

Listening to Ghosts:

**Haunting in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,
Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*,
And in my own writing practice**

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SEA-ROKE

(a novel)

Chapter 1

Jess

The beach was scrubbed, its surface scoured. Where she'd expected to see a chaos of old metal drums, plastic canisters, a tangle of seaweed and driftwood, there was an expanse of pale golden sand. Even the shingle had been swept away, forced into a range of tiny mountains and pushed against the dunes.

Now, in the uneasy calm of the morning, the waves pulled back into themselves, leaving a slowly shifting swell of oil and foam. There were boats, but not many – a distant container-ship sitting numbly on the horizon and a couple of ancient fishing-tugs braving the waters despite the currents swirling beneath.

How silent it was; everything in a kind of torpor. She glanced back up the beach, sure that Rob had followed her. Could feel his eyes watching, sharing it, her discovery of this strangeness.

But there was no one. Nothing. Not even a bird.

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Crows and gulls and pigeons scratched amongst the chicken carcasses and crisp packets deposited in the car park. She picked her way across the oily tarmac and the birds screamed at her, lifting themselves off the ground in angry jerks and then down again. She stood and watched, feeling sickened, almost frightened. The mess looked purposeful, designed to spoil, as if the winds had collected all the litter from Ippingham and brought it to Little Charlburgh saying: There you are, *you* can deal with that.

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There'd been other gales during her time here, fierce ones. But never in the summer. Never ones that tore tiles from the community centre roof or ripped the name-board off the front of Driftwoods gift shop so it flapped loosely - and dangerously - over the heads of passers-by. In front of Sally's Tea House, two men with chainsaws prepared to attack a fallen tree, its trunk having come to rest inches from the pale-blue clapboard walls. Here on this side, the Barker's greenhouse lay in a jagged tangle of glass and pots and broken shelving.

'Still not used to it then?'

Jon Patchett was at her side.

'I thought I was. But this...'

'One teeny disadvantage of living here,' his voice was low as if confiding a secret.

'Is being reminded how uncertain everything is.'

'Uncertain?'

He gestured to the greenhouse. 'Man's so-called dominion over nature. An illusion.'

'You're thinking about what happened before, aren't you? That was centuries ago.'

He stared towards the devastated garden. 'It can be fixed this time. But one day it'll all disappear. There'll be no warning.'

'You're exaggerating.' It was the journalist in him.

'Am I?'

He was a tall man, imposing. A double chin bulged below his jaw, and she could see a delicate sprouting of bristle. To see him like this, close up and in the flesh, always made her feel faintly embarrassed, as if she'd walked in on him in the bathroom. Until he'd been a guest at her wedding she'd only ever seen him on the East Anglia news. Now she supposed he counted as a friend. An acquaintance anyway.

'I think you're teasing me.'

He smiled down at her, his grey eyes not joining in. 'Perhaps.' The chin deepened.

'Have you've always lived here?'

'Always.' The smile faded, as if the question surprised him. 'I travel for work, naturally. But I always come back.' He saw her expression and continued. 'You belong to a place, don't you think?'

She didn't. Never had. The idea was a revelation.

'I don't know,' she said.

He looked up, distracted by the grating sound of the chainsaws, and she followed his gaze. The blades glinted and sank down into the wood, forcing out a grey-gold mist. She supposed the men knew what they were doing. One of them raised his head, the peak of his red baseball cap revealing his face. It was Barry, the school caretaker. She waved, and he grinned in response.

Belong to a place? She'd never stayed anywhere long enough to find out. And yet here...

'Have you been damaged?' Jon said.

'I'm sorry?'

'Your house - was there damage? We're ok, I'm glad to say.'

'Oh. No. I mean yes. Leaks. Two actually. The spare room.'

'Insured, I trust.'

She nodded. 'The carpet came with the house, so I don't really mind. Rob says we're covered.'

'A chap to rely on.'

The tone was casual, claiming an understanding of Rob that he, Jonathan, seemed to suppose she hadn't yet reached. She felt a moment of irritation but when she glanced up

his face was turned away, staring in the direction of his own house down towards the reedbeds.

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‘Well?’ Rob was working on his laptop. He’d showered and shaved, his brown hair still dark with wet.

‘So much damage. I hadn’t realised.’

‘Did the roof come off the public toilets?’

‘Yes.’ She was faintly miffed that he would know.

