had chosen. But there's a difficulty: the names are not in alphabetical order – they're not in *any* order – and she thinks for a moment that they'll have to search the whole book, 152 pages of random names, close-printed in a very small font.

'Perhaps,' Jess whispers, 'their names were written down as they turned up to vote.'

But it's not so bad after all. The list is divided into parishes, and this simplifies their task, a little. Rebecca has read biographies of Blake and she knows that what she seeks will be in the parish of St James.

And they find it! They're not yet searching for *Whetstone*. Rebecca wants to confirm a certainty before she explores a speculation. Then they'll know they're doing it correctly. It's *Blake* she wants to find first. And there he is:

Blake, James, Broad st. carnaby m. Hosier & haberdasher

William's father!

Rebecca already knows they had a shop in Broad Street, on the corner with Marshall Street. But the biographies made no mention of Carnaby Market. Was that part of the address? Or did James Blake have a stall at the market? If so, she thinks, young William would have gone there sometimes, with his father. *There are gaps, and I'm*

already filling them. Perhaps, Jessica whispers, he helped on the stall? But not in 1774, Rebecca whispers back – by then, he would have been two years into his apprenticeship. Too grown-up and too busy to help dad on his market stall.

Rebecca experiences a tiny elusive mental shift: before, the Blakes – even William himself – had seemed like fictional characters in a particularly radiant story from the past. *But it's not like that any more! For here he is! – James the hosier, living with his family, over the shop*. They're both familiar with that set-up, especially Jessica. That's more-or-less her life, living above and behind the family business, and with a print-shop at the back of the house.

There is nothing fictional about James Blake. He was a flesh-and-blood shopkeeper – and a father with sufficient understanding to see that his son would have a life of misery at an ordinary school. So he arranged instead for him to attend a vocational establishment where he trained to be a commercial artist.

But then there's a setback. They cannot find William in any of the later poll books. There are other Blakes, but not William. This shakes their confidence. Are the records wrong? Or have they made some foolish beginner's mistake?

For once in her life, Rebecca shows her confusion. And an elderly woman sitting on the opposite side of the table peers over the top of her specs and whispers across: 'Are you all right?'

For Rebecca, places like this – archives, libraries, museums – are sanctuaries of innocence. And people working there, or researchers searching there, are imbued with innocence too. And therefore *trustworthy.* So she doesn't hesitate. She confides in the lady opposite.

'I've been searching for William Blake. I know he lived in Westminster – but he's not in any of the poll books!'

The woman knows who William Blake was. And she understands the difficulty. 'Perhaps he didn't vote?' she suggests.

Jess and Rebecca exchange glances of understanding. *Of course! If he didn't turn up to vote, his name wouldn't have been recorded.*

‘I’ve read biographies,’ Rebecca says, ‘and I don’t think they mentioned that.’

‘I’m a historian, and – believe me – biographies leave an awful lot out. Does this mean you’ve wasted your trip?’

‘No, we have someone else to look for as well.’

The woman smiles and nods, and returns to her work.

The two young novice researchers, flushed and excited, spend a further hour searching for Joshua Whetstone – or indeed *any* Whetstone who printed or sold books. And they find him at last, recorded in the poll book for the 1826 election, Joshua Whetstone – whom Rebecca had first encountered living in Newcastle – now living at an address in Maiden Lane, and listed as a ‘bookseller’. Printers were always referred to as booksellers.

Attendants loom around them, preoccupied, at a discreet distance, moving among the academics like benevolent phantoms, silently bringing books, documents.

One of them quietly approaches Rebecca. ‘There are rate books too,’ he says. ‘If you need further confirmation.’

‘Here?’

‘Better to try at the Westminster Archives Centre.’

He describes where the Centre is, and the two of them – charged now with research-inspired adrenalin – set off at once, to seek confirmation in another archive of what she now already knows.

It’s mid-afternoon by the time they get there. And things happen more quickly here because she knows precisely what to ask for. The attendant brings a selection of rate books, dating from between 1820 and 1830, three years after Blake died.

In each of them, Joshua Whetstone is listed, living above his printing business in Maiden Lane.

But where is Maiden Lane?

They’ve had nothing to eat or drink since they left home, and it’s now late in the afternoon. As the rush-hour roars and accelerates around them, they find a snack-bar and order food.

But there’s more to be done. Rebecca consults her *London A–Z* and finds that Maiden Lane runs parallel with the Strand. She knows

William and Catherine had been living in Fountain Court when he died, just off the Strand. The building was demolished later, to make way for the Savoy Hotel.

So, she thinks, how far was it from William Blake's print-shop in the Strand to Joshua Whetstone's in nearby Maiden Lane?

'Well, let's go and look,' Jess says.

Libraries and archival centres are all closed now. With the almost inexhaustible energy of the young – and refreshed by sandwiches, chocolate cake, and tea – Rebecca and Jess set off to Maiden Lane.

Once there, it takes them just two minutes to walk to the end of the road and turn into Southampton Street . . .

. . . and after another two minutes they find themselves in the Strand, opposite the Savoy Hotel. There it is, almost directly facing them. They cross over, and gaze for a few moments at the small street beside it, where Blake's apartment had once been. And where he'd died.

Five minutes! That's all it would have taken for Joshua to walk from his printing business to the place where William Blake had his.

They stroll back along Southampton Street and into Maiden Lane, where Joshua Whetstone had lived. Again, five minutes is all it takes to walk from one to the other.

It is, Rebecca thinks, inconceivable that Joshua Whetstone would not have known there was another printer only two streets away.

*

'May I have a bath?' Patrick says to Cressida later. She's in her small kitchen, preparing vegetables. He'd wanted to help, but she'd refused to let him.

'Of course you can.'

They'd been talking about eye-colour. People asked to give a description, she'd told him, are rarely certain about the colour of the eyes. 'Sometimes, they don't even know the colour of their lover's eyes.'

So now, as she follows Patrick up the stairs to the bathroom to find him a towel, he understands why she says: 'Do you know the colour of *my* eyes?'

'Of course I do!'

She challenges him. 'Go on then, tell me. And no turning round to look!'

He stops, on the top step. Gazing straight ahead into the open door of the bathroom, he says: 'Blue, a sort of blueish-grey. And there's a ring of small flecks, light-brown or hazel, in the centre, around the pupil. And in some lights, there's a thin dark ring round the circumference.'

She leaves him to his bath. Downstairs, she sits at her window, lost in thought. There's a path outside, leading to a small green, and a signpost to Paradise Garden*. Where is this Paradise?* she thinks*. I should search for it.* The sound of the city never ceases, but it doesn't encroach closely. It is, for central London, quite tranquil here.

And it's starting to rain. She likes rain.

Her thoughts take her back to Norfolk. She remembers one warm afternoon when it rained. They were at the little brick house, messing about in the river, just the three of them. Rain is of little importance if you're in the water. She remembers she'd climbed onto the bank, gathered up their clothes, and carried them inside the little house, to keep dry. Then she slipped thankfully back into the water and they carried on, untroubled, enjoying, without clamour. *We were always quiet.* She remembers looking with delight at an infinity of circular ripples exploding and collapsing in frantic multitudes around her on the surface of the water.

Why has that all come flooding back to her now, like a vision? When they were young and full of summer, how intensely they'd experienced the world! Through their ears, eyes and nose, their fingers and the soles of their feet – the companionable touch of leaves on their legs as they passed, the rough prickle of grass on their bottoms when they sat down, the warm sun on their skin, the muscular joy of movement and reach, everything around them breathing and radiant.

They were full of trembling brightness, like full wine-glasses in the afternoon light, careless of spilling.

For Patrick, it's a long, long evening, waiting for nightfall. And he's relieved when – about an hour after dark – she says it's time to set off.

'Umbrella?' he says.

'No. They're always an encumbrance.'

'Are you expecting . . ?'

'I have no expectations at all,' she says. 'Anything could happen! But if there's violence, I can hardly ask my opponent to wait a moment while I put down my brolly.'

'I'd help you,' he says.

But they both know how likely that is. He's been trained to kill enemy soldiers with his rifle, or with a bayonet fixed to the end of it. But she's the one who's attended numerous self-defence classes, hands-on, since the age of twelve.

*

It's been a long day, and it's raining hard when they reach Liverpool Street Station. On the train going home, Jess nods off. Rebecca gets out her notebook and drafts the concluding paragraph of her account of the plates' provenance. She knows incontrovertibly how they came to be in Newcastle, and how they'd been there all that time. There's nothing speculative about that. She has the details, and the historical references. But this final link is guesswork – she knows it will strengthen her argument a little, but it won't confirm it. But it would be, she concludes, almost inconceivable that a young printer whose business was in Maiden Lane would not have known that another printer lived five minutes' walk away, in the next street. She knows too, that there is uncertainty among scholars about what happened to Blake's copper plates – hundreds of them probably – after his death. There was a dispute. All that is known to biographers is that two of his friends, and perhaps Catherine herself, sold off everything.

She'd moved to Marylebone, about three miles away, and was living as a widowed housekeeper. She had no choice. There were friends who were kind to her – but still, she had no money to live on.

Joshua Whetstone was a letterpress printer, unlike William Blake. Nevertheless, it's reasonable to presume that at some time in or after 1827 Joshua heard about William's death and made contact with Catherine, or one of the others, and bought the plates of *The Songs.* Perhaps he thought he could find a use for them, or even adapt them for letterpress. Or he might have intended to melt them down. Copper was valuable.

'It is clear,' she writes, 'that when Joshua Whetstone moved his business to Newcastle in 1833, he took the plates with him. It has also been established that, before that move, he lived and worked in London, only five minutes' walk from where Blake spent the last years of his life.'

When Rebecca was standing outside the Savoy Hotel, she'd been unaware she was near the place where she was conceived. It's tempting to think that such a close encounter might have enkindled an illuminating flash of knowledge. This was where the conjunction took place, this was where the two essential parts of her encountered one another, a leap of welcome and joy. Or to put it another way, it's the place where her mother and father had passionate death-defying sex – intensified perhaps by the screaming of Junkers 87s in their ears, the crash and roar of exploding bombs, and the urgent bells of fire engines and ambulances racing through dark streets.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps the Luftwaffe was having a night off.

It's tempting to think that as she moved close to the place where she was so passionately made, Rebecca might have felt a small flicker of excited recognition. A tiny psychic Geiger-counter, somewhere deep inside her, might have twitched in response.

But of course that didn't happen, she experienced no epiphany. And the knowledge that her existence had begun within a few yards of where Blake's life had ended passed her by.

If she has this knowledge, it's at a level that's deeper than memory, deeper than longing, a thousand miles down in the fathomless mud that lies at the bottom of the dark ocean of our inherited unconscious minds.

An elemental secret. Entirely unspeakable, unknowable. Beyond the reach of psychologists, or doctors, or hypnotists. Beyond the reach of *anyone*.

And what use is that?

What is now proved was once only imagin'd.

*

As Patrick holds open the door of the saloon bar for Cressida to go in, his eyes immediately find Mr Myluv.

There's no mistaking him. Patrick stares in astonishment, for this man is the biggest human being he's ever seen. He is mountainous – not fat, not in any way obese. Just *big*. Big bones, big muscles, big features. Even seated on a chair at a table, he's taller than the man who happens at that moment to be passing behind him with two pints of beer.

Patrick had half-expected some kind of derelict, a tramp perhaps, with half a ton of filthy clothes, and unkempt greasy hair. A homeless down-and-out cliché. But Mortimer Myluv is no cliché. He is his own man. His clothes are not especially fashionable, there is nothing of the dandy in him. But they are clean, and smart. And they must have been made to measure. As he comes closer, Patrick takes in a handsome embroidered waistcoat, a dark blue tie neatly knotted, a huge enveloping raincoat open at the front, and a Harris Tweed cap as big as a dinner-plate.

There is an empty chair at his table. While Patrick is ordering at the bar, Cressida approaches Mr Myluv and sits boldly, facing him.

'Mind if I sit here?' she says.

There's no reply and she takes that as assent. There's an unoccupied chair nearby and she pulls it over, for Patrick. She too is awed by this man's intimidating immensity. Why had Mr B not prepared her for this shock? Politicians and film stars are sometimes said to have *presence*. Well, she thinks, Mortimer Myluv has presence – and it's entirely physical. She notices his hands, each

finger as thick as a wooden chisel-handle. And there's not enough space under the table for her feet because his are occupying all of it.

Patrick orders a shandy for Cressida, a Doom Bar for himself, and a short drink which the barman says would suit Mr Myluv. He brings these over on a small tray, followed by a barmaid, who takes away the cleared plate and cutlery.

Mortimer Myluv ignores the waitress. Just as he ignores everyone else in the crowded smoke-filled bar.

Patrick sits at the table and stares at him. It takes him a few seconds to realise that MyLuv is staring back – straight into his eyes – and this disconcerts him. He tries to identify the eye-colour, but it's too dark in the smoky bar.

An unexpected realisation comes to him then, a certainty, an absolutely intuitive conviction. He's almost paralysed by the shock of it.

Mr Myluv is not a man.

He wants to know whether Cressida has realised, but he can't ask her. He reasons it out in his mind. *Yes, if you were that size, it might be easier to be a huge man than a huge woman. A little easier*.

The two of them have a plan, such as it is. Patrick is to do the talking, and they'd agreed there'd be no point in beating about the bush. This man is not going to fall for any carefully staged blandishments, any attempts to soften him up.

'We have your book,' Patrick says.

Cressida takes out her copy of *The Chartered Streets* and places it on the table.

Myluv glances at it and rises slowly to his feet. Without a word he sets off towards the toilet, moving through the crowded bar like a leviathan cruising through shoals of herring. The seas around him divide.

'*He's a woman*,' Patrick whispers to Cressida.

'*What?'*

He insists – and Cressida, for once, is totally disconcerted. All her planning, all her grasp of this situation, all her background of safeguards and defences, suddenly seem useless. She's cut loose

from their anchorage. Her carefully prepared context is in danger of disintegrating.

'He *is*. I'm sure of it.'

'He can't be! Mr B would have told me.'

'Perhaps Mr B doesn't know.'

'What makes you think . . .'

But he can't tell her. He doesn't know how he knows. He just knows he's right.

'Follow him!' Cressida says urgently.

'Why?'

'You might be able to see if he's a man.'

But Patrick can't bring himself to do that. There are some things that . . . Already, after only a few minutes, he's working out new kinds of tact, new rules for negotiating this situation. But to follow him into the toilet . . . *that* would be an impertinence. An outrageous intrusion!

'He might leave by a another exit,' Cressida says.

She is re-thinking the situation they're in. *This makes no difference,* she tells herself*. We only need his help.* ***Her*** *help*.

Myluv returns to the table, takes his seat, and looks Patrick straight in the eye. A great gargantuan being, breathing, waiting.

This new development makes a difference – for Patrick finds that he talks to Myluv in a slightly different way now. He doesn't understand how he does this, but he does know it's happening. He doesn't consider that he perhaps always talks to women differently.

She knows I know. It's in their eyes. They look at each other with knowledge.

He finds himself telling this person every detail, far beyond what Cressida had envisaged. She's alarmed by this, pressing her foot on his as a warning. But Myluv and Patrick are communicating, so she stops fidgeting. Besides, she's been reminded of the solid bedrock of abiding human kindness, and good sense, in Patrick.

Except where Rebecca is concerned.

He describes their search for a missing girl aged only twelve; how they found her at number 57 Charter Street; and that the house

is run as a brothel, with under-age girls; and before they could take action, the occupants had left and found somewhere else.

