

Emporium

Graham Mort

The woman was leaning on the back of a Victorian chaise longue, beaming at him with those deep-set, dark eyes. Keith hesitated. Her daughters had the same eyes. Bright, but with an agate depth. And there he was, reflected in the window: his silver hair tousled, slim in his new coat. His image was superimposed on hers, like two spirits, neither quite real.

The coat was a size too small, really. He'd bought it in the spring sale from Vijay. Vijay Darvesh, nodding, smiling with approval as Keith tried on the coat he'd fetched from the window. He could sell you anything. *Take off your jumper, this is not a coat to wear with a jumper.* Then. *Let me open the pockets.* And with a few strokes of the unpicker, he'd release the stitches that held them closed. Until, tilting his head. *It fits perfectly, just perfectly so.* And all with a tinge of regret as if he didn't really want to part with it. Then flashing that perfect smile as he took your credit card, a smile that held just a tincture of pity or triumph. *Enjoy the coat, enjoy, my friend.*

He'd got it home and then had to move the buttons to make it fit, threading them around a match-stalk as Meg had showed him, so that they didn't pluck the cloth. Bloody awkward manoeuvre, but he'd managed it. The fabric was twenty per cent wool and eighty per cent cashmere. Or was it the other way round? That was the problem with sales, wishful thinking took over. Chasing a bargain. Not that he needed to. But he could do with losing half a stone, maybe a bit more. Cycling might do that, a spell with the rambling club if he could face them again.

Keith raised his hand to wave or brush her away, the woman. *Eunice.* Then he changed his mind and was pushing open the door of the shop, the bell jangling over his head. He'd had lunch in The Highwayman, game pie with a pint of bitter he didn't really want, sitting on his own at a side table, feeling self-conscious. Feeling old. He wasn't used to drinking at lunchtime and felt the flush of alcohol in the overheated shop. Sometimes you did things out of habit. You did things because you didn't know what else to do.

The shop was one of those self-conscious, shabby chic, cleverly old-fashioned affairs. It was fitted out in dark oak and they'd had the sense not to modernise – unlike the old chemists, which had been gutted of all its beautiful hand-fitted mahogany shelves and cupboards. After all, this was a town that bishops retired to. A town that still had local shops, its supermarket discreetly hidden behind the Health Centre. A town that sat above a salmon river and faced a line of hills across the valley. Stone walls divided them into chequered fields until half-way up, where they lost the battle with gravity. The rest was bracken and outcrops of gnarled limestone. It was early December and the gullies were striped with snow. Above the river was a churchyard that had been used in a few film shoots. Beyond that, a viewing point beloved of local artists and tourists where Ruskin had painted. So it made sense to appeal to people's sense of nostalgia, some rosy folk-memory of the past. The town didn't hold a Victorian market for nothing. He liked it because everything was close at hand. And Meg liked it because it had an old-world charm. *Solidity.* They'd moved to an Edwardian town house on the outskirts when they retired.

Keith smiled at the woman, feeling the coat a little tight under his arms, reproaching him. It'd be a crying shame to have to give it to Age Concern. Sod it. The kids could clear it out when he died, the way he'd bundled up Meg's clothes and taken them out in bin liners to the car. He wasn't sentimental, not if things could be of use to someone.

The other clever thing about the shop was that it was neither one thing nor the other: part haberdashers, part antique shop, supplier of fine bedding and tablecloths. You could buy old cotton nightdresses edged with lace, new pillow cases and sheets, hand-stitched quilts, re-upholstered chairs and settees, Welsh dressers, willow pattern plates, china tea-sets, footrests, stools, linen chests and rugs from Afghanistan and Persia. Prayer rugs. He and Meg used to look for the deliberate mistake, the false stitch that allowed an evil spirit to escape, put there because only God was perfect. The shop was a real emporium and Meg had loved to linger there, marvelling at rich brocades, trying out cushions that were tastefully refurbished in antique patterns. And the three women were always there, quietly in attendance.

The shop was double fronted and there was a border terrier on a cane chair in the window, sleeping away its old age. The rooms ran back, three deep, so it was like entering the shade of a bazaar, journeying deeper into its mystery. There was something Oriental about it, something of the cultural collision of empire. East meeting West. And something opulent, faintly corrupted by its own excess. Keith let the brass sneck click behind him with the weight of the door. The shop smelled faintly of floor polish, lavender and joss sticks and something else you could never quite place. The older woman smiled her shrewd smile and met his eyes in that direct way they had.

– Good afternoon!

They all spoke with flat north-country vowels. That seemed another quirk of the shop's special atmosphere. Her teeth needed attention. Keith had managed a dental practice for twenty years. Free check-ups were a perk. It was hard not to zone in.