‘And the pebbles disappear?’

‘I’ve never seen it like that – the beach stripped so bare.’

‘It happens sometimes.’ He went back to his typing. ‘A proper storm, then.’

‘I thought you might come down. I looked for you.’

‘Sorry.’

I thought you were there, she could say, *behind me*. ‘The Barker’s greenhouse was smashed,’ she said. She wanted him to look up, share the drama.

Instead he gave a satisfied final tap to one of the keys. ‘Done.’ He closed the lid, slid the laptop onto the coffee table. ‘You’d think they’d learn.’ He leaned back, his arms behind his head. ‘So, what do you fancy doing today?’

‘Don’t we need to sort out the carpet?’

‘The fan heater’s on. What else can we do - except rip the thing up and chuck it? I’ve emailed the claim form.’ A smile flickered on the edge of his lips, a glint of intention in his eyes. ‘We could go back to bed if you liked,’ he said.

‘It’s ten past ten.’

‘So?’

The truth was she didn't want to. Not really, not after the storm and the strange quiet air on the beach as if time had gone back to the beginning.

'Jon Patchett says this part of the coast will disappear.'

'It will.' He patted the sofa and shifted his weight to make room for her. 'But not today. Come here, Jess. Please.' She went over, and he kissed her stomach through her jeans.

'If you must,' she said.

He pulled her close, and she slid over his knees to face him, feeling the familiar tug in her groin.

++

By Monday, the first day of term, most of the debris had gone. A mound of bin bags sat waiting for the council to collect. There were ladders against the community-hall roof, and the fallen tree had been reduced to piles of logs cordoned off at the side of the road.

'Do you think,' she said, eyeing it from the doorway as she pushed her arms into her coat sleeves, 'We could have some of that for the fire?'

'Don't see why not,' Rob said. He kissed her and slid ahead through the door. 'Good luck today.'

++

'Can we go home again then?'

'No, Tom, you can't.' She looked at her watch. It was early, but not so early that several children hadn't already turned up, as well as a few mothers holding tight to the four or five little ones starting in Reception. She saw Claire coming towards her.

'What's going on? Where's Barry?'

'Dunno. Richard's gone to find out.'

‘I don’t think Whitney’s here either.’ Jess scanned the playground for the dark plaits and yellow ribbons of Barry’s daughter. Because her caretaker father held the key to the big mortise lock for the front doors, the little girl was usually the first to arrive. ‘I guess we better go through the back.’

‘I was just about to. I’ll take that lot in first, if you don’t mind, so they can settle.’ Claire indicated the group standing to one side of the porch. They seemed hardly out of nappies. Such tiny, frightened things. And yet, by the time they got to her... Jess glanced over to where the boys from her own class were already crowding together, shouting one another down in their eagerness to be heard. Oliver’s and Jerome’s new cropped haircuts made them look harder, more street-wise. Eight going on thirteen.

She watched as Claire guided the little ones, each gripping the hand of his or her neighbour, around the edge of the building and out of sight. Their mothers waved, grins forced on their faces. As she turned to gather her own charges, she saw Tracey Tierney come striding through the gate, her jacket flying cape-like around her shoulders, her heels making tap-tap noises on the ground. When she caught Jess’s eye, she slowed.

‘Haven’t you gone in yet?’ she said.

Good morning, Jess, Good morning, Tracey.

‘We were just on our way.’

Tracey frowned.

The kids were still scattered round the playground. Jess called them together.

‘Richard’s coming in a minute. I’ve got the keys.’ Tracey waved them in the air.

‘Barry’s been taken to hospital; we’ll have to manage without him.’

No point in asking what had happened. In this sort of mood Tracey didn’t do chat. She gave you information, and told you off as if you were a kid yourself.

‘What about Whitney? Is she coming to school?’

‘I doubt it, under the circumstances.’

Circumstances? She felt a moment of fear for both the child and her father. ‘Do you know -?’ But Tracey was pushing open the heavy doors, rattling them across the tiled floor and against the wall.

‘Your class,’ Tracey said, without looking round, ‘is waiting.’

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‘An infection,’ Richard said. ‘A form of septicemia I gather. It’s not looking good.’

‘But I saw him last week, chopping up the tree that came down in the storm. He seemed fine.’

