

Biting Tongues/ Critical Theory as Creative Tool: Using Bakhtin's Theory of
Double-Voiced Discourse to Edit a Short Novel

Submitted by Andrew John Thatcher to the University of Exeter
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Biting Tongues is a short, character-driven novel set in South East England in 2001. Central to its narrative present is the recovery of 27-year old Adam Strange from a 13-year coma and its repercussions on his mother, Peggy, his father, Bill and his sister, Jess. Although his recovery is initially welcomed, old tensions resurface to force a re-evaluation of each of the four central characters' senses of self and personal relationships, especially as the truth of the coma, and of events surrounding it, begin to emerge. The narrative is interspersed with segments depicting each character's personal history and the events leading up to and following Adam's coma. It is a novel of fragile identities and of alienation, not only of each character from another and from contemporary society, but also of inward alienation from perceived morals, values and sense of self.

Critical Theory as Creative Tool describes the process of adapting Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of double-voiced discourse and polyglossia to develop an editorial tool for critiquing an earlier draft of *Biting Tongues* which has assisted in creating the draft submitted here. It investigates why such an adaptation is relevant to structural problems posed by themes and content in *Biting Tongues* and evaluates the strengths of its implementation. Primarily using Bakhtin's essay 'Discourse in The Novel' and the chapter 'Discourse in Dostoevsky' from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), this dissertation also uses the work of other Bakhtinian scholars and counterpoints the main argument with a structuralist reading of the theory of free-indirect discourse.

Contents

Biting Tongues

One.....4

Two.....59

Three.....151

Four.....192

Critical Theory as Creative Tool: Using Bakhtin's Theory of Double-Voiced Discourse to Edit a Short Novel

Introduction.....198

Double-voiced Discourse in *Biting Tongues*.....208

 Internal Dialogue.....211

 Internal Persuasion.....215

 Internal Struggle.....219

 Internal Conflict.....221

 Hidden Polemic.....226

 Hidden Dialogue and The Invocation to Common Knowledge.....229

Conclusion: Author as 'Orchestrator' of Discourse.....234

Works Cited.....237

Works Consulted.....238

Appendix 1

59,390 words.

Biting Tongues

AJ Thatcher

One.

The Bethany Hospice nurses had already spoken to Peggy Strange about her son's open eyes. Peggy was more curious than hopeful. It was just one of those things that Adam's body did and at least it was communication of some sort. A rasp in his breathing might mean bronchial trouble. Stomach upsets (dyspepsia, achlorydria...) generally followed a yeasty smell. A sudden head-twitching, denting his pillow, usually meant muscular cramps (hyperflexia, hypocalcaemia). Sometimes Peggy couldn't even say what the signs were, she just looked at Adam, stranded who-knew-where without bottle, cork or paper, and he was simply different. She became astrologer. Tealeaf reader. Medium.

But the open eyes were beyond her. There they would be, for anything between a few minutes to a few days, plus a slight scratching on an ECG –

though there was still, of course, the chance he might jerk back to life. Like those puppet machines on Southend Pier after the penny drops. It was quite the joker in the pack. All Peggy had to do was lean into her son's gaze, look into pupils lifeless as cardboard and she would laugh aloud at her foolishness, setting aside tears for later, when she was safely behind *Tigh-na-Mara's* front door.

Sometimes, slurred words came out. Usually, these were single ones: *lily, morning, her, fags, away, can't, how*. Short sentences also formed from time to time, the longest and most regular being *she's in the water*. None were signs but all were evidence that her son lived on in some locked-away place. If only she could reach inside, spring that lock. A mother should be able to do such a thing, a devoted mother who'd not missed a single day at his bedside. Birthdays, exams, court appearances, not a thing held back her daily journey to Bethany House.

Peggy Strange sat beside her son, wrestling against these superstitions. Adam's blinks seemed agitated, fluttering like someone having a heated argument. They weren't his usual drunken droppings. She stood, ready to lean towards him. His pupils focused on her. And it was more than the eyes. A charge, invisible but there, spread across Adam's skin, like the flameless patches on each pudding she had lit for herself, these past twelve Christmases. Ridiculous. She would grasp her son's wrist and this nonsense would end. Except this time the warm, dark-haired wrist twitched, then was still.

Peggy brought herself closer to the pillows. Adam's pupils stretched out, shrank back, then stilled in each green-brown iris, holding steady as Peggy

watched her son watching her. Peggy pulled herself back. She went to Adam's bedside cabinet and overfilled a beaker with tap water from an orange-lidded plastic jug. As she gulped, she looked back at Adam on the bed. His eyes had followed her. His head had even moved back a little into the pillows as he strained to see her better. His lips had parted enough for a whistle. Peggy drew the beaker back from her lips. Water slopped onto her fingers. Her hand was shaking and her skin prickled with heat from cheeks to feet. Another hot flush, most likely. She needed a ciggie. Yes, perhaps a tablet, too. She was tired. She had every right to be tired. This was not how Adam was going to wake up. When he finally burrowed back up through the loam, Peggy would be ready and everything would be in order, including her wretched feelings.

Peggy looked at her son a third time. Though he hadn't moved, he was no longer looking at her. Adam's eyes were now roaming in their sockets. He was taking in the room. He was awake.

That person looking through her son's open eyes – was that really her Adam? Those eyes wandered around in a darkly-stubbed face. Her son was supposed to be returned pristine, a still-fresh fifteen-year old, his grotesque maturity just another symptom and therefore reversible.

The air thickened, its weight burying Peggy's frame in old blankets. Her guts spasmed, her mouth flooded with drool and she stood, then strode briskly past the nurses' station to the ladies' loos. She splashed tepid (Not for Drinking) tap water against her skin. No use. Safely locked inside a cubicle, Peggy vomited violently into cold ceramic and water, spattering the black shawl that

flapped around her shoulders and thinking thank goodness that toilet bowl didn't get used by men.

Bill and Peggy Strange were ushered into a windowless box room with a large umbrella tree flourishing in one corner. The consultants gestured for them to sit and when Bill noticed the tissues, he rolled his eyes because he had forgotten about these. Hospital consultation rooms always kept such a box primed for use. If the consultation was to do with *feelings*, usually with some dewy-eyed worthy who smelled of lavender, the tissues would be shoved right there on the coffee table, pretty much demanding that you 'open up' and 'let go' in teariness and sniffing. If the agenda was more practical, the tissues would be lined up neatly by the door with the leaflets to assist you with your disability, with accessing support, with your partner's recovery. In either case, the box would always have the top tissue half-pulled out in readiness and Bill often wondered if it was something the cleaners did, or if 'readying the tissues' was on the checklist of a lowly orderly. Whichever way, there was something impatient about it. In the year following the accident, neither he nor his ex-wife had ever needed to pluck that top tissue and this had always added to a feeling of somehow having let the side down. After that year was up, it had been easier to let Peggy deal with it all. Then, as now.

The consultant was outlining the range of possible impacts of both coma and atropine poisoning on Adam's cognition. These began at amnesia and ended at severe brain trauma. Peggy swept the more extreme prognoses to one side to press home the point Bill had expected of her: how much he might remember of the events leading up to the accident and how and when these would be explained to him. The doctor re-iterated the unknowability of Adam's recovery. 'Do you understand what I'm saying? Your son is going to be a very confused young man.'

Peggy placed her palms on her trousers and straightened her back. 'In that case, we should keep it simple. He should be told that he just hit his head. I want the rest to come from me. From the family, I mean.'

The consultant took a sharp breath and turned his head to meet Bill's gaze. 'Mr. Strange? What's your opinion on this?'

But Mr. Strange did *not* have an opinion and, if he had, it was unlikely to be much help to anyone – his opinions were not to be trusted, as Peggy well knew. No, it was best left to Peggy to have all the opinions where it came to Adam. Besides, this was most likely just a blip.

The consultation wound down, agreements were officially noted, reassurances given and Peggy and Bill left with one another and the persistent box of tissues. It was the first time they had been alone together in quite some years. Peggy looked skeletal under the strip light, her greying hair more lank than usual. Bill probably looked little better. Strip lighting always brought out the

ugliness of the human face, perhaps another strategy to make you crack up and reach for the bloody tissues.

‘We’re going to have to play this very carefully, Bill. Especially you...’ Peggy shouldered her handbag, her tone crisp and businesslike. ‘You’ve not said anything to Carole, have you? Or Jessica.’

Bill paused a moment. The thought hadn’t crossed his mind – why would it after all these years? – and he told Peggy this.

‘Good. That’s settled.’ Peggy stood, waiting for Bill to do the same, her feet pointing towards the door. ‘Let me buy you a coffee.’

Bill opened his mouth, ready to agree, but once standing, realised how stiff he was and said he’d like a tea better. ‘Never much cared for coffee,’ he added in response to Peggy’s puzzlement.

‘Really, Bill?’

‘Yes. Really.’ Bill was a little pleased at having been able to surprise his ex-wife like that.

Peggy shook her head in slow, disbelieving sweeps, lips puckered. ‘Well I never. All those years. Well I never.’

Bill woke in the back of his and Carole’s old burgundy Volvo, covered in dog hair. He peeled away the woollen blanket, sat up, then smeared cool moisture from the windows. Traffic tore up and down the dual carriageway on one side of the

car. On the other was a tall hawthorn hedgerow, striped with yellow tape. This same tape had been sealing off fields and farms for months. The TV news broadcast huge heaps of hooves and hides blazing through the night. In more properly rustic parts of the country, the yellow tape probably seemed sensible, almost reassuring, Armageddon kept at bay. In the commuter belt, its presence was a sinister invasion, straight out of sci-fi. Anything might come next.

Bill stretched and a sharp ache awoke in the middle of his back. He sat up and it shifted, then cooled a little. Peggy had wanted to know if maybe he'd like to use a bed at her bungalow, not far from the hospital where Adam now was. Better a pain in the back than the same old pain in the neck. He thought that one up last night and rather liked it, running it over and over in his head like the memory of a particularly fine night of blues. Like when The Yardbirds played at Eel Pie Island, in their original line-up. Besides, Peggy would never change. Although when she first called with her big news, there was an excited softness to her voice, it was rolled back up and stowed away by the time Bill arrived at Bethany Hospice. Better that Bill attend to his own feelings to work out how he should act. He was anxious, that was right and proper, but perhaps he should also be more excited (Carole was excited) and hopeful (Carole was hopeful). Oughtn't this be like waiting for the birth of a child? Well, no. Children are hoped for, planned for, what normal people do. There were maps you could follow. Adam's recovery, on the other hand, was pretty much a blank spot. Hope had long since shrunk to a speck so minute that blankness was by far the bigger presence on the map. Yesterday was his first visit in almost a year.

Bill rummaged for his specs amongst the glove compartment's receipts, wrappers and brochures. They were a new pair, not a cheap pair either, Carole had insisted, saying they could afford it this month and, anyway, he looked quite dashing. A very Carole thing to say, but it made him feel good all the same. Bill yawned wider and louder than usual, starting to feel better about things, and pulled yesterday's clothes back on. The hospital was a half-mile off and on the way was a roadside caff. He would order himself a Full English and then use their loos to freshen up.

Things clicked into place in the men's washroom, his stomach heavy with grease and meat. Bare-chested – the hell with it – and throwing water at his face and armpits, his fingers met the small gold crucifix that Carole gave him not long after they first met. It was her father's. Small and warm and worn, it had nestled at his chest ever since, a reminder of Carole's relentless faith in him. Whenever he felt drawn to a drinks aisle or a wine list, Carole's faith took over, the tenderness in her whispers, not her words. Yes: he could face things. He wouldn't run off this time. He chose *The Best of The Animals* – full blast – for the final stretch of journey towards his Adam.

Information signs dotted around the Royal General proudly proclaimed its start in life as a military hospital during some great historic campaign or other. At its core was that ancestral hulk (*Purple and Orange Zones*), its huge windows long since partitioned by tatty mezzanines. Gothic towers frowned down at a shanty town of one and two-storey prefabs that clustered around it (*Green, Blue and Pink Zones*). The council had threatened closure for the past decade and

despite an absence of local pressure, still it stood, outlasting patients and governments.

Blue zone, Level 2.

Adam's bed was screened off by violently floral curtains from Churchill Ward. Beneath the *Alpine Meadow* smell lurked one of hours-old unflushed loo. No one had yet explained what Adam was doing in a geriatrics ward. Bill paused, then parted the flowers and slipped inside. Adam lay on the bed, eyes shut, skinny arms on top of his sheets and close beside his body, a sort of equals sign. He was hooked up to a catheter, a heart monitor and a drip. His slack mouth was, however, now unmasked and gently sucked in the dreary hospital air.

'Hello, son.' Words more felt than said.

Adam's face was dry and blotchy. Bill sat at the bedside on an orange plastic chair, one of Peggy's black shawls draped over the back. Adam was twenty-eight – Jess' age, two years back, when she was marketing director for some art festival thing down in Brighton and later that year became pregnant. The number fizzed with the electricity of a busy life. At twenty-eight Bill was on the up at Rickett-Lindsey, Jess finally sleeping through the night, he and Peggy thinking about somewhere bigger.

There was Adam, wired up, bedridden and twenty-eight. There was Bill, jobless, broke and fifty-eight when he should have been a manager with a sit-on lawnmower. Life wasn't timetabled. Rather, age was something off-the-peg and it either fitted you or it didn't, Adam and he at least had that in common. Except

how in God's name was he going to help his son back into the world when he was scarcely in it himself. At least Adam was peaceful. Yesterday, each fresh eruption of waking was preceded by a sequence of tremors behind the eyelids that exploded into a violent stare. Unable to find other pressure valves, Adam poured himself through his eyes. This repeated every few hours. At the moment, though, his face was vacant, dormant. And it was true, things were easier this way.

Bill got off the chair and squatted at his son's side. He gave Adam's arm a gentle stroke. The skin was soft, hot and clammy, like a very young child's, though covered with coarse hair. Bill reached for the hand, held it limply in his own, squeezing tightly, hoping for a warm squeeze back. There wasn't even a reflexive twitch, though contact did feel right, almost comforting.

'Oh...' Peggy pushed through the flowers and was dangling a plastic cup between her fingers.

Bill jerked his hand away. Adam's flopped onto the sheets, fingers contracting inwards. Bill stood. 'Peggy. I was just...how did you sleep?'

'In that chair. Was your car nice and cosy?'

Peggy walked around Bill to sit in her orange chair and blow on her coffee. She wore her usual straight black trousers, black sensible shoes, a black blouse and cardigan and a second black shawl that hung off her like a dust sheet. Dressing like a widow: an insult, surely. Bill realised he was towering over her. Where should he sit? He experimented with the bed's edge, but it seemed to want to throw him off, so he just stood. They hadn't discussed it but Peggy was

right. Adam was bound to wake. At least his Mum cared enough to do without sleep.

‘Did he wake up, then?’

‘About six, but not for long. Oh, for pity’s sake, this coffee’s worse than the last.’ Peggy now dangled the plastic cup between forefinger and thumb like a dead shrew.

‘And how did he seem?’

‘Bill, how am I supposed to answer that? He seemed like someone who’s been in a coma for half his life.’

Carole’s youngest once took Bill to see some loud, futuristic film. In one scene, the main character got questioned by a special agent who had, using magical powers, made his lips disappear and the flesh around his mouth grow together, sealing in his tongue and teeth forever. How almost exactly that reminded him of their marriage’s later years, after the children had outgrown museums and caravans and swimming lessons. With a few hints and her crisp, direct tone, Peggy could work this exact same spell. Bill was an easily-upset ditherer and Peggy knew it. He was a self-centred fumbler and Peggy also knew that. He had proved all these things during their marriage and even though Carole really did love him the way he needed, as he was, the very fact he had needed to remarry upheld Peggy’s view.

Peggy put the coffee down and removed her shawl from the chair. ‘Look, I’m having to nip back home. Do you want me to bring you anything? The canteen is astronomically pricey and the food looks dreadful.’

'I'll manage. You take a breather.' Bill regretted saying it like that, as if the breather was his to offer, but Peggy disregarded the opportunity to take up the matter.

'Oh, and Jessica is saying she'll try to come later this morning, though you know what *that* could mean. I doubt she'll bring Florence, either, which is a pity.' For a moment, Peggy's harshness faltered and a softness hid it, like a lone cloud giving a spot of relief on a too-hot day. Peggy adored their tiny granddaughter and, in spite of herself, there was a certain respect for Bill simply because he felt that way too.

Bill's hands rose to Carole's crucifix. 'Peggy?'

'Bill?'

'Isn't this remarkable? Nerve-wracking, but remarkable?' As Bill spoke, he was freeing something, like a wounded jay being returned to the forest.

Peggy looked at the lino between her shoes. The too-hot day returned. Peggy coughed, then stood and when she looked up again, she looked past her ex-husband rather than at him. 'I'd rather not discuss that with you, if you don't mind. It doesn't seem quite fitting somehow, does it?' Peggy parted the flowers. 'I'll bring you a sandwich.'

Ten feet too tall, Bill could no longer look at their son. Above the ward's hum, the TV news was on. Control, exclusion, deepening crisis; these words found their way to him and Bill knew on the screen were those smoking piles of flesh that filled fields and TVs night after night. And Peggy had left her rotten coffee, knowing full well he would feel obliged to get rid of it for her.

* * *

Pink zone, Ground level.

Carole was insisting that Adam's recovery was a miracle, her spoon hovering over a cooling parsnip soup from the Royal General's canteen. Every so often, it dipped towards the soup, nearly brushing the wrinkling surface, or else it got used to add emphasis. Bill gripped their table's plastic veneer till his fingertips became slightly sore. 'But, you don't get miracles in the commuter belt. When those things happen, or at least when people think they do, it's all in French grottoes, or those huge speaking-in-tongues churches. Can you not see that, sweetheart?'

Carole's spoon clinked against the bowl and she poked at the skin with a forefinger. It didn't yield. Pushing it away, she turned to face the sodden leylandii that crowded the canteen window. Bill could hear anger in that *sweetheart*, how it longed to smash her little notion. Better watch himself. Peggy would soon arrive back on the ward. Sticking together was their sole protection. And, to her credit, Carole's face was currently free of down. 'Darling, they just changed his anti-wotsit medication. The miracle of modern-day medicine, that goes without saying, but an actual *miracle* miracle?'

Carole looked even more intensely at the leylandii, her uneaten roll lying beside its knife and pat of butter. Bill wanted it nearly as much as he wanted

Carole to stop talking about miracles – Peggy’s tinned-salmon-and-cress sandwich hadn’t quite done the trick.

‘Bill, I think perhaps it would be better if I went.’ Carole partly stood, then froze mid-motion, legs bent, hands on the table.

Was Bill the unreasonable one, here? Hardly. Carole was the one going on about miracles while Bill was the one with the son being fed through his veins. She should just button it and turn her attentions to him. Anyway, given time, Carole forgave anything. Whenever a request to not dump the post by the front door became an expression of rage, she took it. However overblown his anger at burned rice, she took it. Carole provided a landfill into which Bill threw his emotional waste.

Carole sat down again and sniffed. ‘I’m sorry. This isn’t helping anyone, is it? Do you have a tissue? Mine are in the other bag and I don’t know where that’s gone.’

‘I’ll get you a serviette. That will do, won’t it?’

Carole sniffed that it would and Bill fetched a fair-sized wad he found on an abandoned table. She seemed to thrive on these little tendernesses. Bill made her a cup of tea and she would say how sweet. He bought her a banana at Sainsbury’s and he was a lovely man. Meanwhile, he contributed little to the money pot, wasn’t exactly handy around the house and his relationship with her eldest was so terrible that, whenever Alec and he rowed, she shut herself into the bathroom, taps roaring on full. Meanwhile Carole provided a home, her faith,

a fresh(ish) start and forgave and forgave. He was utterly in the dark as to how serviettes were enough to pay her back.

Carole blew her nose and dabbed her cheeks and eyes. She looked flushed, but a healthy, hockey-pitch flushed. 'And what about Peggy? How are, you know, *things*?'

This was the question Bill had been waiting for, not all that miracle claptrap and he'd been rehearsing his answer to it all day. 'Going on non-stop about Adam getting out of here. I mean, I know that bungalow has all the getup for a wheelchair – the pulleys, that funny loo – but it doesn't give her the right, does it? I mean sure, we'd have to make changes. All your boxes, for starters. Something will have to happen with them.'

'Mm.' At the mention of those boxes, Carole looked down at her soup, then flicked her head as if shaking something loose. 'She is jumping the gun somewhat. But I suppose it can't be easy for her, can it?'

'Pardon?'

'Peggy's world has revolved around Bethany House for years. I think I'd find it hard to cope.' From time to time, Carole said things like this, changing languages without warning. All Bill needed to hear right now was Peggy = wrong / Bill = right. This darting around made him giddy. Best to steer things back towards terra firma; ask if the agency had called back; agonise over the car's impending MOT. Worry put everything in perspective and reminded him of another life, even if not a particularly sunny one, beyond the Royal General, beyond Peggy.

‘Oh, I’m not terribly hungry,’ she added, leaving her spoon to drown slowly beneath the soup’s surface. ‘Shall we get out of here? It’s a bit on the grotty side.’

They stood. Bill pocketed the roll. They headed along ramps (*Purple Zone, Green Zone...*) and up stairwells (*Level 0, Level 1*) to Montgomery Ward, Adam’s most recent destination. Bill put his arm around Carole’s shoulder and she briefly placed one warm hand over his.

Adam’s eyes were still closed, though earlier he had mumbled something like *shoes in water*. Carole went to him, her own eyes flitting about, until she took his hand in hers. It responded, as it now generally did, with a gentle flutter of fingers and a curling inwards towards the palm. Carole whispered something to herself. Maybe it was to do with her miracle. And then her face flushed and tears dribbled down her cheeks, collecting at her top lip. She sat, wiping at her face, even as a fresh surge pushed out and down to her mouth. For a while, Bill stood watching. Perhaps she wanted to be left alone. No, it was his turn as comforter, as rescuer. Slowly, stiffly, he rubbed her back through an old Arran sweater of his that she’d long ago adopted. He hoped they were the right kind of rubs.

Just then, Peggy arrived, looking fresh and in charge of herself again. ‘Is everything alright, here? Hello Carole.’

Bill froze mid-rub, as if he’d been caught smoking behind the bike sheds. ‘Peggy... We’re just...’ Just what? He was simply comforting his wife. ‘How was your massage?’

‘Very good. Invigorating, in fact. How was your lay-by?’ It was a slur dressed as a question with no dignified answer. If life beside the dual carriageway was a part of Bill’s penance for his year-long absence and for – yes, well, that other nastiness as well – then so too were his ex-wife’s lashes. ‘Carole, dear, perhaps Bill could fetch you some water? Not from the loos. From the cooler in the hall.’

‘I’ll be alright.’ Carole sniffed and smiled bashfully, oblivious to the game in which she was caught up. ‘Do you have any tissues?’

‘Let’s have a look in my handbag, shall we?’ Peggy looked at Bill with a tight lipped smile – another lash! – *See what you’ve married? A woman who doesn’t carry tissues is not a real woman.* Thing was, if anyone looked at Carole, they would know Peggy wasn’t wrong. Today, as most days, Carole wore an old, cheap pair of jeans and both this and Bill’s Arran were marked and holed. If the marks had been paint or varnish, you could have thought she was either bohemian or keen on DIY. However, at least some marks were clearly food accidents. One even had a seed in it.

Peggy walked over to Adam after passing Carole her packet of pocket tissues, saying Carole could hold onto them. She placed one hand on Adam’s forehead, then ran fingers through her son’s hair with the other. ‘Poor lamb. He’s so dreadfully confused.’

Carole blew her nose loud and long. ‘But at least he has a mother and a father who care for him.’

‘That’s very nice of you to say so, dear.’

How could Carole not realise what an insult that was? It was always like this on the few occasions that the three of them met and, food accidents or not, tissues or not, Carole was kind and his and he loved her. 'And he also has a step-mother,' he added, reaching out to hold the hand in which Carole had balled her tissue.

She looked at him with another apologetic smile. 'Bill, that's very kind, but your son doesn't know me.'

Bill put his free hand around her waist, an intimacy he had never shown before in front of Peggy, and glanced up at his ex-wife. 'But he will,' he told her. Bill looked Peggy in the eye and, for a moment, Peggy looked away.

The late afternoon light reaching into Montgomery ward was soft and warm as peach flesh. The orchids would be lapping it up, especially the dendrobium with all its perky white faces, that was doing splendidly. Sun fell on Jessica, who held little Florence, another old sweatshirt pulled up to reveal a pale breast from which she was feeding. Such slobbishness might need taking in hand at some point, though this wasn't the moment. Peggy flattened out her turquoise pashmina between her palms. The colour seemed to crackle with energy and a faint but wholesomely herby aroma – Gerda's aroma – rose up. Both were comforting and dampened her nausea, a side effect from having to up her tablets. Just for the time being. Things were on rather shaky ground.

‘That’s a beautiful scarf, Mum. It brings out your eyes.’ Jessica paused until Peggy met her gaze. ‘Who gave it to you?’

‘Are you saying I’m incapable of buying anything colourful for myself?’ She wasn’t falling into that trap!

Jessica looked slightly cross at Peggy’s answer. ‘Not incapable, Mum. You just don’t, that’s all.’

‘But I might suddenly, on the spur of the moment, have decided it was time for a little splash of colour. You need to have more faith in your old Mum.’

‘Mum, don’t say that, I have every faith in you. You *know* that.’ Jessica looked back at her mother, urgent, transgressed: still very much the girl. With her ever-changing haircuts – she had chop-sticks in today – and that vast circle of friends and beautiful little Florence, why did she insist on taking life so seriously? Peggy really was immensely proud of her daughter’s knack for negotiations, hustle and business – that was the Foster blood in her – after she and Keith relocated to Brighton. Right up until Florence’s birth, she was all bustle and buzz, marketing director for this and that dance company, arts festival, schools’ project. Only why such a humourless child? Her father’s side, most likely. Peggy leaned across and tapped her daughter’s free hand. ‘Don’t work yourself up, dear. I’m only having one of my little jokes.’

For a time, the only sounds were an occasional bumping of doors, a trolley’s muffled yelp and Florence’s soft, eager sucking. Peggy envied her daughter that, however slobbish it looked. Jessica and Adam were put straight onto bottles and everyone being nice only ever worsened her guilt. Thank

goodness she was back on Boots' roster next week, dispensing tablets and creams to the lost and broken.

'It was your Reiki woman, wasn't it.' Why wouldn't Jessica just leave it? 'Gerda seems very, you know, *turquoise*. Anyway, have you seen her?'

'I've an appointment this Saturday. You don't have to nag, you know.'

Peggy was damned if she was letting on how very much she was looking forward to Saturday. And though, yes, Gerda did wear a lot of turquoise, that was simply her friend's character. It wasn't an idea she liked, that it was a secret code that her daughter could read and she could not. Anyway, *turquoise* or not, it was Gerda's bluntness and her devil-may-care sense of humour that Peggy responded to more than even her rose otto and chakric alignments. During her lengthy – and expensive – treatments, all Peggy could think of was the moment when Gerda's hands rested motionless on her skin before being removed entirely and they would begin talking, dismissing and laughing. Gerda was the first woman in a long while that Peggy felt inclined to get to know, unlike all those unreliable, insipid mothers at the school gates. Unpredictable Mrs. Shepherd. Feeble-minded Janet Baker.

Jessica pulled Florence away from her breast to look at her. Florence's head lolled forward like an old cuddly toy. Peggy stood, eager, holding out her arms, then sank back into her chair, cradling her granddaughter as Jessica went off for a pee. In the bed to Adam's left was a man about Keith's age, hair neat even though his torso was half-covered with plaster. Today, he was being visited

by his mother – a lovely woman – and his two little girls, Isabella and Rebecca. His wife worked. Peggy hadn't seen her.

Keith! That big posh clown. And not even an engagement ring to show for ten years together and now a child, too. A modern relationship, Jessica called it whenever the subject came up, as if commitment were somehow unfashionable. Peggy loosened her scarf. Florence's warmth flowed into Peggy's flank and arm and travelled the rest of her, as gentle and soporific as hot milk and honey.

'Mum?'

Peggy emerged from unexpected blackness. Her daughter was shaking her elbow.

'Is everything alright?'

Jessica grinned, then laughed. 'You always say that. Whenever you wake up from a nap.'

'You make me sound like an eccentric aunt.'

They both had a laugh at that and Florence stirred, stretching out her little fists. Jessica put her hands on her hips, then momentarily bit her lip.

'Dad says Adam's living with you. He sounds pretty upset.'

'Well, I can quite understand that he is.' Peggy had anticipated this argument and her answers, which she gave slowly so as to be completely clear, had been amply rehearsed. 'You have to understand that Adam has very complex needs and your father's never thought to make preparations. He can't expect to simply muscle in.'

Jessica folded her arms to hug her midriff. 'Mum, it's not about that.'

‘Jessica, I realise that you may think you know your father’s motives, but I can promise you that you don’t know the half of it.’

‘You’re punishing him, I know that much.’

Now she was getting melodramatic. ‘Jessica, please sit down.’

‘No, I think it’s time we went. I want to miss the traffic.’

Why did Jessica so often end up with the hump? A few months of everything being tickety-boo between them, then all of a sudden – this! How like her father, so quick to feel slighted. It went with the humourlessness. And what a brutal combination when combined with the Foster tendency towards speaking one’s mind. Perhaps it even contributed to Keith’s periodic uprootings. If only she could point out to Jessica why Bill wasn’t trustworthy when it came to her brother’s wellbeing. Blood was such a fickle thing when mixed. It refused to side with anyone.

Don’t interfere. You’re interfering. Jessica used these words whenever she sensed anyone questioning or advising, as if decisions were being taken without her consent. But such attacks were welcome. They were proof that Peggy was able to bear the brunt of whatever harshness the world flung at her family, a harshness more threatening than merely being *interfered* with. Her common sense and her sensibly invested capital were her allies, without which the others wouldn’t have their freedom to vent in the first place. No, these attacks were her vindications.

Peggy reached down to pick up her scarf from beneath the chair and right then Adam said *Ung?* The sound was thick and gurgling with spittle but the tone rose unmistakably; a question or a call for something.

‘Mum? Has he done that before?’

Peggy’s heart thrashed in her ribcage. ‘No. No. Not at all.’ She fumbled in her handbag, then stopped herself. Each of them moved swiftly down a side of the bed. Adam turned his head in short, awkward jerks to face his sister.

‘Jzz?’ said Adam.

‘Oh, fuck, *Adam.*’ Breathless, Jessica blinked.

Adam’s eyes flicked between his sister and Florence, who was still sleeping, trying to make sense of what this could mean, then began to turn his head back.

‘Ung? Mm. Mm. Mung? Mum?’

Adam looked at his mother, appraising, examining. His eyes had lost none of their brown-green colouring. Who did he think he saw? Peggy could hardly remember the half-person from before all this. She didn’t wish to, either. She hoped her son would see this whole, self-contained person and recognise her as she was now. She hoped he liked what he saw. Adam’s forehead creased this way and that and eventually, as if having reached some conclusion, Adam looked towards his bedside unit.

‘Warker.’

‘Water? Do you want some water?’

‘Warker. Yeh. Warker.’

Peggy poured out warm tap-water from the lidded jug into a small glass and brought it to her son's dry lips.

Adam woke to see a man seated at his bedside. The man was more old than young. He was reading a newspaper. The man was often at Adam's bedside and often read a newspaper. He wore glasses and his grey-threaded black hair was unkempt. Unclean, even. His face was deeply lined, thick fleshy folds stretched across his forehead. His voice, when he spoke was high, dry and quivered slightly. He seemed an anxious man, but a kind man. The man claimed to be Adam's father. If this was so – and there was no reason to think it wasn't – others were in agreement. Still, when he talked to the man who claimed to be his father, the man sounded unsure.

Adam had no memory of his father. He kept trying to bring one to the surface by repeating the word *Father*. Then *Dad*. And all that came was a garden shed and a powerful oil-and-wood smell and a vague male form that was more certain, more alive than the buckled figure at his bedside.

These moments were peaceful. The man, when he arrived, made only a few comments about Adam. Hello, son, he would say. You've got more colour. You look well. And the man then sat with his newspaper and the stay was punctuated by pages crackling, the occasionally paraphrased story about global affairs that petered out midway, a trip to the canteen. The man called Dad

shared his time with his son. Dad had his time. Adam had his own. There was no invading or imposing.

One other thing made Adam doubtful. He once woke up with Dad at his bedside and there was also a woman and they were talking. He didn't catch what they were saying, but the tone was low and soft and intimate. The woman wasn't the woman who claimed to be Mum, either. So if Dad was Dad and Mum was Mum, then who was the woman who got shooed away as soon as Dad noticed Adam's eyes were open? And why did Dad and Mum never visit together? And how real was any of this, anyway?

Green Zone 2 had been Dowding Wing when Jess had her tonsils taken out. Same old Royal General, though, however much its spectrum of zones might want you to think it was something nicer, like an airport. Same old place of pain, toast and waiting. The only things thriving were the brazen weeds in the flowerbeds. What a place in which to begin your existence – it took a whole summer's rebirthing for Jess to get over her own grim forceps birth. Not like Flo. When you could have a warm, soothing birthing pool, why the fuck did people insist on coming here to hatch their sprogs under strip light?

This visit was intended as a statement: this is Big Sis – bullshit detector perfectly calibrated – protecting little brother. Except, after last night's crappy sleep, her eyeballs felt finely sandpapered and the outside world looked like a

pirate copy. Even her balance was skew-whiff. For sure, time was when sleep-deprivation was part of the fun, a feature of a good night – or weekend (or week) – out. But the awkwardness and cackhandedness was funny-ha-ha rather than funny-peculiar because, back in the day, nothing *mattered*. Being staggering late didn't *matter*. Neither did rubbish spelling, getting rampantly lost, nor having few coherent words for some twat in a suit. She went though it all in one of those huge plastic bubble things you could walk around in, like she saw at her last Glasto. Bit by bit, though, her bubble got punctured by things that *mattered*. Mortgage repayment plans. Funding applications. Stress and pressure widened the gashes, until her little bubble was pretty much shredded and she entered the colourless realms of insurance premiums and tax thresholds. She toughened up and though she did well enough, when her sleep got stolen - like by Flo's terrible cough last night – the same haze that once kept everything hilariously off kilter now made her feel rubbish and paranoid and dangerously wobbly.

Green Zone Level 1. Follow a dingy main corridor, turn right opposite ICU, then second left. Nurses gestured her towards a windowless TV room where her brother was dozing in his wheelchair, slumped in front of some American movie about plucky kids and horses. His face, though mottled and gaunt, looked peaceful, his mouth curled upwards at the corners rather than slack and baggy like before he woke up. Poor guy. She would do what she could, always Big Sis. Big Sis to everyone. In a way, she owed him loads: Keith and Flo, Manchester and Brighton. His accident had put a match to her childhood and she flew on its fuel from then on.

Though her visit was down to Mum's nagging, Jess' main reason for being at the Royal General had nothing whatsoever to do with Mum. No, she was here because she had an old indie CD for her brother called *Groovy Trax* and talked Keith into loaning out his elderly Discman. Adam would maybe know the older ones and these might keep him going until she got out of Mum precisely where his record collection was stashed. *Fool's Gold* was on there and thank Christ Adam wouldn't remember that to talk about. Jess' other reason was to tell Adam about his room at Mum's. About the pencils, ready on his old desk and sharpened annually. His underwear kept folded neatly in drawers. A meerkat poster, bought when he was ten, the only remnant of a collage of tickets and band cuttings that once grew like bindweed across his walls and ceiling back at Number Five. When the accident happened, Jess' little brother hadn't been the boy with the meerkats poster for some time, the meerkats' intent expressions becoming increasingly ironic.

Jess came round in front of the plucky kids and horses and crouched down in front of Adam. 'Hey bro. It's me.'

Adam blinked a few times and his eyes opened more widely, pupils focusing on his sister. 'Jess.' His eyes shifted about and he craned his neck to look beyond his sister to see if anyone else had come.

'No. Just me. I've shaken off the old fogies.'

Adam smiled broadly and shaped a long out breath.

Jess reached into her big saggy bag. 'Hey. I got some stuff. Some apricots – sundried, full of iron. Some Green & Blacks. Pisses all over Cadbury's.

Pumpkin seeds. Really good for you.’ She laid each of these items in Adam’s lap as she named them. ‘And – here. I got you this CD.’

Adam smiled, curious, as he read the song titles. Then his neck and lips stiffened. He turned away from his lap, rapidly jiggling his legs to shake off his little pile of gifts. The pumpkin seeds rattled to the floor, then the CD fell with a clatter. ‘No. No. I don’t want it.’ Adam breathed out hard and rasping through his nostrils, not a person sort of sound, then shook his head hard as if to clear it, his eyes screwed up tight.

Jess scooped her gifts from her brother’s lap and the floor, mouthing platitudes in that tolerant, motherly way she used when changing a particularly sticky nappy. She was stiff and dizzy. She stretched her neck. She cooed a goodbye and carried the pile back to the ward. This person was her little brother just as deep-sea fish, who carve secret lives in intense dark and pressure, look like their relatives in the shallows. Big Sis would have to fumble her way along using trial-and-error and guesswork.

Jess curled up on Adam’s bed, getting her breath back, wishing for sleep. Adam’s blankets smelled of sweat and antiseptic. The other men on the ward were leering at her and she told them to mind their own business, then pulled around those hideous Seventies curtains so she could nestle into herself.