– Good afternoon.

There was a slightly satirical acknowledgement of this formality on both sides, a playful ritual between old friends. Keith had hardly been out and about in months. Just quick visits to the supermarket and post-office, the doctor's. Partly because he'd turned his ankle at the funeral when Meg's sister stumbled against him, waving her hanky, milking the occasion for all it was worth. The bruise had gone from blue to yellow, his puffy skin threaded by tiny purple veins. He'd dreaded going out. The awkward questions, the solicitude, the falsity of it all. He'd not been to this shop in over a year. Something in the woman's gaze had invited him in. Now here he was, not quite knowing how to carry it off.

Eunice. He could never call her that, it was too intimate somehow. She smiled and made way for him. And there were her daughters. Small-boned women who hardly came up to his shoulder. One with short hair, cut like a boy's, and one who wore it shoulder length. Straight black hair, finely textured. And those eyes that seemed to glitter in the gloom at the back of the shop. Like the eyes of Turkish women they'd seen at the market in Istanbul. The older one with the short hair wore riding boots and a flared skirt, the younger one had close fitting slacks and an embroidered jacket. They both wore open necked blouses. There was something... *flagrant*...about them. He couldn't think of the right word. And that was unfair, because they never showed it in their manner. Never exhibited the slightest interest in him. Why would they when he was almost as old as their mother? But it was uncanny the way the three of them had the same eyes. The way they glowed with inner darkness. The way they followed you around the room.

Keith took an interest in a half-glazed earthenware pot that doubled as an umbrella stand, almost tripping over the rug. Halifax-ware, probably a potato pot originally. But the lid had been broken and the base was chipped. The dog looked up at him, pointing its ears and making a low rumble in its throat.

– Sky, don't be silly.

Keith chuckled at the dog's readiness.

– I think I startled him.

– Go back to sleep, you daft thing.

The older woman shushed him and the dog lay back down, putting back its ears, yawning, mooning its eyes. The young women smiled indulgently, showing almost identical white teeth. Small and sharp and slightly backward slanting.

A middle-aged couple emerged from the middle room and pushed past Keith into the street, zipping up their Barbour jackets. You could smell the money on them, but they hadn't bought anything. He edged into the room where an elderly lady in a pale cream coat was testing some cushions on a settee. Her cheeks were rouged and her legs stuck out like sticks as she sat down and stood up again. She reminded him of a Punch and Judy puppet, her glasses bobbing to the front of her nose. Keith nodded to her and moved into the far room. There were some gilt-framed Victorian prints standing against the wall, a dressing table, a quartet of high-backed chairs and a large reproduction mahogany desk. They'd even spilled ink on the writing pad to make it look authentic. Then a flat-topped display case with silver earrings and brooches, some jet funeral pieces and others studded with garnets, malachite and onyx. Keith pushed up his spectacles and peered into the case, a silver brooch in the shape of a curled fern snaring his eye. It was delicately made with lots of fine detail. He saw his own face in the glass like a ghost in those fake photographs. Then the older of the two sisters was beside him.

– Would you like to see anything?

She wore the key to the cabinet around her neck so that it hung below her breasts. She smiled and her eyes were almost black in the dim room. Those neat, even teeth. For a second she reminded him of Meg. How stupid. Keith pointed into the case.

– That brooch, the silver one. It's unusual.

– The fern design? The Victorian loved them. They crop up everywhere. See?

The girl pointed to the settee and the upholstery was a pattern of ferns curling into each other.

– Ferns were quite the vogue at one time. Would you like to see it?

Keith nodded and the girl bent down to unlock the case. There was the faint scent of her perfume. He could see the swell of her breasts. So close. He shut out the thought. She was holding the brooch out to him and he took it. It was beautifully made. Surprisingly heavy for its size. He checked the back for a hallmark.

– It's real silver.

Her voice was a little sharp, as if he doubted her.

– Yes, I can see. Just about...

He squinted at the markings, pushing up his varifocals, smiling apologetically.

– *Anno Domini*. Comes to us all...

– Pretty, eh? Your wife would love it.

– Yes, she would.

There it was. A lie? Almost. Though a lie was something you told on purpose to deceive. He was just being polite. He'd replied without thinking. But Meg *would* have loved the brooch. It was just her kind of thing. What was he supposed to say now? To add casually that it was a shame she'd been dead almost a year? What good would that do? He wondered what had drawn him back here. Memory? Habit? A way of stepping back into the past as if what

followed had never happened? He'd avoided them so far, their old haunts. He handed the brooch back, his fingers touching the girl's palm. It felt hot.