‘I think he cut himself. Anyway, whatever’s happened, it’s happened quickly.’ The Head kept his eyes fixed on the children seated at the lunch tables. They were chattering excitedly, their voice raised over the rattle of knives and forks and plates - as if all summer they hadn’t been playing together on the village green. ‘Obviously you won’t mention it to the kids, especially Whitney – she’ll be back in a day or two by the way – but it’s possible Barry will lose his leg.’

She closed her eyes as if to shut out the words, but the picture was there anyhow, and she opened them again ‘That’s awful. His poor family – how will they manage?’

‘I dread to think. I don’t think his wife’s coping very well.’

‘Is that why Whitney’s not in school?’

‘Sometimes one has to turn a blind eye. We’ll give it a couple of days.’

‘Of course.’ Only the other day Barry had been grinning at her from across the green, his cap angled over one eye.

‘Keep an eye on Tom, will you?’ Richard said. ‘You know how protective he can get. You’d think they were siblings rather than cousins.’

She nodded, her eyes searching the sea of children for the dark hair, the thin shoulders. Tom was near the front of the queue, behind Jerome and Oliver. He had his back to the counter and his tray clasped to his chest. He was laughing at something the other boys were saying.

‘He looks fine at the moment.’

‘Good. But you know what he can be like.’ Richard turned to go. ‘There’s something else.’

‘Yes?’

‘You’ve a new boy starting.’

‘Really? I can hardly believe it.’

New boys didn’t come to this village. In the four and half years she’d been there, six families had gone, and none had joined. ‘There’s nothing,’ Rob had told her, ‘to attract families from outside. Nothing.’

‘His name’s Luke Bayely. Very bright. Quite serious though. His father works in Africa. They all lived there, but apparently dad’s going to be doing a lot of travelling, so Mrs Bayely’s brought her son back to England.’

‘Ok. Right. Goodness.’ Africa. The boy sounded interesting. ‘When’s he coming?’

‘Tomorrow or the day after – they’re moving in as we speak. Sorry not to give you more notice.’

Not the best timing. But a distraction for Whitney perhaps - that might be good. A sudden shout alerted her to the fact that Tom and the other two boys had reached the counter. They were joking with the dinner ladies and holding up the queue. She stepped forward to move them on.

‘By the way, Jess?’

‘Yes?’

He lowered his voice so she had to strain to hear above the clamour of the children eating. 'Luke's not your typical village child. He may need a bit of help settling.'

She nodded, moving away. 'Thanks. I better go. Oliver Sutton's up to something.'

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She told them about the new boy that afternoon. 'We must make him feel at home.

Welcome him to our lovely village.' They gazed back at her with blank faces. 'Come on children, it'll be fine.'

Tom put up his hand. 'Where's Whitney,' he said. There were whispers of interest.

Jess bit her lip. 'Her dad's poorly, you know that don't you Tom?'

'Course I do. But why in't she here?'

The murmur rose to something more anxious. 'Is he going to die then?' said Kyra.

Jess held up her arms for quiet. They liked Whitney's dad, chatted to him around school, surrounded him in noisy clumps and got in his way.

'No, Kyra, he isn't going die. Whitney's staying at home with her mummy today, that's all.'

'Can we make him a card?'

'Of course you can.'

In her old school, they'd hardly have cared less. Not because they were hard-hearted, but because the pupils and staff - ancillary too - were constantly changing. The children rarely had a chance to get fond of anyone. After Jess's three years at Worley Rd, only Maggie, the Deputy Head, had been there longer.

Here at St Margaret's, the kids were more like an extended family, knowing one another's business, in and out of each other's houses. Yet, for all its closeness and security, it nagged at her. What did they know about the world, tucked away on the Suffolk coast?

Actually they did know some things. They knew about X-boxes and The X Factor and the Premiership. They knew about Brexit and Donald Trump. They knew about immigrants, but these were a threat, bad things that amassed, swarming like bees on the borders of their world. Even those who lived relatively close to the village came in for derision, and the class's antipathy to any child from St Peter's Primary in Ippingham was, Jess suspected, as ingrained and fierce as that between the warring gangs roaming the coast before the old city was destroyed.

'What would *you* do?' she asked Rob over supper.

'God, don't ask me. What's the National Curriculum for?'

'That's more about standards, really. About making sure every child gets the same chance. I teach stuff about other cultures, different parts of the world, the struggles people face. But not much actually goes *in*. When they go home, all the old narrow-mindedness and fear gets reinforced.'