Fool’s Gold. 3 a.m. and walking back from The Hacienda and all those cars singing it, those street lights, that thickly-clouded sky. The rain glistening it. It wouldn’t stop, would it? And it was her alone with it. And her friends all knew, were planning to abandon her mad and soaked to the bone. Never liked her.

Nothing to like. Polly and Jo's faces everywhere, singing *Fool's Gold* in the rain. You could never trust anyone. Big Sis? Yeah, right.

Knackered after his physio, his left thigh really hurting, Adam lay among the sheets and pillows he called home. A deeper pain, somewhere inside his chest, radiated out a maddening cold burn to his skin's surface, darting around, impossible to pinpoint. It was usually like this after physio.

Mum's bedside pep talk made it so much worse. *Well, I know it wasn't as good as it might have been, but still, bravo. Well done, you.* It wouldn't let him cocoon himself in bed sheets, be elsewhere. As if the super-cheery comments of his therapist hadn't been enough – Nagging Norma, with her stringy, veiny arms. As he swung his sluggish body along parallel bars (*splendid*), as with great effort he lifted girly rubber dumbbells (*you can do it*), as he lay there on the floor, inhaling ancient rubber (*small steps*), he cursed himself, then Norma, then Mum – if she was watching – then himself again. And then, any sense of self wrung out, he was scooped up into his wheelchair and shovelled back into bed to lie among all the other broken men.

Then, later in the day, Mum brought her followers to worship at his bedside shrine. These neighbours and colleagues and cousins who, he would learn after they left, suffered miscarriages, sons that lived with another man, mothers that no longer recognised them, good-for-nothing husbands, poky houses, artery

problems, mounting debts. He was their miraculous effigy, his presence bringing them luck in their plight.

Was this truly all? Some miracle, returning to this.

Bill was busy with dinner and busy was good. Carole was out in the Volvo, also good, delivering organic fruit-and-veg boxes to other bleeding hearts trapped between Essex and London. Certainly, Bill would never let on he thought this of her customers, especially now *Simply Organics* was bringing in a modest income. You could even say he'd been doing his bit all along, acting as crash mat for all those early *no's* that Carole encountered, whatever Alec said. Thinking about these other things, making cauliflower cheese, alone, *The Rolling Stones – Now!* up loud, this was all good.

That morning, Bill drove down to meet with specialists and present his agenda. First, everyone must be clear on Adam's rights, as an adult, to make up his own mind. Second, Adam must have direct access to the State support he was getting. Third, they must decide on a date by which to tell him the full story about the circumstances of his accident. There were other points, but they had long since dissipated because he ended up in the wrong wing, then got lost finding the right one. He then trotted past where some leaky prefabs used to be, though the redwood was still there, solemnly guarding a staff car park. A year on from Adam's accident, there had been another appointment with another

specialist who talked options and brain activity. He had thought about it, hadn't he? Wanted it, even. He remembered looking through the prefab window at that exact same redwood, its crumbly, rust-coloured bark being pecked for grubs by a treecreeper, weighing these options, practically, like they were mortgage plans. Bill had wanted his son dead, exactly as Peggy said. When he arrived, late and panting, at today's appointment about their son being alive, he sat himself down and went along with everything.

But the evening was sunny and Bill was going to enjoy this. He turned up The Stones high enough to hear from the kitchen. He tackled the peak of dishes in the sink, scrubbed the breakfast bar and even got round to screwing back on the wall units' last remaining door. Cauliflower cheese was his specialty and although, yes, he did make up his sauce from a packet, the cauliflower even sometimes came from the allotment. Just chop up some onion and bacon to fry up and add to the sauce, freshly grate some nutmeg and – voila! A beer would have gone down well but best not.

There was a knock at the back door. Its single pane rattled violently. Bill opened it for Ben, Alec's not-so little brother, and they enacted their habitual *Hello Bill/ Hello Ben* greeting. Both smiled, the only thing remotely amusing about the joke was now that each kept on using it to torture the other. Ben was turned out in a well-pressed blue shirt and informal tie. Well-established in medicine, always a kind word, Bill and he often felt stuck in a world populated by fools and together they applied straightforward commonsense to sort out disastrous road works and idiotic political manoeuvres. If Bill never managed to

become a father to Ben, who was in Namibia when his mother and Bill moved in together, they were at least friends. If it weren't for Alec, Bill could have even got further. Either side of their wedding, he and Carole talked it over, but Alec's buzzard-like shadow fell across the *Dad* subject until, eventually, it scuttled back into its burrow and promptly starved to death. This did, however, mean Bill was neither walking out on Adam nor stepping into the aviator shoes of Ben and Alec's father.

Ben would often drop by for no reason other than to see what they were up to and pass the time of day. Ben dropping round was therefore one further good thing, as they condemned wasting three million on Diana's sodding fountain, Bill chopping parsley all the while and it stayed good right until Ben said 'Mum mentioned an important appointment. It go alright?'

Bill chopped a little of his finger into the parsley at that. 'Hard to say, really. Are you staying?'

Ben shrugged, alert as always to his stepfather's variable moods. 'Not if you don't want me to. But I've already eaten, if that's worrying you.' He paused to give Bill a moment to explain and when Bill didn't – what could Bill say? – he continued. 'So what happened, then?'

'Well, it's all between my ex-wife and them, really.' Yes, this sounded like a good answer. 'She's doing the caring and Adam's an adult in the eyes of the law, so I don't exactly have much say.'

Bill opened the oven door to check on the cheese, which was beginning to brown nicely. Where was Carole? He felt awkward talking about Adam with Ben.

His medical knowledge might intrude into areas where it oughtn't and, besides, Adam was his son and Ben wasn't. Adam was a cripple and a product of Bill's parenting, however much his speech was sharpening and his steps less like Captain Scarlet. Ben was a medical student and the product of a pilot.

'So why did the consultant arrange an appointment?'

Why was Ben pressing him so hard? 'I haven't the foggiest. All I did was sit there.'

Ben's eyebrows arched in answer, his mouth forming an unspoken 'oh.' Unlike his brother, he was sensitive to straying into unwelcome conversations. However, this was no conversation about unapproved overdrafts or dry rot and keeping it bottled contaminated Bill, like after a night on the scotch. Neither The Stones nor the cauliflower cheese could help now. How terribly he was dreading Carole's return because, as he'd just seen, he could not shrug this one off. Carole would look at him, then at Ben, would know something to be up and Bill would be unable to keep her out. It might take days of mentioning his *funny mood*, but she would find a way. There was a moaning and a roaring as Carole coaxed the Volvo up the drive and into the garage. Ben got up from the breakfast bar. What to do? What to say? How long could he keep this up? It hurt. It actually did hurt.

There was an easy solution: turn up the gas and leave supper to burn. This took around two minutes and meanwhile he stalled his wife with a barrage of questions about the demand for fennel and kale. By the time the fire alarm (Alec had installed this) was switched off, the house aired, fish and chips bought from

down the road, Ben said goodbye to and the evening's documentaries watched, Bill found he could shrug off his meeting as going pretty much as expected. In bed, he stroked Carole where she liked and conversation became less of an issue.

Dream or memory? Those same, wood-panelled corridors, endless burgundy carpet and numbered doors. When was that? Pre-dawn light now nudged at the ward's window frames. Come to it, when was now? Whatever the case, this moment-called-now included sitting in a warm, damp mess of pyjamas and bedding, all hot and itchy. Great. Adam's will might be increasingly lively, but his doughy body just lay there. He sometimes even missed the coma. Time didn't crawl, pain couldn't turn you inside out and from that distance, you were connected to the whole universe. But he had been back for over a month, so everyone said, and even that memory was getting vague.

A red button lay beside him. Mum called it room service. Ringing it brought the duty nurse and she would smile, sympathetic, then clean up his mess, though his shame would linger. He had to know what type of mess was down there, so he could throw the nurse a sarcastic look, let her know how, even if he couldn't control his stupid body, he could at least control his feelings. Problem was, it was a big deal simply holding a glass of water without emptying it over himself: forcing his hand down between tight sheets wasn't even an option. They

always mummified him this way, said they didn't want him falling out of bed again. Except he hadn't fallen out of bed, he had woken that night, dead sure he was normal again, and slid his legs off. For a brief, few, amazing seconds, his legs held his weight. Then they jellied beneath him and he plummeted to the cold lino where they found him.

His dream might offer clues. It had been like his other bad ones. An evil presence, unseen and shapeless, stalked him down those same deep-shadowed corridors. There was a man and a woman, faces darkened, each smoking fags that never seemed to burn down. At the bottom of a grand staircase, a vase was filled with huge, white lilies on a table. The woman withered to dust. The man sprouted a snout and made threatening grunts at Adam. Hardly erotic. He pushed the button and studied the strengthening morning beyond the decrepit blinds of the ward's huge windows.

Those windows and blinds! He would be able to draw them perfectly, even ten years from now, if he didn't get sucked back into coma: every bent slat; the precise configuration of the left hand side's tangled pull-cords, patterns and names traced in the dust by visitors. Adam liked it when they were open, liked seeing what the weather was up to or watching dull brown birds hop along ledges on the building opposite. The birds – sparrows? – were argumentative and often whipped themselves up into mob frenzies of little chirps for no apparent reason. When they weren't rowing, they were having little dust baths or getting down to some serious, libertine sparrow-sex. It seemed a totally superior life.

The nurses worked hard on a compromise over keeping the blinds open for Adam. The handful of other men who bothered with an opinion went on about draughts and being seen, but then mostly they just went on about nothing. They went on about insurance, their exes, paperwork, how this or that team was being mucked around with again. What they never talked about was losing a limb or not being able to drive again or how people might stare when they were up and about.

But was Adam anyone to judge? He wasn't one of them, couldn't bring himself to return their smiles or nods or raised eyebrows, their segregation broadened by Mum's fussing around these *nice young men*. They were men before they broke. As they mended, they knew in roughly what shapes they wanted putting back together, because they were fully formed when things went wrong. Though the bloke who had lost the lower part of his leg wouldn't get back on his motorbike anytime soon and that guy in for chemo might not be back in the office for some time, while the chap with something up with his gall bladder might not be playing with his kids for a bit, they at least had some token of who they were and what they, as men, did: rode bikes, earned money, played with kids. Not talking most likely protected such things. Adam had only been a boy when he broke and even those memories were vague. A few days back, the phrase *Sunday roast* brought on a massive surge of memory. Chicken fat crackling in a roasting tin. Mum's steam-dampened cheeks. Nice, but not enough, though glimpses of more did lie stubbornly out of reach. It could even be time to face Jess' CD. For the most part, though, he floated day in and day out

in the lukewarm water of his body and bed without anything much to grasp on to, either to anchor him or pull him ashore.

After a few minutes, Nurse Mitchell came down the aisle. Nurse Mitchell's voice was both definite and playful, hoarse-sounding, as if she were in a heavy metal band or else chain smoked. Or both. 'Good morning, Adam. And how are we this morning?'

Adam rolled his eyes, exasperated; *look what's happened again!* He stood a better chance of making Nurse Mitchell laugh with gestures. His speech tended to make people sympathetic and it drove him nuts.

'Oh, then I expect Sir will be wanting his morning bath?'

Adam nodded, slow and sarcastic.

'Okay, then let's get the show on the road.'

'Cheers.' The word was lame but came out better than *thanks*, which rasped and gurgled horribly. His *cheers* sounded a bit like *cheese* but was more or less there and he went on to venture her first name: Sharon. This came out slurred, but was recognisable. 'Cheese Heron.'

'You're more than welcome, Adam.' Nurse Mitchell poured Adam into a wheelchair and took him off for his scrub.

Keith should wait at their door a while longer. He would have to, because Jess had, as before, changed the locks on the second night of his walkabout, the flat

having been bought with Nan's money and Mum's help, after all. Jess would only open the door to him once he recrossed the landing and began his descent down the stairs' scuffed carpet. She knew what she would say and his likely response but for now, she was enjoying watching his face warped by the spy-hole's fisheye and savouring his awkwardness. He looked a state, his well-stubbed face paler and more blotchy than Adam's, his curls performing acrobatics. His eyes were dark from drinking bourbon and smoking bongs in front of Baz' Playstation during sleepless, speed-fuelled days and nights. This had been no ordinary walkabout. Not only was it his longest at ten days, but also his first since Flo's birth. Keith had twice gone walkabout during the pregnancy and the final time had vowed that Jess would be right to kick him out if he did it again.

Jess had let herself get terribly upset at first, as always. They had been on a date night, meeting up at *Aubergine*, the new veggie place everyone was on about. She called him once they were fifteen minutes over their booking time and, though the phone was picked up, no one spoke, though Keith was obviously in a pub. She tried again over a soya latte and the phone wasn't taking messages. Recognising the signs, she had her sob and summoned her allies to see her through the coming days, to gather what information could be gleaned and to help her wait it out, because there was no use going after him, that only ever made things worse. Nothing could be achieved until guilt kicked in, suddenly and unexpectedly. Nor was it any use asking her why she put up with it, because she didn't entirely know. Jess had been through enough of these

episodes for them to become habitual to their relationship. Where some partners snored and you put up with it, Keith went walkabout once or twice a year and you put up with that. The rest of the time, he was the same sweet fool as when they'd met at a dance festival up in the Sierra Alpujata and he'd asked her for a lift back to Malaga. She'd been giving him a lift ever since.

She tugged open the front door just as Keith had slouched his way down the top three steps, head bowed. 'Keith,' Jess began, coughing out the word to get his attention. He paused where he was. 'If you want to come back into your home, if you want to come back and live with me and with your daughter, then you're going to have to marry me. Either marry me, or that's it. Time to move on.'

Keith stayed on his step, head still bowed. 'But I thought...your parents...and didn't you say it was repressive or something? Can't I just come in and talk about this?'

'The doorstep will do fine, Keith.' Points to him for remembering her two fave arguments for prolonging their engagement, but not points enough. Besides, she was ignoring these herself. 'It's an either or situation.'

Keith blinked, confused. 'What...like with all the...and a top hat?'

'Keith, I don't care if it's down the Wimpy, so long as I get to hear you say vows in front of all our mates and someone who can do the paperwork.' Head still bowed, Keith looked up a little, a slight smile on his lips, weighing up whether of not he was off the hook. Fat chance. 'Only I'm still getting that meal at *Aubergine* out of you. The rehearsal dinner, the night before. I want it at *Aubergine*.'

'Whatever you want.' Keith's smile deepened and his head rose a little.

'Then you're saying yes to the rehearsal dinner at *Aubergine*.'

Keith shifted on the step to face Jess. 'I suppose.'

'Then you're saying yes to the wedding. And yes, you'll marry me.'

'Yes, Jess.'

'Yes-Jess-shut-up-Jess or Yes-Jess-be-my-wife-Jess?'

Keith paused a little, finally cottoning on. He knelt on his step. 'Yes, Jess. Be my wife, Jess.'

Jess crossed the landing to meet Keith at the top, ignoring the heavy smell of fags and drink that cloaked him. They hugged, their ribs pressing up together, and just then the door to their flat clicked shut.

'You do have your keys, of course, Keith.'

'Um. Sure. So you haven't changed the locks this time?'

'Ah...'

The doorway to Gerda's converted oast house was a downpour of flowering wisteria. Removing her shoes, Peggy mentioned how her Double Phalaenopsis had four blooms now, then commented on what a magnificent display. So welcoming. And, though Gerda claimed to let it take care of itself, wasn't there evidence of recent pruning, weren't there careful wire ties? No matter, the result was splendid.

Gerda made chamomile tea for herself and Bengal Bracer for Peggy, a dark, cinnamony potion that was the nearest thing to coffee in her cupboards. Her circular living room, with cushions and curtains that were – yes, Jessica – turquoise, filled with the kettle’s roar, a chink of china. This was Peggy’s bolt-hole. She had first come ten years ago, under duress from Jessica, which went to show what a state she’d got herself into during her really black time. She had clocked Gerda’s manner straight off, a womanly no-nonsense that made her think of Mum and while Peggy hadn’t exactly *let go her feelings* (those counsellors made it sound like she needed a pee), she instead got back the strength to laugh them off. And though she perhaps let Gerda know too much about Adam’s accident, any guilt was just a needle-prick as Gerda could be trusted above anyone.

Peggy would today, at last, talk sense about Jessica’s wedding. Hitherto, she had walked among colleagues, neighbours, even her sister, all turned mindless as sock-puppets at the mention of corsage and fruitcake. If anyone said *big day* one more time... They would talk first – Gerda had long ago worked out that Jess was with Keith out of perverse duty. Second, those hands. Last, more talk. It was worth every penny. Except Gerda seemed more interested in Adam than this latest nonsense about stupidly expensive rings. Peggy detailed Bill’s latest silly little tantrum over Adam’s allowance, how she’d been oiling the special toilet’s multiple limbs and Adam’s wonderful newfound ability to sound the letter ‘v’. Hoping that had sufficed and having drained the Bengal Bracer, Peggy took off her cardie and entered Gerda’s treatment room where a lit candle

floated in a glass bowl. She smiled at Gerda, sliding her legs up onto her funny padded table and placing her hands at her tummy, as Gerda liked.

Gerda stood still a moment and frowned. 'Peggy, I sense you're holding back a little. That's not like you.'

'Do you think so? I don't think so.' Peggy's voice sounded a little panicky to her, though she wasn't panicky at all, she was happy to be here.

Gerda cocked her head on one side. 'I can see that you're holding tension in your shoulders. Is there perhaps something else?'

The first thought that came was Adam's wretched magazine. Was that it? Was Gerda's vision so diamond clear that she could see right through Peggy, through time, through space, see how she smuggled away that sordid thing into her handbag, the police still in the house? 'I don't think so, Gerda,' she found herself saying. A lie! She'd told Gerda, of all people, a lie! Why?

The frown lingered a moment or two longer before being dismissed with a quick upward flick of Gerda's eyes. She smiled. 'Mm. Perhaps all this tension, then. Well, would you like to lie down for me?'

'Of course, Gerda.'

Of course, Gerda. Those hands.

Jess fed Adam another crystallised ginger chunk from a burst-open packet on his bed, then popped one in her own mouth. Its taste was powerful and earthy,

electrifying the hospital air. Keith leaned over and placed one huge hand on what was now his fiancée's knee. Such a dumb word, like somehow marriage wasn't English, like it was fake. Except this wasn't fake. Weird, but not fake. They'd been together over a decade, had a kid. Definitely not fake. Jess placed one hand over Keith's, nestling her bones among his, a single diamond winking up from their muddle of fingers. He caught her eye and she gave him a nod to begin his spiel.

Today was future-brothers-in-law-get-to-know-each-other day. Jess had helped Keith give it polish all weekend and they had rehearsed it in the car journey over. Keith was to lay a cool on Adam by explaining his work as a sound engineer, mention a few bands he'd toured with and then invite Adam to his stag do at The Fu Bar in September. This was to establish Keith's credentials as someone who actually did work, if sporadically, to counter whatever Mum would have said up to this point. It was also to extend a chummy hand to Adam, draw him out of his Mum-enforced Marks-and-Sparks-dressing-gown life. Except Adam mostly lay there going *oh* and *I see* as Keith's account of himself became less sure and headed down its usual avenue of failed opportunities and bitterness about the way things were set up.

Adam still looked pasty and the colour in his cheeks perhaps had more to do with an overworked heating system than his improving health. Even so, his eyes were brighter and shifted around more rapidly than *oh* and *I see*. His speech had improved beyond that, too. Of course, he might be struggling to take everything in. It wasn't necessarily because he'd silently sided with Mum. Adam

was too much the individual, as was Jess, and if that fire now burned low, it was surely her job to point out just how unlike their parents they actually were. That said, there were moments when their eyes locked and Jess would be entirely at sea about this person in the bed. She did her best to keep up the Big Sis thing but it was mostly like she'd dressed for the wrong sort of party.

Today's visit could thus be chalked up as another one of her brilliant ideas, just like *Groovy Trax*. Keith's stag do was less than four months away. Fact was, Adam's fashion sense currently went no further than nightwear and he had to pee sitting down. How would he cope with Keith's gobshite mates? Their goals were perfectly symmetrical to Adam's – to slur speech, lose motor function, lapse into semi-consciousness. And now Adam and Keith had fallen silent. It was time to fill the vacuum the best way she knew how. 'You know, this wedding's going to be fabulous and Mum's having a fabulous time if she wants it or not. We've even got this drag king boy band. Mum probably won't notice and end up singing her little heart out.'

Adam looked confused. 'Mum sing?'

'You don't remember?' Come to think of it, no he wouldn't. Jess swallowed and pressed on anyway. 'How she always used to have Diana Ross on while doing the roast? Now it's Mum and Boyzone. Mum and Westlife.' No, he wouldn't know those either. Oh, just listen to yourself, Jess. 'But then you can't beat a bit of Diana.'

'But you hated Diana.' Again, the confusion, but at least he might have remembered *Chain Reaction*.

'Yeah, well. I sort of hated it. But I sort of loved it, too, you know? Oh, whatever. Have more ginger. It's great for your circulation.'

Jess popped a sugary chunk into her mouth and fed another to Adam who chewed his pensively.

'Oh, yeah,' he said after an awkward pause. 'The CD! The Stone Roses! *Fool's Gold!*'

'The CD I gave you? *Fool's Gold?*' Oh crap, not that. 'No, Adam, I was up at uni. That was long after...' Hang on, could Adam be talking about the tapes? She needed to think about this and Keith being here wasn't helping matters. 'Keith,' she told him. 'Be a sweetie and grab us some coffee? I see they actually do soya lattes in the canteen, though fuck knows if they're any good.'

Keith stood. Having several times seen Jess' reaction to *Fool's Gold*, his eyes widened into a question, mouthing *are you okay?* His Snoopy look. Well, yes, you fool. He kissed her forehead and left them.

Jess sat beside her brother and explained how some people, Mum would never say who, started sending music tapes, the autumn after the accident. 'Mum then started bullying everyone into making them. Even Auntie Angie. Mozart's particularly good apparently.' Jess even got some DJ mates to spin a mix or two. Just for him. Just in case. Si and Matt. God, that took her back. 'It's a wonder I came away from uni in one piece. I mean, there were Mum and Dad, falling to bits, and there you were, and there I was and there were *such parties*, that whole '89 warehouse scene. And if it'd been a good night, a real blinder, soon as it wound down, I'd get all ready to jump on a train, go sit with you, so if I

could transmit this – *thing* – that was going on, then you'd come back and everything would be good again. I mean, yeah *right*. Like things really are that simple. You know, I'm glad. That you're listening to music. It was a big part of you. Mum might still even have the tapes.' Jess bit her lip, patted her brother's hand and searched out more ginger.

It had been a week of tremors. Carole spouting about miracles at AA. Their car's full-blooded MOT failure. Alec flying off the handle about his mother having to borrow his fiancée's bloody car. Perhaps the Clark's shoebox of tapes beside Adam's bed was the big one come at last and would ripple up and down every fault line, land slipping away, infrastructure irreparable. The tapes that girl kept on sending, were they there too? It seemed a touch dangerous, but then Peggy filed her own memories in the form of porcelain ornaments and framed photos.

'Dad? Are you alright?'

Bill ought to mention the box but he was a wretchedly bad liar. On the bus down here, he even pictured telling Adam the full story, not Peggy's version. They would sit solemnly and at the end, Adam would thank his father and then it would be Bill again with his son. However, when it came to explaining about that dead boy, Bill stumbled. Peggy's story might be tragic but it wasn't horrific. It made people sorry for you, pointed their fingers elsewhere. Adam was simply immature and unlucky, not wildly out of control. Then when it came to afterward,

seeing Carole, then Jess, he stumbled again, adding to that what Peggy was next likely to broadcast. He would get seen for the revolting creature he truly was. 'Yes, Adam. I'm *fine*.' Bill was being snappy but carried on anyway. 'Are you fine? Is everything set for tomorrow?'

'I guess.' Adam shrugged, his tone relaxed, as if answering a simpler question. Perhaps he was. 'Mum's fussing about her taxi 'cause of going in the ambulance.'

'In the ambulance?' So Peggy had gone ahead and arranged this without saying anything. This move, along with the tapes, got Bill out of checkmate. He might not be able to make the move he wanted, to tell Adam the story behind the accident, but he could at least move forward. 'Has Mum mentioned Grandma's money? About it being put away for safekeeping. Round about the fifteen thousand mark, with interest, give or take.'

Adam blinked a few times and his forehead knitted, at first into surprise, then into a frown. 'Why did no-one say?' In spite of his struggle to shape these sounds, Adam still spat them.

Bill flinched. Adam's tone was unexpected. Bill had thought he would be delighted: he was being given something.

'Well, for one thing, we didn't know how far you were going to pull through. There are lawyers to speak to. Special clauses. It's rather more complicated than you might think, Adam.' Peggy's words in his mouth. How did she possess him? What powers did she have?

'I want my wheelchair. I need some air.'

Bill lurched towards Adam, bashing his shin against the chair, hard and painful, then fumbled it into position, jerking the thing back and forth to get it close to his son's bed. Adam tore back his blanket, swung himself slowly off his bed, into the chair. Bill watched, tense. He ought to help. Except his touch could go wrong, could somehow give away his guilt, his uselessness.

Bill hooked one hand under a thigh, another under an armpit and swivelled Adam slightly. He was heavier than Bill imagined. With all his physio, he was at last becoming a man. Though Bill always felt he had failed to reach decisive manhood, he had often seen its stirring in Adam. His son's speech was direct, his movements were definite: his mother's characteristics, not his. Such assertiveness was shrewish in a woman but powerful in a man.

The sky beyond the entrance porchway was gunmetal grey. Bill wheeled Adam to a bench beside a weed-strewn stretch of gravel that surrounded a goldfish pond which a tilted sign claimed was a Zen garden. Adam reached into his pocket, brought out a pack of Camel Lights, popped one carefully in his mouth and lit up, his hand shaking. Peggy never mentioned this. Bill ought to give Adam an earbashing. Peggy would have. Except Adam's act seemed more of a confidence than a confrontation and really what was the point? Adam wasn't even breaking the law and that Jess was most likely supplying them showed a growing intimacy between the two siblings, a good thing.

'Does Mum know you smoke?'

Adam gave a sly smile and exhaled slowly and deliberately. 'Not yet. I'll have fun telling her.' His tone was amused. It breathed life into an old

conversation which they could fall back on during times of stress: having a laugh about funny old Mum. This crisis of blame had blown over. Bill returned the smile.

‘You know Mum smokes.’

‘I’d worked it out. You can smell she does. Since when?’

‘She’s always smoked.’ This trading of secrets was fun and intimate, if a little dangerous. ‘You perhaps wouldn’t remember. She’d go out into the garden, soon as you were in bed. After your, you know...she stopped making a secret of it.’

A couple began arguing in the car park, a shaven-headed man with sunglasses and a thin woman with a ponytail. The man’s arms reached upwards, his palms to the sky as if holding something immense. The woman shouted louder and threw something at the tarmac that clinked, then marched off. The man lowered his arms, looked around, picked up what was on the ground and slowly walked after her.

‘Who was Becky?’ Bill couldn’t place the name at first and Adam beat him to it. ‘Some of the tapes, they’re from her and I know her name.’

And now Bill really was on the high-wire: reveal too little or too much and he could plunge. That wasn’t going to stop him, though. He’d fight to keep the intimacy flowing: the hell with it. ‘You know she was your girlfriend when you had your accident. That night.’

Adam sucked in his lips, raised his eyes to the grey sky, blinking. ‘That’s what I’d guessed.’ It was the first time either of them had openly referred to the

accident. Mentioning *that night* drew a dark curtain around the bench. Adam brought his eyes back down and took a slow drag on his cigarette. 'Thanks, Dad,' he said on the exhalation. 'For saying about my money. About Becky.'

Bill patted Adam on the back, an action a father ought to perform on his son but one that always made him nervous. It was the first time he'd done so since Adam's recovery. 'That's alright, Adam,' he said. 'You can always count on me.'

Keep Clear At All Times.

Peggy and Bill were sitting at the bottom of a dark stairwell, close to the double doors guarding Roosevelt Wing. Inserted between two huge vending machines, their seats oozed foam from gashes, as if slit open and gutted by some wicked child. Peggy fiddled with her turquoise pashmina and reminded Bill that there wasn't room for him in the ambulance. 'It's the law,' she pointed out. 'One visitor only. Please don't make a scene.'

'I'm not making a scene.'

'I'm sorry, Bill, but you are. You are.' This being argumentative wasn't very Bill, not now he was off the drink. When his anger did erupt, it always targeted something offstage, such as whatever moron designed that new ringroad system, certainly never her. Perhaps, this little rebellion was down to his celebrated month-in-a-car following Adam's recovery and him in fact doing a

half-decent job of liaising with the doctors, seeing Adam regularly and keeping their son's spirits up. Against her better judgement, Peggy was maybe leaning ever so slightly on Bill. This was now easily put a stop to. 'You do understand that Adam living with me is for the best, don't you? I hope you're not somehow upset about that.' There. As true and direct as something Gerda might say. How Bill would squirm.

'I'm not upset, Peggy.' Didn't Bill sound sad and irritable? Upset, in fact. Anyway, perish the thought of Adam fumbling around in the filth and mess of that house in which he and Carole stranded themselves like refugees. Peggy had only visited the once, for crispy lasagne and soggy fruit salad. The place stank of moth-balls and rotting vegetables.

But Bill would not spoil today. Since four that morning, Peggy had made sure every inch of *Tigh-na-Mara* was perfect and welcoming, even cleaning the grout beneath her cloakroom sink. She hung cheery *Welcome Home!* banners across her lounge and in the doorway to Adam's room. She selotaped little mobs of balloons along her hallway. She filled a glass bowl with Quality Street and placed it on Adam's old desk, removing the nutty green triangles because he never touched them. These went into a wooden bowl which went into her lean-to shed with the one bar heater where she sat and had her ciggies, wondering how to explain that particular part of the arrangements.

Peggy had locked her front door and put the key for Gerda in the belly of a china turtle. Her home must be ready, so ready that nothing could be improved on and no thoughtful, helpful little tidying-away or cleanings-up would leave

marks other than hers. It must present you with a brick wall. It had to say: *don't touch*. Peggy walked to one side of the bungalow, looked around to see if anyone was watching and, certain they weren't, stood on tiptoes to look inside. It all looked cold and empty. Sad, even. As if Adam's surprise party had been and gone and no one had got into the spirit of things, only poked at the food, kept their talk polite. *No. Stop being ridiculous*. Gerda would put out the sausage rolls, the vol-au-vents, the bowls of peanuts, the tinned salmon sandwiches, Peggy's home-made trifle. *Tigh-na-Mara* would fill with people fussing over Adam and saying *isn't it wonderful*, its rooms swelling with life and the banners and balloons would, like the mirrors and lenses in a lighthouse, magnify and beam out everyone's happiness. And Peggy would walk around, letting people tell her how glad she must feel because this was, unofficially, as much her party as Adam's and she would watch them cluster around her son, enjoying that their stay would be short-lived and when all the mess was cleared away and the last guests said goodbye to, it would be just the two of them.

The doors of Roosevelt Wing banged open and through them, feet first, pushed briskly by a male nurse, her son. Adam was dressed in snarled-up jeans like factory rejects, a t-shirt saying something like Rabbithead and some pricey trainers. Not a sign of his nice blue shirt. But his smile was big and eager, not that wry tilt of the past months. Yes, a smile of someone returning home, though he did look tired.

A small crowd was gathered at the ambulance bay. A couple of the female nurses let off party poppers, giggling and cheering. Best not speak too much,

she might cry. Such lovely girls. They followed Peggy to the ambulance. So dependable, these nurses. So solid. One took Peggy's elbow and kissed her lightly on her cheek. Another nurse followed suit, then Nurse Mitchell – the sarcastic one with the most wonderfully red hair – planted a third. The moisture tingled and tickled. It sent ripples through her body.

Adam's wheelchair was installed in the ambulance and he began fiddling about with a personal CD player. Bill helped Peggy up, then stepped up after her. The nurses eased back. Bill clapped his hand awkwardly on his son's shoulder. Adam grinned without looking up. A father-son thing. One of those empty games that men pass off as communication. Bill hopped down and found Carole, who put her arm tightly through his and they began walking delicately towards the car park. Bill shook his head as he spoke, saying whatever he hadn't the nerve to tell Peggy to her face.

'Well, Adam. Here we are then!'

Adam smiled back, thin and mannered this time, and kept on fiddling with the CD player. She ought to mention this was a tiny bit rude, but then two men in green uniforms took the ramp from the back of the ambulance, a balding paramedic jumped in. The doors slammed shut and the hospital complex retreated like a shoreline. Deep inside Peggy's handbag, her mobile phone began squealing.

'I'm afraid we don't allow those in here, love,' said one paramedic, friendly but authoritative. 'Too much sensitive equipment.'

Peggy fumbled around in her handbag, trying to throttle it. As her fingers closed on it, the caller rang off. *Gerda*, its screen told her. Nothing urgent, with any luck. Just *where are the paper plates kept?* Gerda would manage. Gerda always managed. Adam looked up, interested, and took off his headphones. 'I didn't know you had a mobile. Is it old?'

'Yes, it is a brick of a thing. I don't particularly approve, if I'm being honest. They're such a nuisance. People shout such rubbish into them. But if you're a single woman, driving about at night, it's a very good idea. You need to be safe.' Peggy would miss those night time drives between home and Bethany House, the World Service muttering away, the roads quiet, all those households safe and cosy behind drawn curtains. She had felt cradled.

'Funny, isn't it?' Adam added. He fiddled with his headphones but didn't seem to want to put them back on. 'It was only me who could set our video, that's right isn't it? And wasn't I on our answerphone cause none of you could work it?'

'You're right, you're absolutely right. How wonderful you're remembering those things.' And, too, the new cooker that scared her so much that she used an hourglass for the Sunday roast. Mum would have called her ridiculous. Peggy had watched these fears take root around her from early in her marriage and they flourished after stopping work to have Jessica. She had kept on giving herself away, bit by bit, until there was nothing left at all to fight a world that seethed with things to fear. But then came black and pills and dearest Gerda. Now she couldn't imagine life without *Outlook Express* or *Windows 2000*.

Adam's accident had made ruins of her old life, true, but in time fear fell away too. Peggy might like to think she would have eventually left Bill, but could never see how the marriage would have got sufficiently dreadful. This was no way for a mother to think, but Adam's accident had to that extent been a good thing.

Exit.

Two.

'88. The summer night was moonless and cloudless. The botanical gardens smelled pungently of earth and a breeze hissed faintly through leaves. The only light came from the open windows of a small box-shaped house, the source of shrill rock music and, further off, torchlights flickering around a shabby greenhouse. The house was leased to the groundsman, away this weekend and leaving Toby, his teenage son, to keep a watch on things. Only his closest friends now remained. Having filled bin bags with litter, scrubbed carpets, glued china back together, the house was almost as before. Toby, Jez, Geg, Adam and Becky currently stood in the greenhouse, faces torchlit as they used secateurs to cut at rows of squat, leathery datura shrubs, lined up on growing trays. White flowers, long and pointed with tiny fangs at their mouths, drooped

from the shrubs and added a sickly sweet perfume to the dense smell of creosote and fertiliser.

‘God, I’m so sorry I didn’t bring the magazine,’ Becky repeated.

‘Becky, look,’ said Adam, animated but cool about it. ‘I don’t give a flying fuck about the magazine. It’s all up here.’ He tapped at a temple.

‘So we just boil it up?’ Jez sounded intrigued but wary. ‘Wasn’t there like some special way of preparing it?’

‘You want to back out now, boys? This’ll go down in *history*. This’ll be *legend*.’ Adam waited a moment for his enthusiasm to spread.

‘Make mine two sugars,’ said Geg.

‘Yeah, and mine’s with lemon,’ agreed Toby.

Jez just smiled, still nervous.

Adam shouldered the bag of cuttings and headed back out of the greenhouse, past dark rows of other greenhouses and across the lawns to the groundsman’s house. The others followed him, the last closing the front door behind them. The night finally cooling, Becky and the boys set to closing up the windows of the groundsman’s house. Slow, quiet music played in the kitchen where they spoke in low tones, if they spoke at all, the boys wincing as they drank the brew. They stayed there an hour or thereabouts, then filed upstairs as time ceased to be of relevance.

A short burst of music, very loud, too brief for identification.

Another, then a second or two of swirling electronic chords.

Someone shouted: Jez!

Another burst. Then another.

'Jez!'

A girl's voice.

A boy's laugh, high-pitched, violent.

Footfalls drummed the stairs, skittered into the kitchen, stopped. Cutlery rattled.

The upstairs toilet flushed, then flushed again and then the clank and groan of the handle cranking rhythmically in a cistern attempting to fill.

Someone knocked at an upstairs door. The girl's voice again.

'Are you okay? Were you sick? Can I come in?'

Footfalls banged and bumped down the stairs, syncopation off. Adam and Jez exploded from the hallway, sprinted towards the greenhouses, smashing into one another as they flew. A chair scraped the kitchen floor. A minute later, Geg emerged on the lawns, sweating heavily, eyes red, a chain of drool tugging at one corner of his mouth. Walking backwards, he dragged a chair into the middle of the lawn, sat on it and spoke, looking into the dark.

'And I was saying to her, yes, but look there, over there, that was the shop, did she tell you that, how did you find all those fags, it's been a long time, let's pull in here...' On Geg went, moving his hands as if gripping a steering wheel only he could see, reaching down to a gear stick only he could feel, pressing feet into the accelerator of the damp grass.