All the time, Myluv watches Patrick closely.

'We don't think they've moved far,' Patrick says. 'A few streets, probably.'

'We don't know whether the girl has already been forced to have sex,' Cressida says.

The word *rape* hovers, unspoken. Myluv's statuesque and implacable bulk remains perfectly still, except for a quick series of rapid blinking as he stares at Patrick.

'We need to find out where they've moved to.'

There's a brief silence, while the barmaid arrives with a plate of rhubarb and custard. For Myluv.

Cressida opens her book at the relevant photograph, the one with Charter Street a tiny distant feature. She points to the barely perceptible street-sign.

Myluv glances down at it. She rises slowly to her enormous height, tightens the scarf around her neck, buttons up her raincoat, and holds her camera-case close to her chest. Her shoes, Patrick thinks, are like herring-boats.

Myluv leaves the pub without a word – and the two of them follow. Out into the night, into the rain, into the wet and troubled quietness of the city.

The game is afoot. Cressida feels her usual excitement, but she's also confused, wrong-footed. And Patrick is scared, this sort of thing is new to him.

But he won't leave Cressida's side.

*

The rain falling in London has not yet reached Norfolk. An unclouded moon shines down on Cuckoo Farm, as bright as a miracle, almost dazzling.

Zoe is walking along the back lane, behind the wood, heading for the neglected garden that Naomi had told her about, with its mermaid fountain.

She's unafraid, and excited.

She knows the mermaid will only be a statue. *But who knows? Something might happen. Perhaps I'll be able to change the rules*.

She climbs over the fallen wall, and makes her way through the wilderness garden. Others have passed here, animals probably. There's a narrow path through the undergrowth, barely visible. She emerges into the moonlight at a large open space surrounded by a stone balustrade. Much of it is broken, cross-pieces have fallen to the ground, uprights lean crookedly. In the middle, steps lead down to a low circular wall enclosing a rose-garden, partly covered with broken uneven paving, and overgrown with weeds, long-neglected roses, and honeysuckles.

In the centre, there's a tumble of smashed and fallen stones. There's no fountain, just some puddle-water, slimy with decaying leaves. The wet stones are hard to walk on, cracked and uneven.

If she finds no mermaid, she plans to take off her clothes and stand there, arms raised in joy, and *be* a mermaid. Just for a moment or two.

She steps carefully onto the stones, stooping on all fours to steady herself. In the centre there is something smooth, shining in the moonlight. A human back and shoulders, dark, and hard.

She's grown accustomed to having the night to herself, possessing the darkness, secure against all threat. But this time she's wrong. She owns none of this, and she might not be safe at all.

She's unaware that someone else is there, close by. It's Naomi, standing in the shadows surrounding the balustrade garden, watching. She'd warned Aunt Polly about Zoe's midnight wanderings, but – apparently – Polly has not spoken to her. Or perhaps she *has* spoken to her, but Zoe has taken no notice.

So Naomi has kept watch, and followed her into the night. When she realised Zoe was heading for the mermaid garden, she was mortified. *I was the one who told her about that! How could I have been so foolish?*

Naomi has never liked walking at night, unless with someone else. And the skills of following a person unseen are unknown to her.

She finds it frightening, and cannot imagine how Zoe can be so fearless.

Zoe has recognised what she's found. It's a bronze mermaid, lying face-down among the stones, half-sunk in slime, in the centre of the derelict pool. It's only a statue, in need of rescue. Nevertheless, it's a moment of joy and satisfaction.

She finds a firm foot-hold, takes the weight of the statue at its shoulders, and lifts, heaving it up into a standing position. It's unsteady, it will fall if she lets go.

In pictures, mermaids are painted long and lovely, supple and sinuous, like the flowing of water. Statues on the other hand are usually crouching, or 'kneeling', with their tail folded under them. But not this one. She stands tall, her tail like a column bearing her weight, and the bottom of it twisted into a flat coil strong enough to hold her standing, but unsteady.

She's a little taller than Zoe, bronze, but wet and slimy. Zoe had expected the mermaid in Naomi's story would turn out to be stony, with broken edges and rough lichen spoiling the perfection of surface and line.

So she's overjoyed, and they stand together for a few moments, face to face, with the moonlight shining on them.

Naomi watches, clutching her shoulders, almost *grieving* for Zoe.

There's no stir of air. And no audible wildlife. It seems that all the creatures that live there are asleep, while the entire garden is awake and silently watchful, in the bright envisioning moonlight. But there's a sound not far away, hardly audible, at the edge of the space.

A smudge of darkness shifts. There is someone there.

A *third* trespasser.

He steps forward into the moonlight, and stops. From the opposite side of the garden, Naomi doesn't recognise him. A stranger then, preparing to close in on Zoe.

Has he come from the dark world that none of them know much about? This sometimes happens, the darkness impinging upon the world of light, peering in, envious, unseen, aroused. Sometimes,

that's all it does, then it might just creep away. But sometimes it moves in, unnoticed, an invisible worm in the night.

The first cloud hides the moon, the garden is drowned in darkness.

*

Myluv is taking Cressida and Patrick through a maze of streets south of the Thames. She doesn't *lead* them: she just walks, and they follow. Cressida has a clear mental map in her head, and knows where she is. But Patrick is lost and has no familiar landmarks.

They say nothing, no one speaks. Patrick finds the tension unbearable, but he walks along beside her, uncomplaining.

All the time, Myluv strides silently on. Once, she takes out her camera and takes a flash-shot of something, almost without breaking step. Neither of them sees what attracted her attention.

After what seems like an age, they reach a street called Mark Avenue. Halfway along, Myluv stops in front of a semi-detached house, number 26, with its front door opening directly onto the pavement. They stop too, looking at her, expecting a gesture of some sort, even a spoken word perhaps. But she just stands there, motionless and massive, enveloped in the bulk of her coat and scarf. Like a human buffalo.

'Is this where they've moved to?'

Myluv gazes for a moment at Cressida, thoughtfully, then for a longer moment at Patrick. *As if*, Patrick thinks, *she knows I know*. *And she's telling me something.*

'Stay out here, in the road,' Cressida says.

It's an order. Patrick knows he has to be fully attentive. She won't say it again, she's in charge. He's in the army, he's become accustomed to taking orders, without questioning them.

It's a semi-detached house. The front windows are curtained, there are no lights upstairs. Cressida moves stealthily down the side-passage, where there's a small window, un-curtained. She finds she's looking into the kitchen – at an innocently domestic scene: a woman, three or four girls in nightdresses and pyjamas, one in her

underwear. A little boy is on the lap of one of the girls. It's clear that he's been crying and is being comforted.

A man walks in from the front room.

She feels increasing confidence that she's found them at last. But there's no sign of Ellie. She might be upstairs, asleep. But Cressida is certain she'd be down with the others if she'd been there. This almost confirms what she'd suspected. It means this is a dead-end. Either Ellie has been taken somewhere else, or she got away.

But I need to be sure.

She returns to Patrick. Myluv has disappeared now, into the empty streets. They're on their own, just the two of them. There's not a soul in sight as they make their plan.

Patrick's role is to knock at the front door and ask for Ellie. He's not keen on this. 'What will I do if she isn't there?'

'Improvise.'

There's no time for him to ask the alternative question. In any case her answer would probably be the same. *Improvise.*

So he knocks on the door. Courage doesn't come into it, he just *does it*. Cressida is out of sight now, round the corner, in the side passage.

The woman opens the front door. *Ellie's so-called Auntie,* Patrick thinks. There are two of the girls in the shadows behind her, peering out into the dark street.

'Who are you?'

'Is Ellie here?'

The woman is startled, clearly. 'Ellie? What do you want with her?'

She's worried, put off her stride. They don't usually get soldiers, not young ones anyway. And certainly not in uniform. And how did he know their new address?

'Is she here?' Patrick asks.

'No, she ain't. You can have one of the others.'

'I want Ellie.'

Round the corner, in the side-passage, Cressida moves past the door and turns round, facing back towards the street, waiting. She knows exactly what will happen.

The door is quietly opened, and out steps Lucas. He sees Cressida at once, in the passage. He knows something's up, but he doesn't know what. He shouts back into the house. 'Shut the front door! *Now!*'

He turns back to Cressida, facing her. She registers the sound of the front door slammed in Patrick's face. She briefly hopes he's going to be all right.

Lucas is holding his right hand behind his back. *There can be only one reason for that*.

'Who the hell are you?'

'I'm looking for Ellie.'

He moves closer, turning his back to the street. She watches for her moment. He will lead with his left hand – but its purpose will be to *distract*.

Not a threat. The real danger is the knife, in his right hand, out of sight behind his back.

She is not deceived.

He moves in, very close. So close that she can see his stubble, even in the dark. Sharply, wrong-footing him, she moves to her left – fast – and pushes her left hand up between his hidden arm and his torso. This forces his right hand – holding the knife – firmly out and up. His planned surprise attack has been forestalled. The human body has little strength, or leverage, to lower a raised arm.

Her intention was to trap his arm in her own, in a scissor-movement. But it hasn't completely worked, and he's about to kick. She crouches, arcing her lower body away from the reach of his foot.

She grabs his wrist, still twisting and stretching his arm up, above his head. This is hurting him. He tries to grab her with his free left hand, but it flails helplessly in the air as he tries to keep his balance.

Over his shoulder, she can see that Patrick has come round into the passage. What he sees is Cressida struggling with a man holding a knife. She has his wrist firmly in her grip, but the blade is perilously close. Without thinking, he races up behind the man and grabs his shoulders. He pushes one knee into the small of his back –

and pulls his upper body so violently backwards that the man shouts out in pain – and loses his balance.

It's an old trick. They probably don't bother with it in defence classes. Patrick learned it years ago, in the school playground, when he was eleven or twelve.

With her free hand Cressida grabs Lucas' head and slams it hard against the wall of the house. He slides down to the ground, unconscious. She's not concerned – she's been trained how to kill, and also how not to.

One of the girls is just inside the side-door, peering out.

Cressida grabs her arm. 'Where's Ellie?'

The girl is wide-eyed. 'She ran away.'

'Where to?'

She shakes her head, she doesn't know.

'When?'

'On Wednesday.'

There's no more time. The aunt has hurried through from the front of the house. She pulls the girl back inside.

Cressida steps over the inert body of Lucas and takes Patrick's hand. 'Come on,' she says. 'Let's go!'

'Did he hurt you?'

'Not a mark on me.'

With one part of her mind, Cressida is wondering about the girl at the side door. *Will she be punished? Is there an outside toilet here?*

Why? she wonders. Why had the thought of punishment made her think of outside toilets?

*

Naomi knows little about the dark world. Every feature of it is alien to her. *Who is this man?* What does he want? Why is he here? Has he followed Zoe all the way? Had he been waiting for her? Planning something? Or is this opportunistic?

He takes a step forward, onto the overgrown lawn. Towards Zoe.

She's heard him now. She stares petrified, momentarily incapable of movement. She's helpless, like the mermaid.

She lets the statue fall back down. There's a slow crash and a small sickening sound of muddy water slopping quietly around her feet. Then she panics – because she's standing unsteadily on a pile of broken and uneven stones.

She slips, or trips, and falls painfully onto her bare knees. Looking back, she sees he is closing on her.

Faster now!

On all fours, with her knees and shin-bones hurting, Zoe looks up and sees Naomi stepping out of the shadows. Naomi calls into the night-time silence, loudly and fearlessly: '*Zoe!*'

It's amazing that Naomi's gentle voice can make such a sound! Like a horn of some kind, or a huge animal bellowing from a hollow cavern.

She calls again: '*Zoe!*' – in that astonishing voice of urgent fear that no one knew she had.

The dark world recoils from recognition, is terrified of people knowing about it. It never wants a fight. It shrinks from discovery in its own private panic, fearing exposure, humiliation, public shame. But what it fears most is that its dark secret loving will be put a stop to.

He turns and silently races away into the depths of the overgrown garden.

Naomi wastes no time in words. She takes Zoe's hand and leads her back the way they came. In no time, they're in the lane, not knowing what to say to each other. The dappled moon-shadows become looming ghouls, like lost souls at midnight.

Is he following us?

But apparently not. And as they arrive at Cuckoo Farm, it starts to rain.

Naomi takes Zoe to the main building, not to Aunt Polly's rooms. The door is bolted, curtains are closed, and drinks of hot cocoa are quickly made.

In the bright safety of the kitchen, Naomi sits Zoe on the table, like a toddler. She washes the blood from the grazes on her shins

and knees, and applies TCP, which stings.

Naomi is angry. She has no intention of engaging in a discussion with Zoe. Too many nuances, too many compromises. This is too important for negotiation.

'There are two facts,' she says firmly. 'So pay attention. They are *facts*, not opinions. You have to live your life in the knowledge of them.'

Zoe waits. She's unaccustomed to being talked to in this way.

'**One**. It is dangerous to go wandering about after dark, on your own.'

'But I never go out unless . . .'

'It's *always* dangerous. It's a *fact*. You cannot defend yourself. Cressida is the only person I know who can protect herself. But *I* can't, Edward can't, your Aunt Polly can't – and *you certainly can't*.'

'But . . .'

'There *is* no but! Fact number **two**. You're frightening your aunt. She's worried sick. And she doesn't know what to do about it. She thinks she'll have to tell your father about this habit – and *that* will scare *him* too.'

'I don't want . . .'

'Actually, there's a third fact. Two elderly gentlemen live in that old house with the derelict garden. I know them, a little. They are kindly people, and they mean no harm to anyone.'

What is Naomi getting at? And why did she say ***two elderly gentlemen*** *and not just* ***two old men?***

'Go and visit them! Tomorrow! Just go and knock at their door, tell them openly that you've heard about their statue of a mermaid, and would they please allow you to see it? . . .

' – and after that, *it's got to stop*.'

Zoe is good at negotiating with adults. She's expert at it, innocently manipulative. But she has no idea how to argue with Naomi's uncompromising facts. She had no idea Naomi could be so fierce, so implacable.

'It might be a good idea to take a camera,' Naomi says.

*

‘Are we going home now?’ Patrick asks.

‘No. We’re going to Charter Street.’

He is dismayed. ‘Why?’

She hesitates. Telling him might spook the idea she has. It’s no more than a hunch. An intuition. Not a certainty.

But Patrick has been good tonight, she thinks. He’s entitled to know what’s going on.

‘There’s an outside loo in the back garden at number 57.’

‘You need a loo?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘I don’t need the loo!’

After thirty minutes of steady jogging, they approach 57 Charter Street. She wastes no time. She’s explained the lay-out to him: the back alley, the gate in the wall, the backyard with its brick toilet. She leads him down the side-road, and into the narrow cluttered alley at the back.

It’s familiar ground for her – but not for Patrick. She takes his hand, guiding him past dustbins, bicycles, an old pram. The rain has stopped at last, but there’s a strong smell of damp – wet earth, wet bins, wet *everything*.

There is a movement ahead of them in the alley. There are no streetlights here – but in the darkness ahead they can see two people stumbling clumsily away from them.

Drunk, probably. Staggering home after a Saturday night out. Sneaking in at the back of one of the houses.

Once in the backyard, Cressida shines a small focused torchlight onto the door of the toilet. There’s a padlock hanging on a staple.

That wasn’t there before.

‘It’s been cut! With a bolt-cutter!’

Someone had padlocked it, then someone else had cut the lock open.

A quick look inside reveals no signs of occupation, except a screwed-up dirty handkerchief. But they have no time to search.