'Are we so bad?'

'Yes, actually. As far as I can tell. But then it was the same at my old school. In fact it was worse. Some of those parents belonged to the National Front'

'Bloody hell, Jess.'

'They had tattoos on the backs of their fingers, so that when they made a fist -' She shuddered. 'Horrible, actually.'

He leant over and took her hand between both of his. 'I can't bear it, you know, to think of you under any sort of threat. I'm so glad you married me and came here.'

She looked down at his clear, unmarked skin. 'So am I.'

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The child standing in the doorway reminded her of a startled deer, his body stunned into stillness. She smiled, glancing at the line of children surveying him from the back of the room and willed them to smile too. 'Poor little thing,' she thought. She moved forward and leaned down to him. He was leggy but small, with round cheeks and full baby lips, a straggle of curly hair. His eyes were wary. When she spoke, they narrowed as if he were trying to draw them back into his skull.

'Hello, Luke,' she said. 'We're very glad to have you.'

His mother smiled. 'Well, Lukey, what do you say?'

Jess suppressed a small shock of recognition. The woman was an author. She'd written the *Greek Myths for Children* series they had in the library, her picture on the back of every book. What was her name? Emma? Emily? How exciting. The connection might lend her son a kind of glamour and help ease his way.

Mrs Bayely gave him a little push. 'Go on, ' she said. 'Don't be silly now, darling.' The boy didn't move but stood, his arms tight against his sides, looking at the floor. The air in the classroom became a weight, the children, usually so lively and noisy, staring at him in silence.

Jess let her eyes slide over to Whitney. She had come back this morning, quieter than usual. Her hair, clearly in need of a wash, had been pulled back in a ponytail which made her look thinner-faced, older. There was still no definitive news about Barry, who still lay very sick in hospital. Even so, Whitney's gaze, unlike many of the others, was without suspicion or disapproval.

Jess cleared her throat. 'OK children, your holiday journals won't write themselves.' They stared at her then back at Luke and, as if a spell had broken, the silence was gone and they clattered pencils and notebooks and went back to their tasks.

'We'll find a peg for your coat, shall we?' Jess said. 'And a nice place for you to sit.' She looked up at his mother. 'He'll be ok now,' she said.

The woman moved to kiss him but the boy didn't respond. He didn't look up when she reached the exit, nor at the final clunk of the door as it closed behind her. He seemed to have forgotten her already.

'Come on.' Jess gave his hand a tug, and he followed her to the vacant place at the back of the class next to Robin Sketchley.

'Hello,' Robin said.

Luke was silent. 'You're going to sit here, Luke,' she said. 'Next to Robin. He'll look after you.' Robin at least was making an effort, a polite child who knew what was expected of him. 'This is where you'll work.'

Luke frowned and spread his hands over the surface of the table as if checking for something. He picked up a coil of red pencil sharpening and cupped it in his palm. 'Oh,' he said as if it was special. She caught Robin's eye but refused to mirror their hint of amused impatience. Instead she pointed out Luke's locker, and the boy turned to inspect it, trying the catch twice to check it worked.

'That's mine?' he said.

'Yes. Put your things in here, and they'll be fine.'

'Now?' he said.

'Probably best.' The children were watching again, suppressing giggles. Even Whitney was smiling. Jess frowned at them to get on.

One by one, Luke unloaded the contents of his satchel and placed them inside the locker. They were all new, the pencils, the pencil case – it had a picture of a shell on it – and a long blue plastic ruler. He had a pair of cotton gloves, although it was only September, and a folded-up handkerchief, which he laid carefully side by side.

Jess winced. He was as buttoned-up and methodical as an old-fashioned bank clerk.

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Well?’ said Rob. They were walking on the beach, making the most of what was left of the late summer weather. The sun was sinking fast, and in the motionless air the sea glowed silver.

‘Well, what?’

‘How did it go – Whitney?’

‘Oh, she’s ok, I think. But it’s hard. Tom’s mum picked her up, she said Wenda Tydeman was at the hospital.’

‘Barry had the operation today. Didn’t you know?’

‘His leg? Oh God.’ She stopped, put her hands to her mouth. ‘Are you sure?’

‘I saw Hugh at lunchtime. He told me.’

‘How will they manage? Will he get insurance?’

‘Don’t know. How do these things work? Maybe. It takes years though, doesn’t it?’

‘Poor, poor Barry. Is there anything we can do?’