– Thank you. I'll think about it. I've got a few things to do...

He sounded more abrupt than he meant to.

– You're welcome.

A little laugh, then a crimping of lips which were touched with pink gloss. He was flustered now, trapped by his untruth. As the woman locked up the cabinet, Keith pretended to inspect an ornately carved Burmese rocking chair. A family of five – parents and three kids – in wellingtons and fluorescent jackets came in and began fussing around a large oak chest. *But can you date it*, the blonde woman kept saying, *accurately, I mean?* He made his escape, tilting his head in farewell he found the door and exited under the *chang, chang, chang* of the bell. The dog looked up and then went back to sleep.

It was cold. Late afternoon. A bitter little breeze was stirring litter in the town square. His face was flushed and his ears felt hot. As he glanced back through the window, the younger daughter, hand on hip, was asking the older one a question. The older one shrugged, fingering the key and glancing towards the door. He was sure they were talking about him. He'd dreamed about them once. That there was another room deep in the shop with a four-poster bed in which the women all slept in long cotton nightshirts. There were candles and velvet drapes. Weird. He'd forgotten about that until now. It was strange how things came back like that. Random thoughts. Fragments that made no sense. Unless you believed that dreams meant something. He moved on quickly from their line of sight.

Three-thirty. Too early to go home to an empty house to microwave something. Too late to catch the rugby on TV. He was wearing a decent pair of brogues and wondered about the river walk. He could use some exercise after that lunch. It squatted in his stomach, pressing against the coat that was slightly too tight.

Keith went through the village square, past the new outfitters, which catered for all sexes. *Quinne & Starkey*. A made-up name meant to sound traditional, dependable. In point of fact it was run by some middle-aged dandy in tight trousers who dyed his hair and wore paisley pattern waistcoats. The lane led down to the river walk. There was just time to make the circuit before it went dark. Keith felt a pressure on his bladder from the pint and slipped into the public conveniences. They were few and far between these days. The smell of ammonia and disinfectant stung his nose. He stepped carefully over the wet tiled floor. He'd bought a shirt at that new shop last summer and the man in the waistcoat had offered him a complimentary fragrance. *Fragrance?* Keith had looked blank. He wasn't about to start wearing perfume at his time of life. He drew the line at sandalwood shaving cream. There was none of that sort of rubbish about Darvesh. You knew where you stood there.

Keith passed water in one of the cubicles, holding back the wings of his coat with his elbows. He zipped up and flushed the toilet. The plumbing groaned as if there was a demon trapped in the piping. *A djinn*. Was that what they called them? He washed his hands. No soap, of course. The hand-dryer was broken and he dabbed them on the damp roller towel, trying not to think of the germs. He buttoned his coat, his fingers slipping on its tight buttons.

When he left the toilet the dandy in the outfitter's was reaching into the window for something. His hair was thinning like everyone else's. You couldn't hold that back. Vijay knew what a man wanted and he wasn't about to start stocking handbags and cosmetics – or *fragrances* for that matter. Meg would have laughed, of course, flicking back the grey hair she had started to wear very short, cut into her neck. *Why not, you silly thing?* She'd got him

pulling his nasal hair and trimming his eyebrows. That was enough. Funny, how all that hair sprouted as you got older.

It was a degree colder if anything. Keith tucked in his scarf and pulled up his collar, leaving the town centre on a path that led past a new housing development. Just boxes, really, each one had a black solar panel on the roof, but not a chimney amongst them. The path dipped down sharply then curved towards the old stone bridge that went over the river. Parallel with it and twenty yards distant on a new section of road was a modern steel bridge, built to take heavier vehicles. So the old bridge was for pedestrians now, standing on a sunken loop of road.

In summer, kids jumped from the parapet into the river. The pool below was flanked by rocks where couples sunbathed or urged their Labradors into the water. You could see the youngsters daring each other, then there'd be a cheer as one of them found the courage to fall. It had become quite a spectacle, like the dozens of motorcyclists who gathered for tea and bacon sandwiches at the caravan that served as a café further along. They'd be making a killing.

Just before the bridge on the left-hand side, there was a kissing gate. Keith went through it to the river path. He held the gate open out of habit, then let it close with a clang. They must have done this walk a hundred times. The river was high. Brown with peat, it surged between boulders and outcrops of limestone. A woman came past with two muddy beagles on a lead, dragging the dogs away from him with an apology. Keith smiled at her, catching their wet tang. He moved on, turning sideways to allow a couple and their kids to get by. The path had been recently gravelled and made for easy walking. His shoes crunched. Satisfying. At one time it would have been a quagmire. The Council had got some things in hand, at least. There was the cricket ground on the left with the little timber pavilion. It'd been a good few years since he turned his arm over. He'd played until he was fifty-six, bowling leg-spin and batting low down the order. Coming home late for dinner, falling asleep in the bath with a whiskey. Meg hadn't minded. She understood why he still had to do it. Because there had to be more to life than work. A torn back muscle had put paid to all that. He still felt it when he got in and out of the car.