‘It was those two!’ Cressida whispers. ‘We’ve just missed them! Those out in the back alley!’

But when they go back to the passage the two drunks have disappeared.

'*He's got her!*'

Patrick sets off in pursuit, fired up now, upset for Cressie – who's come within inches of finding Ellie, and then lost her – *again*.

'Not that way! Back the way we came.'

Out in the main street not a soul is to be seen – at first. But there's another exit from the back alley, further along. And two figures, stumbling and apparently holding each other, emerge unsteadily into the street, a hundred yards away.

The moment they appear, a black car drives smoothly past them and pulls up in the darkest place between two streetlights. The two dark figures come briefly out of the shadows and approach the car. One of them bundles the other into the back, then gets in beside her.

Cressida holds herself motionless, peering, focusing. She can't be sure. Yet she *is* sure. *One of them is Ellie!*

Patrick wants to race to them and drag Ellie free. But Cressida knows there isn't time. She's concentrating now on getting a good look at the other one, the taller of the two, fixing a mental picture.

The car is driven off, and Cressida sighs deeply.

She sits on a low brick wall bordering someone's front garden. She's holding her head in her hands. Patrick is almost overwhelmed with concern. *Poor Cressie! Of course she's cast down!* He sits beside her, puts his arm around her shoulders, and wonders how he can cheer her.

She moves her hands from her face and he sees that she's grinning.

Why?

'Come on,' she says. 'It's a long walk.'

'Walk? Where? Where are we going now?'

'Home,' she says.

He's relieved, but mystified.

It's a very long way. And by now it's long past two in the morning. To Patrick, it seems as if a special kind of darkness has descended on them, endless and for ever. They will be swallowed

up, engulfed in a wilderness of almost identical wet streets, a poisonous and deadly labyrinth of evil.

Cressida recalls a late night, years ago, when she'd been out with Mr B, on a job, and he'd said to her: 'Never forget that in all these identical houses there are thousands of *perfectly innocent people* sleeping in their beds.'

She tells Patrick about this.

'But there's a problem,' she says. 'We're being followed.'

Patrick's heart sinks. But he 's a quick learner. He resists the temptation to turn around and look. 'How long?'

'Since we left the pub.'

'What are we going to do?'

'*This!*'

They round a corner, an ordinary right-angled turn, into a different street, with front gardens a-plenty, small, with shrubs and hedges. And impenetrable shadows.

She chooses the fourth garden along, at random. Crouching, they stare into the street.

Their follower hurries round the corner, and stops when he sees the emptiness ahead of him. He doesn't try searching the gardens. It would be an impossible task.

'*Shit!*' But he doesn't seem to be especially bothered by this setback

He gives up – but before he moves away he finds a cigarette and lights it with a lighter, unhurriedly illuminating his face for anyone to see.

To Patrick he seems like a thin and weaselly character, slinking guiltily away.

'Wait,' Cressida whispers to Patrick.

She makes them wait for more than ten minutes. His ankles and the backs of his knees are screaming with the strain of crouching tight and motionless all that time.

But their follower seems to have gone.

'Do you know who he was?'

'Yes,' she says. 'Tell you later.'

Unexpectedly, she pulls Patrick towards her and kisses him firmly, on the mouth. He is delighted – but confused. Too worn out to be aroused.

'Thank you,' she says. 'For everything.'

Tired and hungry, they reach her house at almost three in the morning.

*

Cressida closes the curtains, locks the door, and switches on the electric fire. Then she makes beans on toast, he poaches some eggs. They sit side-by-side close to her fire. It's very companionable, and rather joyous. Years later, Patrick will remember this as one of the happiest times of his life.

'Who was that? Who was following us?'

'He's called Toby Jugg.'

'*Who?*'

'He's a colleague. He works at the agency.'

'What . . ? Why would . . ?'

She explains. Toby Jugg must have had orders from Mr Zeppelin to keep an eye on her.

'That's why he lit a cigarette – he wanted me to see his face.'

'And the other one – the man who put Ellie in the get-away car?'

She smiles, as if she's in triumphant possession of a crucial secret. 'Oh, I know who *he* is! I recognised him as he was getting into the car. He is Mr Newcastle-Man, the one I told you about. I saw him once, in Charter Street. When Rebecca was with me.'

'What's Rebecca got to do with this?'

'He approached Rebecca in Newcastle, the day she bought those copper plates. Then, later, he appeared one afternoon in Codling Green, apparently he'd travelled there to see her. That seemed *very* strange to me!'

'And now he's got Ellie.'

'Yes. *And* he obviously has some kind of connection with Newcastle.'

‘If he also has a connection with number 57, wouldn’t he have taken Ellie back to the others, at their new house?’

‘You’re good at this. Perhaps he *did* do that.’

‘Why are you . . ?’

‘Why aren’t I depressed? Is that what you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘Because now I know who’s got her.’

‘But you don’t know what he intends to do. Or where he’s taken her.’

‘I think I *do* know. Both those things.’

But that’s all she says, and he has to be content with it. Perhaps, Patrick thinks, working so much with other people’s secrets gets a detective into a habit of making secrets of her own.

There’s no question of Patrick walking back to the Union Jack Club tonight. Anyway, the place will be locked up.

‘There’s probably an attendant who would let me in.’

‘But you wouldn’t be safe in the streets. We don’t know who else is out there.’

He sees the difficulty. She would have to go with him to keep him safe, contrary to a whole regiment of gender assumptions. And afterwards *he’d* then be worried about *her* going home on her own.

‘You could get a taxi back,’ he says.

‘Let’s not bother.’

There’s a spare bedroom, with a bed, made up and ready. He goes up first, wearily grateful for the prospect of sleep. He can’t clean his teeth because his toiletries are at the Union Jack Club, but he’s too tired anyway. Exhausted, almost to the point of confusion.

She stays downstairs for a while, kneeling on the floor, close to her fire. She’s thinking about Patrick, recalling how sensible and brave he’d been. All that violence was entirely alien to his nature.

She thinks of Myluv too, and Patrick’s notion that he’s a woman.

But mostly she’s thinking about the man who’d taken Ellie. And how she knows what he plans to do, and how wonderful that feeling of understanding is! It’s what keeps detectives going – that heady triumphant *knowing*, when everything comes together and the whole picture is starting to become clear.

*

Patrick's mind is so full of images of the night that he tosses around in the bed, without sleep, without rest. As daylight begins to return, he falls asleep at last, and dreams confusedly of Cressida kissing him.

Cressida, however, sleeps well and deeply all the rest of the night.

They wake up late, have breakfast late, and get dressed late.

'Will you come to Liverpool Street with me? See me off?'

But she has things to do. 'No. But I'll probably come down to Cuckoo Farm tomorrow. I'll see you then.'

'I could wait till tomorrow and we could travel together.'

But he's told her his intention with regard to Rebecca. 'No,' she says. 'There are things you want to do. You've already lost the first day of your leave. You should go today.'

He's not satisfied. 'What things have you got to do?'

'I'll tell you tomorrow, when I've done them.'

As soon as he's gone she begins her work. She consults a list of the nearest hospital emergency departments, and she sets about visiting them, in turn, on foot. At the third, she's cheered to see a police vehicle in the car-park, and the receptionist is immediately on edge when Cressida asks about a newly-admitted patient called Ellie Basset.

'Ward D24,' she says. Then she stops herself. 'I'm afraid she's not allowed visitors.'

As soon as the receptionist is preoccupied with something else, Cressida sets off in search of Ward D24. She becomes invisible. She's good at that, there are corridors and corners everywhere.

D24 is a small side-ward. And there's a woman police constable on duty at the door.

Satisfied, Cressida leaves. *No further action needed.*

There's one more thing to be done. She walked miles last night, with Patrick. So this time she takes a taxi to Mark Avenue – where she sees two police-cars parked outside number 26, and a constable

on duty at the front door. And then to Charter Street, where she finds that number 57 is also a crime-scene now.

She breathes a final sigh of relief and asks the taxi-driver to take her home.

It's late in the afternoon now. She's exhausted. She is, of course, relieved by what she has found out this morning. But she's also a little depressed – and her thoughts go back to Patrick.

He'd told her his plan. He intends to have a show-down with Rebecca. Once and for all! Not a *quarrel*, he tells her, but he wants to know if they are back to normal now. He's determined to make her commit herself.

'The way we used to be,' he said.

'When she was ten?' Cressida asked.

She was challenging him. But he hadn't noticed.

'I need to *know*!' he said.

Thinking about Patrick and Rebecca, she makes herself a meal, and goes early to bed.

She remembers his words, earlier. *You have to do things together. That's what makes a relationship.*

*

At Cuckoo Farm, as several of them are sitting in the afternoon sun, they hear someone approaching around the side of the house.

It's Zoe, with a wheelbarrow.

On the barrow, lying on a large dry potato-sack protecting her from bruising, is the bronze mermaid, in need of a scrub, stained black and brown, and gleaming a little in the sunlight.

'I've bought her,' Zoe tells them. 'They sold her to me for five pounds.'

Astonishment all round. 'Did you have your money with you?'

'No. They asked if I had any savings. And I told them I had just over five pounds. After tea, I have to go back and take the money. And the barrow.'

12

Consequences

While he'd been winding up his Newcastle business, there'd been a lot to occupy Mr Steadman's attention. But as the months passed by he had less to do, and more time to think. He found himself puzzling – over and over – about Lot 210. And about the girl who bought it, and the man who bought some of it back from her. And that same girl's puzzling visit, later, to interview him.

He's baffled by the strangeness of it all – including the fact that a young soldier had intervened and humiliated him on her behalf. Where had he come from? Did he know the girl? *What had been going on that day?*

As the months passed, and his business affairs were finally being wound up, he found himself increasingly preoccupied by this. His mind was empty now, he had little else to think about. He's become almost obsessed by this mystery, and by the suspicion – which he can't shake off – that he's been cheated in some way. Or even that he might be in some kind of danger.

Fear destroys his peace of mind and makes him angry. There is nothing storm-like in his rage, no thunder and lightning. He's not that kind of person. There's no volcanic boiling fury, hidden deep and swelling with increasing intensity towards a violent eruption. Just a suspicion, an undefined inward landscape, featureless, with clouds lowering, spreading, darkening.

He's full of suspicion, hard, determined and cold.

He'd begun by consulting one of his former staff, a foreman, who told him about Mrs Mummery, from accounts.

But Mrs Mummery had been no use at all. She'd simply confirmed what he already knew. Except for the information about this man called William Blake.

He assumed this must be a living person, and he wasted weeks trying to trace him. Eventually, he found out that Blake was a poet, dead long ago. So he bought a copy of the *Songs* and tried reading one or two of them. They made no sense. What had they to do with

him? Or with his printing business? He's rich enough to buy up half of Newcastle – yet he can't understand these so-called *Songs*. What is special about them? What makes them *literature*?

He contrived a conversation with his solicitor. He didn't arrange a consultation – he'd have had to pay for that. Instead, he talked to him informally at a civic function. Over drinks, after the speeches and the meal.

'When she bought that lot, she knew something I didn't. Doesn't that entitle me to some redress?'

The solicitor had barely concealed his irritation. He told Mr Steadman bluntly that he could see no impropriety in the transaction that had taken place at the auction. 'Nothing at all!'

But Mr Steadman persisted. 'But surely . . .'

'My dear chap, we can talk more formally – and more fully – if you'd like to make an appointment. But I can tell you now that you'll be wasting your time.'

'Why are you so sure?'

'You offered this item at a *public sale*; she was the highest bidder; she paid for it; and – even if she didn't keep her receipt – there was a crowd of witnesses to the transaction. It's a very minor and ordinary thing, and it happens up and down the country a thousand times a day. All perfectly normal and legal! And as the new owner she was entitled to do exactly what she liked with it.'

'She did that deal *before* she collected her receipt from the office.'

'Fiddle-faddle! She'd bought it. She owns it.'

'There must be some way . . .'

'Give it up, that's my advice. Whatever was in that box, she is now the legal owner.'

Mr Steadman's face turned grey.

Since his retirement, he has felt himself to be smaller. Socially – even physically – he is a diminished version of his former self. A grey insubstantial half-ghost moving about, unnoticed, with no significance, no power, and not much to do.

He has come to accept that there's to be no help from the law. So he decided to make his own investigations.

He began with the young man who'd bought the rest of the lot and helped the girl at the auction. But he drew a blank. He could find no way of discovering who he was – and he was slightly troubled because he kept thinking he'd encountered him somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where or when it happened. This makes him nervous. *Who was he?*

But the girl herself? And the soldier?

He visited the Blue Tulip Guesthouse and asked the woman at reception – as pleasantly as he could – if he might have the addresses of the two young people who'd stayed at the guesthouse on that date.

She wanted to know why. And who he was. 'It was ages ago,' she pointed out.

He told her the girl was his niece, and she'd run away from home. 'Her parents are at their wits' end with worry. They've asked me to help.'

She was uncertain about what she should do in this situation. He was not the kind of man *she* would have turned to for help. But she did tell him they had separate rooms, on separate floors.

'They weren't sleeping together,' she said. 'I can always tell, pet.'

That habitual *pet* slipped swiftly and comfortably into her sentences – but it didn't mean she liked him. The reverse was true: she was extremely wary.

He listened with great attention, feigning concern. But she let him look at the addresses the two young guests had written in the visitors' book.

He came away in silent triumph.

But it didn't last. He wrote a letter to the commanding officer of No. 57 Training Regiment, Royal Artillery, near Rhyl, about the moral character of Bombardier Cuthbertson. He got a swift and sharp reply: the Army did not discuss its personnel with civilians.

But the girl? Her address was consistent with what she'd said when she visited him. But did that help him? Yes, it did, because he's come to feel this knowledge gives him a certain degree of power over her.

He knows now where she lives. He knows where she is. But he also knows he must be clear in his mind: what exactly does he want?

As the months have passed by, he has lost interest in the plates. And he no longer wishes to confront the girl and shout at her for her insolence and mendacity. No! – all he wants is to prevent her from deriving any further satisfaction from what she stole from him at that sale.

In his gloomy shadowed mindscape, a purpose is defining itself, embryonic and distant.

He goes into the centre of Newcastle and buys himself a road-map of East Anglia.

*

Cressida travels down to Norfolk on Monday morning, as planned. As she boards the train at Liverpool Street, she spots Mr Newcastle-Man, moving down inside.

Well, well! she thinks. She'd expected he'd be going to Norfolk too – but not that they'd be on the same train.

When he takes a seat at a table, she joins him, sitting opposite. Another of her impulses.

He seems not to be particularly surprised. He raises his eyebrows, and waits.

'Detective Sergeant Coulson,' Cressida says. 'Or are you a D.I.?'

'How did you find out my name?'

'Once I realised you were a cop it wasn't difficult.'

She holds out her hand, for a handshake. *Unusual!* he thinks – and takes it.

Cressida sees a nice-looking man, clean-cut, probably in his mid to late thirties. He has a look of straightforwardness about him, which she likes.

He's always taken it for granted that private detectives are a nuisance at best, sometimes a menace. Yet she's clearly an intelligent person, and she has played a part in this chapter of his professional life.

And she's a lovely-looking young woman. So, in spite of protocol, he feels he can trust her. At a primitive level, deeper than his understanding of himself, he'd like her to admire him, to be impressed by him.

'How long have you been on the case?' she says.