Becky appeared at the front door, holding Toby by the hand. Her other hand held a torch, its rubber clammy in her palm. Toby was also drooling and

sweating and his breathing was a nervous dog's pant. 'Geg? Are you managing?'

Geg looked over at Becky and Toby, disbelieving, and wound down his car window. 'What are you both doing here?' He laughed, wound the window, lit what Becky presumed he thought to be a cigarette and, as she steered Toby towards the greenhouses, put the car in gear and drove off.

The door to the greenhouse lay open, its hinges split away from the frame. From inside came a snuffling, a rasping and a scuffling. Becky stepped into claustrophobic blackness.

Toby whimpered, backing slowly out and away, through the ruptured doorway and towards the adjacent greenhouse. 'You mustn't. Not go in there.'

'Toby, I have to.'

'But...her!'

Becky swept her torch around the greenhouse interior; a long aisle between trestles that supported vast wooden trays filled with regiments of plants in pots. At the far end, a scratching, a rattling. Becky's torch fell on Jez, on a ledge halfway up the end wall, splayed against the grubby glass roof. Jez stared at the dirt floor, then at the datura plants with their drooping trumpets, his flushed skin twitching beneath sweat-soaked clothes.

'It's her. Her,' he stammered.

Fear began to trickle into Becky. Her breathing tightening, she squatted down and worked her way down the aisle, looking in the deep, earthy space beneath the trays. The torch beam illuminated only hessian sacks, buckets and

pipework while, from overhead, came a scratching and the scraping groan of glass under pressure, then Toby's voice, calling for her.

Becky sped outside, Toby in her torch beam, huddled up on the weedy ground, knees to chest. Another creak from overhead. Cloud passed over the botanical gardens, an orange screen.

Adam's silhouette was on the ridge of the greenhouse roof, arms out wide, muttering to himself. 'She's in the water. And I can almost reach her. She's in the water. In the water.'

'Adam! You need to get down from there! It's not safe up there!'

From inside the greenhouse came a crash and a crunch and a clatter of things in pots falling to the floor. Adam began to walk and, though he wasn't holding his arms out for balance, he walked the ridge without once wobbling.

'In the water. I have to reach her. Have to try.'

'Adam! Stop! You're almost at the edge.'

Adam showed no sign of stopping, vanishing as he ran out of ridge. Only when Becky reached him, when she touched him, felt for breath, pulse, all those things, did she realise he was naked. Face down and limp among the weeds, he was embracing the earth, arms above his head, legs astride soil. The torch showed no blood.

'You mustn't touch him.' Toby had roused himself and was standing beside Becky, who crouched over Adam, stroking his neck, stroking his limp hand. 'We have to call someone.' Toby sank to the ground again.

Becky prized herself away from Toby to check on Jez, whose body lay slumped against broken trays and trestles, sprinkled with earth and leaves and shards of pots. Shitshitshitshit. Becky made for the house, past Geg, now sobbing and begging forgiveness from his Dad, and into the hallway, still open to the night, from where she used the flash new pushbutton phone to dial 999 and ask for an ambulance to please, please come quick.

'55. The bungalow in which Peggy Foster was born lay along her route from the new but already decrepit prefabs where she now lived, out near the Leigh Beck mudflats, to her school in Canvey Old Village. *Tigh-na-mara* was a neat, contended thing, with ruler-straight exposed wooden timbers, roses in diamond-shaped beds and a sunshine front door. Auntie Val first told Peggy about why that bungalow looked so familiar, but pulled back when pressed for more, tutting, embarrassed, never ever to mention it to Mum. Peggy talked it over with Angie, who was just about old enough to remember life there, and neither could work out why their family abandoned *Tigh-na-Mara*, when Peggy was four and Angie was six. They agreed it must have something to do with the great flood of 1953 which killed all those people, although not their Dad, that was after, another thing Auntie Val said not to go mentioning to Mum. The waters had reached up as far as the bungalow – Angie thought she remembered sailing her wooden boat through the front door – but, unlike those buildings below flood level, not badly

enough to need knocking down and starting all over again. It was quite the mystery.

Sometimes when Peggy walked past *Tigh-na-mara*, she liked to imagine her life there. She would have had her own room, with lots of dolls in perfect white dresses and an elegant doll's pram which she would push around the front garden. She would have tea with all her nice friends in all those other nice bungalows in the street, nothing like the nasty boys and girls who swarmed around outside the rest of the prefabs. *You haven't got a Dad. Everybody's got a Dad. So that means you're nobody! Nose-Peg Nobody! Nose-Peg Nobody!* But she wouldn't need a Dad because Mum said men were worse than useless. They made you promises and never kept them, they built your hopes only to smash them.

One summer holiday, when Peggy was twelve, the sky blue, the trees deep green, on her way to fetch thread for Mum, she noticed a girl and a boy, about her age, playing on *Tigh-na-mara's* small front lawn. She stopped to watch them over its whitewashed wall. The boy was trying to keep a tennis ball in the air with a racket. The girl was reading. And though they were no neater or cleaner than was Peggy or her sister, their clothes looked fresh-out-of-the-packet crisp, not baggy with wear and Mum's not-quite invisible mending. The girl looked up.

'I was born in your house,' Peggy informed her.

The boy stopped playing with the racket and ball. 'You can't have been. This is our house.'

Peggy turned slightly to face him. 'I was. Before it was your house.'

'I still say you're fibbing.' The boy shrugged sharply. 'Don't you think she's fibbing, Hazel?'

'Probably,' said the girl and stared at Peggy as if unsure of what she was.

'I think you should go,' said the boy. 'We don't like fibbers. You're from Leigh Beck, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Peggy, seeing where this was going and that she wouldn't be able to stop it. Her throat tightened.

'See, Hazel?' said the boy. 'See?'

The tide was out when Peggy got home. She had taken a better route, a quicker route back from the shops, round where boat-sheds backed onto salt-marshes. The sweet, oily mud stench drilled deep into her head.

'01. In Mum's potting shed, the fruity smell of unkillable geraniums battled creosote and nicotine. There was faded patio furniture and a little black and white TV with its own aerial. China and glass kittens, puppies and elephants gazed down from the shelf on which they were stranded. TV listings, gardening supplements, computer guides, even a cruise brochure were stacked in date order on the concrete floor. It was impossible to be in there without disturbing something and Adam would get into trouble if Mum couldn't find her soaps guide or the page in the seed catalogue she'd left open. Music on headphones was banned when she was in there. So was any noisy flicking through papers when

one of her soaps was on – always *her* soaps, as if they specifically needed her care – and there was no being in here at all when she was on the phone. The shed was where Mum actually lived (though she seemed unaware of this), letting her keep the bungalow show-home pristine: the cooker still wore its Indesit label like a bandana and the front room's three piece dangled fire security labels among their upholstered fringes.

Adam was in the shed now because it was raining and he needed a smoke. As soon as he sat down, Mum lifted an envelope from beneath her floral sun lounger and waved it at him.

'Adam, would you mind explaining this to me? This thing that's come for you in the post. This Visa credit card from whoever MNLG are.' Between each sentence, Mum left a gap for him to speak, but then spoke before he had a chance to. 'Perhaps you thought it'd be fine with me. You entering into a credit agreement, getting yourself into debt. Twenty-nine percent APR! – exactly how your sister got into her mess. Your father, too. It's the Strange blood.'

Peggy left a slightly longer gap and into it Adam got out 'I'll pay it back'.

'I've heard *that* one before. When the money's gone, it's gone. I'm not seeing it frittered away. All this lying about, endless television, endless music, smoking.'

The first few weeks after Adam's return had been spent in the virgin territory of the bungalow. They had played board games on the dining room table. Peggy had heard him read aloud and helped him do his grasping exercises. They had watched TV shows that Mum had taped to ease Adam back

into the world, annual news roundups and 80's and 90's nostalgia shows. These depressed him because what to him still seemed futuristic – DAT players for example – was served up as retro kitsch. Mum was attentive, painstaking and easily irritated and as soon as Adam left his room, he would feel monitored, even when Mum was at work, as it was impossible to do anything in the bungalow without leaving some trace for her to pick up, even a slight indentation in the sofa would prompt an inquiry into what TV he had watched and whether he'd done his toe-flexing exercises while seated.

Adam's room had initially been part of the pristine territory. Mum would flatten sheets, put away clothes, stack magazines at right-angles whenever she could. Little by little, though, Adam was slowly claiming his bedroom as his own. His first act had been to put the meerkats poster in the bin, which Mum had then rescued on two separate occasions, but given up on a third. Nothing had been said about this at the time. Next, he had shoved the pencils on his desk in a drawer and begun a line of CDs that Jess helped him add to, to which he had added a pair of mini speakers that Jess had also provided. Nothing was said about this either, though he noticed that the magazines were no longer stacked for him but left on the floor around the bed as he left them.

Adam had also made his the semi-wild far corner of the garden, a sort of little house with beech hedges for walls and next door's apple tree for a roof. The grass here had gone clumpy and weeds grew. At some point, Peggy must have decided to let it do its own thing, only ever disturbing it to light the rusted incinerator or collect up all those apples for the extensive stewing which currently

clogged up her chest freezer. From under this tree, the bungalow was completely blotted out by the dollops of pampas grass that swayed around on the lawn like drunken aliens. It was here that Adam wheeled himself out to smoke, whenever the weather let him.

Not that he needed to. Shortly after his Welcome Home gathering wound down, he had wheeled himself outside to light up and found Mum already fag in mouth. They had eyed each other and Mum had, in a flat and brittle tone, asked to borrow Adam's lighter, as hers was out of gas. Rules had been added to the others regarding sensible use of the very expensive loo and the correct procedure for the pulley system which closed the curtains.

So if Adam's room was increasingly his territory and the bungalow a sort of neutral zone that belonged to no-one, the potting shed was Mum's territory. When he had to use it, such as when it was too cold or too rainy for the garden, as it was now, he was at Mum's mercy. The gloves came off.

Mum stabbed out her fag in one hand and stood, the envelope pincer in the other. 'Well, I'll take charge of your nasty little bit of plastic, thank you.' She opened the door and ducked her head outside.

How dare she! Adam's face flushed with blood and words welled up and flooded out. 'Well. F. F. Fuuu. Fuuuck. Yuh. Yuh. You.'

This seemed to please Mum somehow. 'Charming, quite charming,' she said, closing the potting shed door.

'Yuh. You. Furr. Furr.'

She could put the card where she bloody liked. He would find it.

* * *

'54. Foster Christmases – at Nan's in Benfleet, over the creek – were pretty raucous affairs. Nan's mid-terrace with no indoor loo was far too small for that many cackling aunts and drunken uncles, her gas oven too tiny for the turkey and her chairs too few for all but the most senior. But Nan was the lynchpin and so the family headed there from Colchester, from Basildon, from Southend.

Peggy loved such Christmases as much as she feared them and clung to Mum and Angie in case she got swept away and drowned in currents of sharp talk which stripped to the most private, the most raw, the most carefully buried. Carryings-on with this or that person, the unfortunate things that bodies did, daft ideas about money, nothing seemed off-limits.

No, that wasn't quite it. A circle was drawn around Mum, seated on one of the chairs, her expression soft and glowing with drink and sing-alongs, but also sad, the only time Peggy saw her that way. If anyone blundered into that circle, made suggestions about single women, or about Dad not being around, the Foster machinery clicked into place and Mum would be protected by some aunt's finely-whittled remark. Mum, Peggy and Angie were special. They were granted a decency unique in the family. They were special.

* * *

'83. What a view there was from up at the observatory, out across the Thames and over the old docks' stiff, static cranes, on towards the spires and domes of the City and Westminster. And what a lovely early spring afternoon, a cool little breeze tugging at her and Janet Baker's skirts as they sat on the picnic rug, watching Jessica and Adam play on the grass with Janet's two. To think of surviving several years buried in that ghastly, sprawling mess that stretched out below her, Earls Court's washing lines and bare windowsills, the awful grief of losing Mum. That was all over and here she was in a park with her beautiful children and a beautiful home to return to and her beautiful friend a few inches away on the rug. This was her life, now, and how very grateful she was for it all. 'And I said to Jessica: there's nothing strange about being a Strange. You should tell those silly girls that.'

'You're right, Peggy.' There was genuine admiration in Janet Baker's voice. 'You and Bill, you're so...normal. It's always such a relief being around you both.'

'You're very kind, Janet,' said Peggy, though she knew it was meant. 'The feeling's mutual, dear.' Aside from Janet's husband being such an oaf.

She and Janet talked about school photos. Then they talked about salad spinners. They talked about their husbands' jobs and they talked about the price of piano lessons. Every word, a victory over disorder, unreason, indecency. It was a moment for a confidence: Ange's upcoming divorce.

'Oh how awful.' Janet put two fingers to her slightly-parted lips. 'We had neighbours who divorced. We hardly saw them after that. I don't understand how people can have a divorce, just like that.'

'I know.' Actually, it hadn't been just like that – there had been two years of Ange calling with excuses for his temper and its effect on the family. *You've made your bed, now you lie on it*, Peggy had told her. 'And them with their three. I think it's incredibly selfish. You work at it, don't you? A marriage isn't supposed to be perfect.'

'Well, *that's* true,' said Janet, glad to have got to the point of this conversation so swiftly and thus excusing her oafish husband. 'Though you and Bill seem pretty close to that.'

'Oh, we have our moments,' said Peggy, though actually they never had any kind of moments whatsoever, good or bad, and that was precisely the problem. Janet laughed and Peggy joined in with her. Janet's laugh was wilder and coarser than Peggy expected and it absorbed Peggy's gentle snigger, shook it up and filled it with fizz. What a wonderful, wonderful friend, she was. What a most amazing, beautiful woman.

'88. The weather outside was gloomy, the summer heat turned sickly, headachey, and the overhead light in Adam's room needed turning on. Peggy had once come across some old painting of Hell – knifings and intercourse and beatings, all jumbled together. That was exactly how Adam's room looked to her once she removed a red plastic bag from the light. And that smell was of a man's

body, like the smell of Bill's wardrobe, a crotch and armpits smell, no longer his fresh-scrubbed boyish smell.

There was the bag of records left by that girl, propped up against his chest of drawers, at a neat angle, not flung across his bed, as a boy would have left it. The records were packed in tight, each in its see-through sleeve, like museum exhibits. *Butthole Surfers?* There was a magazine, its cover crowded with garish swirls and flourishes, cut-out eyes and cats and flowers floating around the place. It took a while to focus long enough to figure out its name: *Encyclopaedia Psychedelica*. Dirty, she felt so dirty. In her hands trembled an object from an underworld of burglary, addiction, prostitution. Not that you would know from the collage of sunshine faces on the magazine cover – but that was how they got you hooked. Was *that* what they were up to, over at Jeremy's tonight? Inside the magazine was a piece of paper, written in green felt tip, the hand neat but playful. A girl's hand. *Seems a bit dodgy. x.*

A Shamanic Meeting with the Fearsome Goddess said the double spread into which it was inserted. *Trainwreck or transformation*. It described making tea from a thorny-leaved shrub with lily-like flowers. A *channel* to *Gaia-consciousness*. Amazonian Indians were cited, the sort that paraded around naked and painted themselves red. Peggy carefully set the magazine onto her son's bed, a trap. The anger she felt. She burned with it. Her head thrummed with recriminations, rules, targets. Decency would be restored.

'01. Best knock gently. Peggy's knuckles all but brushed the veneer. Nothing. She pushed down the handle, feeling it resist, opened the door slowly to peer inside at her son's nest with its wallpaper of film and old television posters (*Dukes of Hazard* – remember that!) The door hissed against the carpet. Adam still slept, sprawled in a tangle of bedding, his chest, arms and lower legs exposed. Though his expression was almost a snarl, all puckered lips and teeth and drool, he did at least seem peaceful. It seemed a shame to wake him. It had been another rotten night.

It was not far off time to talk about these nightmares. They munched their way into both their lives, leaving days wrung out and each evening spent. All that shouting and screaming about *her* and *water*. One night, it was after midnight and Adam was just standing there in the corridor and mumbling. It sent a shiver right through her, right to her toes. What do you give for bad dreams? There must be something. One thing was certain; she would not pack him off to one of those counsellors, like those Bill badgered them to see. That doe-eyed little do-gooder – what counsel could she possibly be qualified to give? No, she would look into it on Monday. She would cast her eyes along the shelves. Reach deep into books. Trawl the web.

Peggy sat beside her son, his sweet metallic smell filling the room, his breathing's slow pant. On the mattress was a technology magazine with some laptops on the cover that looked like Day-Glo clams. She would let it go.

Peggy stroked Adam's hair, which grew thick and strong and would soon need a trim. His head was cool. Adam groaned as he stirred and his eyes opened.

'What's the time?' he mumbled.

Peggy stopped stroking his head. 'Not far off lunch. Mrs Pinkerton's due. I expect you could do with a cuppa.'

Their relationship had found a pocket of calm these past few days. After all that fuss over the credit card, then the video games console, though they weren't exactly talking, they were able to follow life's basic rhythms with a little more grace. Making tea, doing the dishes, a trip into town, these formed the soil out which a tenderness would grow back stronger than ever.

Resting on Adam's bedside was his huge tablet dispenser. It marked out the days of the week, the hours of each day, each little compartment either ready to refill or ready to empty of blue, pink, white capsules and tablets that, so the doctors said, kept him up and running. Myloxephan – daily, empty stomach, hydazropan – twice daily, phogastrasol – three times and where on Earth did they get these horrible words from? This morning's selection had been forgotten. She got up to fetch water from the bathroom tap.

'You must remember your tablets, Adam. I can't stress how important it is.'

'I will, Mum. For sure.' There was no fight in his tone, nor was there grudging complicity.

'Of course you will.' Peggy smiled. '*For sure.*'

Peggy returned with water and watched him swallow *Breakfast and Lunch*. Mrs. Pinkerton rang the bell at one on the dot. Peggy headed down the hallway, slowing her breathing and her step.

'59. Things grew wild beyond the sheep-grazing fields onto which Mum's prefab backed. Brambles, elder, ivy and nettles clamoured to pull down crumbling brick remnants, another victim, presumably, of the big flood, there were others like it elsewhere. There was also an overgrown plum orchard and every September, Peggy, Angie and Mum walked across close-cropped grass, dangling buckets and baskets which got lugged back again, heavy with fruit rich as toffee. Once home, the prefab filled with a rattle of saucepans and powerfully sugary steam as the delicate purple fruit was cut and boiled and decanted into jars set on shelves, soon to be joined by rosehip jelly and blackberry jam.

September's early plum harvest always marked the end of summer. You did it with the last lightness left over from special trips up to Southend pier, days among sea grass, when Mum eased back on other people's stitching and sewing and spent time with her girls, and their laughing and singing would be loud. And it was easy. You reached out and plucked them and off they came. Brambles, by contrast, would leave bloody splinters in your skin and rosehips needed stripping one-by-one of their itchy furry insides. Besides, blackberry season took you into October, on the doorstep of the cold wet windy season which saw mould on the

walls and damp in the beds, phlegm on your chest and a tickle in your throat. And yet all through the damp and cold, there they were; jars and jars of sweet September goodness that tasted of running on the beach and singing.

'88. How good to be back at Number Five. In spite of a frosting of dust picked out in sunlight on the sideboard, a shirt of Bill's across a sofa arm, a slight pong from the laundry basket. The hospital waged round-the-clock war on behalf of and against bodies. Flesh was every bit as vulnerable and grotesque in your home, she had nearly forgotten that. She might even take up Ange's offer of putting a duster round – though Ange with a duster! Peggy asked Jessica to pop on the kettle. She had been teary since leaving Adam's side, most likely tiredness and stress catching up on her. No time for tears. Best keep busy. Wouldn't Mum have said those words? Jessica had her little sob in the car park and Peggy supplied her with tissues, given her daughter a fond kiss on the forehead. Peggy put on Radio 2, softly, and they drove back, The Supremes soothing their way. Their tea made, they perched at the breakfast bar on those unpredictable new stools.

'Mum?' Jess' tone was cautious and she held onto her mug as if only it anchored her to the table. 'My friends, they're saying it wasn't drink.' The house suddenly seemed even dirtier and more chaotic, these words traipsing muddy footprints across what had still been a clean floor. Peggy realised she was

staring at her daughter and that the shock might give her away, but Jess huddled in closer to her tea. She had most likely taken that stare for outrage and so, yes, outrage it would be. 'Well, you see,' she went on. 'Jo's boyfriend is mates with Geg's sister's boyfriend. Well, now her sort-of-boyfriend... Did you know about this? It not being just drink.'

Peggy drew herself upright, no easy matter on these stools. 'These friends who let you starve yourself on holiday are experts in toxicology, then? Going to study medicine, are they? I'm a bit disappointed, if I'm being honest,' she added. These words always worked when guilt was needed. 'Paying attention to gossip when...'

'But, they're my *friends*, Mum.' Jess looked on the point of tears and Peggy saw the conflict this conversation was causing her. But no matter.

'And *I'm* your mother. And *I* don't let you starve on holiday. And I hope we get to see some photos at some point.'

'Oh. Ah. The film.' Jess smiled, now ashamed as well as guilty. 'The airport x-ray thingy.'

So it was sex. Hiding all that sex she'd been having. All that drinking in bars and discos all night to pick up men, then going back with them. Local men too, probably. Sweet-talking, lecherous Latin men. That's why Jessica was so pale. And too busy having sex to eat. Peggy found she was standing. Her head was pounding. After fetching Peggy aspirin – she took one, then two – Jessica went out 'to get some air' and Peggy was alone in a house pumped up with quiet and stillness. She took a deep breath. Her tear-ducts let her down for a moment or

two. The bin needed emptying so she emptied it. The fridge needed clearing and she cleared that, too. She scooped up a pile of old documents in the utility room, earmarked for burning, then went to grab her handbag.

The garden was fresh and bright with birdsong. Peggy opened the incinerator lid; a filthy thing, a Bill sort of a thing, with rust and spiders and soot. One by one, she scrunched up old bank statements, bills from British Telecom, the Water Board, Southern Electric, guarantees and instructions for appliances they no longer owned. In they all went, creating a springy bed. Sweating now, Peggy took that ghastly magazine from her handbag. She firmly gripped each side of the double spread, straining as she pulled at the paper, trying to get it to rip in two. *Oh, come on, you bloody thing. Come on. Come on.* Slowly, a tear emerged at one end, lengthening until, with one final rip, it tore into two irregular pieces. Peggy made short work of scrunching the last lurid fragments until one remained, which she rolled into a taper. She lit it with her lighter, placed the lid on the incinerator, took the taper to the ventilation opening and watched as the flame sought company among the little paper balls within and a great hissing, then a crackling, then a roaring began inside. The smoke was horribly dry and sharp and there was a burning plastic smell from the magazine's gloss that made her cough. Even so, she fumbled for her ciggies, then lit one with the same lighter as she had used on the taper. She could always fling it into the incinerator if Jessica returned. Or Adam.

No. Adam would not be returning.

* * *

'89. March sunlight poked fingers into the courtroom, liberating orange from the wood panels, green from the carpet. It upped the white. Not that Peggy Strange dealt in omens, far from it. All the same, this arrival of longed-for sun did bode well. Anyway, the judge was bound to pronounce death by misadventure with no culpability placed on Adam, no matter what the Bazley's lawyers had pressed for. Peggy's story would soon be granted legal status, all others consigned to rumour. There had been compromises along the way, of course, and unpleasant little subplots teased out of witnesses. For example, that her son was often the ringleader in the drug-taking, that he occasionally visited a pusher at an illegally occupied house. For example that he said he wanted to, quote, *show those Sevenoaks tossers that the boys meant business*. For example, that magazine's existence and it being stolen from Kensington Market while Jeremy and Adam truanted from school. But without physical evidence, blame could not be laid on either boy and neither Gregory nor Toby nor Becky had even seen the thing. So they claimed.

Becky – hair combed neatly, Clarks replacing Doc Martins – spun a story that matched Peggy's, likewise giving false evidence under oath. *Seems a bit dodgy*: she had known the idea was his and failed to stop him, instead choosing to watch over them. *Sitter* was the word she used. And yet in court, not a word about her note which, though implicating her son, would further vindicate her and

smooth things with her friends. It made little sense. They were only *going out* for a few weeks. Peggy ought to take her to one side, get their stories watertight, thank her for protecting Adam. But that was admitting to perjury and destroying evidence. It placed her in the hands of a girl whose motives could include blackmail, though she didn't look shrewd enough. No, she must accept that another person, over who she had no control, knew that night as she knew it.

The sunlight dimmed, the coroner gave a little cough and a slight drum roll of rain rattled the windows. The coroner tapped his papers straight against his wooden desk. Time, then.

'I'm returning a verdict of death by misadventure.'

The room's stale air was shifted about by sighs and gasps. Peggy's throat tightened. Bill reached over and put his hand over hers. The coroner saw no other options available in the absence of further evidence and suggested any appeal would be unwise. Mrs. Bazley began to sob, little waves at first, but swelling. Bill gripped at Peggy's hand. Peggy's throat tightened further and her temples began to burn. Mrs. Bazley's sobbing awoke something forgotten. Peggy wished to go to her, to sit with her, a pull more powerful than from any other mother – not Mrs. Pinkerton, Mrs. Baker or Mrs. Sheppard. Peggy wished to comfort Mrs. Bazley, tell her she was a mother, too, she was sorry, but there it was, you tried to protect your own as best you could. Body and words separated out. Her vision fuzzed.

The coroner had finished and the court was emptying. Bill stood and placed his hand beneath his wife's elbow. How long had she been sitting there? Peggy

took Bill's hand and he helped her stand. She found a smile from somewhere or other, but it was fragile and blew away swiftly. March 23rd had been at the forefront of her mind for months. She had worked towards it, as if preparing for a play or a concert, marshalling evidence, liaising with the other parents – even the Bazleys – to ensure the local rag didn't get wind of things, working with the school to the same end. Fending off the drugs rumours from outside that inner circle. This performance was of her own story, on which she lavished all that thought and work. Now it was out in the world, it fell horribly flat.

They reached the entrance to the court and Bill heaved hard against the doors, ushering Peggy through. Bill wasn't looking at her. Since the verdict, he was avoiding her gaze. 'Bill, we're going to have to think very carefully about what we tell Adam.' The pitch in Peggy's voice sounded shrill and quavery. Her temples throbbed painfully and shadows seemed to darken. 'We're going to have to think very carefully about what his next steps are going to be. This mustn't happen again.'

'Agreed. Absolutely.' Touching slightly at her elbow, Bill steered Peggy across a slip road, his gaze still averted. She let him lead her to the car park, where he placed one arm stiffly across her back and squeezed her shoulder lightly. Others had reached the car park ahead of them. Gregory's family were already pulling out of their space, their son sombre and suited in the backseat. Toby was just getting into an elderly Nissan where his parents silently awaited him. There were signs of neither Bazleys nor Becky.

Peggy had not prepared anything for such a moment. She had been able to follow the patterns of the courtroom, with its numbered laws and weighed verdicts. Outside, she had nothing to hold on to, unlike Toby's or Gregory's or Becky's families. Even the Bazleys had their grief, with its own horrific structures. Peggy's family had simply come to a halt and she felt alone and watched and judged by those families able to move on. A few miles from that spot, their son lay in his coma. 'We're a decent family,' Peggy told Bill, told herself, told everyone. 'Adam comes from a decent family.'

Bill opened the passenger door and eased Peggy in. Shoulders slumped more even than usual, he rounded the car to the drivers side, where he sat in the seat, staring at the steering wheel. They sat a little while, as other cars left the car park, they didn't look to see whose. Bill took Peggy's hands in his and they held their bodies close to one another, their ribs and flesh drawing tightly together across handbrake and gearstick.

'01. The same presence stalked Adam night after night, terrifying yet familiar, like thumbing through some well-loved childhood bestiary and coming across The Lambton Worm. The first two nightmares were always along those dark-panelled corridors and the third was by a pond, closed in by high walls. Something thrashed beneath the pond's surface, helpless, while Adam became

paralysed. If he tried helping this something in the water, the unseen creature bit into his soul. And all round, a sickly-sweet smell.

Mum came in twice last night. The second time, she lay beside him on his bed, curling her body against his, clutching his head to her bony shoulder, stroking his hot, damp hair. They had two lives together. First you got the daytime life with its meals and medication, visits and visitors, some slow, confusing board game, its instructions lost at some point in the Seventies. Then there was this night-time life which you couldn't speak about using any daytime language, but in a special dialect of tone and touch. Mum didn't know about the corridors, the pool, the creature. She didn't ask, either. It could blow apart the refuge they rebuilt nightly. Why couldn't Mum muster such tenderness by daylight? She would have no need for all that fussing and flapping. And then he would need to cling on less hard to those few scraps of life that were his. Like his growing stack of CDs – Mudhoney, Ween, Christian Death – each one crammed full with memories he couldn't quite get at. When they finally gave, he would get back that old Adam Strange, the one cool enough to navigate Keith's stag do. But at least he could track down Becky Dore – an idea he woke with, as if it, too, belonged to a dream.

Where was Becky Dore? She hadn't vanished into thin air like Mum and Dad's marriage, like their old house at Number Five. Becky would be thirty. She would be a woman out in the world, making money and, yeah, experiencing real men with their cars and jobs and wiry, competent bodies. Not like Adam, the blob

boy. But the idea wouldn't let him rest and later that morning, he found the number of Sevenoaks' only Dore.

Lunch had been and gone. An hour's nap. Only one hour till Mum got back. Ahead lay the call, seductive and dangerous. Adam was at the breakfast bar, phone book out, receiver in his hand. The phone rang at the other end of line. He shouldn't be doing this. He should hang up.

'0601?' A woman's voice, slightly posh, slightly guarded.

'Hi,' Adam began. His sheepish tone disappointed him and no further words came.

'Hello, who is this please?' said the woman. 'Can you speak up please?'

'It's Adam,' he said, as if pushed from behind. 'Adam Strange. I knew your daughter.' That last word came out *door-dur*. He hated using the phone. People must think he was an idiot.

The woman repeated his name a couple of times to herself, testing out where it fitted with the world at the other end of the phone. 'Goodness,' she said at last, her tone still unsteady but suddenly warming. 'Oh, that's the most wonderful news. I mean, at the time... But that's all water under the bridge. Just water under the bridge.' Mrs. Dore sounded momentarily fragile but then brightened. 'So you must be after Becky. Oh, she'd be delighted. Can you give me your number and I'll pass it on.'

Adam stammered his response, trying not to sound ungrateful: 'I was after her address.'

'Well, I'm sure you are who you say you are.' The caution had returned. 'But what about email? Becky uses email.'

Adam flinched. 'I'm not very...'

'Oh, me neither.' Mrs. Dore brightened again, as if this was further confirmation. 'Well, why don't you send a letter to us and I'll pass it on. She's in Bristol. I'm sure she'd love to hear from you, but I'd rather it was her choice. You do understand, I hope. It wasn't a particularly pleasant time for us. I mean, I realise that's nothing compared with you, of course.' Adam and Mrs. Dore exchanged addresses, said their goodbyes and then the line cut off at the other end.

Mrs. Dore had been wrong about the intervening years. While she and her daughter had, so it seemed, been wrestling with guilt, recriminations and formalities after his drunken accident, Adam had been lying safe and cradled in his coma. If any time wasn't particularly pleasant, it was now and it pissed him off just that little bit that people expected him to be so bloody grateful all the time.

'88. Becky was on the doorstep, dangling a bright blue carrier bag full of records. Bill thought she would be pretty without the army jacket that drowned her, the hair streaked with yellowing pink. Adam could shrug off having a girlfriend (*it wasn't like that*), but this girl in lace-up-boots rang most nights for long, earnest conversations. Along with a mob of Adam's friends, Becky once

swooped up to Adam's room, who more or less ignored the old fart who, if they took the trouble to find out, saw *The Stones* long before *Not Fade Away*. Becky, though, managed an over-the-shoulder smile before vanishing.

'Adam told me he'd be in,' said Becky, giving Bill more of that smile. 'I have stuff of his.'

Bill stretched out his arm to her. 'Here. I can give it to him.'

'Oh. Actually.' Becky scratched the back of her neck and increased her grip on the bag. 'Is Adam's Mum in?'

'Not currently,' said Bill. He liked the distancing effect of *Adam's Mum*, neither *your wife* nor *Mrs. Strange*.

'Can I leave it in his room?' Becky looked around Bill, as if half expecting her to jump out from behind him. Bill stepped aside to show that he was alone and Becky entered the hallway, Bill shutting the door behind her. They looked at one another, Bill feeling all big and clumsy. Except Becky was in fact staring at the latest growing crack, beside the front door, around which the wallpaper had been removed by the surveyors, then went upstairs, brisk and determined, trailing a scent like mothballs, but more perfumey. A Sixties smell.

'My son's not the most organised of people,' Bill added and Becky giggled, like she found this slightly endearing. A sweet girl. If such a girl was in that cordoned-off portion of Adam's life, could it be so awful as Peggy made out? Bill perched on one arm of the settee – don't hover – and polished off his second Toby Bitter.

Becky withdrew from Adam's room as if he were sleeping inside. Bill stood – time to be more host-like. He moved towards Becky.

'OH! You made me jump!'

They stood at the top of the stairs, each waiting for the other to start down them, then both moved at the same moment, then laughed. Becky's boots made a heavy thump with each step on the wooden slats.

'You know, my Dad listens to The Animals.' Becky's tone was nervous and childlike. 'I grew up on all that stuff. It's like, you know, I quite like it.' Bill was about to ask if Adam ever talked about his Dad's music. Better not fish, though. Best not look odd, look desperate. 'Well, thanks Mr. Strange. See you around.'

Bill closed the front door. *See you around.* How nice to say that. As if she might, in fact, genuinely want to see him around. Hardly. Neither his children nor even (nor especially) his wife – yet again out with Mrs. Pinkerton – ever appeared to want to see him around. Bill went to the fridge for a third can of Toby and sought out *Five Live Yardbirds*.

'88. A third pulse of chimes. Whatever time was it? My God, Jess would get a ribbing in the morning – though jokingly, Bill wanting to lose. No, Jess was in Ibiza. Adam was at a friend's. A fourth pulse stirred Peggy. Sharp knocks rattled the glass front door and letterbox. Bill switched on his lamp. He swung his legs out from beneath the duvet.

'Is there something the matter?' Peggy murmured, then yawned.

'I couldn't say,' said Bill. 'Have you seen my slippers?' Yawning more emphatically, because Peggy had most likely tidied them somewhere improbable, Bill tugged on his dressing gown and went downstairs, Peggy close behind. The wooden floor was cool against bare feet. They both reached the front door and yes, he had again forgotten to draw across the chain. Peggy said nothing, though. Beyond frosted glass were two outlines against the orange street. Both wore hats. Bill opened the door and matters of slippers and door chains drained away, leaving room ready for other, bigger ones.

'Mr. and Mrs. Strange?' said the male police officer.

'Yes, that's us. That's us.' These words weren't either of theirs, but parental worry off the telly, rehearsed to perfection on some internal sound stage.

'You have a son by the name of Adam Strange,' the officer continued.

'Yes. Adam. That's our son's name.' Peggy seemed suddenly calmer, like she was discussing a dip in grades with Adam's chemistry teacher. Bill was barely aware of himself. 'Is there something the matter? Is everything alright?' Peggy squeezed past her husband as she ushered the police man and woman up to their living room.

Bill lurked there a while, a terrible cold in his bones that didn't come from the open doorway. He shut it and headed up. He might not know what you said to police at four in the morning, but he could at least put his body where it was needed. As he entered the living room, he clicked on the wooden lamp with the ochre shade, a wedding present from Father's business partner. The light was

softly conspiratorial. Peggy sat the officers on the sofa, made tea for everyone, brought it all out on a tray with biscuits arranged on a plate, saying how tricky it must be to work nights. She set down the tray, cleared away yesterday's magazines, plumped up today's cushions as the policewoman spoke about an unknown toxin and a fall and about critical conditions. Each fact burned Bill. And yet he felt he could now relax, as if this was something long overdue, as if Number Five, too, could now slide on down the hill as it seemed to want to.

'I'll go throw something on. Then you.' Peggy nodded at him, then headed for their bedroom, shutting the door behind her softly.

Adam in hospital. Critical. Not some bundle of disappointing grades and oddball friends and mumbles over Sunday lunch. These clichés went, like when Mother took wilted flowers from her precious vases and he would notice the elegance of the pattern and the glaze again, forgotten while petals were dropping and water was starting to pong. His son, who was warm and moving through the world, guided by some force only he could feel, however indistinctly, whether climbing among rock-pools or heading off to a gig, making miraculous decision after miraculous decision.

Beyond their bedroom door, wire hangers scritch around in Peggy's wardrobe. Bill folded his arms, then unfolded them in case this seemed aggressive, as Peggy always said it did. 'And you say you're not sure what this stuff is that they'd been drinking.'

'That's correct, Mr. Strange,' said the female officer. 'We think it's most likely something from the gardens, but we don't know what as yet.'

Drawers sighed open and shut. The scratching made him picture Peggy undressing and he worried that the police might have a similar image in their minds. Bill should say something. Though he had given up his claim on Peggy's body long ago, he at least felt protective of her slight, angular frame. He must talk, act as her beach towel, shield her as she changed in public. 'And the girl who called the ambulance,' he went on. 'Do you have any idea who she could be?'

'I couldn't comment, I'm afraid.' The officer took a sip of her tea as if being polite, then placed the mug down again. The biscuits remained untouched.