He shook his head. ‘I doubt it. Hugh says they’re very proud.’

They walked on, side by side. The pebbles the storm had swept away had returned, forming a wide strip along the sand. Rob kicked at one and it spun up into an arc and down again. He looked down at it for a moment, then leaned to pick it up before sending it bouncing across the surface of the water.

She gestured to the belt of stones. ‘How do they do that – reappear, I mean?’

‘The tides move them.’

‘I’ve never really noticed it before.’ She crouched down, searching for a stone thin and smooth enough to throw. When she’d found one, she straightened, bent her shoulders as she’d seen Rob do and tried to spin it from her fingers. It flew flat for several feet then dropped with a plunk into the sea.

‘Hopeless.’

He found another stone and tried to show her how. Each time he threw, she counted. Four. Six. Five. Each time she tried herself, the stone dropped brick-like into the water.

Rob laughed and put his arm round her waist. ‘It’s a man thing,’ he said. She moved so the fit was comfortable, and they stared out across the water. After last week’s storm it seemed unnaturally calm. Impenetrable.

‘It’s weird, isn’t it, when you remember what’s under there,’ she said.

‘I hardly ever think about it.’

‘Don’t you?’

He shook his head. ‘No. Come on, let’s paddle.’ He pulled off his shoes and socks and rolled up his trousers.

‘Are you serious?’

‘Why not?’ He stepped into the shallows, suddenly boyish, a child breaking the rules.

‘You’ll get salt marks on your suit.’

‘I won’t.’ But he had already. A dark stain crept up the navy material. ‘Come on. What are you waiting for?’

She imagined it - the sea breaking round her ankles, sliding between her toes. She looked down past her skirt to the sensible shoes and tights. ‘My school clothes -’

‘Take them off.’ He moved towards her, this look mildly lustful. ‘I’ll do it for you if you like.’

“Rob!” She looked round, the beach was deserted. He watched, grinning, as she kicked away her shoes and slipped her hands up under her skirt to get at the tights. She did it slowly, to please him.

When she’d tucked her things into a tidy pile on the shingle, he reached out a hand. ‘Come on to the sandy bit.’ She took it, skipping over the stones. The water was warm, as if it had been expecting them.

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It was later, as they retrieved their discarded things, after their wade along the shoreline up to Carston Cliffs and back, that they saw the children. It was turning chilly, a light breeze nipping at Jess’s arms. There were perhaps four boys and two girls, small things nestled into a dip that sprouted hard tufts of marram grass, partly hidden by the curve of the dunes.

‘The pikeys are back.’

‘*Pikeys?*’ She’d heard the word in the village before. Perhaps everyone used it here. It was horrible.

‘Well, gypsies. Travellers. Whatever you want to call them.’

‘Travellers. *Are* they?’ But she could see now: the strange, old-fashioned dresses of the girls, the too-long hair of the boys, their peaky, underfed features.

‘They don’t come to this part of the beach for nothing. They’ll be up to something.’

‘Like what?’

‘Thieving probably. I’m surprised they didn’t go off with our shoes.’

‘They’re *children*, Rob.’

‘Oh Jess. Honestly.’ His face was full of pity. ‘As if it makes a difference.’

She glanced back at the group. They were watching, their stares careful, like animals disturbed at their grazing. It felt wrong to look them in the eye, as if it would be accusing them of something.

‘They look frightened.’

‘Believe me, Jess. They’re trouble.’ He took a step forward, and the children rose and scattered.

‘Rob!’

He shook his head and gave her a look.

She would say no more. There was no point in spoiling things.

++

They had reached the top of the dunes. Below, on the sandy grass where Hinton Lane began, she saw a figure. There was something about the slope of his shoulders and the way he stared at the ground, up at the departing children, and then down again that told her it was Luke Bayely.

‘That’s the new boy,’ she whispered. ‘What’s he doing out here on his own? Hang on, I need to see if he’s ok.’

As if he’d heard her, Luke’s body stiffened. He didn’t look up to meet her eyes.

‘Hello, Luke. Is something wrong?’

‘They broke them.’ His voice was flat. She followed his gaze. Fragments of shell surrounded his feet. Ordinary, run-of-the mill shells that you’d find daily on the beach when the tide was low.

‘Were these special? Perhaps the children didn’t realise.’

He put his hands in his pockets, let out a long slow breath.