The carriage is almost empty and they feel free to talk. He tells her there was an earlier investigation into trafficking in Tyneside, by the Newcastle Police. It was a year or two ago and it came to nothing, with only a few minor villains convicted. But they'd made insufficient progress and they were short of staff, so the case was put on hold. However, they promoted him to detective inspector, and put him in charge of it.

'The thing is, pet, I was left to my own devices,' he says. 'I was promoted, but I was also side-lined, because coppers never feel that crimes against children are important. But I *was* given a free hand.'

He knew there'd been a trafficking link with London. And there was a similar investigation running in the Met. So he came south and liaised with the team.

'We got on well together. But we were still under-staffed, mind.'

'Why did you try to get to know Rebecca, at that auction in Newcastle?' *The big mystery!*

'That had nothing to do with the investigation, at first.'

He tells her he collects old tools. So he'd not been at the auction in his professional self, he was hoping to find something worth buying.

'I saw her, obviously going to bid for one of the boxes of tools. She was very attractive. She was the only woman there.'

He is open and honest about this.

'You wanted to chat her up?'

'Not quite *that*. But I was off-duty – and I *was* interested, like. She was amazing – she seemed totally fearless! I wanted to get to know her.'

'And . . ?'

'And then later I asked her to meet me for a drink – and she said she was too young. She was only seventeen.'

'So you . . ?'

‘I backed off. She was off-limits. Especially for a copper. So I tried to hide my surprise and we chatted until her train left. After that, I put her out of my mind. I never expected to see her again.’

‘But you did see her – you came down to Norfolk, and met her on the village green.’

‘Aye, I did. You see, pet, she’d told me she lived in a village called Codling Green, and I knew I’d come across that name somewhere before. And that’s when my private life crossed over into my work.’

Going through old paperwork one day, he’d found to his amazement that Codling Green was mentioned in the case records – as the home address of one of the traffickers’ possible victims.

‘A girl called Ellie Bassett?’

‘No. It was Ellie Bassett’s older sister. But there had to be a connection.’

So on his next visit to the Met he took a train out to Norfolk, to question Mrs Bassett. ‘And I had tea with young Rebecca.’

A few days went by, he tells her. It felt as if the investigation had stalled. ‘I kept an eye on your movements as far as possible,’ he tells her. ‘Including your day-trip to Newcastle.’

‘You know about that?’

‘Aye. I wasted a whole day on that – and cost the Tyneside Police a pointless railway fare!’

‘You followed me?’

She feels wrong-footed, and indignant. She prides herself on being highly-skilled at following people – but it hadn’t occurred to her to check in case someone else was following her.

He, on the other hand, is mystified. ‘*Why?*’ he says. ‘Why did you tail her all the way there – and then turn back and go home?’

‘I was worried she might be putting herself in danger.’

‘She struck me as pretty confident. Until she told me she was seventeen, I’d thought she was in her mid-twenties.’

‘I didn’t know she was going to meet Patrick there,’ Cressida says. ‘In fact, *she* didn’t know that either.’

‘But why did *you* go?’

‘She’s family,’ Cressida says. ‘I felt protective.’

‘Is there something in the air at Codling Green?’

‘Why?’

‘Well, you and your friend Rebecca are not exactly typical, are you, pet?’

‘You should meet the others!’ she says. ‘You put my young friend Rebecca into a bit of a flurry that afternoon in Codling Green.’

‘Aye, I know. I could see that, but I couldn’t tell her why I was there. It was very awkward.’

‘Did Mrs Bassett give you any useful information?’

‘Nothing I didn’t already know.’

‘The address of the London house?’

‘Aye.’

The Met had come up with several addresses, but the only one that seemed plausible was 57 Charter Street. He tells Cressida how he’d found an upstairs room-to-let, almost directly opposite. A *front* room. The Met couldn’t spare the resources for round-the-clock surveillance. She suspects he paid the rent himself.

‘And that’s how you came to be in the street the day I went there with Rebecca?’

‘Aye. I was mystified! I’d assumed Rebecca had no connection with this case – but there she was, with you, in that very street, trying to talk to one of the girls from number 57!’

‘So you had to find out who I was?’

‘Aye, I did. And you know how I tried to do that, I think.’

‘You followed me home one night. . .’

‘Aye, that’s right, pet. But not all the way. You gave me the slip.’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘Why didn’t you join the Police?’ he asks her. ‘You’d have been a great copper.’

‘*Never!*’ she says.

‘Better than wasting your time as a private dick!’

She changes the subject. ‘So how *did* you find out who I was?’

‘There was someone else very interested in you. I collared him – and found out who he was. And why he was tailing you.’

He can see from her face that she’s puzzled by this. He enjoys the moment: it’s the only time he’s told her something she didn’t

already know.

'His name is Jugg.'

'Ah! Of course! So Toby Jugg has been keeping a fatherly eye on me.'

'He didn't seem very fatherly to me, pet.'

'What did you do next?'

'I decided to take a risk.'

'What risk?'

'I called on number 57. As a punter.'

Cressida is impressed. 'Without back-up?'

'They wouldn't have given me back-up for that. In fact, they wouldn't have allowed it at all.'

'It could have been dangerous. What happened?'

'They offered me a choice of girls. All young. And I chose Ellie. I'd seen her once, with you and Rebecca – and it was clear that she was the girl from your village. Why else would you have tried to talk to her?'

'What happened?'

'Are you squeamish, pet?'

'Not a bit. But surely you didn't . . ?'

The sun is streaming upon them through the carriage window – warm, almost dazzling. They are both lit, illuminated, almost radiant. But the scene they have in their minds has expelled the light of the moment, throwing its shadows over every thought, every imagined gesture and utterance. For that few minutes, the sun's brilliance is powerless.

'We were put in an upstairs room, and I tried to explain to her. I *talked* to her.'

'Did she respond?'

'She was frozen with terror. I think she understood what I was saying – but I can't be sure, mind.'

D.I. Coulson stops there, for a moment. He has misgivings about that night. He tells the story, remembering, re-envisaging. She listens to it, imagining.

*

‘I’m going to play a little game,’ he’d whispered to Ellie. ‘And you have to join in.’

She waited. *What did he want her to do?*

‘It’s a pretend game. D’you know what pretending is?’

She nodded, urgently, anything to please him. He could see she was confused and tense.

‘I’m pretending that you don’t live here at all. I’m going to pretend that you live in a tiny place in Norfolk. Let’s pretend there’s a small village green there, where the kids play on summer evenings. There’s a swing, under a big tree. And you went to school there. It’s called Codling Green.’

He asked if she understood, and she nodded. But he suspected she hadn’t understood at all. And that she was even more scared than she’d been before.

‘Pretending is always *secret*. Did you know that? You must never breathe a word to anyone here about our little game.’

She was probably used to that idea. Keeping secrets.

‘And let’s pretend that I’m working under cover, to find out what goes on in this house.’

He waited for a response, got nothing. ‘There’s stuff I need to know. I need information, pet.’

He remembers she whispered a question. ‘Did my mum send you?’

*

‘But I’d made a bad mistake,’ he tells Cressida. ‘One side of the bedroom was kept in darkness, deliberately. I’d failed to spot . . .’

‘The one-way window?’ she says.

‘How the hell do you know about that?’ *A flash of anger!*

‘I’ve been there too.’ And before he can interrupt, she adds: ‘Not until after your cops had all left.’

‘How the hell am I going to square all this in my report? You shouldn’t have been anywhere near the place!’

She ignores that. ‘What did you do?’

He shakes his head, still disapproving. 'I had to get out fast. There was a man there, downstairs. I could hear him. He wasn't happy.'

'Yes,' Cressida says. 'Lucas.'

'Bloody hell! Is there anything you *don't* know?'

'Yes, lots.'

He draws a long breath, controlling his impatience. 'Anyway, I got out. *Fast!* But he was out of the front door pretty damn fast too.'

'What happened?'

'He was mystified, that's what happened! He expected to see me escaping in the street, or getting away in a car. But the street was completely empty, in both directions. The place where I had my digs was just across the road. I just had time to get inside the front porch.'

'It must have seemed uncanny to him,' Cressida says. 'Then what?'

'They scarpered! I'd not anticipated that. In a way, it was good because it meant we knew they had a lot to lose by staying put. But we had no idea where they'd gone. We were sure they'd get as far away as possible. We did search locally but without success. So we assumed they'd gone to Newcastle.'

'Stalemate,' Cressida says.

'Aye, it was. And it was my fault.'

When number 57 was abandoned, the crime scene people had found plenty of evidence of what the house had been used for. And evidence also of the young girls' part in this. They had enough to prove the house was used as a brothel, with under-age prostitutes.

Young girls, trafficked.

At that point, he explained, their investigation stalled. Time passed.

'Last week, the Met closed down number 57 as a crime-scene. But first they made one more forensic search – and I received a copy of their final report on Friday.'

'Had they found something?'

'The team missed nothing inside the house. Absolutely nothing! – but I spotted something in the paperwork. One young constable

had recorded that there was an outside toilet, in the back yard – which I already knew. But there was no record of anyone looking inside.'

'What did you do?'

'Well, I couldn't rest. I needed to have a look in that toilet. There might have been some small clue they'd missed. I couldn't get it out of my head. So I went back down to London the day before yesterday, on Saturday, to have another look. Unofficial, like. By the time I got there it was late at night. And the toilet was padlocked – but that police record had made no reference to a lock. I stood still for a few minutes, listening. Then I heard a movement inside.'

'You found her there?' Cressida knows this already – but not the details.

'Aye.'

'Did you speak to her?'

'Aye, I did, later – when I'd taken off the gag. His handkerchief was practically down her throat! She was too scared to talk at first, pet. Absolutely terrified. She didn't even know how long she'd been there.'

'She'd been there since Wednesday,' Cressida tells him.

Again, she's taken him by surprise. 'How do you know that?'

She gives him no answer. 'Did she know who'd locked her in? Was it Lucas?'

'Aye, Lucas.'

All stations in the Met are preoccupied on Saturday nights. But, eventually, long after midnight, D. I. Coulson got a car and a driver. And a bolt-cutter.

'Well, you know what happened then, pet. Because it was you in that back alley. I might have known! You and your boyfriend.'

'He's not my boyfriend.'

Ellie had been starving, dehydrated, helplessly shaking with cold. Her throat and neck were painful. Her whole mouth was sore. Her clothing was fouled. And she was terrified. He had to get her to hospital, as an immediate priority. She was unable to stand up on her own.

'If I'd had back-up, I'd have had you taken in for questioning, but I didn't. And my priority had to be the girl.'

Cressida is thinking fast, putting together his narrative. 'But you did round them all up?'

'Aye, we did – at their new house in Mark Avenue. At the hospital, Ellie could hardly speak at all – but she did manage to tell us the new address. And the Met was terrific. Lucas and the woman were under lock and key, and charged. Before breakfast.'

Cressida had known that would happen. 'What about the children?'

'I took Ellie to the nearest A&E. The rest were taken into care. Local authority, or foster-homes, I don't know which. Including two wee boys. But Ellie is in a side-ward, with police protection. There's a WPC on duty there.'

'*That's* why I'll never join the police,' Cressida says.

He doesn't understand.

'Because that's what Women Police Constables get to do!'

'It's the way things are, pet.'

'Were any of the girls over eighteen?' she asks him.

'No. One was thirteen. Most were eleven or twelve.'

'One was called Norma.' Cressida recalls her meeting with the drunken punter that night. It was Norma he'd wanted so badly. The shock of it strikes her again. She wonders if she's going to be sick.

'How the hell did you know that?' he asks her. 'Were you wrong about *anything*?' There's a touch of sarcasm in his tone.

'Yes, I was. I thought you were one of the bad guys.'

But there's something bothering Cressida. Something neither of them had faced.

She checks again that no one else can hear. 'What about the little boys?' she asks him.

'They went into care too,' he says.

'But why were they *there*? What would anyone want with *little boys – in a brothel*?'

'It's best not to ask,' he says quietly.

She shouts in her mind: *No it is **not**!* But she knows he's not going to help her. So the slippery secret slides away again, into the

dark.

He changes the subject. 'When did you realise I was the law?'

'It was the car,' she tells him.

'What made you so sure?'

'Everything about it – not just it's highly polished appearance – but the timing, the way it slid to a stop. And the way it drove off. It absolutely signalled a police job.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes. It was just a hunch – but I was pretty sure I was right. But what happens now?'

'Well, there's plenty to do, pet. We still have to locate the other gang in Newcastle.'

'Any leads?'

'No, nothing. We need an address.'

'You could try this,' she says. She takes from her wallet the scrap of paper she'd been given by the drunken would-be punter at Number 57.

'*Stranroar Street.* Ever heard of it?'

'No.'

Then, after a few moments' thought: 'But there's an estate in Newcastle where all the streets are named after Scottish ports. This could be *Stranraer* Street.'

'You could check it.'

'I will. How did you get hold of this?'

'We private detectives have our methods,' she says. He knows she's laughing at him.

'Thank you,' she says, pointedly.

'What are you thanking me for?'

'I'm just hinting that *you* might like to thank *me*.'

'Well, you have been a help, I admit.'

They talk, non-stop, all the way to Norwich, growing friendlier with each mile, outstripping the darkness. As the train crawls past the Carrow Road football stadium and into the station, he asks her if she'll meet him for a meal one evening. Back in London.

This one's not off-limits.

'Sorry,' she says. 'And thanks. But no.'

‘Ah, well! You’re spoken for?’

‘Yes. I am.’

*Though nothing has been **spoken** at all.*

*

Fresh from her conversation on the train, Cressida reached Cuckoo Farm in time for a quick lunch. And now she and Rebecca are strolling alongside the river, with Zoe tagging along.

There’s a strangeness in the afternoon, a pressure in the air, slightly uncomfortable.

This doesn’t feel like an ordinary Monday. *It feels like a bank holiday*.

The heat of the day perhaps. It’s crept up on them.

The river-bank path isn’t wide enough for three. Zoe goes a few yards ahead, turning from time to time and walking backwards so as not to miss what the others are saying. But when they reach the place where she’d swum with the mermaid, there’s a wider grassy space, and they stand for a few moments, watching the water’s unhurried turbulence, at the point where the smaller river meets the big one.

Feeling buoyant, Cressida has been telling them about Ellie, and what had been going on.

‘Is that the Great Ouse?’ Cressida asks.

A little ahead of them, the tributary joins the big river. It’s wide, and grey, and straight. It doesn’t flow, there are no waves, no ripples. It just presses onward.

‘Yes,’ Zoe says. ‘And from here it’s not far to the sea,’

‘The sea! The sea!’ Cressida says quietly. ‘The mermaid-filled sea!’

But she wonders if she’s struck a wrong note. Usually, she’s in tune with people, and avoids hurting them with careless words. She’d not intended to mock Zoe and her mermaids.

Her morning buoyancy has vanished. Everything she does this afternoon seems slightly off-balance, slightly misjudged. Her remark about mermaids has defined her as an outsider.

So when they turn back towards the village – even more slowly now – it's Zoe and Rebecca walking in front, and Cressida on her own, following behind. She's noticed that whenever there's a group of three, one is usually slightly excluded. She feels as if she's been very lightly – and probably unconsciously – banished. And the other two, ahead of her, are talking so softly that she overhears only fragments of what they're saying.

'Was this the place?'

There's a reply, but inaudible.

Then – 'Did she . . ?'

Silence then, for a while, as they walk on. And then she hears a mention of Catherine Blake. And there's something that sounds like 'red ochre'. *Did* one of them say that?

The banished outsider has turned into an eavesdropper. She feels unaccountably depressed.