Peggy re-emerged dressed in her housework jeans, an old, flowery blouse and black pumps. She crossed straight into Adam's room, not looking up, shutting his door again very, very softly. Must be getting clothes. But when she came back out, there was nothing in her hands except her handbag which she closed with a snap like an angry full stop.

The police were gone by the time Bill was dressed and the cold had retreated a little as his actions breathed in warmth. Peggy was already downstairs, the door open, rattling his car keys.

'You're not to breathe a word about this.' Peggy hissed these words as Bill reversed the car out of the garage. 'Not yet. Not to anyone. You're to give me time to think.'

Did Bill have an opinion on any of this? He did not. Did he depend on Peggy to form one for him? He did. He always did. Bill put the car in gear and it

crawled up the slope, gaining momentum as it passed the summit and headed out into the blue early light and onto the main road out to the Royal General.

'01. Hello there Becky,

I hope you don't mind me writing. I sound rubbish on the phone because I'm having to relearn how to speak and if you don't write back, that's okay, maybe the past's best left there. You lose loads of memory when you're in a coma. I remember your name, I get this warm feeling, but I can't remember what you look like, or your voice. So I'm writing this letter to a name and a feeling and that feels pretty weird. Well, apart from letting you know I'm okay again, and wanting to find out what you've been up to, I'm writing because I've lost so much memory. Mum and Dad and Jess have told me all about what I was like, except it's not brought much back and some of it – what Mum says, mostly – doesn't even sound right. Oh, fuck this whining...

Wotcha, Becky,

Well, I'm back from the dead! That was a pretty wild night, wasn't it? Did you miss me? We've got some SERIOUS catching up to do. Fucking hell, times have...Yeah, RIGHT...

Dear Becky,

Your Mum kindly said she'd pass this letter on to you if I sent it to her. I imagine she's already told you I'm no longer in a coma. I have so many questions to ask and would love to know what you're up to these days. I'd be really grateful if you'd get in touch. Let me know if that's okay with you. If not, I'll understand.

Love,

Adam.

Dear Adam,

Your letter made me cry. There was that same spiky handwriting you always had, and I couldn't help it. Of course I don't mind you getting in touch! So long as nobody minds, that goes without saying – you're at your Mum's aren't you? I've got a flat in Bristol, these days. I work as a location scout, which means I look for places for shooting for TV, film and advertising and the guys I work with are a right laugh. Can't complain about the money, either and Bristol's fab. I went to uni here, did a degree in media – remember what a film buff I always was? – and ended up staying. Been in the job a few years, now. Like I said, can't really complain. There's Willow and Molly – my cats – and my Spanish and tango lessons and I'm in a choir, which is bags of fun. So, so, so glad to hear from you after all these years. I can't tell you how happy you've made me. If I can help in any way at all, let me know – fire away!

All my love and kisses,

Becky.

* * *

'89. One jar of bitter – then another – beside him, Bill sat on the back lawn, watching the pines and the weather and waiting for Peggy to get back from their solicitors'. The past week's clear blue skies had thickened with haze as afternoon wore on, till the sky was all but overcast. And was it getting more muggy or was that the Murphy's?

Bill wasn't needed at the solicitors. After the inquest, Peggy took over the insurance claim with alarming speed, diving onto the lawsuit like an osprey snatching up salmon. For all he cared, Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven could *all* cascade down the hillside, even with him inside, he was that tired and low on hope a year on. But Peggy had shored up the family name and now she was shoring up the family home. She seemed to need it.

One year on. Though the time might have blurred into one very busy month, it was hard to remember anything before all this falling-to-pieces. The 'options' laid out earlier by the consultants needed going over when Peggy got back. Their talk of plateaus and randomly-firing synapses. Of curious anomalies, overwhelming odds. Cases of waking up after thirteen years as if back from a long trip overseas and of an existence of dribbling and contortion.

The garden around Bill stirred into little patters as a gentle shower hit leaves, soil and brick. His shirt clutched, cool and pleasant, at his skin, his eyebrows moistened. He went indoors to search out another Murphy's as the

front door clicked open, then shut. After a pause, Peggy's step clattered up the wooden stairs. Abandoning the idea of that Murphy's, Bill clicked on the kettle.

'I think we're getting somewhere at last.' Peggy's tone was crisp and forceful as she told him about finding some planning documents that the council had rejected. 'Sorry. Would you move out of the way? I need to get dinner on the go. Will stuffed peppers do?'

'Yes,' said Bill, pausing before he began. This wasn't the right moment, though there could never be a right moment. 'Listen. I was thinking we could sit and have a bit of a talk.'

'About the lawsuit?' Peggy stood on tiptoe to get to the cupboard where she kept the rice.

'About Adam.' Bill sat himself carefully on one of their unreliable stools.

'Can you budge? I need to get to the vegetable rack.'

Bill moved to perch against the breakfast bar. Peggy wasn't making eye contact, a bad sign. 'About the consultants. About what they were saying.'

'I don't see what there is to discuss.' Peggy looked up at him briefly, as you might at a cashier who has told you an incorrect balance. 'Apart from filing a complaint. I already have the form.'

'So you don't consider...'

'Don't consider what? They're not killing my son.' Peggy put down the rice and he got the full stare and hand-on-hip he'd dreaded. Her lips narrowed. 'So I suppose you're taking their side, then. I need the salt.'

'No. I didn't think anyone was taking sides.' The kettle came to a boil and clicked itself off, though neither Bill nor Peggy made a move for it, a cloud of steam moping in the air between them.

'He could wake up at any moment,' Peggy went on, then sniffed at him. 'And you've been drinking again, haven't you? You know what? You can get your own wretched meal this evening.' She snatched her handbag from the counter. 'It's too much like hard work for you, isn't it? Having an invalid for a son. You men only ever think about yourselves. Mum always said as much.'

This was harder and more cruel than Bill had expected but he was too numb to be cautious. 'And what about you?' He stammered this out like a hurt child. 'What would people think of you, if they knew you were a perjurer.'

'Bill,' said Peggy, heading for the stairs and removing the car keys from her bag. 'I am doing what I can to preserve the name of my son and my family in the name of common decency. Now, if you'll excuse me, I am going out. Perhaps I'll forget my seatbelt and you won't have to worry about me either.' These last words were filtered through hoarseness and Peggy said nothing further but fled with keys and handbag down to the front door, leaving it open on thickening rain through which Bill watched her reverse their car out of the garage.

'Stupid woman.' Bill had never said those words before, rarely even thought them, but he liked them. They gave him strength. He lurched back upstairs and brought the scotch out from the sideboard. The hell with it. He brought the bottle to his lips, poured its spice down his throat, tongue lashing around as he

shivered. Stupid woman. There was a match to watch on the TV. He kept the scotch at his side. Stupid woman.

Bill was on the basement sofa in the morning. Peggy brought tea and promised that last night's *rather heated conversation* would go no further. There was a new stiffness to her. She seemed untouchable. Should he ever try to touch his wife again, in whatever way, like a sprung trap, the contents of their *rather heated conversation* would most likely ensnare him, holding him down for everyone to gawk at. Bill wanted his son dead and Peggy knew that and no, it didn't equate with her lie and would Bill please bear that in mind from now on.

'91. 'Hello Adam. It's Carole. I've brought you some ox-eye daisies. They were growing at the roadside. I got Bill to pull over and hopped out. Nice and brassy for a nice young man.' Carole was sitting beside Adam as she spoke, his hand in hers. 'Adam, your father and I have just married. Two days ago. Weren't we Bill?'

Bill nodded from his chair as Carole rose from the bedside to throw the flowers into a beaker along with some drinking water from the bedside jug. Peggy's frost was on everything, unmelted by the afterglow of his and Carole's registry office ceremony, the reception with its hearty Appletise toasts. It was in the neatness of Adam's bedside table, the no-nonsense choice of chrysanthemums, that their son's body was warm. When he heard *Bethany*

House in his head, it was in her voice. If Carole wasn't so keen on these visits, he would rather not come at all. It took days for his mood to pick up. He struggled against looking his new wife in the eye. She could be scarily intuitive.

'We even set a place for you at the top table, next to Jess' Keith. There's a slice of cake we're saving. We truly did do our best.' The humming strip lights were the ward's sole sound as Carole coaxed the daisies into a more bouquet-like shape. 'Well. I hope you're going to approve of me. Your sister and I are certainly getting quite chummy. Don't you think Bill?'

Carole looked over at him, needing confirmation. Bill smiled warmly back, glad he could overturn at least this uncertainty. 'Jess thinks you're wonderful, Carole. You know that.' Wonderful because it didn't matter how anxious and scatty she was, Carole was as kind as she was whimsical. The idea of their marrying was hers. Practically leaping from a moving car to go flower picking up one bank of a dual carriageway cutting, that was pretty much her all over. In her arms some evenings, their darkened bedroom speckled orange from outside, it seemed Carole had the power to pardon anything – *anything* – as if there were something saintly about her, something granted by her Higher Power.

Carole's expression, however, remained unsure. She turned back to face Adam. 'Though I know I'll never be able to take the place of your mother...'

'Will you stop saying that, Carole? Just because your sons have decided they're not going to...' Irritation flashed in Bill's voice and for the umpteenth time since they'd arrived at Bethany House, he thought how much better things would feel after a scotch.

'Bill, please,' said Carole, a little upset. 'He's not a piece of furniture. Sorry, Adam. My youngest finds this all quite a trial. He's taking time to adjust, that's all.'

'That's putting it mildly.'

'Bill, he hardly knows you.' Now it was Carole's turn to sound irritated, though it was a pleading sort of irritability rather than an angry one. 'You need to give him time.'

'Like we've been giving Adam time?'

Carole had no answer to that because she was always avoided arguing. Instead, she stepped back from the line Adam always drew between them and they sat silently, listening to their private thoughts. It always ended this way. Carole planted a slow kiss on her stepson's forehead. Bill took one look at this wrecked young man, whose life was IV drips and bed sores. What more was there to wake up for, anyway? Ox-eyed bloody daisies? If it wasn't for Carole, Bill would gladly join him.

'01. The rain, which had been torrential at the other potential wedding venue, was clearing now Peggy and Gerda were at The Downs Hotel, a mock-Tudor affair with its name and the word 'Carvery' painted in huge white letters on the roof. The lawn onto which they walked was spongy with water, blades of grass clinging to their shoes. Beyond the lawn, farmland dropped away gently towards

the sea, above which blue sky could be glimpsed through a rip in the clouds. Peggy was pleased to note that Gerda's shoes, identically practical to her own, were impervious to the wet.

'Just look at this view!' said Peggy, hoping that made up for the hotel not being particularly inspiring, as she'd just admitted to her friend.

'Oh, I don't know about uninspiring,' said Gerda, keeping to the point. 'I think straightforward is a better word to use. The Manor Park was completely false. I don't know why Bill's wife is in favour of it.'

'Because she lives with her head in the clouds,' said Peggy, as she'd said who knew how many times before. Gerda was with her precisely to keep such a no-nonsense perspective on things. 'She doesn't see any further than the brochure – the *splendid drive*, the *majestic horse chestnuts*, the *photogenic portico*, swans in the water garden. She's not seeing the yellow fungi cracking apart the drive, the diseased horse chestnuts and the portico columns being made of plastic.'

'And the swans?'

'Vicious brutes, aren't they, swans, when it comes to it?' And yet there was more to Peggy's objections than her dismissal of Carole's opinion or Jess' bloody-minded decision to support it. The Manor Park struck her as not just decrepit but slightly sinister, though she couldn't put her finger on why. She'd even had a shiver once they got there. It was something about the interior, all that dark wood and burgundy carpets, corridors that ran on from one corner to another to another. Nothing good could come of a wedding in such a place. Not

that anything good would come of the wedding, anyway. After twelve years together and now parents, it was just an excuse for Jess and Keith to have a knees up with their friends. Besides, a wedding was no guarantee of anything lasting. Peggy knew that as much as anyone. Anyway, Jess didn't love him. Fond of him, yes. But love everlasting, no. Love had that doe-eyed look she'd seen in Bill in the early days. Jess was with Keith because she liked a challenge as much as anything and, in comparison, she looked competent and mature. As would anyone.

Perhaps her feeling out of sorts had roots earlier in the day, when it was decided that Adam would take the train to visit his sister in Brighton next week. Though Peggy had put forward the idea, it had already been in the air. Not that she lost much sleep over Adam getting to Brighton, or remembering his pills, or anything along those lines. She worried more about Adam getting ideas out of his brief dunking in a young people's world. Certainly, Jess would look after him, but she might brainwash him into thinking that recklessness was virtuous and doing things properly was uncool. Whatever the case, she was letting him go a little, much sooner than she had expected. It was her choice but it worried her enormously, especially now his curiosity was aroused about the Becky girl. Not that she expected anything to come of it – who would he ask? – but the name was an intrusion, all the same.

Thanks goodness Gerda was here. She stood firmly, gazing out to sea, enjoying stark rays of sun that poured through a growing gap in the clouds, face tilted up to the warmth, lips pressed lightly together. Though a hesitancy had

crept into their friendship of late, Gerda was still her great friend and confidante. One day soon, she would tell her everything. It really was absurd to keep on lying. Though perhaps best wait till after the wedding.

'88. Bill hadn't washed or shaved in days, had barely even slept, and arrivals at Gatwick was like being inside one of Peggy's migraines. What started as a joyful, anxious babble fast fused with rattling trolleys and glaring logos, then industrial cleaner and kerosene to become a real pile-driver of a presence. Only Jess' smile would bring him home.

Angie, currently camping out in Number Five's spare room, had offered to pick up the girls but Peggy said life went on and, later, that Jess might get suspicious if the details weren't got right, so it had to be Bill. Something was quite wrong in all this, however much Peggy said that keeping Jess in the dark kept her protected. Peggy never actually used the words 'lie' or 'lying' but they crowded Bill's mind, as if only he was in the wrong because he lied whereas Peggy protected. When Adam was on the mend, they would need to talk this over, but tiredness currently weighed too heavy and left over thoughts were spent urging help from some higher power, whatever that might be. There seemed little else Bill could do.

Bill took in the crowd, groggy, all those jumpers and suitcases ablur. There were Polly and Jo, blinking against the glare and shivering. And his daughter's

smile! Bill muddled his way around girlfriends and business partners and neighbours to the end of the barriers to his own daughter. He rushed up to her, pressing her tightly to his chest, ribs to ribs. Then his tears came. This behaviour was irresponsible. He was being irresponsible. Bill tried to let go, peel away from her warmth. He could not.

‘Dad, what is it? You look dreadful.’

Bill heaved at the trolley and stammered through everything that had happened over the past few days. And no, he wasn't alright. Jess' eyes darted around, taking this in, working out how far this feeling could take her. Her jaw eased open, her lips forming a lax o.

‘Adam's in a coma?’

Bill nodded, tears heading back. He pushed himself out of his slouch, upright against the trolley, moved back towards Jess and put stiffened arms around her to comfort her. The elder, the stronger, the more in control. The more distant. The father. ‘He fell off a roof. He'd been...drinking.’ How easy that felt. Easy as falling. Jess gazed across the terminal. It could have been the lighting, but she looked pasty rather than sun-tanned and like she'd lost weight. He'd wait for her to begin the asking. He'd volunteer nothing. Bill stiffened to reduce a sudden trembling, as might Peggy, ready to recite the story. Jess stayed mute. Bill shifted an inch or so away. ‘Ibiza. Was it a good holiday?’

‘Oh. Ibiza was a...great holiday.’ Jess lingered on that *great*, like chewing some exotic delicacy. And, yes, she *had* lost weight.

'You can have a shower and a change first,' he told her. 'Your mother would like that. Were you ill while you were away?'

'Why do you ask? Do I look that scuzzy?'

'You look like you've not been eating. Mum will worry.'

'Oh...right...*that*. Yeah, erm, this tummy bug...'

Polly and Jo came over as the luggage trolley went down rubber ramps towards the car parks, letting the trolley pull him. Polly and Jo looked similarly frail. Must all have come down with the same thing. They went down one springy ramp, then another, Bill wishing it were possible to remain alongside the plant-waterers and *Eastenders*-tapers and cat-feeders that jostled about him with friends and family safely back. But he was going back to Peggy and strip-lit green corridors. He would sit beside his son, who wasn't really in a coma. Unconscious as in knocked unconscious after a fall. See how easy it was? And when he woke up, Bill would make more of an effort with his two children. And he would undo this mess of telling Jess one thing, the doctors another and the police yet another thing still. Behind Bill walked his daughter who he could no longer touch.

'88. Summer had tipped towards autumn in the past few days. The huge oak trees around Sevenoaks' cricket pitch, those untouched by last year's Big Storm, wore their final deep green, like old blokes parading their medals on a Sunday.

The evening air wasn't yet cold nor any longer warm enough to wrap yourself up in. On the green outside The Vine, there were noticeably more jackets and long sleeves among the crusties with their multiple piercings, the casuals with their hyper-expensive trainers and whatever you called those in baggy clothes who were, like Frank, like Polly and Jo and Jess, unexpectedly, post-Ibiza, into non-stop ecstatic dancing in warehouses and fields. *A happy face, a thumping bass for a loving race.*

Jess was hugging at her knees under an outlying oak, missing the boring old pub she and Polly and Jo used to go to, missing its fat, lecherous landlord, even missing Status Quo on its jukebox. It was familiar where nothing was now familiar. All the to-ing and fro-ing between hospital-home-hospital-home made things even less so.

Polly slid herself down against the tree trunk and sat beside her friend. She put her arms around her and held her. Jess traced the length of Polly's right index finger with her own. 'So your Mum and Dad still sticking to their story, then,' said Polly putting her head on Jess' shoulder.

'Poll, please, can we change the subject? Is it on for The Bunker tonight? And has Frank got our e's?' Jess stiffened a little and Polly repositioned her hands between her own knees, pushing her elbows outward.

'Yes it is and yes he has. But doesn't it feel weird for you? I mean, with Adam like he is.'

'Will you drop it, Poll? Christ.' Jess shifted where she sat. She was starting to get numb.

Something was kicking off at the pub door. A girl, about their age, was mouthing off to a guy, pushing him hard in the chest and shouting. The girl quietened as another girl put an arm around her shoulders and spoke softly into her ear. The girl's head jerked up, then swivelled around, searching. The friend pointed in Jess and Polly's direction and the girl seemed to fix her eyes on them, nodding. The girl broke away from her friend and headed over towards them, the friend trailing her, arms folded. Jess and Polly stood, bracing themselves for this incoming missile.

'Go on. Get out of here. Go back to your murdering brother and your fucked up murdering family.' The girl reached the foot of the oak. 'He's dead. He's dead.' Polly gently pulled at Jess' elbow. 'Oh, I get it - pretend you don't know my little brother died this afternoon so you can sit around in the sun.'

Jess spun to Poll, who faced up to Jez' sister on her behalf.

'Why does that make it her brother's fault?' No, that wasn't what she wanted Poll to say. 'Listen, go home, go home to your own family. They must need you.'

'It makes it her brother's fault because it was her brother's idea in the first place.' Jez' sister spat these words like expletives.

'Polly? You don't believe her.'

'I don't believe your brother's a murderer.'

Jess pushed Poll away from her with a gentle shove. 'You're lying. You're all just...liars.'

'That's it – you fuck off away from here. Murdering bitch.'

'Jess.'

Summer's late colours went lurid. As she fled, The Vine became framed by the first of an avenue of motionless plane trees. Jez' sister still shrieked after Jess, not words but howls. Jess broke into a run so this feeling didn't rip her apart as she sped past trees towards – what? Home? Number Five might be under attack by chaos and change but surely Mum and Dad weren't lying. Yes, they were freaks, but something like *that*... It was cold and it was bloodless. And, after all, everyone at The Vine – rumour went a long way. Her brother was being made a scapegoat. The whole thing would probably die down, given time. Yes, that was it. She just had to let it cool off for a bit. She was off to uni in a fortnight anyway. But her friends... Those beautiful, glistening conversations. No. There were probably parties up in Manchester too. She would have fun. This would not tear her apart. She would return and everything would be fine. She would have fun.

'01. Jess, Keith and Flo lived in half the attic of a vast Victorian semi. Their five boxes were vibed up in turquoise and terracotta paint, gold-stencilled Chinese characters and brightly-coloured cushions and throws. A plane tree grew in so close that the front windows were blotted out by high-summer green. But the back was a different story; from a tiny balcony, streets sloped down to a sea

fidgiting and glistening on a day that was dazzling everybody out of whatever they had intended to do.

'We bought our flat for days like this. When Keith and I found it, I saw this view and it was like *right, this is the one*. Couldn't you sit out here forever?'

Jess was so keen to amp up how wonderful her life was that she had yet to ask Adam about his. As this was now the fourth time Jess had mentioned the view, Adam felt quite justified in not bothering to answer but changing the subject. 'I got back in touch with someone,' he told her.

'You did? Oh, that's great. I'm glad you've done that. It'll do you good. Good for you.' Jess stood. 'Fancy more juice?'

'No. You remember Becky?'

'Becky – what was it – Becky *Dore*? Her brother was in my year. She was at the inquest, I think. Went out with a friend for a while. Poll. Ex-friend.' Jess sucked in her lips and leaned against the door frame, asked if Adam was sure he didn't want a yogurt smoothie, scratched the back of her neck when he turned her down again, then told him, in a *yeah-right* tone, what she knew of the gossip about them getting high on botanical garden tea. 'It's a load of shit, though,' she added. 'I mean, Mum and Dad are freaks, but they're lousy liars. It really got to me, my so-called friends believing all that. You know, I was kind of on my own for a while after that.'

For the first time, another Adam flickered into view, roaming out there somewhere, one who had survived the accident, lived according to his own terms. One who people thought might take drugs. One who smoked and raised

hell and fucked. An un-dressing-gowned Adam. The one everyone at Keith's stag do would think was incredibly cool because he'd ended up off his face for nearly thirteen years. He asked Jess if he'd really been like that.

'Sort of. I'm sure Becky will fill in the gaps. Invite her to the wedding.' Jess jolted herself upright and was back on the balcony. 'Anyway, I don't believe in all this digging around in the past. Live in the now. It's all you get.' Jess collected the glasses from the table and disappeared indoors, shutting the French window that was only ever closed at night. This was a blow. Jess being all positive kept further memories shut out, a big reason for this visit to Brighton. It kept him the crippled virgin. Moments later, the French window re-opened, though Jess didn't return to the balcony, just stood in the doorway. She looked at Adam a few moments, choosing her words. 'Don't you ever wonder if maybe Mum is gay?' Jess spat out the words, smiling as if in pain. 'I mean, what is it with her and Gerda? Listen, we've got this friend. Their Dad, perfect father, model husband, only soon as the kids left home, off he goes with this guy. Been seeing him for years, it turned out. It happens, that's all I'm saying.' Even for Jess, who often described herself as *The Tangent Queen*, this was out of the blue.

'So why is Mum gay?' It was a struggle to get out the word. Discussing Mum and Dad like this – like Mum discussed her soaps – might give them common ground, but wasn't it less disloyal to say Mum could be a cow and leave it at that?

'I don't *know*. She's got that dykey haircut going on and everything's so definite, so ordered in that house. A woman should flow. That's how Flo got her

name, though we dropped the *w*. Didn't want to get accused of being hippie parents.' Adam was about to point out that they *were* hippie parents but Jess stopped him. 'So you think she's straight. Hetero.'

'Isn't Mum just *Mum*? That doesn't make her gay.'

'Oh, God, no, no, that's not what I mean.' Jess sounded almost embarrassed. 'We've got *loads* of gay friends. Some way more straight than me and Keith with their perfect coffee tables and two cats in the yard. And, oh, yeah, do you reckon John Lewis is too hardcore middle-class for the wedding list?' Off she went again. This was tiring. Perhaps it would be better if Adam did ask for a yogurt smoothie.

'I wouldn't know,' he told her.

'I suppose you wouldn't. But just let me get connected to the internet. I'll show you their website. You'll just die.'

'70. Peggy's sister's car-mechanic fiancé ought to have finished his drinking shortly before his slice of wedding cake. Like the more raucous Basildon Fosters, Brian was drawing stares from a jury of senior Stranges lingering on their dining room seats. Now Peggy was a Strange, too, she felt able to side with them against the likes of Brian and even that name was starting to bother her less. New associations were being forged, the word's newer meanings relating to Mr. Strange's solicitors' firm and the seven-bedroom – if somewhat ramshackle –

family home in its acre of rhododendrons. Peggy Foster. Peggy *Strange*. It was like finally owning a smart outfit you've been walking past in a shop window.

Brian was now rambling on about The Beatles' split being on the cards since *Hey Jude* and Peggy began to unravel his meaning about Bill and her *making a better go of it*. This news must have hit today's papers. In fact, there *had* been some frantic head-to-heads between her bridesmaids that morning, the library door shut. Yes, and some of Bill's Rickett-Lindsey colleagues had been crowded round a Daily Mirror outside the church. She had thought it must be sport though should have twigged something bigger was up. And though how nice of everyone not putting a dampener on things, she nevertheless felt made a fool of. As if wearing this white dress weren't ridiculous enough, with all those pleats to keep out of puddles and not trip over, and a tress to keep from flapping in the wind. Secrets were devils dressed as angels, Mum always said.

If only Rev. Foxton were on hand! Duty! Honour! Respect! Commitment! Fidelity! – rousing as a wartime speech, his sermon had armoured her as she knelt beside Bill. And even if she never had much truck with God, especially not after Mum, at least He commanded authority with people whose opinion mattered. Conferring His grace on her brought them all closer together.

When she tracked Bill down – surely *he* wasn't in on it – she found him in the church hall kitchen. 'Bill? Did *you* know all this about The Beatles? That they've split up. That Paul's gone and left.'

'What? No Beatles? Well. Life goes on, I suppose.'

Well, that was a small relief. And what a very typically Bill thing to say. He loved their music. But though his fondness for pat phrases was rather sweet, Peggy needed more than that. She needed a woman's analysis to help her get to the guts of things that were less about artistic difference and more about pride and spite.

Bill took Peggy's fingers very gently, by the very tips. 'You know I didn't think you'd say yes.'

'I know that, Bill. You keep on telling me.'

He leaned in and kissed her on the lips, as was now his right. It was chaotic and soggy and alarming but there was an oddly wonderful sense of connection, not just of lips, but also a drinking in of thoughts and pasts. Tonight might be like that too and she could sense Bill's mounting eagerness to find out. She hoped it would be like that and Ange had told her not to worry, just to let it happen. But then Ange was the sort to *let it happen* in life in general while Peggy Foster was not. And what of the night after and all those other nights stretching on and on? No. Whatever it was, Peggy would manage. Mrs. Strange would keep her head about her.

Anyway, tomorrow night, there was an excuse for getting up to other things. There was the Apollo 13 launch. The Apollo launches had formed the background to their courtship. It was practically *their song*.

'85. It was Teri Sheppard's husband on the phone, telling Bill how Teri had come down with a terrible headache and so they were cancelling tonight's evening meal engagement.

'Yes, and by the way, she's saying she won't be making it for coffee with Peggy at the usual time next week, either. Sorry.' Pat sounded strained, which was odd, he was usually so warm and relaxed. His hand crackled over the mouthpiece, though the conversation his wife was having with him was just audible, dry and reedy.

'Tell him I'm starting a class.'

'What class?'

'I don't know. Any class.'

Pat returned after another few crackles. 'Sorry. Terry's starting horticulture classes. She's very excited about it. Listen, we'll get in touch. We'll fix up another time.'

'For coffee?'

'No. Your wife will just have to find someone else. Well, better go.' Pat put the phone down. Why did Peggy choose such unreliable friends? Tim Baker's wife had blown similarly hot and cold. And that mother of Jess' friend. But then Peggy did get so very intense. All these hours on the phone, all these arrangements for their kids to get together, even when their kids didn't seem especially bothered. And then the chattering afterwards, about how Janet or Hazel or Teri said something-or-other and how they did this-and-that together

and this funny girlish gleam in her eye that *he* only ever got when he was being made a prat of.

Bill wasn't ready to discuss this evening's change of plans. He walked out into the garden, where Adam was raking fallen beech leaves into neat piles. Bill stood a while as his breathing returned to him, watching his son, who was, this autumn, a shade taller than the spring rake he was using. Later this evening, as it was getting dark, they would feed leaves into the incinerator and watch them curl up like fists, avoiding smoke by dodging this way and that. Bill went to fetch refuse sacks for the leaves from his potting shed. Adam didn't look up, content not to clutter the moment with speech.

The potting shed door wouldn't open. Bill gave it a tug, then another, but no joy. It had been stiff for a while, long before the struts went against one wall to stop the tilt worsening, but just then it was like the door was nailed shut. Bill gave it a yank, then a harder yank, worried its handle would come off in his hand. It was no good. He needed his crowbar.

'Dad? Is it up to its old tricks again?' Adam's face showed his eagerness to be useful, to prove he understood this world of warping wood and subsidence and crowbars.

'No. This is something else.'

'Maybe if we pull together?'

Though it seemed a pity to turn him down, Bill walked back into the house, heading towards the stairs and the garage.

Peggy called from the kitchen. 'Did you wipe your feet? And who was that on the phone?' Bill passed on Pat's news. 'Oh. Poor Teri. I must call her.' Peggy cooed sympathetically, as if addressing Teri and not her husband.

'Didn't you hear me say? She has a headache. *Apparently.*' Bill thudded down towards Number Five's windowless interior. 'Bloody subsidence,' he shouted. 'These bloody great cracks.' He threw boxes and buckets around in the garage. He thudded back up, beating time in his palm with the crowbar. Christ, how he hoped he was treading oil through the house.

'Bill, you need to calm down. Now calm down.'

And Bill pulled and heaved and tugged and yanked at the door with the crowbar. There was a creak, a crackle and a thump as a corner of the door split away from the frame, and from the rest of the door. Then a choir of creaks. A pane of glass shattered. And the wall, so carefully shored up with an old cricket bat, dropped to the ground as if collapsing from utter exhaustion.

'01. Bill squeezed back out of the box room and onto the landing, its width narrowed by newly-printed organics boxes that teetered upwards to the ceiling. 'No, no put them back, put them all back, this is no use, no use whatsoever. You can't even open the bathroom door.' Seeking space to at least stand with dignity, he caught one ankle on the corner of a jutting-out box file. 'Oh bloody hell!!!'

Carole lingered in the box room, nursing her belly behind folded arms. Her gaze moved from partially-cleared floor to entirely-cleared bed towards a window losing a slow war against ivy. Looking after this place, it was building sandcastles on a shoreline.

‘Bill, it’s do-able, truly it is,’ said Carole, eagerness on tiptoes. ‘Adam can get to the bathroom through our bedroom.’

And there Adam would be, first knocking on their bedroom door, unsure of what Dad and this new woman might be up to, then meekly hobbling across their room on crutches, him reading, Carole with a cross stitch, as they listened to him piss. This ought to be self-evident to Carole. It ought. Better watch yourself, Bill Strange.

Earlier this morning, when they started on clearing the box room, Bill’s annoyance was simply no-nonsense gusto. It dated back to yesterday, with Peggy’s call about train times, medication, diet, the wedding palaver, that Becky girl calling the house and Adam looking so peaky. She hadn’t said as much, but she’d be calling regularly, throughout Adam’s stay. Her lack of trust wasn’t just down to Bill’s bumbling, either – it went much deeper than that until Bill began to feel that, yes, perhaps Adam might be at risk just by being under his roof. It was a superstitious worry about events coinciding to harm Adam, however much he looked forward to having his son to himself. Straight after the call, Bill slipped to the garage for a nip from his toolbox. It wasn’t the first time in recent years, even if, yes, it was becoming a more regular thing. It took the edge off it all. It made everything less bloody serious.

It was getting on for lunch. Carole would soon throw together odds and ends from out of their fridge. He would go out to the garage while she was busy.

Bill went back into the box room, where Carole now sat on the bed, looking through and beyond the ivy, one hand stroking the downy back of her neck. What the hell was he playing at? He sat beside her, placing his hands over hers splayed on the duvet, fingering her knuckles. She splayed her fingers wider, making room for him to interweave his own. They clasped. Her crucifix was warm against his chest. He must tell her the truth. His words were coiled and ready. But, yes, make peace first.

'I suppose he *can* get to the drawers.'

'Yes, yes, that's what I was thinking.' Carole stood, ripping her hand from Bill's. 'And the door will now shut. Look.' She opened and closed the box room door enthusiastically, clutching at its handle as if ready to rip the thing off its hinges should that improve things for her stepson. Carole had no second thoughts about Adam's visit. She drifted through the clouds of her dreams, painting colour, sprinkling glitter as she went along. Bill patted the bed. Carole glanced and smiled, then glanced and smiled a little more, came over and sat, not quite touching. Bill pulled her in close with one arm, drew back her glorious red tangle of hair and kissed the back of her neck. Carole nestled her head into her husband's shoulder.

Yes, tell her now.

Carole's fingers stilled on his knee, sensing agitation. Her hair surrounded her face like solar flares, her brown eyes wide and deepening, a holy kindness in

their life's flesh and muck. Very few people got to see that look. It told him he was understood and accepted and, whatever it was, it mattered less than he imagined. A knot, tightening in Bill's chest for days, slackened and unravelled. He breathed in deeply. Gentle tremors: he was close to tears. Carole gave him a gentle squeeze, laid her head back on his shoulder.

'It'll be fine. Adam loves you. You're his father. Sons need their fathers. Mine worshipped theirs.' That knot again. Bill twitched his head and Carole removed hers. 'Oh, no, Bill, that's not what I meant at all. You know Alec and Ben...'

But Carole was not built to lie. It verged on disability. They didn't talk as they went downstairs, she into the kitchen, he into the garage, fiddling with her crucifix on the way.

'71. Bill locked Number 12's back door and walked, in thirteen paces, the ten Peggy said it took to get to the front, to double check that was locked that, too. He had. It was only that one time, wasn't it? Derwent Drive's lights, fractured by mottled glass, curved away in a sodium curtain, towards the final almost-finished houses and the gasometer, swollen and waiting for the coming cold and damp. Derwent Drive wasn't such a bad place to live. With a click of the latch, their front door shut out the world well enough and, though Father's house had been so much larger, he was now less minutely observed. Peggy's noting of neglected

deadbolts and grease stains he could handle. Bill clicked off the lights and took the steep steps up, wondering if it was time for a stair gate.

Peggy was in her nightie, perched on her side of the bed, brushing her hair. She stopped and put down her brush as Bill entered their room. 'Bill, what's that book of yours? In your sock drawer.'

Damned fool! Peggy was always going to end up finding that. But if Bill put it anywhere less conspicuous – the back of the airing cupboard, for example – she would only have found that in due course, and that would seem even more seedy. Leaving it in the sock drawer was almost casual. No particular cause for shame, or so he'd told himself. He was just waiting for a good moment.

'And are these things you were thinking of getting me to do?' she went on, smiling as if delighted at her indignation. 'With your six-months pregnant wife? You were thinking we could do things like that?'

More the damned fool for thinking she would react any other way. Bill had been caught up in daydreams – his body, her body, feathers. This, however, was not the daydream Peggy, but the one who insisted the lights were off and the bedroom aired the day after.

'So this is what you've been thinking all this time? That your wife isn't *joyful* enough for you in that department.' She pushed aside the duvet, replacing it carefully as she stood. 'And are there any other departments that aren't *joyful* enough for you? I just hope you're not looking for your joy elsewhere.' Peggy went onto the landing, then locked the bathroom door behind her.

Great. Bill had as good as handed her one more brick to add to the wall that ran down the middle of their bed. Their very own Iron Curtain. He would put his book in the garage. She wouldn't ask after it again, not if he was careful. It seemed a waste to get rid of it – and he couldn't exactly give it to Oxfam.

'74. *Sought-after, secluded location...*

Elmwood Drive was at the foot of a steep slope and the one road plunging down had iced up overnight. The estate agent had suggested they take the flight of steps that wound down through pinewoods, now speckled with snow. After dropping off Jessica with the Bakers, Peggy and Bill abandoned their Cortina at the top.

'Are you going to manage, darling?' fussed Bill, offering an elbow. 'Hadn't you better take my arm?'

Peggy explained that she knew what she was doing, this being the second time she'd had to waddle around with his child. 'Besides, if you go flying, we both go flying,' she added to finish the matter. What an old woman. Only that morning he was droning on about her smoking too much – when she had long since cut down to ten a day, which everyone said should be fine. Such a worrier. Even about his promotion.

...unique, neo-Georgian styling...

Reaching the bottom of the flight, they stepped onto Elmwood Drive. Peggy felt for Bill's hand. Their woollen gloves rubbed up against one another. Warmth grew between them. There was a fair amount of hand-holding, now she was pregnant again and, now they were house-hunting, Peggy even initiated it. It was all rather cosy.

Number Five was a split-level terraced house, at the rear of which towered the pines through which they had descended. It didn't look at all *chic*, as the estate agent insisted, but slightly on the pretentious side, with its plastic pillars astride the front door, its latticed bow windows. She turned to Bill. 'Well?'

'Hm.'

'Yes, I'm thinking hm, too. Still, seeing as we're here...'

Bill rang the doorbell.

...deceptively spacious, characterful family home...

The hallway into which they entered was dark and narrow and choked with coats and boots. Mr. Ellison, the owner, showed them through to a windowless 'work area' with a 'work room' just off it, neither more than a carpeted, wallpapered cellar. Bill squeezed Peggy's hand. Neither had yet taken off their gloves. Peggy squeezed back. They climbed stairs even steeper than those back at Derwent Drive.