‘There’ll be lots more.’ She waved across at the beach. ‘You can go searching another time. Or perhaps, when I’ve got a moment, I’ll collect some myself – some

unusual ones - and bring them into school, and we can examine them properly. What do you think?’

His eyelids lifted to reveal wide blue irises, then dropped again.

She leaned closer to try and engage him. ‘Where’s your mummy, Luke?’ The cottage she knew the Bayelys had rented was just visible where the lane met the dunes. Cut off from the village, it wasn’t an obvious choice for a woman living alone with a child. But it looked cosy enough, and its position, so close to the sea, was one she would love herself.

‘She doesn’t -’ Luke said. His fingers were moving anxiously, clutching something that he brought halfway out of his pocket, before pushing it back down again. He seemed unable to finish the sentence.

‘Doesn’t what, Luke? Do you mean she doesn’t know you’re here?’ Still he was silent but there was the faintest inclination of his head. ‘Then she’ll be worried, won’t she? You must go home now. I’ll see you at school tomorrow.’

He sighed again. ‘I expect so.’ He turned to make his way with precise steps back towards the cottage. They watched as Luke passed through the gate and disappeared into the porch.

‘Weird little chap,’ Rob said.

‘He is a bit. He’ll settle in.’

‘Will he?’

She stopped. ‘Why do you say that?’

He shrugged.

‘Well?’

‘I don’t know. No reason.’ Rob turned away, stepping out towards the track that led to the farm.

‘Rob, wait. It’s quicker through the reeds.’

‘We’ll go past the pigs.’

‘The pigs?’

‘I thought you liked them.’

‘I do, but -’

Somehow, in the last few moments, she’d lost him. It surprised her every time. She stood studying the curve of his departing back, then hurried forward to catch him. As they tramped side by side up the muddy path that leads to Sheering’s Farm, the dying sun split the birch trees and stung her eyes.

Emily

She can see him at the bedroom window, his blue eyes all but swallowed by the crease of his frown. She supposes he's thinking of the sea, but there's no way of knowing.

It's a long while since she's heard his little boy laughter, the chesty chuckle that makes his body quiver and turns him into a toddler again. When she touches him now, he becomes sharp, like a vase already splintering. So she tries not to, because the responsibility feels too great, the rejection harsh.

She lays the trowel on the earth and stands up to wave. If he's seen her he doesn't show it. She tries calling him. 'Luke,' and then again, 'Luke'. And still he gazes, his forehead a fierce cross-hatch of lines, across the dunes to the ocean beyond. She's sure he can hear her but, if he's determined to be difficult, well then let him. She sighs and bends back down. The cottage has been empty for too long, the garden a mass of weeds, it's almost impossible to know where the lawn, such as it is, ends and the flowerbeds begin.

She wants to ask him to help her. In Arusha, when they planted beans, he was amazed to see the tendrils twisting round the canes she'd rammed into the rust-red earth, demanded she come and look. She remembers the pathetic little shoots thrusting out despite everything, the dark splotch from Luke's watering can that dried to dust in seconds. When he tried to get the shoots to catch on his fingers, she told him it took time, that it was to do with the direction of the sun and how the tendrils behaved when they felt something in their path.

She almost smiles. Then, realising, she fights the image away. There's no knowing where it will take her. Instead, she pushes the trowel into the earth and pulls it back hard. A tangle of roots wells up white and blind from the soil.

++

Her wrist jars as she digs again. The pain reverberates along her arm and into her shoulder, but she doesn't stop. Damn these bloody roots. They go on forever, down past the sand and stones and into the clay, defying the North Sea winds. Why does she never live where the soil is generous and protected, where things grow as nature decreed?

She digs on, ignoring her aching wrist, leaning back to give her weight to the task. Bits of vegetation tear away, and she bends again, pushing her fingers in, curling them round and tugging upwards. More root rises to the surface, and then more, the wispy sinews at the ends revealing that at last she's found their beginnings. She lays them out on the ground beside her, becoming aware as she works of the growing piles of debris. This is a foe she can beat. For the first time in over a year she feels something like pleasure, a sense of a goal to be reached.

After an hour or so, after she's worked her way along the front of the cottage, she sits back on her knees. Now she can see what's what. She raises a hand to wipe the hair from her face. It's stuck to her forehead, and she feels the cold damp of mud as she fingers it away, sensing as she does so the sudden pressure of a gaze. So Luke has noticed her at last, has he?