She knows she might have imagined those fleeting words. *What has Catherine Blake to do with mermaids?* And then Zoe says quite clearly into the oppressive heat of the afternoon: 'It won't happen again. I know it won't. Ever!'

They stop then, take off their shoes and sandals, and sit in a row on the grassy river-edge with their feet in the water.

Rebecca is usually uncommunicative about the Blake plates, but today she tells them about the misgivings that have been troubling her thoughts for weeks.

'I really want them to be authenticated,' she says slowly. '*But what will happen afterwards?*'

They wait. Their feet are cool in the water but the heat hums around them like a swarm of invisible bees, and the purple sky beats down.

'If they are really William Blake's own plates, where can I put them? How can I keep them safe? People will want to come and see them, scholars will want to spend hours studying them. Hundreds of them, probably!'

Zoe has already thought about this. Not deeply, she's only ten – but she's grown up with an acceptance of the importance of libraries

and archives in academic life. Cressida hasn't considered it at all, but she's beginning to understand Rebecca's dilemma.

'What are your options?' she says.

'I can sell them. Or I can keep them myself. Or I can donate them to a museum or a gallery.'

Their words float under the heavy sky looming over them, there's not the slightest stir of air, not even over the river. Cressida feels like a different being, like a visitor among them, who belongs somewhere else.

'I know what Mrs Blake would say,' Zoe says.

Cressida thinks she must have mis-heard. Rebecca is immediately attentive.

'How?'

'She told me.'

'You saw her?'

'No. I heard her voice.'

'Here? By the river?'

'No. In bed, waking up one morning.'

'What did she say?'

'She said the plates had been hidden long enough.'

'Was that all?'

'She also said William was an untidy man, always making a mess.'

Hours seem to pass.

'You heard this? You actually *heard* the words?'

'Yes.'

'Did she say anything else?'

'No.'

'How did you know it was Catherine Blake speaking?'

'I don't know how I knew. I just did.'

Cressida – again – feels excluded from this troubling and oppressive sense of enchantment. This is all alien to her. Just as her prolonged and difficult investigation has been concluded successfully – at a time when she might at last have expected to feel jubilant and at peace with the world – she finds that everything is unaccountably edgy, off-key, tense.

*What's **wrong** with me today?*

And Rebecca? What about her? In the oppressive heat of the afternoon, she lies back on the soft grass, her feet still in the water, her upper body stretched out on the ground. As she stares up into the blue-bruised clouds assembling above them, she hears it – faint but with perfect clarity: the soft and sticky sound of a printed sheet of paper as it's carefully peeled from the inked plate – envisioned once in William Blake's workshop, witnessed often in Jessica's father's.

Cressida has never had a psychic experience. She's not an unbeliever, but she is a doubter. She would like to ask questions. What had Catherine Blake said to Zoe? Were the words actually formulated? Had Zoe understood it? Or had she *interpreted* it? Or even *made it up*? Is it just Zoe-nonsense, like her mermaids?

Then everything changes. They become aware that someone is approaching along the river-path from the village. It's Patrick, striding purposefully towards them. He'd arrived at the Farm the day before, after his night-time adventures with Cressida.

But now, everything is altered. Patrick is a man among the women, and the dynamics are changing. Ambiguity and psychic uncertainty vanish in an instant.

There's a sense of purpose. Patrick is going to make something happen.

Cressie and Rebecca stand facing him. Zoe stays at the water's edge, with her feet still paddling. He gives Cressida a look, as if to say *you'll understand what I'm about to do*. And she does understand. He intends to have it out with Rebecca, finally. He's going to do it now.

So why is Cressida's heart racing?

Patrick's plan is to confront Rebecca and make her define, once and for all, what the two of them are. He can't bear the uncertainty, her on-and-off pleasure in being with him. He wants her to commit to a return to the companionship they had when they were children, total and perfect. But he has a young man's capacity for self-delusion. He has a purpose certainly, but it's misguided and ambiguous. He doesn't need to go back, he needs to go *forward*.

And despite what he says, he wants her to go with him. As a woman, not a girl.

He's confused about this, but Cressida sees it all – his trust in the power of words, his confidence that he can articulate their situation into a clear and logical explanation. And Rebecca will – she *must* – understand it as he understands it. And everything will be all right. She sees his determination: this encounter with Rebecca must be conclusive and uncompromising. A final settling of their long-ago quarrel, one way or the other.

And it's all such nonsense!

There are brief greetings. But there's an unasked question: *Are we going to walk on together?*

Cressida – generous as always, but dispirited – says to Zoe: 'Come on, Zoe! We're not needed here. We should leave them to it.'

Zoe would rather stay with Rebecca and Patrick. But she just nods, and picks up her sandals.

As the two of them set off towards the village, Cressida is tempted to look back. Instead, she turns brightly to Zoe and engages her in a conversation about what it was like to be a child living in a Cambridge college.

As Zoe chats, Cressida is changing her plans. She needs to talk to Mrs Bassett in the village, this afternoon. That's one of the things she came down for. But after that – instead of spending the night at the Farm, as she'd planned – she'll get an earlier train back to London.

Cuckoo Farm is not the place where she wants to be. Not just now.

She looks back once as they approach the village. She can see Patrick and Rebecca, tiny in the distance. A colossal purple darkening of sky is intensifying above them, behind them.

How small they look.

*

Cressie – sad at heart, but resolute – knocks on Mrs Bassett's cottage door in the village. There is a long delay, but eventually she hears slow footsteps inside.

'Sorry,' Mrs Bassett says. 'I was having a little nap, to tell you the truth. Come on in.'

Inside, a pot of tea, but no cakes this time, no apple tarts.

First, Cressida must know that she's free to talk about this. 'Has D.I. Coulson spoken to you?'

She speaks gently, aware that this situation needs carefully chosen words.

'Yes, he has. He was here earlier. He come down all this way just to tell me.'

'About Ellie?'

There is a long pause, and a deep sigh. Or perhaps a big intake of breath as she braces herself.

'Yes, he told me where Ellie's bin and what she's bin doing at that house in London.'

Cressida dimly sees what it must mean to a mother to be told these things.

'I don't think she's been doing *that*,' she says.

Mrs Bassett understands. 'Well, I hope you're right. He also said it was you that found her.'

That was generous of him.

Mrs Bassett – sitting straight-backed and firm in her chair – says: 'And he thinks she'll be coming back to me as soon as she's out of hospital.'

'That's good news,' Cressida says.

'Yes, that is! Poor Ellie, what she must have bin through! I've missed her, y'know.'

'And Mr Bassett – what about him?'

Mrs Bassett sighs deeply. 'He's disappeared. Living in hiding somewhere, or roaming around. The police are looking for him.'

'They'll find him, eventually,' Cressida says.

'I hope they don't find him dead in a ditch somewhere. But if he does turn up, he'll go to jail.'

'Yes, I think he will.'

‘ – for selling his daughters for sex.’

Her chin is raised, her face is taut, stretched and tensed with amazement and distress. Cressida can see that the word *trafficking* would have been beyond her. The detective-inspector would have had to spell out its meaning.

‘Yes,’ Cressida says. ‘There’ll be a trial.’

‘So I understand. The detective wasn’t sure if I’d have to go and give evidence.’

‘I think you probably will have to. How do you feel about that?’

‘I’d be scared stiff! I een’t ever bin to London, let alone inside a courtroom! But if they summon me I shall hev to go.’

There it is again. Something Cressida has often seen in the people around Codling Green – a deep patient resignation, learned and passed down through generations of peasant life, all the way from the Norman conquest.

She knows that Mrs Bassett might be charged too – with negligence or even collusion. ‘Well, she *was* complicit,’ D.I. Coulson had said on the train. She decides to say nothing about that unless it comes up.

‘He’ll have to stay in prison until the trial,’ Cressida says.

‘And afterwards?’

‘If he’s found guilty, he’ll definitely go to jail.’

‘How long for?’

‘I don’t know. I think it will be a longish sentence. But I don’t know what will happen after that.’

‘I *do* know,’ Mrs Bassett says. ‘That police inspector told me. There’ll be a court order.’

Cressida had been wondering about this.

‘He’s also going to be charged with *sexual assault*.’

‘Against?’

Mrs Bassett whispers her answer. ‘Against his own daughter! Here, in this house!’

Clearly D I Coulson had not minced his words. And this woman has the courage to understand and speak them.

‘My Ellie! Can you believe it?’

‘Did you suspect?’ Cressida asks gently.

'No, no! But how could such a thing happen without me knowing? How could I *not* know – but I *didn't*!'

Everything is in her face. Her body posture has remained fixed, held firm and ramrod-stiff. But her face is grim and mobile – Cressida can hardly look her in the eyes.

'Why didn't Ellie tell me?'

'I think he must have threatened her.'

'He also said something about *attempted murder* but I didn't understand that.'

Cressida explains about the locked toilet. Mrs Bassett stares in confusion.

'Your husband had nothing to do with that,' she says. 'That was someone else.'

'But Ellie had something to do with it – she was in the bloody toilet!'

'Yes, she was.'

But what about the little boy? What about the darkness *he'd* been taken into? *Does she know? Or suspect?* Can it be told? Cressida knows she is powerless to explain it, she doesn't understand it herself. It remains unsayable, unspeakable.

Even now.

She decides to let Mrs Bassett's knowledge set the pace.

'So I shan't see my poor old man no more?'

'Well, after he's done his time, and when your little boy is grown up . . .'

Mrs Bassett is dismissive of that long-term consolation.

'What use is that to me? Me and my little boy are going to be homeless in a couple of weeks.'

Cressida had not expected this. *Why will she be homeless?*

'This is a tied cottage. That belongs to the farmer, and that goes with the job. He's already bin to see me, as soon as the news got out that Charlie had cleared off, he come round here and told me.'

'What will you do?'

'I dunno. I really have no idea.'

What will happen to her? Cressida wonders. She's probably around forty, far too young to qualify for a state pension. With no

job, and no home.

Cressida knows nothing about such things. At the front door, as she turns back to say good bye, Mrs Bassett says: 'I can't stop thinking about my poor old Charlie. With all those horrible wicked thoughts inside his head! The shame. And the guilt. How he must have suffered! And I never *knew*!'

Cressida has an acute understanding – sudden and entirely new to her – of the great bedrock of forgiveness and patience that can be found in people. Perhaps that too comes from a thousand years of peasant life.

Mrs Bassett is staring out across the village green, blankly, unseeing. The school bell has just rung, and a small crowd of infants has come out of the main door, squinting in the sunlight.

One of them – *I don't even know his name!* – races across to the cottage, dodges around Cressida, and stops by his mother, standing still, with one arm around her leg.

Has damage already been done? Cressida wonders.

'If you do have to go to court, I'll go with you if you'd like me to.'

'Thank you, that's kind. I don't think I'll be able to bear to look into his face.'

'And if you'd like to visit Ellie in hospital, I'll find out if it's allowed. If it is, I'll go with you there too.'

As she is taking her leave, there's a cataclysmic boom of thunder immediately above her head, followed by a prolonged and menacing roar, subsiding slowly. The bus to Norwich is pulling up on the opposite side of the green.

Cressida had planned to visit Miss Babbington too, but she can't face it. *I'll write to her,* she thinks.

She races across the grass and clambers into the bus just as the first heavy drops are falling.

I need to get out of this place.

*

Zoe's father is half-expected to arrive, to stay for a few days. *Half*-expected because he might have to stand in for a colleague who is unwell.

Zoe is resigned, she's used to these uncertainties. 'He might not come at all,' she says sadly. The new academic year has just started. It's always a busy time.

They're sitting outside, in their own private sunny spot.

'By the way, a parcel arrived for you,' Aunt Polly says.

A parcel?

It is tightly wrapped, with a Cambridge postmark, addressed to Zoe. With hurrying fingers, she undoes the knotted string and pulls open the brown paper wrapping. There is a note inside.

> *I finally got round to sorting Professor Dougal's belongings. One of them was this, and he wanted you to have it. I decided to post it in case I'm not able to come. Love, Dad.*
>
> *P.S. I'm still <u>expecting</u> to come.*

Wondering, she pulls away huge amounts of cotton-wool wrapping and finds what lies safely inside. It is a perfect statuette of a mermaid, about eight inches high. There is a flat rectangular base of white stone, and the mermaid stands on that – on the tip of her tail, coiled at the bottom. Her upper body is in smooth white stone, crisp and sharp. But from her navel down to the end of her tail, she is enamelled in luminescent purple, green, blue and silver.

She stands with her head back, her breasts raised, and her arms lifted above her. She is joyous, triumphant, and queenly.

Zoe is enraptured. *Oh!* she thinks. *How lovely!* And then she looks at the mermaid's face. And the tiny perfect ears. *It's **her**!* she thinks*. It's **my** mermaid!* But how can that be?

'It's exactly like her!' she whispers.

She's so entranced that she doesn't notice (until later, recollecting) that Aunt Polly's reply is surprising. 'Yes, it's *exactly* like her,' she says.

Zoe's mind is full of questions. She's looking at the base, which has a three-inch flat projection extending forward from the bottom

of the mermaid's curled tail. It's like a tiny carved shelf, with a small hole carefully carved or drilled down into the middle of it. She looks up at her aunt, puzzled and excited.

'Run and get her!' Aunt Polly says.

Zoe races off to her aunt's studio, and back out again. In her hand is the miniature sculpture of the little girl kneeling, with the strange plug carved underneath her. Zoe has pulled off the plasticene.

Back in the garden, she fits the girl into her place on the base of the mermaid. The little projection underneath the kneeling child slips snugly into the neatly carved hole in front of the mermaid, and they become one.

'Perfect fit!' Zoe whispers.

She feels at that moment that intricate knots and tight tangles inside her are coming loose and free. It feels like a kind of magic. Something has been restored and put right. Made complete.

A perfect fit. The young kneeling girl is gazing up in adoration and joy at the mermaid standing before her. And the mermaid looks exactly as if she's enjoying a moment of delighted triumph.

'You'd better keep them in your bedroom,' Aunt Polly says.

But things of beauty are always in peril. And works of art are always in danger of destruction, through malice or neglect. Charlie Bassett has been on the run for several days now. He's been living rough, sleeping during daylight hours and searching at night for food. He has no plan, no sense of purpose, no destination of any kind. He is gripped by the darkness inside him and driven by hunger. And fear.

He doesn't know what he's doing, he doesn't know why he does what he does. He's lost his grasp on orderly thought. And, seeing these two people at a garden table – the woman, seated, and the girl placing some object on the table-top – he is gripped by a sudden overwhelming fury.

They are *so* contented, *so* safe, so radiant in the afternoon sunlight, that he is seized by a lust for destruction. To *shatter* them, *smash* them to pieces.

What Zoe and Aunt Polly see is a strange man shambling towards them, unkempt, in dirty clothes, his gaunt face and staring eyes intent upon hurting someone.

Aunt Polly is fearless. 'Who are you?' she demands, as she squares up to him.

For Zoe, time almost stops, waiting to reveal what he will do. *Is he going to hurt us?*

Slowly, slowly, like a slow-motion dream unfolding, Charlie Bassett bends his body at the waist, stretches out his right arm, seizes the double statuette in his fist, and raises it into the air. The eyes of Aunt Polly and Zoe follow as it is brandished above their heads. They are appalled, mesmerised, unable to move.

The stranger, with the mermaid in his right hand, turns round with such agonising slowness that it should have been possible to stop him. But time is stuck in invisible glue, and they're unable to push their way through the evening air, trapped in the same unbearable sluggish dream. The little kneeling girl falls off and tumbles unhurt onto the grass. Floating slowly down.