The room at the top was as light and airy as downstairs was dark and gloomy and it stopped Peggy where she stood. The floor was polished wood, an almost amber tint to it. One end led to a decent-sized, open-plan kitchen and the other was mostly glass. Peggy dropped Bill's hand and walked over, taking off

her gloves. She rested damp fingers against the sill and looked out through branches to a meadow around which curled a willow-lined river and beyond which was a grand house. Peggy leaned nearer the glass, looking along the wooded ridge on which the house perched, surrounded by it all, like some glamour model drawing herself up in her furs.

Fabulous countryside views.

‘You can’t see so far in the summer,’ said Mr. Ellison, joining her at the window. ‘But it’s a pretty nice view all the same.’

The view, the wood, the open-plan kitchen, there was a sense of thriving about it all, hard to put your finger on. Here was something unexpected and new. Somewhere to put down roots deep into the soil of the work area through which they had burrowed.

Enclosed garden surrounded by trees and mature shrubs.

Mr. Ellison led them through to the bedrooms, which weren’t huge, then the bathroom, which was decent enough, and out to a patch of garden, where Mr. Ellison left them to answer the phone.

Viewing strongly recommended.

The patch of garden included a potting shed where, Peggy pointed out, Bill would have space to grow some veg, like he always wanted. Tomatoes and carrots and lettuce. She told him the house was lovely, the best they had seen.

Bill frowned. ‘But did you see those cracks in the work area?’

‘Paint will fix them,’ she told him.

‘It’s a new house,’ he said, as if she mightn’t be aware of this fact. ‘There shouldn’t be cracks.’

‘And you’re an expert on cracks, are you, Bill?’ she pointed out. ‘Shouldn’t we leave that to a surveyor?’

They headed back downstairs, thanking Mr. Ellison, they would be in touch. Why wasn’t Bill feeling her excitement? It *had* to be this house. It *had* to be. If she were to acquire that view – which was neither mud flats, washing-lines nor gasometers – a long, long journey would finally find its end.

Rapid sale needed – open to offers.

’90. ‘The old house is back in the estate agent’s window,’ began Carole, then waited to make sure she had everyone’s attention. The group leader, Chris, former phone engineer nodded to her to continue and Carole gave a little cough then went on. ‘The last owners had a swimming pool built and I thought, well, we could have had that done. Jerome and I talked about it. And when I started thinking I would head back to that flat... One bottle. Bristol Cream. It would be easy. And it struck me how ungrateful I’ve been. Jerome rescuing a girl like me. Being plucked into a world like that. All that garden but no pool. Beautiful boys but no girl. Though always the sherry. Just a little Regency glass about this big. Then, when the three of us were at Mum and Dad’s...mugs, not even glasses. You know, I wasn’t even grateful they took us in. I would sometimes take a bottle

to the park with Dad's Thermos cup. I became a bit of a regular. That's when I had to start coming here. I couldn't bear becoming a regular. And thanks to my Higher Power, I haven't touched a drop for fourteen weeks.'

The circle of fifteen clattered its approval from beneath the strip lighting of St. Nick's basement sports hall on a dark Thursday evening. Chris thanked Carole and left a pause, looking at Bill, who hadn't shared for weeks. Could he cough up evidence of Higher Power in action? Except how could he follow such a performance from their Bristol Cream Madonna, their Lady of the Thermos Cup? It was partly why he sat next to her, as if Carole spoke for him, too.

Carole placed her hand over Bill's, the third time she had done so. The contact felt warm and welcome. He was thirsty for it. Peggy hadn't touched him for a year. Actually, no, that wasn't it. Peggy's touch never lingered as Carole's did.

'I need to make it up to my wife.' Carole's fingers gripped at Bill's with more urgency, then released. The words stumbled out of him, incoherent as an upended laundry basket. Did he even mean this? The hell with it, at least he was speaking. Even if he hadn't mentioned the Higher Power. Again applause, though looser. It was getting on. And then it was coffee and custard creams and small talk. As they filed out into the security-lit alley beside St. Nick's, Carole bustled up beside Bill to walk with him, out into the car park and early frost.

Carole grabbed for Bill's hand and buried something small and warm in the cave within his fist. She curled his fingers back around it, then curled her own around his. 'It was my father's. Good luck with your wife.'

Bill looked up, but Carole was already in her Volvo. He unwrapped his hand as he sat in his and Peggy's car. The security light picked out a delicate gold chain that was threaded through a small, plain gold crucifix. He realised he wasn't equipped to understand what this meant, but felt warmed all the same.

'01. Bill called Adam's name up at the box room window, tentative at first, then with more vim. Not a peep, though best let the lad rest. The two of them had been ridding their lawn and paths of thickly-rusted bits of who-knew-what, hacking at nettles and brambles. Adam's unexpected spurt of energy was very welcome. Almost like old times, in fact, regardless of his awkwardness on crutches. They always got on best when tearing out bindweed or wiping out blackfly. The games of indoors, Peggy's games, rarely ventured into the open, like some insect colony that seethed beneath a paving slab. Bill returned to the barbeque, took a deep breath and blew violently into stubborn coals which – glory be! – crackled faintly and at last offered up a couple of tiny blue flames.

Carole crossed the chaffed lawn holding out a long, chipped glass full of cloudy lemonade. She made large, sour batches of it every summer. After handing it over, ice clinking against wet glass, Carole looked at her sandals and explained that Alec wouldn't be coming as poor Katie had terrible hayfever, had to take something and been completely knocked out by it. 'Alec can't just leave her, now, can he?'

'Oh. *Poor* Katie. She *does* suffer, doesn't she?' For the third time today, Bill thought of bringing up the fortnight-old down on Carole's upper lip. Their red-setters, Bonnie and Clyde, began a fresh round of baying and scraping against the garage doors, behind which both they and the scotch were penned until after the barbeque.

'Don't you think we ought to have some music?' suggested Carole, her tone inquisitive, deaf to Bill's sarcasm. 'We could do something with my kitchen tape player.' Bill wasn't too sure there was music everyone could agree on and told her this. 'Oh,' she continued, undaunted. 'But surely there's music everyone likes. Like The Beatles. *Love, love me do.*'

'Well, I'm not sure.'

Carole went bright red at that, her typical allergic reaction to feelings of anger. 'Bill, when are you *ever*?' she told him. And so Carole, highly-strung since Adam first arrived, fled indoors. It was a bit much taking on acting as hostess; with *Simply Organics* taking off (Bill was now having to work alongside his wife). Plates failed to stay spinning and now she was frustrated, tired and *feeling a little under-appreciated*. This summer get-together was a further spur-of-the-moment inspiration, one declared *wonderful*, and Bill had now pushed too hard against that *wonderful*. Unlikely they would make up before guests started arriving though fortunately, when they did, it was Ben.

'The barbie's coming along, I see,' he said. 'I bought veggie kebabs in case you and Mum hadn't. Some non-alcoholic beers too. Indian. Very decent. That's

allowed, isn't it?' Ben looked up at his step-father, his eagerness to please out of compassion for Bill rather than the respect which had been behind Adam's.

Bill swallowed to clear his throat, thinking of Wadworth 6X, thinking of John Smith's. 'Can't very well have a barbeque without a few cold beers, now.'

Ben clinked off to the kitchen as the doorbell went and he returned with chipolatas, chicken wings, Peggy and the turquoise terror. Gerda planted a dry kiss on Bill, then handed over home-made mushroom and courgette skewers and a bottle of fizzy grape juice. Carole entered the garden with a tray of lemonade in glasses and though she wasn't making eye-contact, the lip was at least down-free. Kisses were exchanged and a delicate dance of polite talk began, one that waltzed around the unreliability of summer and stripped-the-willow to the tune of epically disastrous picnics involving wasps and stubbed toes and sudden downpours.

Peggy came over as Bill put the meat onto a barbeque which was, thank heaven, sending up a respectable heat. A brief tussle followed, involving how much Adam was spending, whether he was doing all his exercises, not smoking too much, but it fizzled out as swiftly as it began.

'He's been having more of those dreams,' Bill told Peggy. She would want to know this as much as he needed to share it.

'The bad ones?' said Peggy. She sounded sad and disappointed. 'Poor lamb. Has he said anything about them? To you, I mean.' She sighed and dipped into her handbag for cigarettes. Looking up, she gave a slight smile, then lit up.

Bill smiled back. His shoulders relaxed. 'I haven't asked. It seems a shame to. In the mornings, it's as if they hadn't happened. Though he always looks so washed out. Us too. Have you asked?'

Peggy shook her head. 'As you say, it seems a shame to.'

As Jess, Keith and Flo burst into the garden and a first wave of greetings broke around them, a big something seemed needing saying by either Peggy or Bill, it didn't matter who. This thought or memory or feeling bobbed in the air between them like a big red balloon. Tethered too long, it got fed up and fled to the skies, leaving only a puff of sadness behind it. Peggy patted Bill's forearm more tenderly than was usual.

As if waiting for this cue, Jess came over, complained about Peggy's interfering, Keith, lack of sleep, Peggy again, then produced tofu yakitori. Organic. From the Farmer's Market.

Hell's teeth! Just ten chipolatas and five chicken wings. Bill delivered the barbeque into Ben's care. The supermarket was a three-minute drive. He parked in a disabled space. After all, he was running an errand for someone disabled. Carole wouldn't have agreed, but then Carole wasn't with him. Meat. Needed to be cheap, funds running low again. Not too cheap – then Carole would worry over animal welfare. Jess would put her oar in, too. Why couldn't you just buy food anymore? Wasn't it sufficiently righteous, laying on a spread for this bloody family? This was the drinks aisle and there was the scotch. It was nobody's business but his. Things were a bit much and his slow-paced dosing was getting him through the week better than Carole's praying. He slipped a pocket-sized

Teachers' into his basket, casually, there was no guilt in it. Meat, oh the hell with it.

Bill picked out five shrink-wrapped economy kebab packs and made for the checkouts, sped home assertively, taking two large swigs on the driveway. Bonnie and Clyde bayed at his back as he headed into the kitchen where Jess, Peggy and Gerda were crowded round Keith. Behind Keith's back, a bottle clinked onto the counter.

'Bill,' said Peggy, coming towards him, waving her hands up and down as if to pacify a child. 'Keith's brought along a little vodka. Just to add oomph to Carole's lovely lemonade.'

Bill drew closer. How tense everyone seemed. He was in a perfect position to make a scene. To shake up the structures of power. But then Peggy sniffed at him. Keith unscrewed the cap of the vodka and headed with it towards the kitchen sink, tilting it ready to empty it.

'Keith, I really wouldn't bother,' snapped Peggy. 'Apparently, we're not the only ones sneaking around.'

Carole entered the kitchen, waving around a cluster of hot dog rolls. 'What's the hold-up? Ben says the meat's done.'

Everyone looked at each other until Jess acted as spokesperson. 'Dad, you need to tell her.'

'Tell me what?' Carole asked, blinking.

'Oh, alright,' said Bill. What did anything matter now? 'That I've had some scotch. Is that such a bloody crime? I bloody need it. Have any of you a single

idea what it's like having to hold my tongue the whole bloody time?' Bill went into the garden and over to the barbeque where Ben stood beside Adam, a blanket across his shoulders. Bill ripped into the first packet, which smelled of fat and sweaty plastic. Carole came out from the kitchen. As did Peggy.

'What's that about holding your tongue?' Adam asked him, curious but as yet unsuspecting.

Peggy came over, arms folded. 'Adam,' she told him. 'There are some things best let drop. You'll learn that as you get older.' Peggy's eyes strained at Bill, urging him to please control himself.

Except Bill couldn't stop now, had he even tried, had he even wanted to.

Jess came to his side. 'Dad, I don't mind if you're drinking. Just don't hide it, alright?'

'Dad, what's going on?' said Adam, who had been watching the looks pass between his parents.

Bill looked at Peggy. Peggy looked at Bill. 'Well, go on, then,' she told him, waving him along. 'Ruin everything. It's the one thing you were ever any good at.'

Right at the moment that Bill finished his own concise but almost entirely accurate version of *that night*, right at the moment that Jess was scooping up Flo and grabbing for Adam's hand, right at the moment that Carole slapped his cheek and Gerda and Peggy exchanged a look that told him Gerda knew – she *knew* – Keith's parents, Christopher and Audrey, arrived.

'Sorry we're so dreadfully late,' said Audrey. 'Frightful traffic. I put my marinated cherry tomatoes onto cocktail sticks, sort of mini-kebabs, if you like, if it's not too late.'

'But it *is* too late,' Carole wailed. 'Far, far, far too late.' She fled to the bathroom and the roaring taps hid little.

'62. *Sew-and-Sew* opened its doors to Benfleet High Road one dark, wet April Wednesday and the prefab was no longer piled high with fabrics and hangers and dummies and other people's mending. Even in the dark, the shop's interior glowed with the coloured check of the rolls of fabric in the window – yellows, oranges, and pinks – and the fresh yellow walls, as if curtains had parted on the high road's grey and through which passers-by could glimpse somewhere brighter.

After school, Peggy and Angie rode the bus across the creek to help out. When they got to the shop, Mum was sitting smoking and chatting to a bald-headed man in a suit. They were both drinking tea.

'And here are my two little treasures,' Mum told the man. 'Angie, Peggy, meet Mr. Sullivan. This is his shop.'

'Hello,' said Mr. Sullivan, putting his tea down. 'What fine young girls, you have, Mrs. Foster. Well, I must get going.'

As Mr. Sullivan stood, Mum reached out for the collar of Mr. Sullivan's suit. 'Not quite yet, you don't.' She took it between forefinger and thumb and examined it, while Mr. Sullivan remained half-bent and reddened slightly. 'You'll have to bring that in. The seam's coming apart. Unless perhaps Mrs. Sullivan was planning to mend it.' Mum released Mr. Sullivan's collar and he opened the shop door, which jingled. 'Goodbye, Mr. Sullivan.'

'Mm. Good day to you then. Er. Girls. Good day.'

Mr. Sullivan pushed the door shut.

'He's such a pushover,' laughed Mum, waving aside the thought of him. 'And his wife's a fool, though maybe not such a fool for marrying into property.' Mum smiled at her daughters. 'His upstairs tenants are behind with their rent. Three months behind.'

And then it was Peggy's turn to smile.

'67. The flat was off Hammersmith Road. There had been talk of inviting some really swinging girls and one of them might always take an interest – Bill was wearing his sharpest suit after all. If not, there was always the claret he was bringing along for company. Thing was, sharp suits seemed currently out of vogue, unless offset by ruffles or beads or fur and Bill felt more undertaker than swinger. A similar infestation was taking over at Eel Pie Hotel. And the drugs! Not just taken backstage by the musicians – that was excusable – but now they

were jumping off the stage and into the audience, making everyone shake like ghouls, barefoot, sometimes bare-chested, eyes wild and disturbed. Eel Pie Island was no longer his haven and he had stopped going.

Tonight's party might have thought it was hip to that, but it wasn't. People might have been sitting on cushions discussing free love, but they were still early-career professionals working for plastics companies, insurance agencies, investment banks. If they actually found themselves surrounded by genuine free love, like at Eel Pie, they would be appalled at its seediness. No, free love was unlikely to be anything wilder than conversation topic.

Two girls arrived late. One wore a sheepskin jacket and beads that chafed at her kneecaps, but the other was wearing tweed, like a refugee from some other, better-heeled party which had unexpectedly been called off. She cast an aghast look on seeing the floor writhe with junior clerks and stenographers. Here was a kindred spirit, though one quite at home with *aghast*. The girl in tweed sat herself on a dining chair in the kitchen, unable to find anything other than a cushion or the corner of a table. Bill waded through the throng to join her.

'I've come to claim my claret,' he told her. 'Would you like some?'

'Normally, I'd say no,' the girl answered. 'But this evening, I think I just might.' The girl placed a lilting emphasis on that *just*. A challenge; join her or side with the cushion-dwellers.

Bill laughed and began to search the stiff kitchen drawers. 'Where do you suppose they keep their corkscrew?'

'On the floor, I expect.'

'And their glasses?'

'In their yellow submarine? I'm Peggy, by the way.'

Peggy held out her hand. Bill took it and introduced himself.

They talked the rest of the evening, seated on dining chairs, Bill probing the room and the era to prompt Peggy's acid tongue. When talk turned to establishing personal details, she seemed impressed by clerking in a way that Mother never was. She was a lab assistant in a nearby girls' school, and Bill pictured Peggy's boyish figure in a long white coat, goggles on, gripping the collar of some peculiar glass receptacle and watching its contents bubble.

It was time to leave when a group arrived of what Peggy thought must be junior architects, dressed in high street bell-bottoms and ruffles, one sheepishly dragging bongos. Bill walked Peggy a short-ish distance to the dingy Earl's Court flat she shared with her sister – James Earl Ray was at one point a neighbour – all the while agreeing on how awfully crass the mid-Sixties were, Bill thinking how very, very much he wanted to taste that vicious mouth for himself. It was sheer willpower that prevented him from smothering hers with his as she permitted him a goodnight kiss. Within a month they were courting.

'01. Jess never got out of Mum who gave the table lamp at her and Dad's wedding. With a turned wooden base and a yellow ochre pleated shade, it squatted on the living room sideboard at Number Five and was kept on all night,

a campfire in a wild, desolate place. However lost Jess got herself in the complications of childhood, whatever nightmares she woke from, whatever boys she snuck in late at night, on it blazed, calling her back. Out of all the old furniture she was offered following the divorce, it was the one piece she had been keen on having. Now it sat on her and Keith's living room floor, its flex curled whiplike around it, surrounded by books and furniture and pictures, each one marked with Tellytubbies stickers. Po stickers meant items for handing on, Dipsy stickers meant recycling and Lala stickers meant the tip. Tinky Winky stickers meant the anarchist collective, where the lamp and its brethren would get traded for the services of an Irish folk band, a replacement for the drag king boy band who cancelled a week back.

'Not the most beautiful of things is it, bro?' she admitted.

'Hardly. I don't know why Mum...' Adam drew fingertips across his mouth. 'Oh. Oops.'

Jess rolled her eyes and wagged a finger at him. 'That's two mentions, now. One more and it's a quid in the pot. The phone rang. 'Your turn,' she told him. 'Mum called when you were...'

'Now you're on two.'

Jess growled in frustration. 'Whatever. It's you, either way.' She brought the phone to her brother and went to her bedroom, where Flo lay dozing on the floor. Would Mum work out that Adam really wasn't fine? His lack of colour was in his voice. No, she was absolutely not going to listen. She did some yoga stretches,

fiddled with the blinds. Did Adam say peevish? Or was it radish? No, no, stop this.

How fake everything suddenly seemed. Even this furniture purge, even the final arrival of that long-pestered-for tax rebate which was funding it. Yes, even the sodding wedding. All one performance since that first day in halls in Manchester, her declaring she would have as much fun as inhumanly possible. So much front and so little behind it, she always knew this. For a while, knowing the truth had felt liberating: here was ultimate proof of exactly how fucked-up her parents were and no wonder she sometimes fell into dark moods. Indignation had allowed her to seize Adam, to ritualise their estrangement of Mum and Dad (especially Mum). Except she had sided with their lie, partly out of convenience, was even complicit in it. Now, increasingly, she yearned to go back and choose otherwise. If she were perhaps to call Polly and Jo...

Flo stirred in her sleep and Jess crouched down to kiss her cheek, little fists uncurling as the child began to wake.

'65. It was hard to believe Mum wouldn't be finishing the dresses – needles and felt left on the dummies – would never again disappear out back through bead curtains to stick the kettle on for a customer. Beside the till, she had even left her Silk Cut and her matches, certain that she would only be gone a minute, just popping over the road to pick up some eggs for their tea.

They gave Mum a proper send-off yesterday. Family, old friends, customers old and new – which meant pretty much half of Benfleet – they all chipped in and Auntie Val had arranged it all admirably. Now it was morning and Peggy was downstairs before Angie woke up and was sitting in *Sew-and-Sew*, soft autumn sunlight seeping in around its blinds like some peeping Tom. She reached over to Mum's ciggies and matches and held them, feeling for a weight that was barely there, the skin of her hands beginning to stick to the card as it warmed. Though recently turned twenty-one, she wouldn't dream of taking one of Mum's ciggies without first asking, wouldn't so much as pick up the packet, though not out of fear, no, out of respect. And yet she drew breath as she flipped open the packet, ready to call out to Mum what she was doing and was it alright. Peggy's out-breath was shaky and brought a squall of tears, just a small one, but enough warning of many others being kept inside since hearing about what happened with the postal van.

She'd not once seen Mum cry. Had she? She hadn't. She had seen Mum solemn, seen her grave, but not once letting her whole body surrender to what her face and tone suggested.

Peggy coughed. She dabbed her eyes with a paper hankie. She blew her nose and pulled out one of Mum's ciggies, her hands shaking as she lit it, tremors lessening with each puff.

'Do you want any breakfast?' Angie was in the doorway, bead curtain pulled to one side. Her face was damp and red and unashamed.

'I couldn't eat a thing,' Peggy told her.

‘Me neither. Tea might be nice, though.’

Peggy listened to her big sister in Mum’s kitchen, listened to taps turned on softly, the gas lit slowly, cupboards opened nervously. Angie’s sounds. Not Mum’s sounds.

Presently, Angie brought the tea. ‘Do you want me at the building society with you later on? Would that help?’

‘It’s kind of you,’ said Peggy. ‘But you don’t need to, unless you want to. Do you want to?’

Angie sucked in her lips and shook her head. ‘Not very much.’

‘I didn’t think so,’ said Peggy. ‘It’s so terribly awful. She had the deposit to give them and everything.’

Angie brought her own tea and placed it beside Peggy’s. ‘I don’t understand why it had to be *Tigh-na-mara*, though. It would have been better to buy something nearer the shop. And the last people let it get into such a state. It’s not the same place. Not at all.’

‘But I understand, Ange,’ said Peggy, patting Angie’s hand. ‘It could never have been anywhere else. Not for Mum. She’d have put it right.’

Angie shrugged. ‘You remember my boyfriend Ricky? That scrummy communist? He said no one should own their own home and I kind of agree with that. It’s such a burden. On everything.’

‘You can’t mean that Ange. What, and spend your life in digs and shared flats? A prefab out on the marshes? That’s not how decent people live.’

Angie tilted her head, unsure of that last remark. 'Are you saying we're not decent? That we didn't grow up decent?'

'Of course I don't mean that, Ange. Perhaps you don't feel it now, but you will. Some day. I'm sure of it.' Peggy came to the end of her ciggie, stubbed it out in Mum's Morecombe Bay ashtray, reached for the pack again and withdrew another, her hand now steady.

'91. This wasn't the way to behave at all. It was only Mrs. Pinkerton at Patterson's cosmetics counter. Her old friend, her meet-up-for-coffee friend. She had just paid money into Bill's account to tide him and Carole over till his redundancy cheque arrived, she was about to buy her Number 24 lippy. All perfectly decent. So why duck behind the shower caps? It was only Mrs. Pinkerton at the cosmetics counter.

This was happening whenever she saw those mothers from the before-Adam's-accident days. Mrs. Baker and her mob. At the supermarket, in the multi-storey, down the high street. At first, Peggy would do her little routine that no, no change, not yet, not at the moment, no one could say. And though most were unlikely to have heard or believed the rumours, Peggy nevertheless felt blamed, somehow at fault. A wayward child didn't appear ready-formed. Time went on and Peggy's routine got more earnest, the mothers' cheery concern becoming poor-thing sympathy. Each time, a little more Peggy spilled out, like very fine

beach sand from the bottom of a plastic bucket and now her bucket was close to empty. As she walked through town, she looked around for those mothers. She would cross the road to avoid them. Rush for a door. Duck behind a car.

Not wearing colour certainly helped. All her colourful clothes had first been left with Oxfam, then she picked out sensible black shoes, black cardies, a black shawl, black trousers and blouses. Black, the non-colour, it was a cloak. People spoke to you in quieter voices, looked a shade nervous. Vague though not invisible, she could walk through a crowded street and the crowds parted around her. And though black didn't stop those darker, nastier thoughts from clawing, it did at least dull them. Anyway, black was so practical.

And so why this nonsense with Mrs. Pinkerton? This would not do, getting all het up like this. Mum would have called it ridiculous and she would have been right. She would see Dr. Singh. She would see what he had to say. She would see what could be done.

'01. *Go _ . Run out of control (7).*

Peggy always channelled her power through the phone, her trusty little messenger, as she balanced everyone's budgets and played oracle to Adam. Now the yellowing plastic thing had gone and changed sides. As the business about the accident wormed its way through her address book, Peggy could get hung up on, shouted at, her calls left unreturned. Even sworn at – though

mercifully only once. Even Ange – who was so keen on flying out for Jessica's wedding – now spoke about money being tight which was absolute nonsense, she was loaded. The phone sat on the kitchen countertop, no longer tucked away neatly beside her dresser, poised and bad tempered, while Peggy did her best to keep her concentration on the crossword in front of her.

Spot or mark which is difficult to remove (5).

Only Bill and Carole's calls were amicable. Bill, playing victim rather than accomplice, called to swap opinions on Adam's wellbeing, increasingly forward as Peggy felt herself get more subdued. There was softness and kindness in his voice. Had it always been there? Had she been deaf to it? And then Carole being central in bringing everyone back together after that barbeque business. Not that she was entirely successful, she didn't have the skills for that, but how diminished it made Peggy feel all the same. Even were Peggy to play her card about Bill and the life support, she might not currently get believed and, yes, she did in a way need Bill.

Planetary path (5).

Adam was gone and could well stay gone. Only his sickness might return him to *Tigh-na-mara* and how wretched it felt to long for that, a feeling to fling out. There were many such wrong feelings, slimy and evil and which had nearly emerged in her black period, only to slither back into shadows once her tablets began to do their job, before they got her to act. Now they were spotlit. Ageless, they lurked behind every decision Peggy ever had made, every thing she had ever said and done.

Fashion with a knife (5).

Even her dream of Adam was gone from *Tigh-na-mara*. Finally the bungalow was her own. She had briefly forced herself to lap up the freedom of smoking in front of her living room TV, even in bed, though in time this new spaciousness, at first so fresh and promising, became as crowded with wrong feelings as it did with lingering tobacco. But Peggy continued to smoke indoors. Only the guest bedroom, her orchid room, was kept smoke free, though mainly because Peggy couldn't bring herself to face what distractedness had inflicted on her collection.

Concerning nuptials (11).

When the phone finally did ring, it was La Bella saying her dress would be ready for collection on Wednesday. A brown dress! And though Gerda had so wonderfully guided her through ordering it, and, yes, it 'went' with her turquoise pashmina that she would now cling to like a life-raft, the choice was made before this latest business. She craved invisibility, though as mother-of-the-bride, even a lying, controlling one, she was unlikely to be permitted to lurk in the background. She would get cajoled into photo smiles and isn't-it-wonderful. And, no, it wasn't wonderful. Jessica was marrying a soft-headed fool that she didn't love. The matter might be out of her hands, especially so now, but Peggy had no desire to see her daughter make a mistake she already knew plenty about.

Subordinate (8).

'62. Eel Pie Hotel sat on an upriver Thames island to which it donated its name. Mother would not have approved but then Mother never knew a thing about it. Pretty much every other weekend over the very early Sixties, Bill tramped from Twickenham, where Dave and Ricky shared a cold-water flat, and over the high arch of the footbridge which led there. The Hotel was a dump, even the floorboards untrustworthy, but also the best place in London for hearing rhythm and blues and for picking up crumpet, though, yes, Bill had more success with the former than the latter.

The Rolling Stones, The Yardbirds, Downliners Sect, you got to hear them all in their heyday, a Watney's Red in one hand, a Pall Mall in the other, jumped and jostled from all sides, even by the sprung dance-floor beneath your feet. You had your work cut out not to spill your beer, not everyone came to hear the music but to act the goat and cause a ruckus. Even a fair few girls, they could be quite cutting if you looked at them the wrong way. But if you ignored all that, the music coming from the stage was magnificent. Such energy, such intensity, such bluntness.

And once the week began again and Bill was commuting into Cannon Street from Sevenoaks, he cherished these memories, like a lover's lock of hair, as he knew he'd do when he found someone who would love him for longer than a month or two.

'69. Father would not be watching man's first steps on the moon. His new, higher morphine dosage was sending him off into deep waters out of which he wouldn't emerge for hours. Peggy had gone and nodded off in sympathy and Bill didn't know what to do. It was three in the morning and the ward was dim and silent apart from the nurses' portable black and white.

A dying man's wish that his son and – maybe – future daughter-in-law be with him to watch footsteps in the dust and dark. If this grand stunt even worked at all. Peggy and Bill weren't actually supposed to be here, but the ward sister spun some line to the doctors, shifting the end a shade nearer – days – then back again to where it belonged – weeks. Still weeks, though. Soon enough. Mother kept in the dark about it all, Father was insistent, and this complicity felt good. It untied things that needed untying.

Peggy's head drooped onto her chest and she gave a short gasp before her breathing settled back into a soft, regular rasp. Awake, there was a smile that never quite broke on her lips, but asleep, it flooded them. His sweet young thing, you wouldn't believe how alive and alert she was to life's battles. And though, yes, she was a touch prudish, that was her individuality, too; a refusal to get swept along, a preference for dining room chairs over floor cushions. The ring box was warm from handling, waiting to get cracked open. When he looked at Peggy, he glimpsed the future, glimpsed a first home, glimpsed children. Glimpsed freedom. Glimpsed protection.

The moonwalk could be anytime. Bill ought to join the nurses, he oughtn't miss this. Those watching were up in the sky tonight, leaving behind husks and

anyone reluctant to give up the earth. You were either up there dreaming or you were down here breathing, you couldn't be in both places. Surely he belonged here with Father and with Peggy.

A nurse came down the ward and told him it was now.

Bill looked at Peggy. Would she be angry if he woke her or angry if he didn't? Would she unleash that tongue on him? To date, she never had. But he couldn't be certain.

'Listen,' said the nurse. 'If you want to join us, you know where we are...'

'Thanks,' Bill told her. 'Look...'

Bill found that he was standing and that he was walking towards the nurses' station. He could barely make out the screen. Armstrong stepped off a ladder and into white dust. A flag was unfurled, all those cold thousands of miles away. It was a leap his mind couldn't make, but at least he would know he saw the first man on the moon. Neither Peggy nor Father nor Mother nor anyone else would ever know that. Thus they couldn't take it from him.

'01. Yet another summer storm – several had even produced tornados. Rain flailed their bedroom window and wind tried forcing entry wherever rain couldn't get. Even the thick curtains stirred, begrudgingly. The duvet was no protection, either, because the storm was in here as well. Carole's back was again towards Bill as she reread *Conversations with God*, as since the night after the barbeque

fiasco. One freckled shoulder jutted up over him, framed by a lacy semicircle of nightie, just a few finger spans away, as was her warmth and her soft smell.

Though shutters had been pulled down before, it was the first time that Bill felt like a culprit. Not that Carole had pronounced on the barbeque further than saying she was dreadfully upset, that she felt stupid and that it brought back the horrible business with Jerome. She hadn't even made follow-up probes into details; the architecture of omissions, fictions and half-truths. Bill would have even welcomed being found out. No, they went to bed that night pretty much as any night, except when Bill tentatively touched Carole's shoulder, his opening gambit, she flinched, said she was awfully tired and put down her book, ready to drop off. On the fourth night of non-sex, Bill broached the subject and Carole opened a small window on her emotions, said she simply wasn't ready to go reopening old wounds, wished him goodnight and closed the window softly but securely behind her. Though it drove him round the twist, Bill nevertheless accepted the importance that women placed on their feelings. He had said sorry, after all, hadn't even waited to be asked. She would come round. Wasn't it simply a matter of giving her time? Except that line no longer worked because Bill was a culprit. Certainly, everyone else partly excused him as Peggy's victim – cowardice in the face of cruelty – but it wasn't so simple when it came to lying to Carole. All that badness left behind with Peggy, kept out by stuffing newspaper into the holes, like the downstairs loo window, had now got in. His Carole turned a shoulder against the draft and her withdrawal cancelled his right to be in the right. Even her crucifix felt cool against his chest.

* * *

'01. Adam hadn't slept long. The album in his ears, *Daydream Nation*, was a few tracks from the end. Jess stood in curtained gloom, lamp in hand, telling him something. He killed Keith's Discman, fumbled off the headphones.

'But don't you think it's fabulous?' she was saying. 'The lamp I got. This lamp.' The long sought-after replacement table lamp had a deep orange ceramic base, patterned with squares. Its shade was an expansive canvas ring with geometric flowery blotches. It was garish even through gloom. 'It's so Seventies. I had to have it, though they got a mint, even after haggling them down. Adam pointed out that the old one had also been Seventies. 'Yeah,' carried on Jess, her excitement undiminished. 'But, like, buttoned-down Seventies. This is tasselled swimwear Seventies. Chest hair Seventies.' Jess sat herself and the table lamp beside her brother, then stroked his hair. 'You been in bed all this time? No energy, huh? Poor thing.'

Though Adam was spending more time dozing and always felt drained, lethargy wasn't his greatest enemy. Apathy was. Arriving in Brighton had, at first, shoved him into seeking out remnants of his wild, old self – like *Daydream Nation* – but once the momentum was gone, he remained an uncool billy-no-mates and a cripple. Staying in, nestling into relics, was tons easier than facing any fierce everyday reality where people had jobs and cars and had sex. Such a

reality might include his childhood lamps but cool irony gave them other meanings and kept them out of his reach.

Jess sighed, then turned to Adam, her expression angry and confused. She had avoided catching Adam's eye all day and something in her stare was making Flo erupt in shrieks. Now she pinned him with it. Adam hauled himself up against his pillows.

'Don't you feel like we've been orphaned?' Jess grimaced and gestured at Adam with open hands. 'I mean, lying like that. It's not like you killed that boy. I don't even think datura's illegal. Though it should be. If anything should be, I mean. Which, right, it shouldn't.' Jess turned from Adam, breathed in deep and stared at the carpet as she exhaled noisily. 'At the end of the day, it's all about the family name, isn't it. Mum looking Auntie Whoever and Mr. Whatever in the eye and sending them Christmas and birthday cards and putting their kids' graduation photos on the wall of her bungalow. Plus Dad being too soft to stand up to her.' Jess tone dipped, sad and sympathetic.

'So you're angry with Mum. Not with Dad,' said Adam, angling for confirmation of what he thought he had seen over the past few days.

'I suppose.' Jess shrugged, unwilling to argue but unwilling to agree. 'But, you know, who I'm really angry with is my-fucking-*self*. It all turns to shit, doesn't it?' The gesturing hands returned, performing well-rehearsed acrobatics. 'Family life, I mean. All those picnics in the park, school carol concerts, thank you cards to auntie whoever. Just some stupid theme park while behind it all, something like this was always lurking, like some serial killer who lives behind, I dunno, the

log flume.’ There was a strain and a moist rasp to Jess’ voice and she gave a few sniffs before asking Adam what he made of it. It was one of the few times anyone had asked for Adam’s thoughts, of which there were many when it came to this. Now he had to distil them into the easiest syllables he could muster.

‘I reckon it’s them lying to themselves.’

Jess mulled that over a while, perhaps filling in Adam’s gaps. Things like Mum and Dad’s sense of guilt and failure about the accident. If anything, Adam felt sad for Mum and Dad, though perhaps his own guilt guided that.

Jess puckered her lips. ‘I can see that. Hey, and you know, I’m so glad to have you back, bro. I mean that. I’ve felt so adrift. Thank God I’ve got you. And Flo.’ Jess slapped at her knees and then stood. ‘Hey, why don’t we all go to Vegas. You fancy that? Me and Keith getting hitched at the Elvis Chapel. Oo... speaking of which, you know the brochures came today? For the hotel. I can show you this place.’ And off she went. No sooner did you start nearing intimacy than Jess said something flippant, found something to get on with and she was out of reach. She was the same with everyone. Jess was always on the run.

When she returned, Jess tipped an armful of glossy brochures onto Adam’s bed. Adam opened the first page. The Meridian/ Heritage South Downs Manor Park Hotel and Corporate Hospitality Centre seemed déjà-vu familiar. The many corridors of the complex were wood-panelled. The carpet was a deep wine colour. In the hotel’s centre, a wide staircase led up from a table on which was a lily in a pot. So he was back in his mansion. So he was dreaming. So all this –

the table lamp, Jess opening up, then closing down – this was all dream. Then how much else?

Three.

The Fu Bar was close to empty, like all other nearby discos (no, they're *clubs*, now, Jess said). A small group, Adam among them, sat around a couple of tables, backs to the dancefloor while a DJ spun an indecisive mix of Latin, punk and techno which failed to live up to the wild eclecticism trumpeted on the flyer. The only other person sat watching news on a hidden TV above the bar. No one knew how many were dead, but thousands for sure. Back at their flat, Keith's stag do was very much in the balance for a while. There was talk of respect and no-one being up for it. *'If we let ourselves stop what we're doing, they've won.'* And Jess strode over to the TV, switched over to binary-coloured grass and bunnies and plonked Flo down in front of it. How like Mum: definitive, defiant. More like Mum than Mum herself, who called earlier as things were worsening,

sounding oddly euphoric, saying didn't it make you think about what really mattered? Alec called it off as Katie's Mum's friends in Wyoming used to live in DC. Two of Keith's mates simply didn't show. Adam even thought about playing up his tiredness, though actually, he didn't feel so wretched today. All would be in front of the TV. If nothing else, Keith and Baz did at least provide an alternative way of responding.