She glances up, but the window is empty. As is the sitting room's directly above. She looks round, expecting he'll come into the garden, but there's no one. Yet the feeling is still there, that suspicion that someone's watching.

She waits, hoping he'll come suddenly from the corner of the house or be hiding under the branches of the overblown tamarisk tree, but, other than the heavy thud of the

waves behind the dunes, there's silence. She looks round at the gate. It's just as she left it, its latch firmly in its place.

No, she will *not* worry about him. Perhaps that's the trouble. It makes him reclusive, secretive. He isn't a baby anymore. If he wants to be alone, that's his choice.

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Luke is drawing. He's curled in the corner of the new sofa, his legs pulled up, his forehead, as ever, deep in a frown. He's wearing his trainers, and already there's a stain on the upholstery.

'Luke,' she says and, before she can stop herself. 'What have I told you? Shoes.'

It's enough. He looks up, his face tight with anxiety and, gripping the pad to his chest, slides down and away.

She watches him leave the room. Always now, the wrong thing. The sharp comment. What is the matter with her? And Luke – when he's normally so fastidious, even obsessive. 'It's new, Luke, All the furniture's new. We have to look after it.'

And why hasn't Simon rung? Friday night, he said. And now it's Saturday - and nothing. He's in Kinshasha this weekend, another meeting with the Aid agencies. But there are phones there, the Internet. He can Skype, can't he?

The garden behind Sally's Tea House, sheltered by the flint wall of the gift shop next door, still held the last strains of summer. A pergola of late-blowing roses scented the air round their table, and wasps hovered in lacklustre fashion over what was left of the toast and jam. Five years after her first visit to the village, it was still where they liked to go – delaying the weekend business of shopping and cleaning and opening the post.

Jess leaned forward, waving away a wasp with her hand. 'You know,' she said, 'sometimes I feel as if I've lived here forever'

'Do you?' He looked surprised.

'It's the quiet. It gets into your blood.'

'It wasn't quiet last week.'

She laughed. 'Ah, but that noise - the wind and the waves - is different. It's natural. If you lived in the London, where the traffic's non stop, and the bloody bin lorries came and collected bottles from the pub next door hours before your alarm went off, and the men coming out of that same pub at night shouted and swore so loudly you couldn't get to sleep, then you'd know what quiet was.'

'Ok.' He grinned though his eyes were serious. 'But at least London's alive. It's got energy. Here -' he waved his arm causing a shower of rose petals to fall to the table, 'You call it "quiet", which sounds pleasant enough, but doesn't it ever -' He stopped, studied her face. 'Doesn't it ever *suffocate* you, Jess?'

'Suffocate me? What a weird thing to say. I love it. I feel a part of it.'

He frowned and sat back, his lids half closed. She'd thought he was happy, settled with her in the terraced cottage overlooking the green, the grey thread of ocean visible from the bedroom window.

He opened his eyes, stretched for his coffee. 'There were stables here once, did you know? Along this side of the green.'

'Were there?' The change of subject was comforting. 'You mean from before the old town was washed away? I thought the whole lot got destroyed. Other than the leper chapel.'

'Oh, it did. This was a farm. In those days the sea was a quarter of a mile away.' He waved his hand again, more expansively this time. The roses shuddered but withstood the assault. 'Later, when there was more erosion to the coast, the farmhouse flooded and had to be abandoned. It was only because the groynes were built that the village survived. You can see it all in the archives at County Hall - I came across them when we were doing that work in Hinton. It wasn't until the early seventies that this bit got prettied up. Shame really.'

'Why? Don't you like it? You've never said.'

'Well, I do. Because you do. And it's a place we come to. But, look, there's not one local here. '

She glanced round at the weather-battered tables, the tree with the circular bench. The faces sitting there were unfamiliar, their owners dressed in shorts and tea shirts despite the approach of autumn, flip flops on their feet.

'I suppose not.'

'It's meant to be haunted, you know.'

'Is it?' She pulled herself upright, her eyes scanning the shadows.

He laughed at her excitement. 'It's only what people used to say. To be honest, I haven't heard anyone mention it in years.'

He disappointed her, bringing it so abruptly to an end. She leaned back. 'Look there's Claire. And Hugh. See, locals *do* come.'