He raises his right arm behind and above his shoulder. Takes aim. Swings it round.

Facing him is the big end wall of the barn, the gable-end, four hundred years old, built of red bricks. There are two windows in it. One of them is Zoe's bedroom window and, in the middle of this strangeness, she has sufficient time to think *Oh! He's going to smash my window!*

But it's the figurine he wants to smash, he doesn't care about the window. Why is he so *angry*? Zoe has never seen anyone so angry. He adjusts the swing of his arm. Aims for the wall, about ten feet above the ground. Opens his fingers at exactly the right moment. Releases the statuette.

All his rage, all his horror at the darkness inside him, all that concentrated violence drives that throw. The mermaid leaves his hand at approximately eighty miles an hour.

In dreams, people turn up unexpectedly and we're not surprised by their appearance. Round the corner Zoe's dad arrives – and it

would seem normal in a dream. But this is not a dream. He's really there.

Dr Whittaker, carrying a small suitcase in his left hand, is a keen cricketer. He played for his school, his college, and his regiment during the war. His special skill is fielding, and he is always placed close to the batsman. At mid-off mostly. Sometimes at *silly*-mid-off, which is even closer. And particularly dangerous if a ball hits you on the head at around eighty miles an hour. He fields in that position because of his quick reactions. He's known for them.

So when he sees an object about to be hurtled through the air towards the brick wall beside him, his response is immediate, based on hours and hours of concentrated cricketing. It has to be immediate, because he has approximately 0.7 seconds before the mermaid arrives. He has around 0.1 of a second to estimate the speed of the missile. And make allowances for the falling trajectory caused by gravity.

Even slow motion cannot reveal that exact and complex computing. Motor neurons and electrical impulses deal with it. Between eye and brain, and between brain and muscles. He stretches out his right arm, opens his fingers, relaxes his hand to receive the flying object. Realises his reach is not enough. Does an additional sum, and raises his body on his right foot, briefly leaving the ground in a precisely-judged sideways leap, his other hand (carrying his small suitcase), waving in the air for counterbalance.

Every catch ever made is the result of an instant reaction to a fast-moving geometrical problem of baffling complexity.

Dr Whittaker's judgements are computed with perfection. The body's grasp of its own leverage, weight, and counterweight has functioned well. His hand meets with precise and perfect accuracy the speeding object in its flight. It is at the right place and at exactly the right moment to prevent it from smashing to bits against the wall of the barn. His fingers close upon it, safely.

There might have been a difficulty. A cricket ball has no projections. The statue does. Luckily, it does not spin in the air, it approaches Dr Whittaker's outstretched arm in more or less the same relative position – upright. If it had arrived headfirst, either of

the mermaid's up-raised hands would probably have pierced the palm of his hand.

End of slow motion.

Zoe sees her dad drop his case, and hurriedly transfer the statuette to his other hand so that he can inspect the one that's smarting. He rubs it on the side of his trousers to ease the sting.

Only then does he look to see what he's caught. *Two days ago*, he thinks in surprise, *I wrapped this up and posted it!*

Charlie Bassett, bitter and defeated, rambles off into the wood behind Cuckoo Farm, muttering words they can't quite hear.

'Who in God's name was that?'

Aunt Polly thinks she knows who he must be. 'I must phone the police,' she says, and hurries off.

In the recovering quiet of the evening, with her arms triumphantly raised, and her head lifted in joy, the mermaid stands safely on the garden table again, reunited with the little kneeling girl, gazing up at her.

'Look!' Zoe says to her father. 'They fit perfectly.'

'Good lord!' he says. 'So they do!'

Aunt Polly returns. 'Well,' she says to Zoe, 'your dad has his uses, after all.'

'Sometimes,' Zoe says.

13

Resolutions

A couple of weeks later, in the shadows of a shop-door in Maidenhead, a man and a woman are standing, close, in the dark. He has his hands around her throat. Cressida has her right knee poised at his groin. They are in a street on the edge of the town centre. Passers-by, glancing in, assume they are lovers.

She is powerless to force his hands from her neck, but one determined push with her knee will disable him, long enough. The locked and bolted door is behind him, so he won't be able to bend his body back from her thrust.

Each has power over the other.

Stalemate.

But he has a small advantage. She's standing on one leg. It will eventually tire, and she will have to lower the other one. She considers her options – the fingers of one hand at his eyes, perhaps, while the other grabs his genitals.

'Break?' he says. 'On the count of three.'

She forces a nod against the grip of his hands. She is especially aware of the placing of his thumbs. She knows that he knows what he's about.

'One – two – *three*.'

He removes his hands from her throat, she lowers her raised foot to the ground. They move a few inches apart.

'You *are* good,' he says, as if confirming what he'd been told.

What happens now?

'Drink?' He nods towards a pub on the corner, opposite.

Ten minutes later, they're seated, facing each other across a small round table. They each have a beer, and pie-and-chips have been ordered at the bar. He's paying – and since he was the aggressor, she's not going to argue.

'You hurt my throat,' she says.

'I'm a bit out of practice.'

She looks ironically surprised.

‘Oddly enough,’ he says, ‘we don’t make a habit of strangling people.’

‘*We?*’

He doesn’t provide an answer to this implied query. So she asks a more specific one. ‘Why are you interested in me?’

‘Because you and I are both interested in Jasper.’

‘Who do you work for?’

Is he one of Myluv’s unknown protectors?

He hesitates, just a second or two. ‘M.I.5,’ he says. ‘What about you?’

‘If you’re in M.I.5,’ she says, ‘you will already know who I work for.’

‘Of course. But you’re not working for Mr Zeppelin on this one. This is freelance. And private.’

She concedes.

‘So why,’ he says slowly, ‘are you interested in our Jasper?’

‘I followed him to Maidenhead to see where he lives. And anything else I might be able to find out.’

‘But why?’

‘Because he’s interested in Olivia. Your colleague.’

He will know this already. No need to spell it out.

‘But why,’ he asks, ‘is Olivia a matter of concern to *you*?’

‘She’s family.’

This seems to puzzle him. ‘Literally?’ he says. ‘Biologically?’

‘No. But she and her sister brought me up.’

‘So you’re simply honing your considerable skills in some domestic snooping.’

Ow!

‘Tell me more.’

The pie-and-chips have arrived. They set to, both eating greedily. Hunger, she has found, is one of the biggest difficulties when you’re tailing someone. Another is toilets.

But she has no intention of giving him more information.

‘So why is M.I.5 concerned about Olivia and Jasper?’

He stares at her, mid-mouthful. ‘Because,’ he says eventually, ‘Jasper has just got back from a trip to the Soviet Union. And since

he's just hired a private tutor to polish up his Russian, he's probably planning another.'

Cressida conceals her surprise at the direction this conversation is taking.

'A week in St Petersburg?' she says. 'Innocently selling diamonds to soviet millionaires?'

'No,' he says. 'A week in Moscow. Including a visit to the Kremlin.'

'But still possibly just selling diamonds to rich commies,' Cressida says.

She feels a longing to be back in Mr Zeppelin's homely office, dealing with safe and harmless enquiries of fraud, or sexual misconduct. She has no desire to be involved in anything that happens in the frozen and hostile landscapes of the Cold War.

'I'll drive you back to town,' he says. 'I know where you live.'

'No,' she says. 'I'll go by train.'

'I'll drive you to the station then.'

'It's only two streets away. I'd rather walk.'

*

Rebecca receives a letter from the Print Room at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

> Dear Miss Meredith,
>
> I am pleased to inform you that we have now received reports from all the institutions, and the one individual scholar, we consulted concerning the authenticity of the Blake copper plates you left in our charge.
>
> We are drafting a summary of their reports, and we believe you will find this encouraging.
>
> Please telephone to arrange a time when it would be convenient for you to visit us to receive copies of all the

statements, and to take back the copper plates you kindly loaned to us, and which have now been returned.

Yours sincerely,

Maximilian Waller-Dixon.

What do they mean, *encouraging*? She doesn't want to be encouraged, she wants to be *told* – plainly – yes or no.

All her months of waiting and speculating are coming to an end. She has been – she knows this – almost obsessed. By the plates, by William himself, and by Catherine, by printing and inking and water-colouring. And by the *Songs* and their shifting multiple meanings.

'It's not the future of the plates that bothers me,' Jess says to her. 'It's *your* future!'

After A Levels, Rebecca could have got a job. Or she could by now be in her second year at a university. But, instead, she's kept her life on hold. Nothing she could have done would have commanded her attention – her *devotion* – to the same degree as William Blake's engraved plates have done. Whatever the final verdict is, the question will have to be faced: *what will my life be now? What will I do?*

She sets aside these looming matters and turns instead to immediate practical ones.

'Would you like me to come with you?' Olivia asks.

'Jess is coming with me,' Rebecca says. 'I've phoned her.'

That's my girl! Olivia thinks. She doesn't mind. She's proud of her daughter – and, besides, she's preoccupied by thoughts of Jasper.

Young Zoe would like to have been invited, but Aunt Polly has become stricter lately, especially about school. Secondary school is altogether different from Miss Babbington's primary classroom. There's less joy in the day – but there's a stronger sense of purpose. Zoe feels this herself.

'I could go and see my Dad,' she says.

‘You can visit your father on a weekend, whenever you like,’ Aunt Polly says.

Jessica travels down from Durham by train. And shortly before twelve o’clock, they meet in Cambridge, for lunch at the Copper Kettle.

Afterwards, at the Fitzwilliam, introductions are made and Dr Wheeler and Dr Waller-Dixon are told that Jess is reading English at university.

Well of course she is! Isn’t everybody?

But when Rebecca tells them Jess is making a replica of Blake’s printing press, they are bemused. Their habitual thinking is briefly de-railed. *Everything* about Rebecca has taken them by surprise: her mother, apparently a former colleague of Winston Churchill; the strange group of people she lives with, in some kind of commune; her assumptions about her personal autonomy.

And her friends too apparently! What kind of English undergraduate builds a printing press in her spare time?

However, they get quickly down to business. The eighteen plates are already on the table, resting on a tray. Rebecca gazes at them.

Much-travelled, safely arrived back.

They produce a typed statement summarising all the reports (including, she’s pleased to see, her own supplementary one).

‘I will start by *summarising* our *summary*,’ Dr Waller-Dixon says. He smiles at his little verbal joke. ‘There is one of our consultants who believes your copper plates are *almost certainly* by William Blake.’

Almost *certainly? Which one of them said that?*

‘But the others have no doubts at all.’

As Rebecca breathes in, slowly and deeply, he explains that all the reports agree that Rebecca’s research in Newcastle and London *make it extremely likely* that Joshua Whetstone purchased the plates after William’s death. And then took them to Newcastle when he moved his business there.

Not decisive. But persuasive nevertheless.

However, all but one of them regard the rest of the evidence as conclusive. And they are happy to endorse the plates as William

Blake's original engravings.

'They all,' Dr Wheeler says, 'looked for discrepancies between the plates and known printed copies. They found none. This is crucial because even the most brilliant forger makes the occasional small slip. None have been found.'

Also, some of the plates are etched on both sides, and this is consistent with other research. Jess wonders how they can be sure of this, but she feels it's not her place to ask.

Dr Wheeler continues. 'The plates have been subjected to close chemical analysis. The composition and quality of the copper exactly matched other plates known to have been engraved by Blake. And what's more, on the backs of some of them was a known plate-maker's sign: **JONES & PONTIFEX, Copper Plate maker, No. 47 & 48 Shoe Lane, London**. Blake is known to have bought his plates from them. Ready-cut and polished, probably.'

Why didn't I see the significance of them? Rebecca thinks. *I have a lot to learn.*

'The most important thing,' Dr Waller-Dixon says, 'is that the dimensions of your engravings *exactly match* the dimensions of the last known printings.'

Neither of them knows what he's getting at.

Dr Wheeler takes up the story. 'The last man who printed from these plates was not William Blake. Some time after Blake died, his friend, Frederick Tatham, got hold of the original plates and printed off sets of the *Songs* – but only in monochrome. *Tatham was not a printer*.

'In all the surviving original copies of the *Songs*, the sizes of the prints never precisely match the plates. This seems surprising perhaps, but it's because Blake always used the best paper – and he dampened each sheet before printing. It was good practice. The wetting caused expansion, and the drying brought about some measure of shrinkage. But this process of expanding and shrinking was slightly variable. After this, the final printed image was never *exactly* the same size as the original engraving on the plate. The difference is always small, just a matter of millimetres.'

They wait.

‘But with your plates, the match is perfect.’

‘Why are they?’ Rebecca asks. ‘Is that good?’

‘As Dr Wheeler has explained, Tatham was no printer. He did *not* dampen his paper. The images he printed are very inferior and amateurish, partly because the ink did not penetrate the fibres of the paper in the same way. But these posthumous prints are useful to us because they show us the actual dimensions of the lost plates. The paper was printed dry, and came out of the press dry. The inked impression was made, but there was no expansion of the paper, and no contraction.’

‘We have some of those posthumous copies, here in the Print Room,’ Dr Wheeler says.

‘So you checked your copies alongside my plates?’

‘Yes. And they match. Perfectly! They are the same size.’

‘What happened to the plates after Mr Tatham had used them?’ Jess asks.

‘Nobody knows. They disappeared – but not before a set of electrotype copies were made from them. We have sixteen of them here. Electrotyping was a new development in the late 1830s. About ten years too late for Blake to use.’

‘He would have hated it,’ Rebecca says.

‘Yes, I think he would.’

Then she asks them about the margins. ‘On my plates, there are margins. But in the facsimile you gave me, most of the designs have no margins. Why is that?’

As Dr Wheeler opens his mouth to begin a lengthy explanation, she interrupts him. ‘I know about the wax he used for holding in the acid.’

‘Oh, you do?’ he says. ‘Well done! The margins were part of the process, not part of the design. Blake didn’t want them to print, just to contain the acid.’

‘So how did he stop them from being printed?’

‘Simple! I expect he made sure the margins were wiped clean of ink before each plate went into the press.’

‘But there are,’ he adds, ‘*some* later plates in which he kept the printed margins. Sometimes, he ruled in a linear frame too, or drew

a decorative one.' Dr Waller-Dixon believes in scholarly accuracy.

'How did you know about the dykes?' he asks Rebecca.

'Jess told me.'

Dr Wheeler looks at Jess, again, with renewed interest.

The conversation shifts to Blake's use of gold. The four of them – two new enthusiasts and two experienced scholars – share their admiration for the shining radiance in most of the plates, ruefully admitting that even the best facsimiles cannot do justice to that. Dr Wheeler refers to Blake's steadiness of hand as he painted over the words he wished to highlight in gold, or parts of the designs. 'Every tiny serif, and even small irregularities invisible to the naked eye, are faithfully gilded – *engoldened*.'

He is enraptured. And he describes how the engraver would have mixed gold dust with a fixative so that it could be applied with a brush, lightly, like paint.

'I don't think that's how he did it,' Rebecca says. 'Not with the lettering. It would have been impossible.'

'Well, you could be right. Some scholars believe he used gold leaf.'

'I don't believe that either,' Rebecca says.

They both stare.

'How then? In some copies of 'Infant Sorrow' the first word of the title has been re-touched with gold, and the second word is in just the basic printed ochre. The difference is there to see! Two adjacent words, one in gold, the other not!'

Rebecca rises quietly to the challenge. 'He would have tipped gold dust onto that word while the ink was still wet – and he probably used a soft brush to spread it. The dust would stick to the ink – and he would brush or blow away the excess.'