The path was badly eroded in places, where the river curved and undermined its banks. In different phases of conservation, the Council had laid concrete blocks, driven timber piles and dropped wire cages of boulders to protect it. Unchecked, it would wash everything away, eroding the banking, bringing down the town above it. Further on it parted around a little island overgrown with willows, then joined itself again. Sometimes there was a heron waiting in the shallows. In the deep pool at the far end of the walk, salmon and sea trout rose or leapt clear of the water. Fisherman waded out from a gravel bank to stand thigh-deep with their rods and landing nets. But not today.

Light was fading now, the river supple, gleaming like eel skin. Keith went through another gate, stepping down awkwardly over the rocks on the far side. Here there was a house set back from the water – a converted mill of some sort – then the path ended in a row of iron railings where the banking became too dangerous, dropping away to the current. Next to the house was a churned mud paddock. A white horse tapped its hooves against the metal gate, a restless ghost in the dusk. The gate tolled like a bell. Then a climb of sixty-eight steps led up to the viewing point and the churchyard. Keith set off up them steadily, feeling his heart rate rise. *What doesn't kill you...well, maybe.* He paused gallantly to let a stout woman in a purple fleece get past on her way down. Then he made it to the

top, chest pounding. The woman had smiled at him, ruefully. As if they were in it together. Old age. But it was in them, really.

The viewing point overhung the banking and showed a perfect view. Picturesque. The river had planed a wide flatland, leaving a curved terrace in the middle distance in front of which nestled a farm. Beyond that a line of dun-coloured hills with those streaks of snow. The side of the sheet metal barn was painted in outrageous candy-stripe colours. That was about planning permission being refused, the farmer's way of hitting back. He'd seen something about it in the local paper, laughing with Meg one Saturday after they'd lain in bed a little longer, then breakfasted on coffee and toast and soft-boiled eggs. One of their rituals now that getting up didn't matter much. They still fitted together nicely in bed, her face against the pillowslip like the face of a girl in the dim light. Making love gently and without haste. Strange, how he still saw the girl in the woman, as if time hadn't flowed on at all. Somehow the rainbow-coloured barn had become a local feature, a quirk of humour that people had appreciated and become fond of. After all, it did no harm in the end, upsetting the way things were. The colours glowed now in the setting sun.

Keith turned into the graveyard where a squat church was surrounded by yews. There was a low perimeter wall and beyond it rows of stone-built houses with yellow lights. The vicarage was set in a space of its own to the north side, accessed by a cobbled lane. A set of iron gates led back into the main street. The gates had been made by a local blacksmith with an ingenious self-closing mechanism. Pushing the gates allowed them to rise on rollers that went up a greased iron slope. Gravity made them roll back down and close again. No special effort needed. It all worked beautifully, elegant and simple. He'd pointed them out to Meg whenever they passed this way. He'd probably bored her with it all.

It was gone four-thirty now and the lights were on in the bookshop and cheese factor, the ironmongers and the Age Concern shop where he'd taken Meg's things. Then, without quite realising it, he was crying, sobbing out little spasms of air. He turned back into the graveyard before anyone could see him and made for a bench in the church porch, loosening the buttons on his coat to sit. It could happen anytime. Things working away inside you. Things you weren't really aware of. Thoughts of the future didn't go anywhere now. They couldn't. There was only really one end to it all, to grief, to memories.

Keith sat for a few minutes, catching his breath, feeling the cold strike into his buttocks. There was the stone coffin with its chipped edges. It had been cut for some bishop in the Middle Ages. Meg used to joke that it was about his size. But people were smaller in those days, malnourished, their bones crooked with disease. He was a respectable five foot ten. There was an inscription around the church porch in Latin, but it was eroded and impossible to read. Even if he could have remembered what he'd been taught at school. Centuries of rain had eaten it away. The mower had left clumps of dead grass between the headstones. A thrush was hopping and stabbing for worms, cocking its head, listening to the earth seething. There were tiny pearls of moisture on its back.