'It's all there in *The Bible Code*,' Keith was jabbering. '*There shall be two brothers* or something.'

'Fuck that, seriously, *fuck* that,' Baz told him. Baz always told Keith. 'No, what's really happening is those complacent fuck-heads who've been thinking they're safe in their Smart cars... I was out and this plane went overhead and everyone looked up and were all like *is that another?*'

Adam reached for his crutches to go to the loo. Not that he needed a slash but he needed to do something. Plus he could catch a glimpse of TV. Keith and Baz were no less delusional than Mum, nor any less self-contradicting. Their friendship with him got turned on or off according to whoever was over or in or out and their hatred of *the system* was a tad undermined by their dependence on Sony and Bacardi. All the same, their delusions were more glamorous, swaggering in Timberlands rather than striding stiffly in sensible shoes. Adam might well have been that way, too. He might have been deluded, but better that than a shuffling sadcase. Right? Adam began to piss and the door behind him banged open and shut. Ben entered.

'Looks like you'll be helping them from their chairs before the evening's out. I'm going to have to grab a train. Morning lecture.'

'At least you've an excuse.'

A politely awkward, men's toilet silence followed and they transferred to the wash basins.

Ben turned to Adam as they reached the hand-driers. 'I meant to ask if you've tried looking up your old school chums on the internet. There's this website helps you do it.'

Adam was spared sharing his worsening technophobia with Ben because as they finished up with the dryers and made for the door, Keith and Baz crashed into them, all limbs and beer-breath. A roar of raised voices and much louder music – the boom-boom-boom sort that had sprung up everywhere from nowhere – flooded into the loos behind them.

'Oi, oi, lads!' said Keith, punching the air. 'It's kicking off. It is kicking right off!'

Ben stood perfectly still. 'Great,' he said, his tone low and measured. 'The freaks are out to play.'

Keith eyeballed Ben momentarily but was yanked into the toilet's main body by Baz and shoved into a cubicle.

A smell of weed hit Adam the moment he was back in the club. Three men in a huddle, right in front of the DJ booth, they were smoking it. Maybe others too. Jess and Keith sometimes smoked it, out on their balcony after Flo was down for the night. A smell that was like a snatch of song he couldn't precisely

remember, looping over and over as Adam frantically tried to match it. He could feel it at his lips, in his lungs, at his fingertips. Not that he fancied smoking the stuff, not with all that medication rattling around inside. And then something gave: an initial shove of familiarity and then Adam, gasping for air, was dragged into floodwaters of memory, spinning and eddying faster than the glitterball. Attic bedrooms. Filthy carpets. Fag butts. Warm cider. Groping and fumbling. Car parks after dark. And a wash of faces, his friends – Jez, Toby, Geg. Becky.

‘Adam?’ Ben was at his elbow, his face engaged, probing. Adam was trembling.

‘I’ve...’

But how the hell could you explain this sudden gift – curse? – of memory. There, over at the DJ booth, three men with pasts in a similar landscape. Alright, so Keith and Baz were tossers, but there was at least a shape he could grow back into, rather than the mortgage holidays and miles-per-gallon of the men back at the Royal General. He would go up to this lot. He would ask for a toke. He would not. There he stood and here he stood. He had to do something. He had to move.

‘Fancy a beer?’

Adam’s words were reflexive and Ben’s answer was slow and cautious. Adam paddled through the crowd to the bar, skin burning, barely feeling either the money he handed over or the bottles as he returned to where Ben sat, looking concerned.

‘You’re white as a sheet. It’s your medication, isn’t it?’

Why wouldn't Ben drop it! Better if Adam could vanish, get teleported out to the shingle to throw stones into a black sea under the pier, be left alone to catalogue the contents of this unsealed room, fragile if exposed too long to light and air. 'Yeah. It's the drugs,' he told him.

Ben, the nice young man, held his gaze, still probing, then looked away. He put down his beer. Had that been a test? If so, Adam had failed it. Ben was being receptive and sympathetic – how many times had Adam wanted that? – and, because Ben was a trainee GP and Adam recovering from a drug overdose, he had put up a barrier. He must knock it down.

There was a majestic crash of tables. Bottles clanked across the floor from where Keith had just collapsed. Baz stumbled himself onto a chair. 'Ladies, gentlemen and the undecided. Mr. Keith de'Ath sends his farewells from the privacy of his very own k-hole and bids you join him later on.' Laughter. Cheers. Clapping. Keith was poured into the nook of a corner seat, eyelids flickering, an expression on his face that could have been a smile of pleasure as easily as it could have been a grimace. Ben shook his head. Adam asked what k-hole meant.

'Means he's taken ketamine. It's a horse tranquiliser. That mustn't seem too clever to you, must it?'

And, true enough, Keith did look pathetically comatose, his eighty quid *Sherbet Fountain* t-shirt soaked in beer and dribble. Except Ben was wrong: his coma hadn't just been wasted time. It had cocooned him. Nor had it been entirely empty, though certainly empty of fucked up families and crap discos-no-

they're-clubs. No, it didn't disgust him. Didn't fill him with pity, either, but an odd envy and, somehow ignoring everything, kinship with Keith, at least right at that moment.

It was time to leave. This throng of wasted people, however sexy and seductive, seemed darkly alien, even macabre when you placed it against a backdrop of bodies falling from the sky. He didn't speak this language. He didn't know these ways. His coma made him a generation of one who belonged nowhere but in his own company. He turned to Ben.

'I'm coming with you. I need some air.'

The phone box across the street was at last working. Bill had needed to walk all the way up to the tube station to call BT because, not so long ago, the next nearest phone box had without warning got hoiked out of the ground and been carted away on the back of a lorry. Bill had felt genuine grief as he watched this from their bedroom window, one early spring afternoon spent ringing round the agencies. Its usefulness overtaken by mobile phones – even Carole now had one – the phone box was another victim of the bulldozer of progress.

This evening, of all evenings, their line was dead. BT were saying nothing could be done till the morning, some rubbish about keys for the new exchange, and it turned out that *both* chargers for Carole's mobile phone were now

somewhere. Not wanting to bother their neighbours, they were very nearly cut off from the world, their one connection being the box opposite.

It was the end of a marathon, everyone slightly wary of being too excited in case it wasn't appropriate, given that awful business across the Atlantic. And, no, he wasn't superstitious, even given the Beatles split on his own wedding, then that Apollo 13 business on their honeymoon. Jess and Keith were such a lovely couple, just as Carole said. And though he didn't exactly connect with Keith, that wasn't so very unusual for him. Anyway, they'd been together years. First call was to Alec, who was now coming down without poor Katie. Then Ben, to answer a query about a particularly tricky road junction east of Lewes. Next Jess, confirming things. He hadn't asked after Adam. He would see him tomorrow anyway, not that he would have got far in asking. That last call bumped up gravity by a notch or two. So just Peggy left to ring and Bill was almost out of coins. Only a twenty and a ten remained and these new boxes didn't take coppers. Still, it kept his call to Peggy to an economical length. Certainly, there was no absolute reason for calling other than having arranged to speak; their travel and accommodation arrangements were wholly separate. It just seemed the thing to do. So she wouldn't get at him. No, not get at him. She would work herself into a flap. She would worry.

At the other end of the line, Peggy's phone rang only once.

'Bill, thank goodness,' she said, her voice shrill and anxious. 'I've been trying and trying and there's been no one there.' Bill explained to her about their

phone problems. 'Oh, how awful. Is Carole coping? I suppose Carole's not much of a phone person, is she? Well, are you all set, then?'

Bill went on to explain that he was indeed all set for their daughter's big day, then, after a curious silence in which Peggy should have criticised him for using a phrase she hated, that he was very nearly out of change.

'I could call you back,' she offered. 'Do you want me to call you back?'

'Only if you want to.'

'No. I can't see any desperate need. Not especially. But never mind. We'll see each other tomorrow.' Peggy's breathing was heavy as she returned the receiver to its cradle. She hadn't attacked him – why? Just one cardboard cut-out opinion and whatever she was holding back wasn't spite but something tender and fragile. It wasn't very Peggy. She didn't even fuss over how well their son was or wasn't. Adam would be okay though. Adam sounded okay.

The nights were starting to draw in, the last sunlight kindling cloud tips. Indoors, Carole was allegedly packing and readying their house for the morning. She was to have already shown the crucial elements of Bonnie and Clyde's routines to an old family friend, who lived on the other side of the park. Where to find towels, leads. Their rubber squeaky Winnie-the-Pooh. The very loose timings of meals and walks. Carole had got round to asking the friend only yesterday by dropping a note through her door. Carole took non-communication to mean agreement – he didn't *know* Nancy.

From their porch, the only light in the drab, dark house was up in their bedroom. A rotting plywood table blocked the garage alleyway. Sash windows

were painted shut. A leaf litter of pizza flyers ringed the door mat. Usually, Bill hurtled along, his agitation stopping him from fully noticing these things, from identifying them as to do with him. Except this evening, regardless of the phone business, he fell into a pace slow enough for their house to scream its grievances. Clearing it up was no easy matter, though inch by inch, it could be restored and made over. At least you could see what needed doing. Mending his relationships, though, was like patching a hole in the ocean. Bill entered the garage, lifting its door quietly (he had oiled the hinges) and reached behind Father's rusted and filthy toolbox. The scotch's heat filled some of his emptiness and he went to find Carole who was in the centre of a swirl of nightwear, shoes and toiletries.

'Bill, are you wearing your suit on the journey down, or what exactly are you doing with it?' Carole sounded cross and flustered. Bill would need to be calm and patient.

'I hadn't thought,' he told her.

'Well, can you now? I'm getting one of my headaches and this needs sorting out.'

It turned out there had been no time to contact the friend. Bill lingered at the doorway. Carole looked right at him. Blood rushed in Bill's ears and a train distantly clack-clacked through the dusk. A few seconds were followed by another few. At this point, Carole should have given way, should have apologised, should have put herself down, not stood as unmoving as Alec,

staring, waiting for him to budge. The script was being reworked. Bill fingered her crucifix, pushed it to his chest.

‘Don’t you worry about it,’ he said, smiling. ‘I’ll pop over to Nancy’s. I’ll do that right away.’

‘Would you?’ Carole raised her eyes to his, grateful and happy. ‘That would set our minds at rest, wouldn’t it?’

It was 11.04 and the station was now in view. Becky’s train was due at 11.06. He’d make it. Except what if the train was early? Becky might get off the train and disappear into the shops and kiosks of the main concourse and what then? Of course, what then would be calling her mobile, but the pre-mobile anxiety of missing one another urged him on through his fug.

11.05. Adam was grateful his frantically-working crutches were a moral stop light at the taxi rank.

11.06. The wall of black clattering platform boards were mute. Though replaced by a series of monitors, only these relics seemed authoritative.

11.07. *No signal detected* multiplied on every monitor. No staff detected either, no cornflower and buttercup uniforms, like off under-5s TV. Adam swung himself up to Platform 9, then back down to 1. No information and no Becky. An overhead announcement, sluggish with echo, used the words *apologies* and *further announcements*.

11.20. The screens on the platforms spat out numbers and places. Platform 7's screen brought up the magical *11.06* and placed it beside *11.20 – Expected*. Adam swung up the gates. He felt rushed and these hitches had made him brood. He tried focussing on his breathing, and hitching a *the* to his *now* but his feelings splintered off into bitterness about *the then* and anxiety about *the there*.

People gushed through Gate 7, a few lingering in front of the gates and one, a young woman travelling by herself, looked around nervously. The young woman had on the long, Dalmatian-print coat that Becky said she would be wearing. Adam briefly thought of just walking off but then Becky's eyes met his and elastic twanged them towards one another until they were holding one another in a tight hug.

'Adam,' she said at last. 'I'm really glad to see you but you're hurting my ribs.'

'Oh, sorry.'

Becky was neither ghost of the past, nor ghoul of the present. Though her face now lacked some of its chubby smoothness – was it memory or fantasy or dream in which he had kissed it? – the lines of her face brought out a quickness that replaced her bolshiness and her hands, faintly veined, remained fascinating and delicate. They left the station and headed down towards the seafront.

'God, everything must seem so different to you.' Becky's tone was light and flippant. 'Kind of like another country, right? I mean, Marathons now being Snickers, Opal Fruits being Starbursts.'

This was a well-worn line of conversation with Adam but Becky seemed intrigued to know what he thought, rather than just stalling for time until she could get away. 'No Maggie and the government being Labour,' said Adam with a smile. 'Sorry, New Labour. I mean what's so New?'

Becky giggled. 'What's so Labour, more like. New as in New suits, perhaps. New hairstylists. Fancy going down the pier? I haven't been in *ages*.'

The wind met them at the seafront, stripping the September warmth, day-trippers left all goose-bumped and shivery. Adam lit up at the pier entrance, Becky helping shelter the flame, and they walked out over sea that peeped through the wooden slats beneath them.

Halfway along, Becky headed to the railings to look out along the coast, hair tossed by the wind like noodles in a big copper wok. Becky wiped moisture from her eye, maybe the wind, maybe not. Or maybe someone else was stirring up Becky, someone behind him. No one was there. It was just him. She turned to look at him, eyes flickering around as she studied him, lips parted, amused and amazed. She drew her lips together and swallowed. 'Has your Mum ever said about the magazine?' Becky spat out the words like they scalded.

'Magazine?'

Becky explained about *Encyclopaedia Psychedelica*, the datura tea recipe, her note and the magazine being left in his room on the night of the accident. Adam listened to it numbed and goosebumped by the wind, scrabbling among his new pieces of memory in case anything now fitted. *Kensington Market* brought back an image – racks of Smiths T-shirts – and a smell of incense and

cheap leather. Background details. No pieces connected up to make a bigger picture.

'It never got mentioned at the inquest,' Becky told him, her tone controlled again, but serious. A very adult tone. 'I always thought that was odd because it would have been evidence and I didn't think your parents were like that. It kind of freaks me I'm going to see them again. Anyway, you *couldn't* have read my note. You were wild, but not crazy. I mean, the note getting mentioned in court probably wouldn't have changed things for me. Except maybe with Mum and Dad. Anyway, the magazine would have definitely been evidence of some kind.'

'Evidence of what?'

Becky paused and looked him in the eye, reading him, seemingly unsure of his uncertainty. She blinked a couple of times and smiled tenderly. 'Of it being your idea.'

His idea? Thirteen lost years, a death, a broken family. His idea? Adam Strange, the virgin who panicked whenever he heard a dial-up signal, he might spend most of his days shuffling around in a dressing gown his mother bought him but here, skywritten, was his influence on the world. Yeah, his idea. Adam felt small, powerful, horrible. He wasn't sure he wanted to own this. He looked at Becky. Again, her eyes were probing his expression.

'Me coming probably wasn't such a brilliant plan.' She sucked in her bottom lip, then released it. 'It's just going to stir things up, isn't it?' The implication seemed to be that she should go.

Adam needed a think about this: Becky was right about stirring things up. A few months back, Mum had got close to hysterical even getting wind of Becky's letters. Except maybe his family had, for years, been in a sort of coma of its own, one of denial and avoided gazes and bitten tongues. Perhaps since before his accident, as Jess reckoned.

'No. Stay,' Adam told Becky, reaching out his hand for hers. 'Things needed stirring up.' Becky grasped Adam's hand and squeezed tight.

Bill stood in the drawing room of the Meridian/ Heritage South Downs Manor Park Hotel with his sniffer, looking out through the PVC French windows onto the old garden, savouring the peace. Bill's pre-lunch double cognac was founded on good sense: drinking early made possible a pleasantly low-level haze, more or less invisible to others. Waiting for the bottle's formal introduction risked running headlong into drunkenness – drinks at the bar before, during and after tonight's dinner, tomorrow's Bucks' Fizz reception, post-nuptial champagne on the lawn, toast wines, rounds at the dance, night-caps. Deciding when and what he drank put him in the driving seat. He could turn down the zealots without putting a dampener on things. Without denying himself.

The Manor Park was a 250-bedroom sprawl of red-brown brick dormitories, halls, kitchens – not entirely unlike the Royal General, but with healthier plants, red carpets and a thick smell of furniture polish, gravy and lemongrass. It sat in a

slightly claustrophobic acreage of lawns, pockmarked by mole-hills and horse-chestnut trees, their leaves withering to septic browns and yellows as autumn rushed along with its agenda. The estate was bounded by drunken red brick walls, the modest Tudor manor itself at the complex's core, its oak-beamed hall the venue for the wedding itself. The old drawing-room where Bill stood, piped-icing plasterwork swirls on the ceiling, was now a lounge bar, all arm chairs and glass coffee tables laid out with *Esquire*, *Vogue* and *The Lady*.

The weather was warm, even for mid-September – a worn-out season's tatty heat. The lounge bar roared with eager but ancient air conditioning, though the air stayed stuffy. Bill tried the French windows, found them unlocked, stepped outside into a smell of hot dirt and yellow grass. He swirled his snifter ornamentally and took the cognac for a walk.

Behind the manor were its original gardens; not the official, be-gazeboed photographic lawns with their crew-cut grass. Crumbled steps led to shaggy lawns split by a weed-cracked path, a dark shrub thriving alongside, its trumpet-shaped flowers familiar, though hard to place. Beyond the lawns rose up a very tall, scrappy hedge with a low, rough opening through which he could spot more hedges and a pond, its surface thick with spongy, toxic-looking stuff.

No. Not exactly a pond. At its far end was a splintered and mossy shelter, a slatted wooden bench running along the back. In front, a pool ladder reached down deep into the crimson scum. Bill sat at a rusting table, two chairs arranged to face the spongy surface, thinking of stick-thin ladies in hydrangea swim hats. He was glad of this place. Pool and gardens waited for Meridian/ Heritage to

move on, pouring scorn on their mission statements, awaiting the return of more sympathetic, less crew-cut money. It was only a matter of time.

On the pool's other side was a fresh notice, its wooden stake beige and rough. *Warning!* it said, then a yellow triangle around a dark blob – a skull? He must get his eyes tested some time. Beneath that, more text. *Toxic. Health. Death.*

Bill was half-way across the upper lawn when he realised he had left the snifter and most of its contents behind him. But now Carole, Alec and Ben's voices were somewhere at hand, his plan shot to pieces. He would have to face them, face everyone else without his protective haze. The Beatles split and the terrorist attack. Everything was doomed.

Though there was still the minibar.

Peggy's twin room was in the old part of the complex. Its window looked onto the photography lawns and away to wooded downland. The view was so pretty, the staff must have thought no one would notice the terrible papering and the mattresses that floundered in their frames like dying, lumpy fish. Peggy opted for the twin, there being no available doubles, because the mother-of-the-bride shouldn't be locked away in some spinsterly single. This opened up the possibility of saving some money by sharing with Gerda. Here, they could create a bolt-hole, a place to keep her tablets, smoke in peace (out of the window) and

speaking one's mind. Gerda had seen two children married off and divorced and believed the rot set in at these ghastly doses. Jessica and Keith's excuse about stability was preposterous, given the rising tide of divorce. It was certainly nothing to do with matrimony. Take Jessica's best friend, who was reading an excerpt from a book entitled *Heal the Hole in Your Heart*. She read it beautifully at this afternoon's rehearsal. The words dealt with growth and truth and inspiration and joy. Lovely words, no doubting it, but they sidestepped anything requiring commitment. Words like duty, respect, fidelity, honour. Words Peggy herself had used and ought to keep a marriage ticking over indefinitely. Whether love was there or not.

Peggy sat on a bed and swallowed one tablet, then another. She had brought along a more than ample supply. Just in case. In case of things that couldn't get dismissed so easily. Like what a shadow Adam seemed. Like the brown of clothes that placed her on the spectrum, jostling against greens, purples, reds, organic things. The brown, she could feel this, was working into her skin, like one of Gerda's therapies but monstrous, turning her body from sturdy container into soft flesh.

Breathe, Peggy Strange. Let the tablets do their bit.

Solidifying, she stood, then moved her ciggies, tablets and water to the bed nearest the view. Picking it felt greedy but Gerda would think her foolish for being selfless.

The bed Gerda would soon occupy still wore Peggy's outline. Gerda's scent would soon infuse the room. When she slept, would she snore? How

would she prepare for bed? Peggy lay back, closed her eyes; time for forty winks. Oh, she would get through this alright. In fact, a short break away with her dearest friend could be just what the doctor ordered.

Fact 2: Aside from eggplant, the aubergine has also been known as Guinea Squash, gully bean, susumber, apple of love, apple of madness and apple of Sodom.

Aubergine was sandwiched between a particularly dowdy Somerfield and an antique lighting shop. Across the road were Manzone's whited-out windows and Sweet Muffins, a vegan café. The restaurant walls were hacked back to reveal its original greengrocer's tilework, its floor showed off uneven wooden beams, its reclaimed and tastefully-mismatched furniture stripped of layers of paint and varnish with careful imprecision. Pre-wedding talk spilled across five different tables, each table-placing with its hand-made paper placemat printed with one of 37 facts about aubergines. All that stripped-back everything forced up the volume of conversation, imperceptibly but unstoppably.

Fact 7: For scorpion bites, apply raw aubergine directly onto the affected area. For frostbite, prepare a tea of aubergine, bring it to room temperature and apply a compress to affected areas.

Bill was blustering away at one particularly ill-thought-out table combination: him, Alec, Keith and a second cousin of Peggy's who few had

previously known to exist. *'All our beers are vegetarian. What the bloody hell is that supposed to mean? I don't remember tasting bull's blood in my bitter.'*

'Um, Mr. Strange,' offered Keith. *'It's in the processing. Fish guts, actually. Used to clean the beer.'*

'Fish guts in beer?' Bill banged the table with an open palm. *'That's ridiculous. Don't you think that's ridiculous, Alec?'*

Alec took a calm, measured sip from his bottled lager without looking up from the text he was presumably composing beneath the table. *'Mum's asked me not to think, remember, Bill?'*

Keith looked across at Jess, who widened her eyes and nodded towards Alec. Keith nodded back in agreement, then leaned across the table. *'So, um, Alec. What do you, erm, you know, do?'*

'I work and I get paid to work.' Alec was still refusing to look up. It must have been a very long text. *'As do most people, as you might have heard someone say.'*

'Join me in another pitcher of beer, Keith?' drawled Bill. *'Never had such a thing in my day! Rather larger than a jar, eh?'*

'Oh, no thanks, Mr. Strange. Not yet.'

'Alec?'

'Hardly.' Alec's expression briefly flashed annoyance at the text. He pocketed the phone and looked up. *'Mum? He's getting drunk.'*

From her table, Carole grinned and nodded in response.

Fact 19: Although the aubergine is richer in nicotine than any other edible plant, you would need to consume around 20 lbs for the same amount as a single cigarette.

‘Well, here we all are together again,’ Peggy was saying at Carole’s table. ‘Second time lucky. Fingers crossed.’

‘Peggy, it is supposed to be third time lucky, am I right?’ Gerda pointed out, staring harshly at Peggy. ‘I’m right, aren’t I Carole?’

‘Not that it was your fault, of course, Carole,’ continued Peggy, braving a little sarcasm.

‘That’s very kind of you, Peggy,’ said Carole, pausing to think of an answer. ‘And I do like your jacket. Brown suits you.’

‘And thank you again for telling me,’ Peggy answered, the sarcasm a shade stronger.

Seemingly satisfied with Peggy’s reply, Gerda turned to face Carole, drawing her hand into a sharp clap. ‘So. You must tell me about your vegetables. In Germany, we have very strict rules for organic farming.’

Fact 29: The Aubergine was originally considered highly dangerous as it shares the plant family solanaceae with powerful hallucinogens henbane, deadly nightshade, mandrake, Jimson weed, thorn apple and other members of the datura genus.

At the bar, Jess shook her head at her brother. ‘Sorry, Adam. I don’t think I can do more secrets. Besides, I don’t see how it can be your fault. Sounds like none of you knew what you were doing.’

'So you're not pissed off with me?'

'I'm beyond pissed off. Look, any new family revelations are going to have to wait a day or two. Okay? Now try and eat something. You need to keep your strength up.' Jess passed him his beer and swept back to her table where *the girls* greeted her with shrieks.

Fact 31: Beguni is a traditional Bengali wedding snack. Aubergine is sliced, marinated in salt and chilli powder, dipped in chick-pea batter and deep-fried.

The half hour or so between Becky's arrival and departure was like an industrial fire, Becky providing the initial spark. Peggy was first to ignite, her chair scraping the wood as she stood, demanding that the slightly sodden woman *stay away from this family*. Jess went up next, shouting about her mother's *need to control everything* and then, unexpectedly, Alec joined in, spattering about *this fucking joke of a family*, which set Bill off so violently that even Carole's hysterical tears had no effect. Adam then stood and, with Ben, attempted to calm his father but got caught in the blast directed at him for *bringing this on the family in the first place*. This set Peggy off again and the two former spouses argued so fiercely that some guests left. And then Peggy said at least she hadn't wanted their son dead and everything went silent, aside from the funky house playing in the background and the rain pattering against the windows.

Bill stood in the wreckage of chairs and glasses and coats, trying to find words, eyes pleading, locked to his son's, no one answering.

'Is this true?' Adam wanted to know

Bill could not answer but just looked helplessly around him until Carole walked over to him and took his arm in hers.

'No,' she said.

'And what would you know about any of this?' said Peggy, her voice hoarse and breathless.

'I know Bill.' Carole wiped her nose on the black lacy shawl that lay around her elegant, black-sequinned dress. Bill's eyes stayed round as pennies, his lips, jaw and shoulders sagging, a nine-year old being dressed down.

Fact 37: 'To dream of three aubergines is a sign of happiness' is a popular saying in the Middle East.

The world was triple-glazed. The gently gurgling drains, the cars hissing as they passed, Becky's banter, all were muted and muted was good. On most Friday nights, the queue at the taxi stand should probably have been of people, but tonight it was the cabs that waited.

'Well, I'm glad I didn't end up staying there,' said Becky, once they'd climbed into the back of one. 'I loathe veggie restaurants trying to be chic. They always seem smug or apologetic. That place looked both.'

Their cab headed off and they dissolved into the unfolding orange-lit streets, kebab shops, block after block of bay windows and Eighties revival posters. Becky seemed not to mind Adam's silence. She looked out of the taxi

window, smiling like she expected something would make her laugh. Thank God she had got him out of there, dragging him from a deluge of blame and guilt, justifications and excuses. At least for the time being.

‘You know, at least your family are *interesting* these days,’ Becky said after a lengthy silence. ‘They didn’t used to be.’

Her flippancy was welcome, but it didn’t even begin to counteract the scene she’d just witnessed. ‘God, Becky, look I’m so sorry about back there,’ Adam told her. ‘My family...’

‘Don’t worry.’ Becky shook her head gently and smiled. ‘I mean, *hey*, what an entrance. Anyway, did you ever get to meet the stock I’m from? Don’t get me wrong – we’re brilliant in public: there’s acting and music in the genes. Only I think sometimes we’re some amateur dramatics group who just get together for big performances like weddings and Christmas. I mean, yeah, we do have fun, but if things turn to crap, you’re on your own past a taxi service and a bit of cash.’

‘I could do with on your own,’ Adam admitted. The distance from *Aubergine* and Becky’s company were easing him back to himself. ‘We’re like we’re in *Big Brother*. Always on show.’

Becky sounded delighted at the mention. ‘God, didn’t you just *hate* that programme? I guess you’re right, though. Especially when you stay at a hotel, trapped in with people you hardly know and, I don’t know, all these rules and pointless tasks.’

‘Jess says families are so last century.’

'Yeah, kind of. I mean, my friends, they're pretty much my family. Not that I'm one of your big groups people, only if it comes to it, there are three, four, five people I can always call. You know, special people.'

Adam smiled. No, he didn't know. He had missed out on those initial, blind sprints into the world of the late teens and twenties. Instead, on crutches, he would now have to stumble his way through, bumping against others and seeing who came his way.

The streets fell behind until there was just the dual carriageway's Lucozade light and the taxi plunged off even that, along twisted lanes lit up and spooky in full beam. Becky, too, fell silent as the taxi crunched up the hotel driveway, its dark chestnuts hissing in the breeze, towards the hotel's sombre lights, where began the dark-panelled corridors. At night, the curtain splitting the waking and dreaming worlds got unsteady, threatened to fall off its hooks. The Continental breakfasts and reproduction hunting prints could too easily slip away, revealing the gnashing, the snarling, the eyeless. Though his remaining energy was low, though it would be somewhere to flop for a bit, no way was he going in.

Gerda was keeping to herself in the taxi. Her sentences were short and pinned by full stops, not the usual easy-flowing stream of commas and semicolons. She did agree what a fool of Jessica to invite that girl, but held back on the dissection that Peggy so needed. As for the violence of Peggy's reaction, not a word.

Peggy's very dearest friend, the woman she admired so much it was sometimes stifling, was being distant. For a while, Peggy tried to carry the conversation but it weighed heavier than she imagined and she simply did not feel up to the job. Silence shrouded everything as the taxi plunged into the dark. Things were unravelling. Bill, Carole, even Gerda and Peggy herself, all out of character. It was impossible to see where *things* could lead and tonight everyone could see there *was* something strange about being a Strange. They were a family that lied, took drugs, killed friends, committed perjury, wanted one another dead, got divorced, used blackmail to force a marriage, had illegitimate children, didn't wash, couldn't hold down jobs, stole credit cards, needed sedatives, drank themselves stupid, screamed at one another in public. Her old script, years in the making, had got ripped up, flung from the window of a fast-moving car, its fragments swirling around on the road behind. It was a wonder anyone had remembered to pay the bill.

Peggy felt naked. Odd to say, but that felt good. Like the hidden country beyond the taxi windows, being naked was filled with dangerous unknowns, yet somehow it was powerful, this having nothing left to hide. She could fling herself naked into the dark, join the beckoning black. Just walk out into it and keep walking.

The hotel's quiet was swollen, the air motionless yet poised as it lurked up stairways, crouched in darkened function rooms. The wind outside bothered the trees into faint little whispers. Even that pretty Latin-looking girl on reception simply smiled up at Peggy and Gerda and then returned to her magazine, not

fancying stirring up this stillness, scared of what it would do. Stillness like a cave system's main chamber – was that Wookey Hole or Cheddar Gorge? Each cough, each soft footfall got eaten up, feeding that primeval stillness.

Bill could make out the Drambuie on Carole's breath as they lay tangled among the sheets. Apparently, Jerome always swore by it to calm one's nerves. The smell blended into a spicy haze with the single malt on his own breath and their intermingled hotness. Two alcoholics meeting on the territory of their addiction for the first time. A reckless, dangerous idea, without doubt. All the same, Bill basked in the heat, wanting to tell Carole how well the flush of spirits suited her cheeks. Except the sticky silence was too delicious to disturb, was even left intact by the gurgling heating, the whining plumbing. Carole had said *no*. She had unquarantined Bill's words that he and Peggy should at least talk over removing the life support. His words had received a second opinion, been reclassified, discrediting the original identification. Carole had said no and completed Bill's divorce from Peggy. Perhaps she would now cope with *no* from bank managers and sceptics. Certainly, Carole was surprised at herself. Long after everyone had swept out and given up pleading with Jess not to call things off, she and Bill sat quietly, set apart from boiling sympathies and outrage.

Carole sat up a little way, leaning on her elbows. 'Bill, what *are* we going to do about Alec?' Bill now brought himself sitting up. This was the first time that

Carole was broaching action on this, the first time there was a *we*. 'And I don't mean how are you going to get through to him. That's pointless. I mean that if Alec has a problem with you, he must have a problem with me.' Carole paused, her eyes flitting around, as if losing her way through her thoughts. She blinked and continued. 'Up in the bathroom, it's what goes round and round: he hates me. A deep down, deep down hate. Alec and Jerome did everything together. It sometimes was like I didn't exist. I think he blames me. So he does to you what he can't bring himself to do to me, for Jerome's sake.'

Bill stroked Carole's shoulder, kissing it slowly before suggesting that she ask him.

'How? He'd get all huffy.' Carole crossed her arms.

'But you could stand your ground. Like you did with Peggy.'

Carole looked down at the tangled sheets, as if surprised at the memory. 'I suppose I did, didn't I?' She sighed. 'Poor Peggy, I'm so dreadfully sorry for her. She seems so unhappy.'

And there she went again, defending the indefensible. Bill would have pointed this out if she wasn't right – except that Carole's 'no' had given her the freedom to show compassion without excusing or cowering. Carole seemed changed. Still his dear old thing, but also sterner and more powerful and he sought out her lips.

Becky and Adam sat on a mossy, stone bench, the old gardens' high hedges at their backs. Shrubs, steps and borders crouched in the dark and a sickly, floral smell was in the moist air. Becky idled his knuckle with a fingertip. Adam's spine was jelly. His limbs: jelly. The night spun and yet his useless body surged to reply to that touch. He quietened it with speech.

'You know, sometimes I wonder what I'm back for.'

Becky tilted her head to one side. 'Like how?'

There – Becky hadn't told him he was *self-obsessed* or *being negative* or simply shown him dismissively raised eyebrows. Clouds fled off to get replaced by more clouds and more clouds again, never fully revealing the fuzzy moon. 'It's such a mess, you know?' Adam told her.

Softly, Becky caged his hand in her fingers, her warm pressure blotting out the night air, stiffening the jelly. 'Looks like it was going that way, whatever. I mean, isn't life a mess, anyway? Though I do understand what you mean.' Becky's widening smile was slightly embarrassed but thrilled, a glimpse of before all this. She looked downwards, then up again. They were moving towards one another.

Except for the dense fog between them. Within it swirled histories of glances and tongues and touch. Sublets, P60s, abortions. Funerals and NVQs. Head gaskets and New Zealand. That they sat beneath the same scudding sky would not disperse it, though only Adam could see the fog.

'Are you...going out with anyone?' The question, which Adam had been attempting to banish all day, popped out as soon as it appeared in Adam's head

'Going out?' Becky sounded amused.

The fog thickened. Idiot. Women in their thirties would be beyond going out.

Becky looked at her shoes and sighed, her tone a little defeated. 'I suppose I'm kind of seeing this *guy*. I don't know. Things have got messy.' Becky scratched at her rib cage, then looked up at Adam, hopeful again. 'That's why when I heard from you, and you said about the tapes I did. I always thought your Mum got rid of them. Back then it was such a pure thing, doing those tapes for you. I thought if I saw you, I'd remember what I was like. Oh, go on, listen to me. You must think I'm bananas.'

The fog expanded, engulfing them. It spread out through the grounds to all the angry, crazy, terrified people trying to understand and accept each other, everyone arriving up the drive in taxis and entering the devil-drenched corridors. All floundered in one cloud, bumping up against one another from time to time, helping point out a direction or else clinging together as it swirled. The coma, the betrayals, the results of his actions, these were his own angry tangle. That he had missed the last thirteen years, that was his own thing to deal with.

Adam reached towards Becky, who was giving little teary gasps. He put his arms around her, holding her as she nestled into his shoulder. Adam held Becky. He wanted nothing more. She would not save him. She would not find him. Only he could do this.

Becky's gasps and sniffs turned to sighs, then soft breaths. Adam kissed her hair and loosened his embrace. There was something he ought to try.

'Watch,' he told Becky.

Adam rested his hands at his hips on the bench's cold, damp stone. Was he going to do this? He was. He placed his feet a foot or so apart, pushing lightly into the damp grass. Bit-by-bit, muscles straining, shaking but holding steady, he became upright. Yes. Adam got his left foot a few inches above the grass and slid a few inches forward. The pressure on his right was painful but it was manageable. Repeat; the right foot this time. And left again. And right. He was a couple of feet from the bench. He was free standing.

'Bravo!' Becky clapped excitedly and laughed.

And why even tell Becky these were his first steps? Why make such a fuss anymore? The pain in his legs worsened.

'I need the crutches.'

'Oh, absolutely.'

Becky jumped up to bring them to him and they headed back through the gardens towards the hotel. Adam looked back at the bench. Beyond the hedge, something glinted and was gone. Something that could have been water.

'What is it?' Becky asked, sensing him tense.

'Nothing. Déjà vu.'

Nothing at all. The hotel was just a hotel, the devil on his fag break.

Gerda draped her turquoise shawl across her headboard. Peggy did likewise and offered to make her friend a last pot of tea. Some of her rooiwotsit, if she

wanted that. Gerda declined, sitting on her bed as she removed her low-slung heels with a relieved moan. From her suitcase, she extracted a shimmering, wine-coloured slip and brutal, black toiletries bag and took these to the bathroom, locking the door behind her. The bathroom filled with a fan's rumble and hum, then the shower's hiss and swish.

Locked? Such absolute segregation, between two women of a similar age, should be unnecessary. Her friend should be dressing for bed in the room. Peggy had assumed she would, Gerda already having some knowledge of her body. Doubtless, it was what Gerda always did in strange places, even during her marriages. Otherwise it was because she was German. Or that Peggy was her client. It was professional distance. Any of those. All of those. Peggy slipped off the ghastly chocolate jacket – never, ever, EVER again! – then rooted around for her ciggies and opened a window onto the night, even though Gerda said it was perfectly alright, not to fuss about the pong. The night opened out towards hills in silhouette against the faint orange of the coastal sprawl. Headlights raked the driveway, taxis spat out their occupants. Jessica's raging was muffled as it plunged into the lobby and Peggy did not catch the words.