There is a pause as the two archivists digest this.

'We can't be sure. But we know it's possible.'

'But how can you know that?'

'Because we've done it,' Jessica says quietly. 'Lots of times. In my father's workshop. It's not difficult.'

The two of them exchange glances. *And there's always a joyous touch of wonder when it happens,* they both think.

Jess goes on to explain that when her father has to print golden wedding anniversary invitations he prints the text in a deep yellow, and tips gold dust on the ink while it's still wet. Then he brushes off the excess, salvaging as much of it as possible. 'Blake *could* have used gold leaf,' she says. 'But doing it with dust would be better.'

They chat for a while. But something hangs in the air, a question waiting to be asked.

At last, Dr Waller-Dixon can bear it no longer. 'May I ask,' he says, 'what your plans are – with regard to the plates?'

'I'm going to sell them.'

Having said the words, she now knows this *is* what she will do. She hadn't been entirely sure before. But now she feels as if all four of them – the room they are in, and the whole Fitzwilliam Museum even! – breathe a sigh of relief. She can feel it.

'I couldn't house them properly,' she says. 'I couldn't guarantee their security. And there would be constant queries and visits from interested people. I'd have to build and run a small museum or gallery! And have it all insured. And organised. And staffed.'

They understand her dilemma. She has no money to build a gallery. If she sells the plates, she will have the money – but she'll no longer need the gallery.

'I think that is a good decision. Do remember, though, that only these eighteen plates have been authenticated. The auctioneers will insist that the others are also scrutinised.'

'I'm not going to auction them,' Rebecca says. 'I want to be in control of who buys them.'

What does she mean?

'If there are lots of buyers, I will select the one I want to have the plates.'

Dr Waller-Dixon plans to write a paper for one of the academic journals. 'Thousands of Blake enthusiasts will want to read about this extraordinary discovery,' he says. 'And collectors and connoisseurs will be excited too. And probably the national press.'

'No one has been in touch with me yet,' Rebecca says.

'That's because,' Dr Waller-Dixon says, 'they don't know who the lucky owner is. We were unable to stop the rumours spreading like a

virus. But we did succeed in keeping your name out of it. The interested people all think in terms of elderly connoisseurs and collectors – it would never occur to any of them that the plates were found by a schoolgirl in an auction sale in Newcastle.'

Dr Wheeler interposes. 'Some of them are very rich!'

'Well, they're welcome to make me some offers,' Rebecca says.

The business of the meeting is now concluded and the conversation shifts its ground – because Dr Wheeler is fascinated by Jessica's plan to build a replica press.

'Isn't it very difficult?' he asks her.

'The design raises questions,' Jess says.

'Such as . . ?'

'Rollers!' Jessica says. 'I need to find a pair of large wooden rollers. I'm fairly confident I can build the rest of the structure – with help – but I doubt if I could make the rollers.'

Rebecca likes to watch her friend in action. Jess never pushes her passions forward, she does not insist on the importance of her enthusiasms. But, once asked, she's engaged immediately. Modestly, but straightforwardly, without flirtatiousness. Jess never flirts. She wouldn't know how.

Dr Wheeler is fascinated, Rebecca thinks.

*

Arriving home after her adventure in Reading, Cressida finds an envelope on the door-mat. It has a Newcastle postmark.

Interesting, she thinks.

There's no letter inside, just a newspaper cutting. In the margin there is a note in red biro.

LOCAL BUSINESSMAN DISGRACED

Former print-works proprietor arrested

Six men and two women were taken into custody last night in a police raid on a house in Stranraer Street, Newcastle. Several arrests were made, including the owner and occupants of the property, who have been charged with running a disorderly house and procuring under-age children for sexual activities. Eight children – aged between ten and fifteen – were taken into care and will be questioned. Their names have not been released.

Four local men were also taken in for questioning and were subsequently arrested and charged. Later, a police statement confirmed that one of the suspects was the former owner and manager of Newcastle's biggest printing business, Mr Tristram Steadman. We understand that when the police broke in, the four men were found in an upstairs room, watching through a see-through mirror indecent and illicit sexual activities taking place in the next room, involving an adult male, two under-age girls~~, and a boy aged ten years.~~

Detective Inspector Ted Coulson told reporters that this was part of a wider national investigation involving other forces. Neighbours in the area were shocked by the revelations. One said they had never heard any sounds of drunkenness or noisy partying in that house. Mr Steadman's housekeeper, when quizzed by our

> reporter, said she 'had no idea such things went on at all' and observed that her employer 'always kept himself to himself.'
> We understand that the crime of procurement or trafficking under-age children is punishable by a fine and/or unlimited imprisonment. However, the law around voyeurism is less clear: a fine is likely to be imposed, but the fact that the four businessmen allegedly paid a considerable entrance fee – and had done so on many previous visits – is likely to lead to a more severe sentence and a lengthy imprisonment. It is the hope of this paper that the offending gentlemen, if proved guilty, will feel the full weight of their public disgrace.

A hand-written note in red biro explains that this cutting was taken from the early edition of the *Evening Chronicle*, and that the words crossed out were deleted from later editions. The day editor could not bring himself to allow the mention of a ten-tear-old boy in such a context. He struck it out.

D.I. Coulson had also underlined Stranraer Street. *His way of thanking me for my help*, Cressida thinks.

But there was another hand-written note. 'We found a length of metal pipe in the boot of Mr Steadman's car. There was no evidence to connect it with the charges against him.'

Cressida feels no false modesty about the part she played in this investigation and intends to show the cutting to her boss.

And she will show it to Rebecca too – who came very close to this crime and ought to be told about it. But she doesn't show her the D.I.'s note. And she won't mention the metal pipe.

*

A few nights later, Cressida is disturbed in bed. One moment she's deeply asleep, the next she's sitting up, alert, on her guard.

Her luminous clock tells her it's a few minutes past three.

Against the distant noises of night-time London, there'd been a sound from close at hand. A soft clatter, and something landing on the floor.

Downstairs, she thinks.

She does nothing for several minutes, sitting up in bed, attentive, motionless. Concentrating her hearing for further sounds of movement.

But there's nothing.

Quietly, she gets out of bed. She takes a small torch from her bedside table, but she doesn't switch it on, yet. Nor does she turn on any lights.

Better that way. She's slightly disadvantaged by the darkness, but an intruder would be more so.

She crosses silently to her window, to look down into the street. There's no one at her front door, no one crouching to peer through the letter-box.

She watches as a figure at the end of her road dismounts from his bike, heaves it up several steps, and wheels it inside. A shift-worker, she thinks, returning home from work. A taxi slides soundlessly across the far end of the street, and she can hear a night-time bus revving away from a distant traffic-light.

She steps cautiously round the foot of her bed.

Across the space to her door.

Onto the landing and slowly towards the top of the stairs.

She's almost sure there is no intruder. Still, she's careful and deliberate in her movements.

But who delivers letters at three in the morning?

In the dim light that spills softly into the shadows of her house, she can see that something is lying on the coconut mat inside the front door.

On the stairs, she pauses at every step. But there's nothing to alarm her. Nothing at all – except an envelope lying on the door-mat.

In her kitchen, where the curtains are drawn and it's safe to switch on the light, she sits at the table.

There's writing on the front of the envelope, an elegant calligraphic script, with loops and a flourish or two.

For Miss Cressida Wiseman/Benbow

and

Bombardier Patrick Cuthbertson.

She tears open the envelope and finds two black-and-white photographs.

They are identical, taken in the dusky interior of a pub. She recognises it at once. It's The Purple Anchor, Myluv's Saturday night favourite.

She and Patrick are seated at a table, Myluv is not in the picture. He was behind the camera, taking the shot.

Is this some kind of message?

A threat perhaps?

But this missive brings no message. Just questions.

She stares at the two identical pictures. Searching for a clue.

If Myluv took them, that explains the midnight delivery. Her house is on the western edge of his territory. And the small hours of the night are his time.

But then the questions start. How did he find out where she lived?

How did he know her name? She'd not told him.

How did he know her original surname was Wiseman? And that she'd disowned it when she was sixteen and called herself Benbow? That scares her, a little. All that knowledge!

And how did he find out Patrick's name?

He would have known Patrick's rank by the two stripes on his arms. But he also knows corporals in the Royal Artillery are called bombardiers. Most people don't know that.

There are no errors. No confusions. Is there anything he *doesn't* know?

On the back of one photo are the words: *For you.* And on the other: *For him.*

But there's a bigger question. It is the most perplexing. It belongs to a different genre, defying logic.

How did he take this picture? She has no memory of it. There was no flash, she is certain. And the only time they were left alone at the table was when he went to the toilet.

Why did he take it?

And *how* did he take it?

For the picture is impossible, it didn't happen! It shows two lovers, totally engaged with each other, holding hands across a table and gazing passionately into each other's eyes.

I never held Patrick's hand. I know I didn't! I haven't held his hands since we were kids! And, anyway, they'd been too focused that night by their purpose to look into each other's faces like that.

Like lovers.

We're not! We never have been!

So why did he do that?

How could his camera record something that hadn't happened?

With all the power that he apparently has, she wonders, can he also provide himself with a duplicate key to her house?

Could he have got inside, if he'd wanted to?

She resolves to buy strong bolts for her two doors.

Her heart is racing. She needs to talk to Mr B. She tries to recall exactly what he'd told her about Myluv. She remembers one of the things he'd said: *Mr Myluv deals in knowledge. He knows things. That's his currency.*

But almost at once she knows it's not Mr B she wants to talk to about this.

It's Patrick.

*

Rebecca is lying on her back, with the covers kicked off.

It's no longer night. It's not yet day. This seems to be a dream, yet she is awake. Half-dream, half-light.

The slow grey dawn outside is spreading its stillness, but in her mind there's confusion and chaos and noise. Her hands are clenched, her toes are clenched, her body is twisted, her legs are bent up and flattened against her upper body.

She could bite her knees.

Has she been taken over? *Am I awake? Am I asleep? Am I being* ***possessed****?*

Possession obliterates clarity, single-mindedness, all definition of purpose. She has no personal agency. Autonomy is dissolving.

She is starting to panic. She's being crowded and compressed into nothing. She's being suffocated, pressed *in* and pressed *down*, she'll end up the size of a bean-seed, helpless, alone and forgotten in the unseeing cosmos. The entire universe is full, there is no space for her.

Help me!

She's aware, faintly, of the homely sound of a milk-float coming slowly up the lane, and the clinking of glass bottles rattling in their crates.

Now she hears voices. With her eyes squeezed shut and her face twisted in concentration, she attends to them and struggles to separate them from the thunder and turmoil that is extinguishing her.

It's not the roar of many voices, she realises, it's just one. Angry, violent, demanding. *He* is causing all this!

'*Throw them into oblivion! Let them be hurled into the burning sea and melted down. And re-cast by one greater than I!*'

He is old and ill, his voice is angry and bitter. His rage will not be silenced. His words are resonant with authority and certitude. He denounces, he roars, he commands. He summons all the gods and spirits of his mental universe, their power, their entitlement, their ultimate authority. He lives among them, he knows them. They are wise in their judgements. And implacable.

'*Let them be melted in the fires of Los!*'

'Dear William! Attend to what I say.'

A woman's voice. All their married life she has steadied him, held his hand and led him to safety.

Despite his purpose, despite his rage, he cannot deny her, he cannot silence her. She is his wife, his beloved wife. She knows him through and through. The chaos quietens a little, and recedes.

'I have ground and polished your plates,' she says. 'And cleaned them, and cut my fingers on the corners. I have mixed pigments and inks, and trimmed paper, and coloured your prints. I've turned your press and printed whole runs. I've wrapped packages, and stacked

pages, and worked into the night after you've gone to bed exhausted. And for 45 years *I have cleaned up all your mess!*'

She points, dramatically, like one of his own angry demiurges, denouncing, refusing.

'Look at those plates! Stacked there, packed and padded, as neat as needlework! I did that while you were sleeping!'

'You have ever been a dear and faithful wife to me.'

'We are *not* going to melt them down!'

A plain statement. A statement of intention. Firm, quietly spoken.

Go back to sleep, Rebecca tells herself. *The plates are safe. For now.*

Silence everywhere then. Except for the loud rattling of the milk-float as it bumps its way up the stony drive towards the Farm.

Later, when she tells Jessica – for she is the only person she can talk to about this – Jess reassures her.

'No! You're not going crazy,' she says. 'But I do not believe that what you saw in your head was a re-run of what happened a century and a half ago.'

Jess is firm about this.

What then?

'That doesn't mean it had *no* meaning.'

Rebecca stares, waiting.

'The plates,' Jessica says. 'Are you really going to sell them?'

'Yes.'

They know each other well, these two. 'And what will you do with the money?'

No one else has asked Rebecca this. No one has dared.

'Give most of it to Naomi.'

'But I thought she'd decided on only *two* foster-children?'

'She has – for now. But she'll still need more money. She's already employing someone to help. And she'll probably have to buy a car. Or some kind of minibus.'

Rebecca crosses the room and sits on the sofa, beside Jess. She snuggles close, lays her head on Jess's shoulder. They used to cuddle a lot when they were little, she recalls.

'Are you sure that's what you want to do?'

'Yes.'

'Then do it.'

'There's something else.'

'What?' Jess asks.

'I've had an offer.'

Anyone else would have asked: *How much?* But not Jessica.

'Are you going to accept?'

'I wish Durham wasn't so far away,' Rebecca says.

*

Mrs Houseman has no intention of driving her beloved Morris Minor up that stony driveway to Cuckoo Farm.

She leaves it at the gate and two children get out, a boy of six and a four-year-old girl. She gives her briefcase to the little boy to carry, and takes each of them by the hand. He holds the briefcase proudly, being allowed to carry it is an honour.

They cut across the grass, up towards the back of the house. Mrs Houseman has been here before.

The big kitchen door is open and a small crowd gathers outside, waiting in the October sun. This is a daunting moment.

Outside there are garden chairs and a table. *The biggest table in the world,* the little girl thinks.

A woman steps forward to greet them.

She looks kind.

'I'm Naomi,' she says. She longs to sweep the children into her arms, but she knows that's *her* need, not theirs. 'Come inside!'

'This is Robert, and this is Rose,' Mrs Houseman says. She lets go of their hands. They are briefly adrift.

Naomi bends down. 'People always like it here,' she says.

Edward steps forward and stands beside her. Mrs Bassett is in the kitchen too, peeling potatoes, with her little boy beside her. Poppy is there as well, holding both hands under her pregnant stomach. The new baby is due, any day.

There is another enormous table – here, in the kitchen.

Naomi decides not to introduce everyone to the two new children. They wouldn't remember the names anyway. 'We all live here,' she tells them. 'That little boy goes to school in the village, and you'll be going with him. He lives here, with us.'

Mrs Bassett's little boy watches solemnly, one arm wrapped around his mother's legs. His face is expressionless, dark.

This is all part of their strangeness. It's happened before. Twice to the little girl, three times to the boy.

'Zoe, would you take Robert and Rose to their bedrooms? Let them choose.'

Zoe is not good with young children, she prefers grown-ups. But she's dutiful and kind-hearted. So she takes them into the hall, up the big wide staircase, and along a corridor that takes them to the two newly-decorated rooms, with open windows and fresh curtains stirring a little in the warm autumnal air.

Robert speaks for the first time. 'Can we be in the same room?'

They've become accustomed to dormitories.

Zoe looks at Rose. 'Would you like that too?'