Now there was a commotion at the iron gates. A long, high cry without words. A shriek that went right to Keith's chest, visceral, like the distress of a baby. The thrush took off and perched in a yew tree where it sent out an alarm call, repeating the same phrase. A boy of about fourteen in a red puffer jacket was being led through the gate in a group of five kids and two adults, probably from the special school up the hill. The boy dragged back from the group and called out again. There were mangled words, but Keith couldn't make them out. The boy had glasses and walked with a jerky gait. One of the adults led him to a bench

and he let out another howl of anguish, inconsolable, his hands clenched up in front of his face as he was pulling down on a blind.

Keith hunched back against the stone of the church porch. The other kids stood in a half circle: another lad and three girls. They gazed at the adults as they tried to soothe the boy. Keith was trapped in the boy's shrieking. It was dredged from the bottom of his lungs. It was another kind of grief. One of the adults tried to take the boy's arm, but he pulled away, letting out a scream that carried all the way back into the town. People were pausing into the street now, looking anxiously towards the churchyard where the little group was hidden.

Keith rose, buttoning his coat, getting ready to slip away. The paving stones were treacherous with moss. He looped back through the churchyard to the viewing point where he could find another path back into town. That way he wouldn't have to pass the boy rocking there. Wouldn't have to feel this helpless shame. He stood for a moment. Frost seemed to crackle in the grass. Dusk was thickening. There was the moon pulling clear of the horizon, huge and white above the line of hills. There was the glimmer of the river, the outline of farm buildings, the candy-stripes blurring. And there were the boy's cries, raising goose bumps on Keith's neck as he veered down a back lane that took him onto the main street between the wine merchant and Vijay's.

Back in the shop, he could have sworn they were waiting for him. The mother lingering in the lit window, watching the street. The dog curled on the cane chair, the dark-eyed daughters hovering at the counter. Keith didn't even speak, he simply nodded at the back room and then followed the eldest daughter there and watched her unlock the cabinet. His glasses misted with the heat in the shop. He could smell her perfume again, stronger this time, a little stale.

She smiled and handed him the silver fern with a little curtsy. Her eyes seemed to shine. Feverish. When he paid for the brooch they all gathered around to congratulate him. The old woman with her crooked-toothed smile, the daughter who wrapped blue ribbon around Meg's neat little parcel, the daughter who rang up the till and took his debit card. It was the way they all stood so close together exuding...*something*...he couldn't describe what it was, that feeling. The way they were so perfectly *demure* – not the right word either – and yet seemed to give off a glow of their inner selves, a hint of pleasurable appetite. Perhaps that was pride in what they did, what they knew, a kind of worldliness about *things*. There was no harm in that, after all. The older woman touched his arm.

– Give my regards to your wife. I hope she enjoys the brooch.

– Thank you. I will.

– Bye! Bye!

A chorus. He half turned in the doorway. That ironic gentility overcoming him again.

– Until next time.

Keith gestured with the package, tipping it up then slipping it into a side pocket of the coat. He smiled at the young women who stood side by side, regarding him inquisitively. Then he was in the street, seeing them drawing down the blinds and locking the shop door, realising he'd kept them past closing time. He wondered if they knew about Meg. If they'd known all the time.

The bell faded as it jangled to a standstill. He tidied his scarf and tucked his hands into his pockets. Then he made for home, flattening his fingers inside the tight fabric, against the little package that fitted snugly there. Cars pulled away from their parking spaces in the town square, swinging the white scythes of their headlights. There was the

moon, voyaging above chimneys and roof slates. There was a single star, pulsing with light. A star that might no longer exist. That old illusion of life after death. He'd learned that on one of those TV documentaries. When we look at the night sky we're really looking back in time. It was unimaginable. Even the mathematics seemed fabulous.

Everything was connected in the end. Salmon and sea trout nosing upstream in the river, leaping the weirs, scenting their birth waters in minute traces of peat. Returning to breed and to die. Their gleaming bodies pinned to the river's surge. The rainbow colours of the barn fading. Cattle herded into shippens, mired with dung, blowing out gouts of steam, pulling hay from iron mangers. Sheep straying on the hills, white-faced where darkness was falling. Little owls calling from that island where the river forked. It was all going on around him, beyond him. Life was just messiness, really, but we saw patterns in it. Had to.

It'd be Christmas soon. He'd be invited to stay with Katherine or Simon, when what he really wanted...when what he really wanted was somewhere else now. Somewhere in that current of time that they'd trailed their hands in so carelessly.

Keith paused, irresolute, drawing blades of air into his lungs.

Home.

He moved on, his shoes rapping against the paving stones.

Home.

The night pressed a cold mask against his face. He thought he heard the clank of a horse's hooves tolling against a metal gate.

Homeward.

There was that cry again. A little lower, like the yelp of a fox carrying towards him from the churchyard where the boy was.