The shower stopped its hissing, though the door remained locked. Gerda would be towelling herself dry with one of the hotel's puffy apricot towels. How would Gerda be ministering to her body? She would floss, most likely. She would apply herbal lotions to her feet and elbows and face and hands. Gerda's body was worn as a gown, whereas Peggy's was wrapping paper selotaped together by a four-year-old. The lock clicked. Gerda entered from a warm, scented cloud.

Once in bed, she put on a pair of reading glasses, felt for a fat romantic novel which she then opened and began to read. This being shut out! She must not let this happen. She must somehow reach out. 'Is there something the matter?' she asked, digging her fingernails into her mattress. 'Have I done something wrong?'

Gerda lowered her book to her lap and tipped her glasses forward. 'Don't be so paranoid.' She resumed reading.

'Gerda, I can't bear this. Please talk to me.'

Gerda closed her book, leaving her thumb at her page. 'Alright, then. What is it exactly you wish to talk about.'

'I don't quite know.' Peggy heard pleading in her tone. Her throat tightened.

Gerda put down her book. 'Well, then since you insist we talk, perhaps I can ask you this question: why was that girl such a terrible threat to you? What is it about her? Look at me. *At me.* So.'

But Peggy could not. Gerda's critical look terrified her, thrilled her, threatened to draw from her more than she was willing to give. It was a look to keep close to, keep ahead of. It was her first time in its crosshairs: she could feel it even without returning it. Peggy would have to answer Gerda's question or else flee this room, flee Gerda, and keep fleeing that question. So she told Gerda about destroying the magazine, about lying in court, finding herself short of breath and going all round the houses in her explanation. When she was done, Gerda drew aside her sheets and sat on the edge of her bed, facing Peggy.

'I see,' Gerda told her. 'You failed to protect your child, didn't you? And you didn't want anyone to know. And so you lied about it. And you kept on lying. I knew there was a lie. Am I right?'

'Yes.' The tears, when they came, were a purgative. Such violent emotions, such primitive bodily processes – surely the hotel room ought to fall away, its tea-making set and dead flies in the ceiling light giving way to an ancient cave or a campfire deep in the woods. Gerda came to sit softly beside Peggy, holding her shoulders, rubbing them as the sobs worked their way through until, spent and empty, she turned limp. Peggy turned to her friend, her face hot and wet. 'Thank you.'

'There, there. The body doesn't lie.'

Gerda drew Peggy towards her breast in a light embrace. Their cheeks brushed together. Gerda's was cool. Peggy would kiss it. To thank her dear friend again. Except the kiss she gave was slow and lingering. It was not the kiss she had expected to give. Nor had Gerda expected to receive it and she pulled away slightly. A new physical process overtook the tears; like craving, like hunger. Peggy must repeat the kiss to satisfy it. She took Gerda's hand in her own. In preparation. For...? Gerda tugged her hand away. She withdrew her other hand from Peggy's shoulder. Her warmth was removed from all points of touch and Gerda moved slowly to sit on her own bed, still facing Peggy. Such a total physical break: Peggy must close it. What was this?

When Gerda finally spoke she, too, was breathless. 'I'm hoping, Peggy, that you are simply emotional. And I'm also hoping that our sharing a room was purely out of thrift.'

'I'm so very sorry, Gerda.' Who was this woman, Peggy Strange? First the screaming, then the wailing, now this? *Had* she planned for it? Who was this woman, Peggy Strange? She would not stay here. She was dressed. Her shoes were on. She would get out. Away. Wherever. Before Gerda said more. Stirred up deeper sediment. And her ciggies? Oh, yes. And her tablets, oh yes. She gathered them all up. She shoved them into her handbag. 'So very, very sorry.'

Peggy fled the room, though she closed the door softly, then was in the corridor – might she even run? – then down the stairs, across the foyer and out into the night.

The stuff of Baz' they had all smoked – saliva divina or something – was making Jess all spangle-headed and stupid which was just fine and dandy because the last thing she wanted right now was to be capable of thinking. Not about her family, nor getting married to Keith, certainly not her-stupid-fucking-self. So when finally she calmed down and they settled into the near-dark at the back of the red-upholstered bar, Baz had brought out his funny little tub of leaves and a glass pipe, she was very much up for that thank you very much. After the first

few puffs, the idea struck her like she had just inhaled it: get married now with Baz as priest and arrange the chairs around them as witnesses.

'In the name of Lucifer almighty,' Baz was saying, tracing an inverted cross in the air. 'I damn you wife and monkey.'

'No, Baz, no,' Jess told him. 'We haven't exchanged the rings, yet. Keith? Is yours still in your pocket? Oh, for fuck's sake, you've got whizz all over it.'

'It's just sand,' mumbled Keith.

'Oh, give it here so I can give it a wipe. Right. Now. Repeat after me: with this bling I thee enslave.'

'With this bling I thee enslave,' intoned Keith, putting the wedding band on Jess' finger.

'Now my turn. With this bling 1...2...3... Fetch!'

'Hey, that cost almost two grand.'

'Keep your shirt on. It's over by the bar. My ninja aim is most deadly.'

And then Dad was striding through the darkened bar while two women – the unlikely union of Gerda and Carole – waited in the lobby and the problem was that Dad striding seemed so improbable that it was funny and that made Jess laugh, which made Baz and Keith laugh until they all heard the gravity in his voice as he announced that Mum had disappeared, he and Gerda were worried and that they should search for her. 'We should split up,' he told them.

'Oh, it's like Scooby Doo.'

'Shut the fuck up, Baz,' said Jess, Dad and Keith.

* * *

Peggy stopped half-way down the drive. Her path had seemed simple: leave behind the hotel and the things she had done this evening. But now the gateposts loomed into view along with the stretch of wall and beyond that she faced darkness. She wanted to be swallowed up by it. Except she could make out the road beyond the gates, the tarmac faintly glowing back moonlight. The road would lead to another and another and that road would reach other hotels, other families. Should she abandon roads altogether, plunge into woods and fields, the true dark? Ridiculous. These were the South Downs, not the Outer Hebrides. Sooner or later, she would come across a little house, a shaded bulb's creamy light seeping around drawn curtains. Inside would be tea and carefully-kept address books. A world no longer hers.

Peggy's feet throbbed. A long while, they must have been throbbing. Now she could feel their heat and blood. She leaned down to unlace her shoes, removing them and then her socks to let her feet breathe. The drive's gravel poked sharply and coldly into her soles. Peggy sighed. A tiny liberation. The cold tingled up calves and shins, hidden in ghastly brown material. Not that you could see it in the gloom, but Peggy could feel it. What if she were to take it off? Out here in the dark? She laughed at that thought and her laugh was wild and dangerous. Who was this new woman, Peggy Strange? She had kissed another woman and now she would be naked in the moonlight. She stepped off the harsh

gravel onto the soft grass, which felt colder still, the damp blades clutching at her toes.

A sickly smell was on the air, some night-scented shrub. Peggy walked towards a little bench beside a tall hedge and sat herself down to pull off her trousers. There was her flesh, freckled and wrinkled and marbled in the moonlight. She had not studied it before, always in a rush to keep it covered, ignore it. She stroked her skin, watched the wrinkles form and break around her fingers like waves around the prow of a boat. And then she removed her jacket and her shirt to view her belly, her arms, to feel them. She lifted a forearm to her nose and smelled her skin, sweet and slightly bitter, like the pages of an old novel. Beyond the old gardens were the lights of the hotel. If only she could return there, naked. Everyone would think she was crazy. .

Beside the bench was an opening into the hedges and beyond that blackness. Peggy stood to investigate. It was an old pool. There were other blacknesses one could escape into. In one of these she might find Mum. Peggy fiddled around for her tablets. They would be looking for her soon.

They were six – Keith, Baz, Jess, Carole, Bill and Gerda – and they spread out from the plasterboard portico into the murky grounds. Bill and Carole headed clockwise around the hotel, the youngsters went the other way, while Gerda strode off down the drive. A night-scented plant fragranced the air, gathering

strength as Bill and Carole neared the old gardens. They called Peggy's name in loud whispers, expecting accusations of disturbing the peace, being called ridiculous and couldn't she have a moment's peace? But silent moment followed whisper followed silent moment. The calls became more urgent, whispers abandoned in favour of shouts. Lights went on behind the hotel's windows. Two figures stepped out from the gloom and down onto the old gardens' unmown lawns, their shoes swishing through the stiff, damp grasses. Adam and Becky's arms were laced through one another's and they headed towards Bill and Carole, passing the huge urns with the dark shrubs. Adam was only using one crutch.

'Your mother's missing,' Bill told them. 'We're worried.'

The moon, not yet full, was at last spat out by the clouds. The old gardens and the figures moving about them were lit up, carved in stone. The shadowy fuzz of plants, high hedges and paths became clear-etched. The white, trumpet-shaped flowers of the dark shrubs glowed blue, their petals ribbed and toothed, mouths open wide to the night. Here was the source of the sickly scent.

'Oh... ' Adam's voice rasped as if winded. He gulped, trying to draw breath, coughing hoarsely and violently.

'Yes, Adam. I see them,' said Becky, glancing half-panicked at the flowers. 'I remember them too. Let's get you away. Look, your Dad's here.'

Adam coughed again, more violently, hawked, then spat. He stared at Bill, eyes goggling from panic, pleading, unable to translate fear into words. He trembled.

‘Bill, those flowers,’ said Carole. ‘They’re datura, aren’t they? Oh, that’s not good.’

‘Becky, we must get him away,’ said Bill.

‘For sure,’ said Becky. ‘Adam, come on, don’t stiffen up on me.’

But Adam was rigid, transfixed; not by the flowers that Bill would rip from the soil when this was over, destroy every last bloody shrub on the face of the planet. No, Adam stared at the hole in the high hedges, towards the filthy, toxic water that they surrounded. Adam glanced back at Bill, his gaze increasingly terrified and desperate. He whimpered, the same whimper as when Bill found him drenched in sweat on the landing, two days before the barbeque. The only intelligible words he had uttered then were the same as he uttered now. Focused by moonlight and adrenaline, given context at last, their meaning was unmistakable.

‘She’s in the water! In the water! She’s in the water!’ Adam’s body stiffened, bracing further until it reached some terrible point of maximum tension, then relaxed. Adam ran. Across sodden grass, he half-charged, half-stumbled, crutch forgotten, down the steps, Bill sprinting too, both towards the pool. Behind, a drum-roll of younger, stronger footsteps. ‘In the water!’

Bill reached the pool to see his son – yes, it had to be Adam – slap down onto its spongy surface. He ran along the pool, stumbling on grass tufts between the paving slabs, eyes raking the poolside murk, the shelter’s shadows, the sore of water. A faint splashing and slapping came from somewhere in the middle and regardless of his revulsion for water – all water – Bill plunged in.

The pool was cool. Its slime stroked him. Peggy's face was just above the surface. She fought for breath, her movements weakening. Someone else thrashed further ahead. Adam? Another splash, another rescuer. Keith?

Bill found Peggy. Her eyes latched onto his and she clung at him, gasping on the in-breath, moaning on the out. They began to sink.

'Peggy. Let go. My arm. Hold that.' How did he know this? Peggy nodded, clasping Bill's left arm and shoulder. Bill swept at the water, fighting the sludge. The poolside drew closer. One figure dragged out another – Keith and Adam? Carole held out an arm to both. Peggy began coughing, her fits becoming hysterical, tensing, clutching harder at Bill, grabbing onto his chest. They sank, the sludge winning. Bill's head dipped under once, then twice. They began a slow descent into blackness. Still Peggy held on, struggling, whining, swallowing water. Bill's feet touched the bottom. Blackness. Only his feet told him up from down.

Peggy let go. Bill was moving upwards, dragging her along, heading for air. He broke the surface. Crispness replaced the haunted slurps and gurgles. He coughed water and phlegm and steamy breath and looked around. Ben and Carole were pulling out Peggy. They laid her on her side, where she coughed and wept and shivered. Ben reached into the pool for Bill, helped him to the shelter where he sat, knees to his chest, trying to create warmth as Ben stroked his back. The poolside echoed with panting and coughing, five dull shapes in the returning drizzle: Ben, Carole, Peggy, Keith and him. Adam was not among them.

Bill stood from huddling, spitting the bitter, earth-tasting water, cleaning the scum from his nostrils as his heat escaped into the night. He rubbed his soaked clothes and skin and found the way back through the hedges to the gardens. A short distance off, Jess and Becky were kneeling beside Adam, who lay in the grass. They talked in quiet, anxious tones and barely noticed Bill's approach. As he crouched down to their level, Jess leaned over Adam's face, bringing her cheek to his lips, where she held it a short while, her eyes moving around as if listening to a distant conversation.

'No, he's still breathing, but it's faint,' she said

At the top of the steps, beside the datura bush, stood a security guard, his radio crackling. He looked briefly at them, then beyond towards the pool. He brought the radio to his mouth.

'Rosa, I think we need to call for an ambulance.'

Bill crouched closer to Adam. The skin of his face, damp with sweat, seemed cold and dead as ivory. Bill stroked his hair slowly, just like when Adam slept in Spiderman pyjamas and Bill came into his room before retreating to Peggy's side for the night. The wail of a coming ambulance sounded in the distance. Adam was being taken once again.

Four.

Sixteen miles upstream from Westminster Bridge, Eel Pie Island elbowed its way into the middle of the Thames at Twickenham, splitting the river into two unremarkable streams for a third of a mile. Thick with willows, oaks, birches and limes, it was crowded for most of its length with boating buildings and sleepy bungalows that slouched along low banks. Home to artists, recluses and therapists, it had its own time zone; a Sunday afternoon, in the Seventies. Carole, Bill and Jess, who pushed Flo in her McLaren, approached the one footbridge, a gentle rain starting to patter at their coats and umbrellas.

‘You two might as well go on ahead,’ said Carole. ‘I’ll wait here.’

‘But Carole, you’re *family*,’ said Bill.

'I know that, Bill, and you're kind, but it's not the same, is it?' insisted Carole. 'No, you two go on ahead. I've already said my goodbyes. Here...'

Carole dug around in her cagoule and produced the balled-up wad of tissues she had grabbed from home, offering it to them, then offered to take Flo.

'Oh can you?' said Jess. 'I mean, I'd thought we all should...the next generation and everything...but she's a bit too young, isn't she? Besides, this weather...'

'Yes, that's what I thought.' Carole nodded rapidly. 'After all, this weather...'

Bill placed his free hand on his wife's left shoulder and squeezed gently. Carole kissed his knuckles. He drew a slow, deep breath and placed both hands on the rain-slippery wooden casket. Jess parked the McLaren beside Carole, at the footbridge's first step, and lifted the rain hood to kiss her daughter, who gurgled and went Ba! Jess then kissed her step-mother on the cheek.

Carole's plan for Adam's ashes was the response to indecision. Ever the soupmaker, she made sense of everyone's contributions; Jess' wish that Adam return to nature; her husband's that he needed to feel his presence near at hand; her stepson's passion for the music that flowed from London. If the ashes got scattered in the Thames, in time they might even end up at the mudflats where his mother began her own life. Peggy eventually went along with that, insistent on scattering onto the river up close, not from a bridge. Carole agreed; it would be dreadful if Adam ended up at the bottom of some window-cleaner's bucket.

Bill and Jess left Carole watching over Flo, her face's hollows darkened beneath the large, black brolly. They rose up flaking concrete steps and onto the

footbridge, a high iron arch over the unhurried river. At the apex, they slowed to look down into the sluggish murk, pocked with fidgety little circles from the rain. Eel Pie Hotel, long since burned down, was too fragmented for Bill to reconstruct, though his feet remembered the right turn he would take on reaching the island, his few hundred excited yards to the entrance. And the bands, he pictured them well enough, had kept them alive on guilty evenings of longplayers and Watneys' when the family was out. He had been less drum-tight, hadn't he? Less afraid and with his future uncluttered. Surprised to meet that person waiting for him, Bill kept pace in front of his daughter as they descended towards the island.

'How was Mum when you last spoke?' asked Jess.

Bill shrugged. 'Over the worst of what the water did. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. And that woman, the counsellor, she's very nice, apparently.'

'Well, that sounds positive.'

Bill said that he thought so, then asked if she'd mentioned Australia before.

'*Australia?*' Jess stopped and turned to her father. 'Dad, she hardly speaks. I don't think the meds are much help. Anyway, didn't she and Auntie Angie have this big falling out?'

'I thought that. I obviously need to call her. It would do her good.'

'Yes, absolutely. I'm just surprised. She's never flown, has she?'

They continued across the bridge and reached the island. They turned left, downriver, squeezing through hedge-crowded alleys, past gardens speckled with solar panels, prayer flags and wishing wells, finally reaching a stretch of

boatyards that terminated in a high brick wall. Jess walked towards it while Bill stood watching, cradling Adam, sick and empty with it all. Were the things he loved about Adam in that box? Was his conspiratorial chuckle? Or the word *mindfuck*. The luxuriant silences they shared in the middle of doing some chore neither wanted to do. The angry light in his eyes. He more than once thought about flushing this gritty carbon down the loo, but he had stopped the thought to examine it. The thought belonged with ones that had kept him from Bethany House, kept him numb, had let him cave in to Peggy's story. Alongside Adam, hope had returned to Bill and he would not give that up though Adam was now gone. He would not shrink before this grief.

Besides, you had to do these things, didn't you?

Bill walked towards where Jess was waving, past sheds and boats and coils of rope. Jess pointed to a shattered doorway in the brick. Beyond was a narrow track leading away through trees, past derelict greenhouses and on along the riverbank, winding out of sight.

'Jess, I don't think we're supposed to...'

'Oh, come on, Dad. Adam would have.'

No-one was watching, so Bill squeezed in after. It was far from easy progress. The path was strewn with rusted pulleys and engine parts, outcrops of ruptured concrete, puddles of broken glass. The river bank became a corrugated metal cliff. They tramped beside it, weaving between and around trunks and roots, towards the island's tip. Everything was damp, dead and rotting, Autumn well into its shabby finale. An ancient, burnt upholstery smell came from the

remains of a shed, windows smashed in, bleached-out curtains framing emptiness. What were they expecting? *The Wind in the Bloody Willows*? They walked the remaining distance to the very tip, where the two channels met one another again with a few swirls of current. Bill's palms were warm and slippery against the casket's surface.

Mustn't let go. A terrible thing for a parent to let go. A bad thing. But no, no. Let go. And Peggy had her own casket, after all. Bill passed the ashes to his daughter.

'You're sure?' she said. 'This is what you want to remember?'

Jess took the casket. As her fingers wrapped around the polished wood, Bill noticed that his daughter's engagement ring was missing. But that could come later. First, this. Jess knelt slowly. Bill knelt too, his jeans soaking up moisture. Jess placed the casket onto mossy concrete and opened the lid. She peered inside.

'Dad, do you have anything to say?'

This was too quick. He wasn't ready. Bill drew closer to his daughter, then bent to the casket. He brought his lips to its surface, warm from his hands, the rain now starting to ease. He kissed the wood, then rose and kissed his daughter.

'There. That's everything,' said Bill.

Jess lifted the casket, then lowered it towards the river's surface. She slowly tipped out its contents, which fanned out as they fell, forming a short-lived

little slick on the water that cracked apart, then was gone as the ashes began their long journey towards the sea.

Critical Theory as Creative Tool: Using Bakhtin's Theory of Double-Voiced
Discourse to Edit a Short Novel

Introduction

Biting Tongues is a short novel on which I have been working on-and-off since 2005. Although not initially the focus of the academic study I commenced in 2008, the novel became a testing ground for the two interlinked creative objectives that I had wished to pursue. First, I sought a strategy for better working practice in my writing to assist in disassembling and reassembling a lengthy piece while maintaining thematic and character coherence. Second, through studying in an English department, I sought fresh critical frameworks to examine recurrent creative problems in my work that had remained unresolved by more orthodox creative writing tuition. This essay focuses on the latter of these two objectives, specifically my adoption of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyglossia in the novel.

Although the fusion of critical theory with the conventional craft-focussed approach to creative practice is becoming more commonplace in creative writing as an academic discipline, it is still relatively marginal when it comes to the novel¹ and until well into my programme of study, I was unaware of others working in this field. This being the case, I investigated several theories before

¹ Some tutors blend the two disciplines, such as Hazel Smith in *The Writing Experiment*, which briefly engages with Bakhtinian theory, while others use critical theory to critique the context of creative writing and re-envision it as a politically-engaged critical exploration and articulation in its own right – as with Paul Dawson's *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Michelene Wandor's *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else* and Tim Mayer's *(Re) Writing Craft*.

encountering Bakhtin's work. Narratology initially appeared to offer a usable and comprehensive framework for understanding the process of writing a novel: it is also one occasionally used in the teaching of novel-writing. However, I encountered quite significant problems using it that, at the time, I could not understand and which I will revisit below. Continuing in my search, although I found metafictional self-reflexivity intriguing, the production of literature is not one of the themes of *Biting Tongues* and so, after trialling it and receiving unfavourable feedback, I abandoned it as a narrative strategy. Discourse analysis using the work of Foucault was particularly useful in the investigation of discourses (in the Foucauldian sense) at play in the novel and to identify and thereby strengthen themes of class, gender and authority in terms of character and plot. However, I did not find his theories suitable for the very fine-grained close reading and structural analysis needed in redrafting a novel and neither could I turn possible worlds theory, nor the nascent field of cognitive poetics, to such an end, although the former introduced to me some of Bakhtin's thinking. Encountering Bakhtin, something just clicked and this essay, in part, investigates why.

The methodology behind my research consisted of discrete stages. First, a thorough immersion in primary and secondary Bakhtinian sources resulted in the creation of a taxonomy of styles into which discourse (in Bakhtin's sense of the word) can be broken down as it appears in a novel's narrative language.²

² Discourse is not, here, used in its Foucauldian sense but in one that is sociolinguistic: Michael Holquist notes that the original Russian term, *slovo*, signifies 'both an individual word and a method of using words...that presumes a type of authority' (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 427). Bakhtin's usage of the term can be traced through V.N. Volosinov's theory of the 'utterance',

Secondly, to apply the taxonomy to my then-current draft of *Biting Tongues* (called Draft 1 below), initially by a close reading to reveal any patterns differing to the original taxonomy, then by developing a colour-coded fresh taxonomy (see Appendix) whereby each form of discourse could be underlined in that colour (often several times), latterly by drawing conclusions about any patterning and its relationship to the novel as a whole. The third and final stage was the creation of a fresh draft (Draft 2) using the analysis to strengthen, edit and develop Draft 1. This essay will draw on this entire process, each segment developed from a section of the taxonomy of modes of representations of discourse that Bakhtin designates as double-voiced and comparing each to the theory of free indirect discourse.³ In doing so, I will examine social identity, authority and power, the literary use of theme, unity and disunity, hierarchy and values.

which is the event of speech, its occurrence in space and time, with an object or theme and a perceived target. Says Volosinov '[d]iscourse is oriented toward the person addressed, oriented toward what that person is.' (Quoted in Todorov, 43). Thus, according to Holquist, '[d]iscourse is an action' (Holquist, *Dialogism*, 63) and includes the forms through which an utterance is oriented towards a listener, whether employed as a gang-member's socially-coded slang or the stylised language of a character in a novel. Though a Foucauldian discourse (e.g. gender, sexuality) may be what provides authority to a Bakhtinian discourse, the two meanings are distinct. Hence I will refer both to the discourses of medicine and law (also authoritative discourses in the Foucauldian sense), social propriety and hedonism (what might be termed 'folk discourses' – adapting the term from 'folk-psychology') and of Peggy, Bill, Jess and Adam ('character' or 'personal discourses'). However, no discourse exists in and of itself: it can only *mean* through entering a field of multiple discourses, the condition that Bakhtin refers to as 'heteroglossia' and must enter into 'dialogic' relations with those discourses, adapting to the circumstances of the utterance. Holquist notes that '[a]t the heart of the Bakhtinian enterprise is a vision of language as constant struggle, movement, *energia*. The logosphere is an ocean of consciousness that floods the world of brute things, a sea whose face is constantly changing and whose depths are torn by the restless flux of discursive striations' (Holquist, 'Answering as Authoring' in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work* 61).

³ I am using free indirect discourse in a strictly structuralist sense prevalent in poetics in Bakhtin's time. Free indirect discourse has since become considerably more sophisticated and recognises social discourses as well as those of character and narrator (e.g., Hugh Kenner's 1978 book *Joyce's Voices*). Nevertheless, even if Bakhtin's theories are to be considered as overlapping with those of free indirect discourse, Bakhtin's remain, to my mind, the more highly-developed and politicised. They also remain the more radical, as he abolishes entirely traditional tools of analysis (such as point-of-view and voice) that are still commonly found alongside analysis using free indirect discourse and, while acknowledging plot, considers it as subservient

*Biting Tongues*⁴ is a work of contemporary fiction set in and around London's commuter belt, with its present narrative set in 2001 and with back-story commencing in the 1950s. It focuses on a mother and father – Peggy and Bill Strange – and Jessica and Adam, their children. The present narrative depicts events following Adam's recovery at the age of 27 from a 12-year coma, ending nine months later, with his death. It is a novel of fragile identities and of alienation, not only of each character from another and from contemporary society but also inwardly, from perceived morals, values and sense of social identity.

Writing a character-driven novel exploring alienated, divided, self-deceiving characters presents a significant difficulty in choosing narrative style: no matter what strategies I used (e.g. manipulating plot, point of view, metafiction), I could not get my characters to speak – to one another, to themselves or to the reader. Nor, as narrator, could I find a means of articulating their thoughts for them.

Narratology had been one early suggested solution and, indeed, narratological terms here prove useful as an analytical framework. Seymour Chatman, in *Story and Discourse* (1978), formulates what he calls 'the narrative

to the achievement of polyphony: Bakhtin is almost unique in raising this area of literary activity, which is commonly marginalised, to become paradigmatic of novelistic discourse. To this end, I am using any overlap as an area of conflict to clarify why I have chosen Bakhtin's theories over those of free indirect discourse, to acknowledge the source of Bakhtin's conflict and also because it is this strict structuralist sense that I have most commonly encountered in various sources of guidance on creative writing.

⁴ *Biting Tongues* is the most recent of many titles for this work. Although arrived at somewhat spontaneously, it reflects better than its predecessors the novel's themes: tongues are bitten metaphorically to keep thoughts internal, usually commanded to do so by an authoritative figure; tongues that are physically bitten become damaged and inarticulate; tongues bite because speech can be used to inflict emotional violence. In addition, a tongue is a common metaphor for a language: that several languages can perform all of these actions represents the restless, bickering multiplicity of language in everyday speech, or dialogism, as Bakhtin calls it.

communication situation' (151), a model of the progression between centres of speech, both communicative and receptive, which he has amalgamated and adapted from terms by Gerard Genette, Gerald Prince and Wayne Booth. Disregarding post-structuralist theories of authorship, Chatman begins, at one end, with the 'real author' – the individual, embodied mind at work crafting words into a narrative piece. Those words are given presence by the 'implied author' (Wayne Booth's term) who exists solely within the piece and is 'not the narrator, but rather the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative ...[which] can *tell* us nothing' (148). It is, then, the role of the 'narrator' to *tell*, whether as a character within the piece or an external, more-or-less omniscient voice (whether faint or strident, cultivated or commonplace) that organises the reader's experience of it. The 'narrator' subsequently narrates to the 'narratee' (Gerald Prince's term), again, either a character within the piece or a speech centre targeted by the 'narrator' (e.g., a representative of a social group with more or less specific moral, cultural or political values). An 'implied reader', counterpart to the 'implied author', is the intended audience for the novel in its entirety and does not need to (and is frequently highly unlikely to) share the values of the 'narratee'. The 'implied reader' is nevertheless a creation internal to the piece, created by the 'real author' and distinct to the 'real reader' – the embodied consciousness sitting in a chair and decoding it for him- or herself.

In *Bitting Tongues*, all four positions are particularly problematic. For example, if my 'implied author' opts for first-person narration as an organising principle and I were to choose Peggy as my narrator, I am limiting the access of

my 'implied reader' to the inner lives of the other three main characters: they are unlikely to divulge much to Peggy in conversation, Peggy is not present during the majority of their private lives, and the plot structure does not, without enormous revision, give them the opportunity to reveal their inner thoughts through their observed actions. Of course, I could – and eventually did – opt to construct a multi-viewpoint narrative but that does not solve the problem of who might be, for example, narratee to Peggy's narrator. Peggy does not confide in anyone, is neither reader, letter writer nor diarist and so would not address herself to a readership and does not (nor wants to) have the learned understanding of social identity necessary for narrating to herself as objective narratee.

I would run into other problems were I to create an author-narrator to speak on behalf of my characters. This is primarily a mismatch between my creative intentions and the social context of my novel's content: *Biting Tongues'* characters⁵ are unlikely to read a work similar to that in which they find themselves and so any cultivated tone, articulating what they will not, risks assuming superiority or lacking empathy. Such a narrator can only ever speak

⁵ It is important to stress a distinction in this context between a character in a book and a person on the street. A character in a book is capable of being represented as wholly unified or stable: that is, composed either of a single discourse (as a flat stereotypical representative of, say a doctor or an Irishman) or of a character whose social identity, though it may consist of more than one discourse, contains neither contradictions nor conflicts, whatever may transpire to them. Says Bakhtin, 'certain kinds of internally persuasive discourse can be fundamentally fused with the image of a speaking person: ethical (discourse fused with the image of...a preacher), philosophical (discourse fused with image of a wise man), sociopolitical (discourse fused with an image of a Leader)' (*Dialogic Imagination* 347). A person on the street, however, can only ever be multi-linguaged as his or her myriad social roles call on them to be as such: the language one uses to a small child is markedly different to that one uses at a stag party or when giving a paper at a conference.

about or *on behalf of* and never *for* characters whose language it did not share and could work artistically only if deliberately drawing attention to itself in the case of comedy or parody.

Chatman places both narrator and narratee within parentheses in his model: they 'are optional' (151) whereas implied author and reader are not. But even were it possible for an author to achieve the linguistic transparency necessary for there to appear to be no narrator, just coolly reported objects and events, *Biting Tongues* is primarily a novel of inner thought and only secondarily of outward behaviour. Though inner thought can be hinted at through outward behaviour, the latter can only be fully articulated with relative transparency through direct or reported speech which, as noted above, is out of keeping with *Biting Tongues*' characters, or else by reporting thoughts directly or indirectly and which then requires a narrator. So what kind of narrator?

Narratology offers what would appear to be a solution: what is generally referred to as 'quasi-direct speech', 'indirect free style' or 'free indirect speech' but which I will refer to as 'free indirect discourse' – the term covers both verbalised speech and non-verbalised thought. In its most basic formulation, free indirect discourse is 'a linguistic combination of two voices' (Rimmon-Keenan 110). Thus a narrating voice can incorporate the speech of a character represented within an unbroken stretch of narrative without tagging it with speech marks or other punctuation denoting the entrance of a separate narrator ('I love her', he said) or grammatical devices indicating reporting (he said *that* he loved her). '[I]n free indirect speech', as Gerard Genette theorises it, 'the narrator

takes on the speech of the character, or, if one prefers, the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are then *merged*' (174). This organising principle of the implied author brings together into much closer proximity the author-narrator and the character-narrator, making possible the author-narrator speaking *for* the character-narrator. It is also an acknowledged literary style and so negates the need for a narratee: the author-narrator speaks to the implied reader not only *for* but *with* the character-narrator using his or her characteristic language.

For *Biting Tongues*, however, strictly structuralist free indirect discourse is not quite the easy solution it might at first appear because it assumes a relative amount of linguistic stability: that character-narrators speak consistently in a recognisably distinct language and that author-narrators do similarly. To speak consistently in one language assumes a strong sense of social identity, unwavering when in contact with other language styles, whether those of other characters or of authoritative discourses such as medicine or law. None of the characters of *Biting Tongues* has such a strong sense of social identity, each wavering in contact with other language styles and cultural codes: alienated and disempowered, they have limited command of any authoritative languages through which they must pick their way. Peggy, Bill, Jess and Adam have no option but to speak not in one but in many languages.

Mikhail Bakhtin calls such many-languagedness *polyglossia*. His theory recognises the tendency of novelistic prose to consist of multiple forms (such as professional jargon, local dialects, formal conversational styles and both literary

and non-literary forms of written language) at first in the novels of Dostoevsky and subsequently in those included under Bakhtin's idiosyncratic definition of the novel, one that elevates polyglossia to be its defining generic principle and which he calls in this context polyphony (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 262). It is important to reiterate that, while polyphony (especially the forms of it which he calls double-voiced and internally persuasivediscourse) appears in some ways to overlap with free indirect discourse, it is rendered entirely distinct.⁶

Part of Bakhtin's frustration with structuralism was its lack of acknowledgment of the social language environment (heteroglossia) into which any utterance emerges, not just in terms of the way that the environment shapes how a language is received, but how that environment acts on the utterance itself. The practice of language understood as polyglot is a ceaseless negotiation (what Bakhtin refers to as 'dialogue') between speaker, who may use a variety of discourses. Bakhtin argues passionately that what makes the novel so very special is its (to him) unique ability to create an 'image of language' that not only represents but captures dialogism and heteroglossia. This polyphonic genre, the novel, is '[t]he framing context, like the sculptor's chisel, [that] hews out the rough outlines of someone else's speech, and carves the image of a language

⁶ As noted above, Bakhtin's theory of the novel – and the basis of much of his broader theory of language – is to a great extent a reaction to the literary theory prevalent in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, both to classical Aristotelian analysis via character, plot, diegesis and so on, and to the growing interest in Saussurean structuralism, out of which the term 'free indirect style' had just emerged, authored in 1912 by Charles Bally, one of two editors of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. This argument is most fully developed in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, which Bakhtin co-authored with P.N. Medvedev, prior to his book on Dostoevsky while V. N. Volosinov, another of Bakhtin's circle (some even insist Bakhtin authored the book using his name), explicitly attacked the theory of free indirect discourse in the final chapter of his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

out of the raw empirical data of speech life...'(358). Indeed, '[t]he primary stylistic project of the novel as a genre is to create images of languages' (366).

Not only is polyglossia in the novel a theory that examines discourse in its social environment, it similarly and by extension, and unlike the theory of free indirect discourse, calls into question the social conditions of its own occurrence. Indeed, Bakhtin's brief identification (370) of conditions promoting polyglossia is of particular relevance to *Biting Tongues* as he considers these to be triggered by a breakdown in previously dominant, authoritative language discourses (such as when one country becomes invaded by another linguistic group, or when class structures are under especial stress). The linguistic alienation this engenders (from both mother tongue and official language, in the case of an invasion) requires a shifting between languages or genres according to necessity and, frequently, the creation of hybrid forms (such as a pidgin or creole). Polyglossia thus flourishes in times of social instability and alienation, two of *Biting Tongues*' central themes.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin schematises polyglossia as it occurs in the works of Dostoevsky, creating a taxonomy of types of discourse according to the extent to which they are dialogic (i.e., enter into dialogue with other discourses) (199). These, he refers to as 'double-voiced discourses' (185) and it is worth remembering the earlier, general definition of free indirect discourse as achieving something similar. However, Bakhtin is here concerned not only with the discourses of character and narrator combining, but also with social discourses that are not contained within a single person and so he does

not confine either character or narrator to a single discourse apiece, thus creating a dialogic space where discourses become dynamic in the creation of meaning.

Bakhtin's schema is a powerful tool for analysis. It was relatively simple to break *Biting Tongues* into its constituent discourses and to identify the relations between the individual discourses of narrator and character and those that are social. However, for the purposes of this essay, I have limited myself to the categories of 'hidden polemic' and 'hidden dialogue', both of which I explicate below. I have also appended to Bakhtin's schema the analysis found in the essay 'Discourse in the Novel' for a category of a character's interior dialogue (double-voiced discourse can be applied more generally to include rhetorical genres, both spoken and written, literary and non-literary) described as 'the internally persuasive word', which I have myself subcategorised into 'internal persuasion', 'internal struggle', 'internal conflict' and 'internal dialogue'. I have also identified the category, 'invocation of common knowledge', which is particularly relevant here. The bulk of this essay details the process of close-reading, analysis and redrafting according to this schema, taking each category and subcategory one at a time.

Double-Voiced Discourse in *Biting Tongues*

Before progressing to forms of double-voiced discourse, let me first identify Bakhtin's distinction between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive

discourse. An authoritative discourse will never, in itself, communicate dialogically: though it might recognise the assertive force of another discourse, might even cite it, it assumes the linguistic environment to be receptive purely to itself and so there is no need for the negotiation present in a heteroglot environment. Authoritative discourse asserts itself as incontrovertible and does not accommodate other styles of discourse in its delivery. Though it may attract other types of auxiliary discourses, it always maintains its elevated hierarchical position, without dilution or hybridisation: it 'permits no play with the context framing it, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it'. A formal style of delivery is thus established and adhered to. 'It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain' (*Dialogic Imagination* 342), ensuring that one who wields the discourse uses correct, officially-licensed jargon and rhetoric. Indeed, in prosecution cases on the grounds of libel or professional misconduct, fraud, perjury or plagiarism, the incorrect usage of authoritative discourse can and does bring about punishment.