Rose's eyes have filled with tears at the strangeness of it all. She nods her head vigorously.

'Well,' Zoe says, 'I don't see why not.'

Tears are averted.

Downstairs, papers are read and signed. It doesn't take long. Mrs Houseman has witnessed some terrible scenes.

As they complete their business they hear Zoe coming down, with Robert and Rose.

Robert and Rose, Naomi thinks. Already the syllables are merging into one word, *Robert-and-Rose*. And the more the words are repeated, the more coupled together the two children will be.

'OK?' Naomi asks Zoe.

'Yes, but they don't want separate rooms. They want to share.'

And then it's over – and Mrs Houseman is crossing the grass towards her waiting car. She's looking forward to driving back to King's Lynn on her own. She enjoys her car, especially when no one else is in it, and her day's work is done.

The late afternoon sunlight pours through the doorway, flooding the kitchen with radiance. Naomi gives Edward a slightly beseeching, look.

'They'll be fine,' he tells her.

*

Mrs Bassett turns back to her cooking, her little boy leaning against her leg. He's an anonymous figure – except when he's with her. Ellie is coming home soon. And he thinks that will be good.

Is there hope for him? There's a *change*, certainly. They have moved out of the cottage on the Green and now they're living at Cuckoo Farm. His mother is employed there. The kind lady called Naomi will be good to them. He knows that because his mother told him.

But will kindness be enough?

His mother is happier. He somehow knows that. And *he* will not be coming back. Ever! He's going to prison. He's been told that too.

His mother hasn't talked to him about what happened. She thinks it best to put it behind them. Others agree – Miss Babbington, and the old man with white hair who lives across the Green.

They won't say anything.

Only Ellie has *said*. Brave, reckless, foolish Ellie told it all. The policeman had two bare dolls, one female and the other crudely male. But Ellie didn't need dolls. With blunt clear words she told them what her father did to her, and what he made her do to him. But she didn't stop there – she also told them what she knows he made her brother do. And then what went on at 57 Charter Street. A doctor had examined her. A policewoman wrote it all down in a black notebook.

Everyone assumes his darkness will clear now. The criminal has been locked up; the crime has been put a stop to; the victim's story has come to an end. A new home has opened its doors to him, and a bright and innocent day will dawn.

But they can't be sure – how *can* they know? They see him as a victim, inert and helpless. But no one foresees the lifelong

consequences, no one understands that the boy knows better than all of them. He can't tell them because he knows it was *his* fault, *he's* to blame. And one day he'll be found out.

It's 1961. There is going to be – soon – a great opening of closed doors, a universal expansion of understanding, happy brilliant exchanges about things that have never been talked about before. There's going to be a worldwide cleansing of the stables, and then a *Glad Day* for everyone, delight and knowledge for the whole world, wisdom and innocence at peace with one another, the lion lying down beside the lamb.

And joyous innocent sex!

But the darkness will still be there, and people still have to learn how to see into it, and understand it. There are rarely witnesses who will give testimony, like Ellie. Usually there are just victims.

As for Mrs Bassett's little boy, well, he's only five. His future, his inner growth, his manhood – he has no sense of these concepts. They are in every way beyond him. He lives mostly in the moment.

Will there come a time when he can see his way clearly out of his own darkness?

Perhaps. But it's not like a dressing-gown, it can't be lightly shrugged off and just left somewhere. It's a closed door, with darkness on the other side of it.

14

Doors of Perception

Olivia is in London. She had decided never to see Jasper again. But here she is, at his office.

She's not replied to his recent messages. She has cut him out of her life. She's found she can be ruthless and unrelenting about this. An excision, a sudden unexplained banishing. She's given no thought to how he might feel about it.

But Naomi, when she learned about this, was appalled. 'It's unfair to him, to suddenly break off all contact! How could you do that?'

'Very easily, it seems,' Olivia said.

'It's *wrong*, Libby! It's unkind and hurtful. You've every right to decide to end it – but you owe it to him to *tell him why*. You should give him an explanation.'

'Why should I?'

'He'll be unhappy. And confused.'

'He's never confused!' Olivia had said.

But she decided, after all, that perhaps her sister is right, perhaps she *should* meet Jasper one more time. To talk to him. To say goodbye.

So she's visiting his office.

The lift has a carpeted floor, and the walls too are carpeted. Even the ceiling is enclosed in soft fabric! It's more like a padded cell than a lift, muffled and unsettling. It rises so swiftly that she's reached the top floor almost before she's realised it's moving. She steps out into a wide carpeted reception area, with bright Swedish chairs discreetly placed, and incomprehensible modernist pictures hung aesthetically on the walls.

The atmosphere is hushed. Bright and sunny.

She approaches the receptionist. 'I need to speak to Jasper Travis,' she says.

'Do you have an appointment?'

‘No.’

‘Is this business?’

‘No. Personal.’

Everything about Olivia takes obedience for granted – her manner, her voice, her presence. So she’s not surprised that the receptionist – not deficient herself in these characteristics – agrees to fit her in.

‘He has someone with him at present. But he shouldn’t be long. If you’d like to take a seat, Miss . . ?’

Olivia chooses a chair on the far side of the area, directly facing Jasper’s office. When, after about ten minutes, the door of the office opens, out steps Rebecca.

Rebecca?

Only it isn’t Rebecca. She’s two or three years younger, but otherwise identical – *identical!* – to Rebecca. Tall, rather lovely, and purposeful.

Rebecca Mark II. About fifteen, probably.

Jasper has followed the girl to the door of his office, where he takes her in his arms, a fatherly goodbye hug. As she walks away from him, her glance falls briefly on Olivia, coolly, without interest.

‘Bye, Vanessa!’ she calls to the receptionist, waving her hand airily as she passes.

Jasper’s eyes fall upon Olivia, rising uncertainly to her feet, staring at him. Her confidence – along with her charisma and her usual command of life – is collapsing.

She knows at this moment there will be no more timetabled nights of sex. From now on, she will be improvising. She has no idea what she’s going to do. All her certainties are crumbling.

*

No door opens for Zoe. She opens a door for someone else.

One day, when Jess has come to spend the afternoon with Rebecca, Zoe makes an announcement. ‘I’ve found something for you,’ she says to Jess. ‘I’ll show you. Come on!’

They go with her, mystified. On their way, they pass Zoe's mermaid statue, the one she bought for £5.00, standing proudly erect now, the base firmly cemented onto a small raised plinth. She's surrounded entirely by vegetable beds, but Zoe intends to put that right as soon as she can find a suitable pond or lake.

If necessary, she'll make one.

She takes Jess and Rebecca round to the back of the house, to one of the sheds left over from when there was real farming at Cuckoo Farm.

The wooden door scrapes and drags on the dry ground as Zoe heaves it open. The contents stand exposed and shadowy.

'Look!'

It takes a moment to identify individual objects – buckets, rakes, a rusting lawn-mower, two old metal bedsteads, and multiple scraps of old wood, meaningless.

Zoe points – and Jess and Rebecca find themselves staring at an ancient mangle, with its own forgotten history of long-ago wash-days. It's a big solid metal construction, with an enormous rusting frame and a big cast-iron handle shaped like a wheel. This is not a domestic mangle, it's built on an industrial scale.

It has two huge wooden rollers.

'Are they big enough?' Zoe asks.

'The rollers?'

'Yes! The rollers! You can have them.'

'But . . .'

'It's all right! I've asked Naomi. She says you can have them – if we can get them off.'

Jessica draws close and studies the rollers. They are grimy and dusty, and dull with dis-use. But there are no wood-worm holes, and under the dirt the grubby surfaces are smooth and firm. Almost *polished*.

They would be perfect!

The big round metal wheel with a handle attached will have to be taken off. But Zoe has come prepared. In a pile on the ground are spanners of various sizes, and a rusty adjustable wrench, which she has oiled.

It's a struggle. But eventually they manage to crack the ancient solidified paintwork – dark green – and turn the four great bolts. After that, it's straightforward to pull the handle carefully free, and take the rollers out. A square metal crank-shaft fits tightly through the middle of each roller.

'I could use them too, probably!'

Jess is in a state almost of ecstasy. But she keeps it private, she doesn't go in for rhapsodising.

'Thanks, Zoe,' she says.

*

Cressida, feeling lonely and low-spirited, unlocks her front door. It's a Friday and she's looking forward to a restful weekend.

Her house welcomes her with a smell of beef-stew and dumplings, which she'd prepared and left all day in her slow-cooker.

Comfort food. For a lonely girl from Norfolk. All her doors safely shut.

On the table in her small kitchen she lays out dishes and cutlery for one. Then she goes upstairs for a bath.

As soon as I can afford it, she thinks, *I'm going to have a shower installed*.

She's feeling more cheerful already.

As she's drying herself, there's a firm knocking at her front door. She grabs her dressing-gown and hastily shrugs it on as she hurries downstairs. Visitors are almost unknown.

She finds Patrick waiting on the doorstep – the last person she expected to see! He's in full uniform, except that he's wearing shoes instead of boots-and-gaiters. How smart he looks, she thinks. His trousers are immaculately pressed, his belt is trim at his waist, his lanyard is spotlessly white at his shoulder, and his khaki tie has been carefully knotted. He's tall, neat, and fit. Good to look at.

But downcast.

He has, she observes, three stripes on each arm.

'I've got a weekend pass,' he says. 'But I've nowhere to go.'

'And you've come here?'

'Yes.'

'You've got three stripes!'

'Yes. I'm not a National Serviceman any more. I've signed on in the regular army, for three more years. And I've been promoted to sergeant.'

'What did you mean – *you've nowhere to go*? You could go to the Farm.'

He shakes his head. 'I'm not wanted there.'

'Oh! She turned you down?'

'Yes. She said it isn't her I want anyway.'

Well said, Rebecca!

She takes his hands and draws him in. She reaches around him, and shuts the front door firmly. In the semi-darkness of her tiny hall, her dressing-gown falls open. It's an enormous garment, with sleeves like trouser-legs. So when she raises her hands to his face, the cuffs slip down and he feels himself enclosed within her bare arms, still damp, smelling faintly of her bath.

They're improvising. Joyously improvising!

*

And Rebecca?

Telling no one, she leaves the Farm after lunch one day and sets off to catch the bus into Norwich. That's where she is now, approaching the imposing front entrance of Sir Godfrey's house.

She rings the bell, takes two steps back from the door, braces herself.

There are movements inside, and in a moment the door is opened. It's Sir Godfrey himself this time – and she knows immediately what he's thinking.

He's troubled, she can see. But he's a kindly man, and polite.

'Can't you bear to be away from them?'

She admits she doesn't like it. 'But that's not why I've come.'

He looks at her, questioningly. Waiting.

'Have you appointed a new assistant since Marilyn left?' she says.

He understands, instantly. 'No,' he says cautiously. 'No one suitable has applied.' In truth, he hasn't got round to advertising the vacancy.

Rebecca has come with a clear objective. She doesn't intend to leave without stating it.

'I would like to apply for the job,' she says.

'But you have no training in conservation, or cataloguing,' he says sadly.

'You could teach me.'

'I could, that's true. But it would be a long project. Years, not weeks or months.'

'I know.'

She senses that he's warming to her proposition, already.

'I'll write a proper application if you like,' she says.

He shakes his head. '*This* is an application.'

'And you'll want to interview me . . .'

'Yes, I suppose I will.'

Rebecca sees that Lady Alice has arrived and is standing a little behind her husband. She puts a hand on his arm. 'Darling,' she says. 'Don't be foolish! You know perfectly well this is exactly what you wanted.'

'But I ought to . . .'

'You've already interviewed her,' she says. 'That afternoon, when she came here . . . It went on for hours! What more do you need to know about her?'

Sir Godfrey smiles ruefully, happy to play the man-always-overruled-by-women game.

'Come in, my dear. We'll settle the details over tea and cake.'

Inside his study, a new table has been placed against a wall. It's covered with a soft plain cloth, and William Blake's 35 copper plates have been laid out, carefully spaced, in the correct sequence.

She is a novice entering a secular order, an apprentice joining a guild, a young woman standing on the threshold, wanting to be part of a community of scholars. The plates are talismanic, mysterious, ambivalent.

'Why did you accept my bid?' he asks her.

‘I couldn’t think of anyone better to have them. And besides, you’ll probably donate them to the Fitzwilliam Museum eventually.’

‘No,’ he says. ‘I plan to *bequeath* them. While I live, they are staying with me.’

‘It’s time for tea and fruit-cake,’ Lady Alice says, and leaves to go to the kitchen, shutting the door as she goes.

The two of them are alone, standing side by side, in silence, lost in admiration. Or is it a kind of love? Or anticipation, perhaps, of all that quiet and diligent work that is still to be done.

Years and years of it, probably. Enough for a lifetime. Rebecca has found her home and is rejoicing. In it, there’s a place for her. In time, she will be known and recognised by its many other occupants, worldwide.

The set is complete again, as neat as needlework – *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

The copper plates reflect some of the sunlight from outside. They’ve not been polished, *that* must never happen.

But still they shine.

The End

Also by Victor Watson

~

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FACTS AND FICTIONS

This narrative is entirely hypothetical. William Blake's engraved plates for the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* were lost in the years after his death in 1827. It is possible (but unlikely) that they will one day be found. In spite of the fictional nature of this novel, I have tried to give accurate accounts of Blake's engraving, printing, and colouring processes. This proved difficult, if only because there are disagreements among the academics, especially with regard to the methods he used to colour the *Songs of Experience*.

Blake's last years were spent at Fountain Court, off the Strand. The building was demolished in the 1880s, when the Savoy Hotel was built. After his death in 1827, everything passed to Catherine, including the plates. She died in 1831. At some point in this period Frederick Tatham acquired the plates and printed posthumous mono-coloured copies of the *Songs*. In 1838 the new process of electrotyping was introduced in Britain and at some time after that Alexander Gilchrist had electrotype copies made for his biography (*Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus'. With Selections from his Poems and Other Writings,* Macmillan, 1863). The original plates, however, disappeared.

The Whetstone family – owners of a large printing business, first in London, later in Newcastle – is entirely fictitious.

The facsimile copy of the *Songs of Innocence* that Dr Whittaker lends to Rebecca in Chapter 2 is fact, not fiction. It was published by Ernest Benn Ltd in 1926.

There is a reference in Chapter 7 to the fact that Jane Bewick went by sea from Tyneside to London to bring a newly-orphaned niece back to Cherryburn. I am indebted to Jenny Uglow for this detail (*Nature's Engraver – A Life of Thomas Bewick*, Faber & Faber, 2006).

The character of Sir Godfrey in this novel is entirely fictional – and readers could be forgiven for suspecting that he is an author's lazy way of providing a convenient Blake-loving millionaire to allow the story to end satisfactorily. However, there *was* just such a person: Sir Geoffrey Keynes (1887-1982) was a philanthropist, a scholar, a bibliophile, and a much-honoured authority on the work of William Blake. An extraordinary man, he donated and bequeathed hundreds of Blake items to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. He did not live in Norwich; but he did live in East Anglia, in a village near Newmarket. Sir Godfrey is entirely fictional, but he was inspired by Sir Geoffrey.

The quotations I have used are mostly from *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience;* a few are from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. I have followed Blake's own rather erratic punctuation, except where he has a full-stop – and in one case a question mark – in mid-sentence. He seems to have used commas, colons and semi-colons mostly to indicate pauses in the reading.

Zoe pays £5.00 for the mermaid statue; in 2022 this would be roughly equivalent to £130.00.

VW.
24tth October, 2022.