This willed singularity of discourse (monoglossia), Bakhtin argues, is problematic for the novel. Should authoritative discourse appear in the polyglot novel, it either loses hierarchical supremacy by proximity to other discourses (ceasing to be authoritative and leaving behind, for example, 'relics' of professional jargon), or 'the context around it dies, words dry up' (*Dialogic Imagination* 342) if authority is asserted (e.g. the didactic novel). It might also be ironised as a subject of pastiche or parody. Of course, the novel offers the possibility of presenting characters representative of authoritative discourse (the

doctor, the policeman, the teacher) but such characters may only ever be didactic and therefore stiff and somewhat redundant outside of their given roles (rather like the scientist that warns of impending doom in a Hollywood disaster film). This is because authoritative discourse can only ever be ‘recited’ rather than ‘told in one’s own words’ if it is to maintain its assertive force.⁷ Moreover, because social identity is composed of multiple discourses, and authoritative discourse can only fully assert if willed as singular, it can only form part of an identity if it is retold and thus enters into dialogue within a social identity.

According to Bakhtin,

internally persuasive discourse – as opposed to one that is externally authoritative – is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word’. In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s. (345)

Thus, in a novel, we may come to know imaginatively the politics of a politician in a novel through the way he ‘retells’ it; that is, how he brings it into dialogue with other authoritative discourses (now internally-persuasive) such as those of sexual conduct, religion (the debate over secular and non-secular politics illustrates well how discourses assert supremacy), family, social category, cultural sophistication and so on. The novel is therefore uniquely placed in becoming a space where multiple discourses circulate together, often antagonistically. As Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist note, referring to

⁷ Bakhtin here draws the distinction from education: ‘When verbal disciplines are taught in school, two basic modes are recognized for the appropriation and transmission – simultaneously – of another’s words (a text, a rule, a model): “reciting by heart” and “retelling in one’s own words”’ (341).

Bakhtin's formulations in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, '[t]he novel as a genre...is in effect another organ of perception. The Dostoevksyan novel makes it possible to see paradigms of human interaction that are nowhere else so clearly drawn or perceptible' (*Mikhail Bakhtin* 243).

In the following subsections, I will consider, one at a time, separate forms of internally persuasive discourse, analyse how these occur in Draft 1 of *Biting Tongues*, how such analyses compare with those using the theory of free indirect discourse in its strictly structuralist form and lastly demonstrate their utility in the creation of Draft 2.

i. Internal Dialogue

I have identified four ways in which a character might respond to the presence of an internally persuasive discourse that forms part of his or her social identity, ranging from its complete acceptance to its complete rejection. The first of these is 'internal dialogue', where the internally persuasive discourse – or elements of it – is incorporated into the character's social identity without challenge.

Nevertheless, it maintains a degree of separateness, retaining traces of the externally authoritative discourse such as formal conversational rhetorics, jargons, or simply a 'tone'. As internal dialogue, the internally persuasive discourse may be consulted as an expert, oracle or friend in times of change or uncertainty, providing means of solving moral, circumstantial or interpersonal problems and it may be mobilised if the individual feels under attack, either for

internal self-justification or external argument. Internal dialogue is therefore an uncontested, unproblematic frame of reference for perceiving, understanding and acting and when it becomes dialogised with other internally persuasive discourses, this negotiation is similarly unproblematic.

Here is an early example of internal dialogue from a section of Draft 1 depicting Peggy and Bill's wedding:

If only Rev. Foxtan were on hand! Duty! Honour! Respect! Commitment! Fidelity! – rousing as a wartime speech, his sermon armoured her as she knelt beside Bill. And even if she never had much truck with God, especially not after Mum, at least He commanded authority with people whose opinion mattered. Conferring His grace on her brought them all a little bit closer together. (111)

I was able to distinguish three primary authoritative discourses – the church, marriage and social status – as well as politics and the military, which add gravity. The character's discourse adopts the rhetoric of a priest through exclamations and capitalised 'His' and 'He' which, though slightly ambiguous, is consistent with Peggy's respectful irony found throughout the draft. This appears to be an example of having *told* the discourse in the character's own words, making it purely social and rhetorical: though its transcendental qualities have been stripped and its authority challenged, it has been adapted rather than eliminated. Similarly, the church holds a position amongst other discourses which it both validates and is validated by: promoting social advantage ('people whose opinion mattered') and conferring authority on the practice of marriage

(‘armoured her as they knelt’). Nevertheless, the church discourse has been represented as subservient to those of social status and the national political system in which it is embedded and by which it is given meaning. The sermon has therefore been represented only in terms of something with, for the character, still greater authority (‘a wartime speech’). In this way, though there might appear to be a certain amount of jostling, the internally persuasive discourse of the church has maintained an ability to exert influence over Peggy’s thoughts and actions.

The above is an example of a much richer analysis than would have been possible using a strictly structuralist free indirect discourse, which only recognises the speech centres of character and narrator (although Rimmon-Keenan tantalisingly mentions character ‘attitudes’ [113] before suggesting a connection with dialogism [115]). An analysis using free indirect discourse would only have let me comment that Peggy, as character-narrator, has been permitted to penetrate the author-narrator’s position so fully as to relegate the author to the role of secretary, noting words and relaying them either neutrally or with Peggy’s characteristic inflections. An analysis using double-voiced discourse has made possible the identification of a much broader range of discourses, thus affording a richer representation of the characters’ inner thoughts without requiring an uncharacteristically elevated narrative style. Besides, any person is, to a certain extent, in a constant state of narrating their external stimuli, thoughts and emotions, not just to others or to an identifiable audience, but also to the many

internally persuasive discourses which, in the condition of internal dialogue, act to validate, invalidate or question ongoing conscious experience.

The above needed little adjustment in the creation of Draft 2 and, as such, is more of an exception than a rule. In the example below, the discourse of one character (Peggy) appears to be internally persuasive to another (Bill). Meeting up at Adam's bedside, Peggy diminishes Bill and he recalls a scene from a film:

the main character got questioned by a special agent who had...made his lips disappear and the flesh around his mouth grow together, sealing in his tongue and teeth forever. How almost exactly that reminded him of the latter part of their marriage, after the children had outgrown museums and caravans. Using just a few hints and her crisp, direct tone of voice, Peggy could work this exact spell. He was ineffective and easily upset and Peggy knew it. He was weak and selfish and Peggy also knew that.... and, even though Carole really did love him the way he needed, the way he was, the very fact that he'd had to remarry proved Peggy's view to be correct. (14)

Peggy's discourse is here unambiguously stated as internally persuasive to Bill (his struggle to free himself from it lasts the duration of the novel) as he uses it to probe his feelings and the discourse again maintains its tone: Peggy's judgmentalism is present in 'ineffective' and 'weak'.

Such close-readings have allowed me to spot-check whether or not the 'orchestration' (*Dialogic Imagination* 366) of discourse is successful. For example, in the Draft 2 version of the above extract, the third and fourth sentences of the original are replaced with: 'He was an *easily upset ditherer* and

Peggy knew it. He was a *self-centred fumbler* and Peggy also knew that.’ In these alterations, choosing a more colloquial insult creates more stridency in Bill’s internally persuasive discourse: we can ‘hear’ Peggy saying these exact words about him and so her presence is strengthened, her words becoming an internal dialogue. Appearing so early in the novel, such a foregrounding becomes more important because it is making a point. However, elsewhere in the draft, the omnipresence of Peggy’s derogatory tone came, quite rightly, under criticism and so has since been lessened to avoid the device becoming ubiquitous.

ii. Internal Persuasion

Internal persuasion is a discourse – or elements of one – that has only partially been internalised, either because it has just been encountered or because an external or an emotional event is causing it to be reassessed. An internally persuasive discourse under these conditions may still be assertive, but more tentatively. Uncertain as to the discourse’s hierarchical position among the others that form the character’s social identity, he or she seeks to be repersuaded of its authority and so reabsorb it as in internal dialogue. Otherwise, it can be recognised as a site of internal conflict and so a new position taken up in relationship to it (e.g. internal struggle, internal conflict – see below). While not hostile to the discourse, the character therefore seeks confirmation of the discourse’s usefulness, either by comparing it with other internally persuasive

discourses or through creating dialogic conditions that coax it into a gesture of assertive force.

In the following example from Draft 1, Peggy's character checks her bungalow before her son's homecoming party.

It all looked rather cold and empty. Sad, even. As if the surprise party had already happened and no one had entered into the spirit of things, only poked at the food, kept their talk polite but reserved.

No. Stop being ridiculous.

Once Gerda had put out the sausage rolls, the vol-au-vents, the bowls of peanuts, the tinned salmon sandwiches, the trifle which Peggy had made rather than bought and the house filled with people fussing over Adam and saying *isn't it wonderful*, the rooms would swell with life and the banners and balloons would, like the mirrors and lenses in a lighthouse, magnify and transmit everyone's happiness. (55)

I found the most prominent discourse, here, to be that of social propriety, a recurrent aspect of the character's social identity. I also found this discourse to circulate unchallenged (as internal dialogue) throughout the draft via formalised social contact, either viewed on television, read in magazines, purchased as a commodity or experienced first hand. However, anxiety appears in this case to challenge its authority: the character has mobilised social propriety so as to persuade herself of its validity and her ability to wield it. This persuasiveness is present in the choice of tense ('the rooms would swell'), in the emphatic language ('magnify and transmit'), the use of a phrase the character would never

use ('everyone's happiness') and an extended and detailed list of food. This citation recalls the earlier sermon but rendered absurd by content, lengthiness and awkward language that appears at one remove from Peggy's characteristic speech. Destabilised by anxiety, it is no longer quite internalised, though its authority is still solicited, and so invited to persuade anew: recalling Bakhtin, the character recites rather than tells.

Such an analysis has permitted the identification of a different relationship between character-narrator and author-narrator than that of their simple merging, suggested by the theory of free indirect discourse in its structuralist sense. This has proven crucial prior to the development of Draft 2. The above author-narrator appears to act as secretary by using the third person and omitting tags such as 'she thought', while Peggy's tone is largely typical: especially in the case of '*No. Don't be ridiculous,*' the character's thoughts have been represented verbatim. And yet 'like the mirrors and lenses in a lighthouse, [the banners would] magnify and transmit everyone's happiness' is uncharacteristic both of the character's tone and of references on which she might draw for metaphor. While these are more characteristic of an author-narrator, nothing signals a transference between narrators and so the phrase logically remains an expression of the character's inner thoughts and emotions. As mentioned above, adopting a high literary style in the representation of characters unlikely to use it distances the author-narrator from the characters, a heirarchisation for which Bakhtin has considerable venom (*Dialogic Imagination* 381). So should I remove the phrase?

Similar interruptions occur repeatedly throughout Draft 1 and identifying them was relatively easy, as was performing small pieces of spot-editing to remove or rephrase them. For example, when Bill's character notices a softening of Peggy's tone at their son's bedside, Draft 1 has him mention that 'her harshness faltered and a softness obscured it, the way a single, lone cloud gives a moment of shade on a too-hot day'. In Draft 2, I have changed this to: 'her harshness faltered and a softness hid it, like a lone cloud giving a spot of relief on a too-hot day' (15), retaining the meaning while using a tone more consistent with the character. On the other hand, 'harshness', 'faltered', and 'lone' may be rather more eloquent than is typical of Bill's speech, but I judged that he would be familiar with such words and, as this is a somewhat emotional comment, might take more care in choice of word than is characteristic. Through using 'obscured' and 'moment', however, I felt his eloquence was stretched too far, even appearing pompous, and so these Latinate words are replaced by the Old English 'hid' and Middle English 'spot' ('shade' has been replaced by 'relief' as I felt the substitution more vivid as an image).

And yet I have kept the more literary tone in the earlier example. I felt that destabilising the smoothness of Peggy's tone through introducing one alien to her (the poetic voice) further destabilises the authority of the discourse of social propriety (the lists of party paraphernalia) of which she is seeking to persuade herself anew in order to authorise her actions (hosting the party): this is Peggy's party, she wishes it to run it her way and for her guests to be compliant. Making use of rather than correcting this inconsistency in Draft 2, I have intended to

thwart the smooth combination of author-narrator and character-narrator or the relegation of the author-narrator to the function of note-taking secretary, thereby bringing their discourses into play with one another: they become dialogised.

iii. Internal Struggle

Internal struggle could be said to be the most typical relationship position for internally persuasive discourse whereby each discourse jostles with others, struggling within the character's social identity 'for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values' (346). Not only is this position typical, it is essential for what Bakhtin calls our 'ideological development' (346): '[t]he semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*' (emphasis Bakhtin's).

I found one example of internal struggle, which needed revision, in the following extract, where the character of Jess arrives at the hospital to visit her brother after a poor night's sleep.

She was not supposed to feel like her eyeballs had been sandpapered, like the world was a pirate copy. Of course, time was when sleep-deprivation had been part of the fun, a feature of a good night – or weekend (or week) – out. But the accompanying awkwardness and incompetence had been funny ha-ha rather than funny-peculiar because, back in the day, nothing

had *mattered*. Being staggeringly late didn't *matter*. Neither did rubbish spelling, getting rampantly lost, nor having few coherent words for some twat in a suit. She'd gone through it all in one of those huge plastic bubble things you could walk around in, like she'd seen the last time she'd been at Glasto. Bit by bit, though, her bubble got punctured by things that *mattered*. Mortgage repayment plans. Funding applications. (28)

I identified two internally persuasive discourses struggling for supremacy: those of hedonism (which might not like to think of itself as a discourse, but nevertheless has rules, rituals and jargon as much as does any other) and of personal finance (Jess goes on to mention 'insurance premiums and tax thresholds'). As previously, each discourse had been represented as a 'recited' list ('rubbish spelling', '[m]ortgage repayment plans'), but the discourses appear here to be set against each other, both because the character expresses that they are and in the words themselves. The most intense struggle is suggested by '*mattered*', which each discourse seeks to claim, recital implicit in the use of italics as well as repetition, though it is unclear which discourse is being cited, hedonism or finance.

In editing the above example, I have made two alterations between drafts. The first clause of the first sentence now reads 'her eyeballs felt finely sandpapered', thus removing the author-narrator's tag 'she felt' and so allowing for a more direct character-narrator. I also felt that 'incompetence' implied judgement (and so 'finite' rather than 'open') while, being Latinate, also suggesting financial discourse. Rather, I had wanted the character to imply

hedonistic irreverence and so felt the more familiar, Anglo-Saxon 'cackhandedness' would let her do so. For the purposes of representing a struggle between discourses, rather than an unproblematic dialogue or act of persuasion, it seemed more suitable for them to battle it out in that single '*mattered*'. This struggle might also be seen as typifying the character's broader struggle between responsibility and irresponsibility that has been brought about by her recent initiation into parenthood, a struggle that is still unresolved at the end of *Biting Tongues*.

Like many fictional characters, Jess is divided and multiple: using a Bakhtinian analysis of discourse on a word-by-word as well as structural level can and does open up more possibilities, both for strengthening prose and for developing and deepening those divisions. It also allows for expansion of the position of character-narrator, which no longer needs to be represented as the voice of a unified individual: these are some of the internally persuasive discourses out of which the character is constructed as a linguistic entity.

iv. Internal Conflict

If internal struggle is the common condition of the uneasy coexistence of internally persuasive discourses, internal conflict occurs when one or more is perceived as a significant threat, either by another internally persuasive discourse or by the character's social identity as a whole. Thus, like a foreign agent within a body, the discourse becomes subjected to an attack marshalled

by the character using other internally persuasive discourses, seeking for it to be expelled, to be silenced (in the previous example, Jess might struggle to maintain equilibrium between hedonism and personal finances, but she ultimately rejects neither). The hostile discourse might be newly encountered and so its authority poses a threat to the existing discursive equilibrium, or else an external trigger (e.g., an emotional event or an interpersonal problem requiring solving) might have forced a re-evaluation of its status, otherwise the discourse may be an 'old adversary'. Bakhtin particularly notices such conflict in Dostoevsky in whose

characters' language there is a profound and unresolved conflict with another's word on the level of lived experience ('another's word about me'), on the level of the ethical life (another's judgement, recognition or nonrecognition by another), on the level of ideology (the world views of characters understood as unresolved) and unresolvable dialogue. (*Dialogic Imagination* 349)

At the outset of *Biting Tongues*, Adam is in a unique discursive position when compared with other characters: his amnesia has stripped him of his sense of identity and thus all prior internally persuasive discourses appear as newly encountered, both those adopted from family and institutions such as school, and also peer discourses such as alternative music and hedonism. Each authoritative discourse must, therefore, penetrate his nascent social identity to become internally persuasive and, as it disruptively does so, enters into conflict

with other discourses that have either not yet become the site of inner dialogue or are vestigial of Adam's pre-coma social identity.

In the following Draft 1 examples, I found that I had regularly represented Adam's internally persuasivediscourse as the subject of narrative commentary rather than more directly through the use of jargon or received phrases. Such a patterning of categories and subcategories of double-voiced and internally persuasivediscourse is what might be termed a 'dialogic design'. This made sense in terms of Adam: due to his amnesia, he would be inexperienced in the language of discourse and, though this dialogic design might be understood as representative of the character's condition, it also represents the key theme of alienation. Below, for example, he is recovering from a session of physiotherapy:

This was what came afterwards. Mum and the bedside pep talk. It made it so much worse. It wouldn't leave him to nestle into the sheets, lick his wounds, dream of elsewhere. As if he hadn't had enough from the bolstering, hyperactive comments made by Nagging Norma with the stringy, veiny arms. ... And then, his sense of self crushed, he was scooped up and shovelled back into bed to lie among all the other broken men. (34)

The character here has encountered medical discourse through the actions and speech of Peggy and Norma which are 'another's word [about me] on the level of lived experience' and, being only partially rejected, become an 'unresolved conflict'. This conflict surfaces in the character using colloquial, informal speech rather than medical jargon – 'nestle into the sheets', 'pep talk', 'shovelled back

into bed' – and echoes Adam's equating of comfort with effortlessnes. The alienation here, therefore, appears to be willed into being. A less clear-cut example of internal conflict follows shortly afterwards:

much of what [the other men on the ward] ever did was complain. They complained about their insurance companies, of their ex-wives, of how this or that team was being mucked about again. They never talked about having lost a limb or not being able to drive again or how strangers might stare when they were up and about. (40)

The internal conflict here appears at first to be a stated rejection of the discourses of the '*nice young men*' (40), as Peggy later calls them, and the authority and sense of social identity available via them: 'insurance companies', 'ex-wives', 'this or that team was being mucked about again'. However, unlike the previous example, I found that I had represented the character reciting words belonging to these discourses. The character might later state his regret for his alienation from these discourses ('they at least had some token of who they were and what they, as men, did'), but what appears to be an internal conflict is more likely an attempt at finding a relationship to it, an internal struggle. This is perhaps because he seeks, in both his actions and speech throughout Draft 1 (and despite the conflict with Peggy's 'word...on the level of the ethical life'), a sense of self centred on what he perceives a man of his age ought be doing, which is in itself a discourse of masculinity. Although Adam might not use the authority granted by such a discourse in speech or action, it is nevertheless a

way of thinking. Certainly, the bed-ridden character has little else to observe and transform into a social identity.

The above examples illustrate how the dialogic design of a text extends beyond the crafting and structuring of prose, articulating theme in ways that its imagistic and temporal (plot-based) content cannot: the exclusion of Adam from using medical jargon might be understood as representing isolation and alienation at a very basic linguistic level. This construction of an image of language as it appears in heteroglossia is, as noted earlier, what makes the novel unique to Bakhtin. Through an author's careful orchestration of polyglossia, the reader can observe discourses in dialogue – conflicting, contradicting and allying with one another – in a fashion that is problematic to, say, an academic text or piece of journalism. It is to the author's duty of care that I now turn.

In terms of creative work, such analysis has proven crucial, both to identifying the key themes of Draft 1 and to identify where spot editing is needed to smoothen or expand elements of dialogic design over the entire text, such as Adam's internal conflict with medical discourse and internal struggle with masculinity. In the first of the above extracts, the only alteration between Draft 1 and Draft 2 has been the replacing of 'bolstering, hyperactive comments' with 'super-cheery comments'. 'Bolstering' and 'hyperactive' are not words that Adam would use, as are the rest, and neither, in this context, would the other characters because these are made sarcastic when tied together. I had considered using words akin to the professional jargon of therapy – 'supportive',

'nurturing' etc. – but these would be placed dialogically in the character's commentary, indicating an – albeit problematic – admission if not acceptance of their authority. To maintain the separateness of the discourses required for them to conflict rather than struggle, I had to avoid any sense of telling of authority in the character's own words and so the words are the childish ones he might apply to Norma as a kind of person – 'super-cheery' – rather than the authoritative role she represents. The themes of alienation and powerlessness can then be voiced and developed: unique among *Biting Tongues*' characters, Adam nurtures a sense of self that rejects any discourse that might, so he believes, have power over his choices and actions. Had medical jargon intruded, its authority would have loomed noticeably over Adam who might otherwise be said to have (unlike Peggy, Bill and Jess) willed himself into alienation and powerlessness.

v. Hidden Polemic

Hidden polemic is a term from Bakhtin's original schema of double-voiced discourse in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

In a hidden polemic the author's discourse is directed towards its own referential object, as is any other discourse, but at the same time every statement about the object is constructed in such a way that, apart from its referential meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the same object. A word, directed toward its referential object, clashes with another's word within the very object itself. (195)

Thus the discourse is hidden, its presence in the novel sensed rather than observed by the reader. Such a discourse is neither represented, observed nor subjected to commentary by character- or author-narrator, as has been seen above. Instead, the narrator might superficially be speaking about an object – say an orange – but, in doing so, the narrator senses the discourse of one who despises oranges and this forces a change in the way the narrator speaks about it: the qualities of the orange are deliberately exaggerated to strike a blow at the orange-despiser and so the narrator’s words, without making reference to or incorporating those of the orange-despiser, enter into dialogue with them.

Bakhtin notes that such a use of discourse is extremely common, not only in the internal discourse of a literary character, but also in everyday speech: ‘here belong...all words that “make digs at others” and all “barbed” words”’ (196). In giving a dialogic reading to Draft 1, I encountered numerous examples in which the discourse of Peggy’s character might be said to feature ‘barbed words’, such as in the following extract. Meeting her in the hospital Bill says:

Oh. Peggy. I was just...how did you sleep?

In that chair. Was your car nice and cosy? (13)

Ostensibly discussing sleeping arrangements, Peggy’s primary communicative intention appears to be to attack her ex-husband’s choice in spending the night away from the hospital: ‘In that chair’ strikes ‘a polemical blow’ at Bill’s discourse by refusing to answer his question correctly. The given answer thereby turns the question around, answering not ‘how’ but ‘where’ Peggy slept, ostensibly continuing the character’s discourse uninterrupted. Nevertheless, the choice of

words is evidently in direct response to Bill's, though it remains, in her redirecting of the conversation, hidden.

The above instance of dialogic patterning – the use of barbed words in the language of Peggy's speech – was brought to light through colour-coding the different forms of double-voiced discourse as I progressed through Draft 1 (see Appendix), letting me identify many patterns. These included other variants of hidden polemic, such as Bill's tiny acts of rebellion (e.g. the circumstances in which he chooses to play his music loud), which strike a blow at the discourse of social propriety, hidden by him but prominently displayed by Peggy. Although I do not have space to expand on it here, I found the depiction of physical, rather than linguistic, action in response to discourse to be a pivotal thematic element. Separate from the discourses that prevent *Biting Tongues'* main characters from achieving intimacy, the body became a location of emotional, interpersonal activity. Colour-coding made possible the mapping of a steady increase in such instances as Draft 1 progressed, and a parallel decrease in instances of linguistic hidden polemic. In creating Draft 2, I was able identify where absent forms of double voiced discourse might support this structure, or where their elimination might also be useful, not just in spot-editing for language but also in reshaping plot elements on a more structural level.

vi. Hidden Dialogue and The Invocation of Common Knowledge.

Hidden dialogue is akin to hidden polemic in that one discourse is sensed rather than observed, although here the hidden discourse gives rhetorical structure to the words of the represented half, as if each were a half of a two-way conversation: Bakhtin argues that such a form of double-voiced discourse is central to the success of Dostoevsky's prose style.

Imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated...a conversation of the most intense kind, for each uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker... .

(Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 197)

Thus, in hidden dialogue, the character addresses their words to another character or group that embodies a discourse and continues the address by imagining – but not articulating – their responses (Bakhtin favours the term 'rejoinder'). If expertly achieved, it should be possible to rewrite a passage of hidden dialogue inserting the responses, which Bakhtin performs on an extract from Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* (210). However, although the versatility and poetry of such a technique excited me, in no part of *Biting Tongues* could I find examples (or of other categories of internally persuasive discourse not cited here) and I found myself reluctant to use the technique in creating Draft 2 . What I did find, however, was a proliferation of something similar that does not appear

in Bakhtin's analysis and which I have called 'the invocation of common knowledge' and I return to this divergence of dialogic structuring below.

The invocation of common knowledge is a partial adaptation of Bakhtin's schema. Common knowledge, in this sense, is not a discourse, but the intentional hierarchical raising of an internally persuasive discourse or matrix of discourses to a position of supremacy, re-externalising them as internally persuasive for a majority or privileged minority that exerts authoritative influence, a community to which the character invoking it claims to belong. In doing this, the speaker takes an internally persuasive discourse and repositions it dramatically: it is the dramatised but anonymous 'everybody' that provides the authority, who decides what is 'normal' or 'reasonable'. Bakhtin, too, suggests that one should '[r]eflect how enormous is the weight of "everyone says" and "it is said" in public opinion, public rumour, gossip, slander and so forth' (*Dialogic Imagination* 338). Of course, there is always disagreement as to what constitutes incontrovertible common knowledge, proving there to be nothing 'common' about it: it is whatever an individual claims it to be.

I have split invocation to common knowledge into three subcategories. Firstly, and closest to hidden dialogue, common knowledge is invoked in a pseudo-conversational comment (such as below, where an unprompted agreement appears) by a character to provide validation or invalidation for a thought or act, either of the character or of another. Its affirmative reply is assumed and so unvoiced. Even were the full dialogue to be laid out as one might with hidden dialogue, the approval is present from the beginning of the

conversational comment until the end. This following example immediately follows Adam's waking from coma:

[Peggy's] hand was shaking and her skin prickled with heat from cheeks to feet. Another hot flush? She needed a ciggie. Yes, perhaps a tablet, too. She was tired. She had every right to be tired. (7)

The word 'perhaps' appears to question the character's authority to smoke or take a sedative while maintaining social propriety. The 'yes' is superfluous to the meaning of the sentence and, while it could be understood as connecting the uncertainty of 'perhaps' to the previous sentence, it does so conversationally. So with whom is Peggy having this conversation? If it is with an internally persuasive discourse, as in a form of inner dialogue, there is nothing here to mark it, such as jargon or a tone. The answer could be said to come two sentences later: whatever hidden force has authorised her 'right' to be tired has previously authorised her 'right' to need to smoke and to take a sedative. I believe this hidden force to be common knowledge, it being common knowledge that grants such rights to a (as Peggy might see it) devoted mother who is careful with money and impeccable at housework. I could have thus rewritten the sentence: 'It is common knowledge (or everyone knows) that a morally upright woman would be tired and, faced by the recovery of her son, would need a cigarette and a sedative because she has every right to panic'. This is the bold statement which the character wishes to embody to counter uncertainty.

I found that, in Draft 1, I had also invoked common knowledge in a second way: as a statement of (to common knowledge) the obvious, often in the form of

a cliché such as the previous ‘she had every right to be tired’. Similarly, when Adam leaves the hospital, Peggy observes them:

Such lovely girls. They followed Peggy to the ambulance. They were so dependable, these nurses. One took Peggy’s elbow and kissed her on the cheek... It sent waves of energy through her body. (56)

The above could therefore similarly read ‘It is common knowledge that nurses are lovely, dependable girls, so when they kiss you, it sends waves of energy through your body’. Thus the character is here invoking common knowledge in the clichés ‘such lovely girls’ and ‘so dependable’ and these act as a counterbalance to the unwanted erotic feelings she has in response to the kiss.

Characters can also explicitly appeal to common knowledge and this is the third subcategory. In the above example, Peggy might well have asked why she reacted as she did were it not that phrasing the confusion as a question would frame it too overtly as a problem, making its cause too clear for a character in denial of her feelings. Shopping for food for a barbeque, Bill experiences the following dilemma:

What meat? Had to be cheap, funds running low again. Not too cheap – then Carole would worry over animal welfare. Jess, too. Why couldn’t you just buy food anymore? Wasn’t it moral enough, just laying on a spread for this bloody family? (128)

The first of these questions is simple enough, a vocalisation of a problem.

However, the discourse of animal welfare intervenes and, to combat it, Bill unsuccessfully invokes his notion of common knowledge, even including into this

matrix that of family (though made partially ironic with his 'bloody'). The moralistic solution to his problem is clear enough – Bill may even have partial sympathy with it – and so appealing to common knowledge underlines his uncertainty, not just of Bill's values in relationship to the problem he is facing, but in his ability to invoke common knowledge.

In addition to internal dialogue, both hidden dialogue and invocation of common knowledge expand the function of the narratological narratee. Just as the narrating takes place within heteroglossia and so is polyglot, the narratee is thus necessarily multiple: multiple narrators in a symbiotic relationship with multiple narratees, each creating and altering the other within heteroglossia rather than the stable and straightforward linear conception of narrative taking place from one speech centre to another. A narratee, within a single utterance, might be another character, communicated with either directly or through their internalised persuasive discourse or both, or an identifiable group embodying a discourse such as an academic readership, (again either directly or internally or both) or an implied group with perceived moral values. Such diversity allows for shifts in and ambiguities between narratee at any structural level, including the single word. The question that therefore needs repeatedly asking to gain a fully dialogic analysis of any novel, whether for critical interpretation or for creative evaluation prior to editing – even in the creation of a first draft – is: '*who* precisely is speaking, and under *what* concrete circumstances?' (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 340.)

Conclusions: Author as 'Orchestrator' of Discourse

Polyphony is achieved in the novel through what Bakhtin calls 'orchestration' (*Dialogic Imagination* 383), the term deliberately chosen to emphasise the hearing of sounds (speech types in this case) which are interwoven tightly and numerous. By extension, an author therefore orchestrates the discourses of his or her work according to a design principle governing that work. That different novels and writers call for different means of orchestration can be shown in that hidden dialogue is central to Dostoevsky but does not appear at all in *Biting Tongues*, whereas invocation of common knowledge is central to the latter work but, in Bakhtin's analysis, absent (or at best so minor as to have avoided notice) in Dostoevsky. I don't doubt that many additional categories would be uncovered in other works given a similar reading because design principle is not arbitrary, but directly relevant to the novel as a whole, as seen above relating to theme: Bakhtin also notes that themes, too, are orchestrated (292). Thus hidden dialogue is a direct product of a thematic concern that, so Bakhtin argues, runs throughout Dostoevsky's work: his novels' heroes are all idealists seeking to free themselves of discourses that diminish their individual worth. The characters of *Biting Tongues* are, for the most part, quite the reverse: they are desperate to cling onto the discourses without which, they believe, they have no individual worth. Discourse, far from being held in Dostoevksyan contempt, is instead appealed to, its approval sought in earnest. It is clear that such orchestration is a design principle and so, returning to Chatman's taxonomy, a function of an

implied author, as, therefore, is the now-dialogised narrator, narratee and, ultimately, the implied reader.

So have I solved my initial creative problem: that I could neither get my characters to speak of themselves – either to one another, to themselves or to the reader – nor find a means of articulating their thoughts for them as narrator? My answer can only be yes. My characters might not directly speak of themselves to one another but are nevertheless able to do so through the workings of internally persuasivediscourse: Bill even notices ‘Peggy’s words in his mouth. How did she possess him? What powers did she have?’ (92) Similarly, though the Strange family might not subject themselves to an articulate, thorough self-analysis, a narration to the self and to an imagined narratee is possible by representing both the languages of the internally persuasivediscourses on which they rely for social identity and the play between them. Lastly, this identifying and strengthening of a narrative style that fuses author-narrator and character-narrator to orchestrate both theme and discourse is the means both for the articulating of inner, unverbaised thought and for its critical representation. I have found in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, therefore, not just a critical framework which I could use to redefine my creative problems (which turned out to be not so much problems as misconceptions) but also to revisit my other initial research objective: to find a new strategy for better working practice. That better working practice is, for me, not as monoglot author but as polyglot author-orchestrator.

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Framing $\frac{70}{115} \frac{34}{58}$

Common knowledge

Technical (Official)

112-24

Ownership of what is appealed to?

Distance

Carnavalesque

Hybridity

Adam as most balanced - most self-aware

Interior Dialogue

Interior Persuasion

Interior Struggle

Self-concealment

* Pseudo objective Statement

Economy/surplus

Literary/poetic

Language as subie

Value of voice

Act for/against pg

Shared language

Misunderstanding
Stupidity
Clown, pol.

15+9 in earnest
14 27

$\frac{73}{112}$

$\frac{39}{2}$

Hidden dialogue

Hidden polemic

P.O.S.*

Silence + body

with U

The Bethany House nurses had already informed Peggy ^{strange bed} that her son's eyes were open. Now she sat beside him (pale)

Adam Strange had spent the first decade of his adult life at Bethany House. His mother had never missed a single day at his bedside – not one – and long ago learned to read the few signs his body made. A rasp in Adam's breathing might mean an infection of some sort. Stomach upsets were generally preceded by a yeasty smell. A sudden twitching of the head, denting his pillow, meant muscular cramps, on the whole. Sometimes Peggy couldn't even say what these signs were, she just looked at Adam, stranded who-knew-where without bottle, cork or paper, and he was simply different. She turned astrologer, Tealeaf reader, Medium for her son.

Adam's eyes would also open, sometimes for a few minutes, even for a few days. Such open-eyed periods, if rather creepy, amounted to no more than a bit of scratching on an ECG. Even so and in spite of reading up on Adam's condition, there might still, surely, be a chance of him jerking back to life like one of those puppet machines on Southend Pier after the penny drops. This unwanted anticipation could be snuffed out with a simple act. If Peggy leaned into her son's gaze, looked into irises and pupils that were lifeless as cardboard, she would know that whatever Adam was seeing, it wasn't her. Peggy would laugh at her foolishness and siphon off tears for the later solitude of High-n-Mara.

Sometimes, slurred words came out. Usually, these were single ones: *lily, morning, her, fags, away, can't, how*. Short sentences also formed from time to time, the longest and most regular of which was *she's in the water*. Peggy had come to cherish such evidence that her son still existed in some locked-away place. If only she could reach inside, spring that lock. She ought to be able. She was still his mother.

Peggy had already informed of today's open eyes by the Bethany House nurses and now sat beside her son, wrestling with her superstitions. Except.. Adam's blinks seemed agitated, like the rapid flutterings of someone having a heated debate. They weren't his usual drunken droopings. She stood, ready to lean towards him and then his pupils focused on her.

Surely not.

Only it wasn't just the eyes. A charge, invisible but tangible, spread across the surface of Adam's skin, like the flameless patches on the Christmas pudding she lit for herself each year.

Ridiculous. She would grasp her son's wrist and this nonsense would end. Except the warm wrist, pale and dark-haired, twitched, then was still.

What on Earth?

Peggy brought herself closer to the pillows. Adam's pupils stretched out, shrank back, then stilled in each green-brown puddle of iris, holding steady as Peggy watched her son watching her. Peggy unplugged herself. She went to Adam's bedside cabinet and overfilled a beaker with tap water from an orange-lidded plastic jug. As she gulped, she looked back at Adam on the bed.

Adam's eyes had followed her. His head had even moved back a little into the mound of pillows as he strained to see her better. His lips had parted enough for a whistle.

Saturated
with
secrets.

→ familiar
sneaky
revels
thing
create
rummy

2

Peggy drew the beaker back from her lips. Water slopped onto her fingers. Her hand was shaking and her skin prickled with heat from cheeks to feet.

Another hot flush? She needed a ciggie. Yes, perhaps a tablet, too. She was tired. She had every right to be tired. This was not how Adam was going to wake up. When he finally burrowed back up through the foam of consciousness, Peggy would be ready and everything would be in order, including her wretched feelings.

Peggy looked at her son a third time. Though he hadn't moved, he was no longer looking at her. Adam's eyes were now roaming in their sockets. He was taking in the room.

He was awake.

Yes.

No.

Yes.

Yes.

That person looking through her son's open eyes – was that really Adam? Those eyes wandered around in a darkly-stubbed face. Her son was to be returned unblemished, a still-fresh fifteen-year-old, his grotesque maiming a mere symptom.

The air thickened, its weight burying Peggy's frame in old blankets. Her guts began to spasm, her mouth flooding with drool and she stood, then strode briskly past the nurses' station to the ladies' loos. The cold water that wasn't for drinking splashed against her skin wasn't much help and so Peggy locked herself into a cubicle where she vomited violently into the toilet bowl, spattering the black shawl that flapped around her shoulders, thinking thank goodness this toilet bowl didn't get used by men.

Peggy, Dr. Kaplan's just being reasonable. That's all.

You would take his side, wouldn't you, Bill? None of you has any faith. You never have.

Mr. Strange, what I'm trying to explain to your wife...

I'm not a piece of furniture, you know.

Of course, and your faith is very healthy.

Well then, how we are going to explain things? And anyway, how much might he remember about the accident?

Mrs. Strange, even if – if – he makes a good recovery, he'll have no memory of the accident. Atropine poisoning and coma both commonly result in amnesia. Do you understand what I'm saying here? Adam is going to be a very confused young man.

In that case, we should keep it simple. About the accident. He should be told just that he hit his head. I want the rest to come from me. From the family doctor.

Mr. Strange? What's your opinion on this?

Er...