They were making their way through the tables, tall fair-haired Claire and Hugh, an inch or so shorter. 'You're not going, are you?' Claire said when they reached them. 'I thought for once we might actually *talk* to one another. School's so bloody crazy.'

'We can have another coffee. We've got time, haven't we Rob?'

'Sure.' He gestured to the waitress.

'Just seen your new boy and his mum,' Claire said. 'Funny little thing, isn't he?' She settled herself opposite.

'The mother's weird,' said Hugh. 'Very hoighty-toighty.' He emphasized his Suffolk accent. 'Ignored Claire completely.'

'She probably didn't hear me.'

'She heard.'

'She writes books,' Jess said. 'They're very good.'

'That makes it OK, does it?'

Jess frowned. It hadn't been easy this first two weeks. Whitney fragile and subject to sudden attacks of tears, Tom grumpy and impatient. Luke a strange little outsider, watching everything. She really hadn't had time to talk to Mrs Bayely. She needed to ask her how she felt the boy was settling. Perhaps even call round.

'Any news of Barry?' Rob said.

Hugh shook his head. 'I saw Mum yesterday. She says he's doing all right but the pain's shit. Poor bugger.'

‘His wife, how’s she coping – what’s her first name?’ said Jess. ‘Hasn’t she got some medical condition herself?’

‘Wenda. Yea, she has, though no one’s quite sure what. She gets headaches. Been frail for years.’ Hugh put his hands to his chest and rubbed at his sternum as if the thought were giving him indigestion. ‘It’s tough on Whitney, though. She’s in your class isn’t she? She has to cope with the baby.’

‘She’s only eight.’

‘I know. Mum tries to help, but Wenda...well, she’s stubborn.’

‘How long’ll Barry be in hospital?’ Claire asked.

‘No idea. Weeks and weeks. Do they wait for the wound to heal before they ...?’

‘God, it could be months then.’

They were silent. A wasp hovered, settled on the edge of a saucer.

‘Bloody things,’ said Hugh.

Jess watched as he swatted at it, glad that the insect escaped.

‘Rob says this place used to be haunted,’ she said.

‘He’s winding you up, sweetheart.’

‘No, he isn’t.’ Claire’s mug slopped coffee as she put it back on the table. ‘I researched it. I told you, Hugh, ages ago. You said I was wasting my time.’

‘And you discovered... precisely what?’

She thought for a moment. ‘If you must know, there was a story of a woman looking for her child. They’re supposed to have got separated during the storms. And another about the lepers from the leper chapel. Properly documented sightings.’

‘All bollocks,’ said Hugh.

‘Shut up,’ Jess said. ‘Claire, go on. What else?’

‘Crikey - it was ages ago. Usual stuff, I think. Cloaked figures on the seashore, disembodied voices.’

Rob shook his head, made a guffawing sound.

Jess glared at him. ‘Well, I like the idea. It *feels* as though it ought to be haunted here. All this history. The ruins.’ The past was powerful, dynamic. It didn’t just melt away in the sunny present. She sat up, squaring her shoulders. ‘I believe you Claire, even if these two don’t. I think it’s exciting.’

‘It’s about the only bloody excitement you’ll get here.’ Hugh’s tone was scathing. ‘Little Charlburgh doesn’t know the meaning of the word. If it weren’t for a bit of lively weather now and again, it’d be the dulllest place on earth. God knows how we stand it.’

‘So why *do* you stand it?’ There was an edge to Claire’s voice that Jess hadn’t heard before. ‘Why don’t you – *we* - leave and go to Norwich, say? Or Ipswich? Or even London?’

‘Good question.’

‘Lethargy,’ Rob cut in. ‘That’s what it is. Leth-ar-gy. Same for all of us.’

‘Nah, it’s not that.’ Hugh frowned. ‘I don’t know *what* it is exactly. It’s more like being *trapped*.’

What was the matter with them? Her dad’s words drifted into her head: *there’s chains of iron*, he used to say, *and chains of silk*.

You needed to know which was which.

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‘Something’s happened at work,’ Rob said the next evening. He was in the kitchen doorway, one hand pulling at his tie. He tossed the tie on the table and moved to stand beside her.

‘Ye-es.’ She felt queasy. There was a look on his face, as if he was about to deliver news she didn’t want to hear. In a moment of panic she wondered if he’d lost his job.

‘You don’t look very excited,’ he said.

‘Excited?’

‘There’s a promotion going. They’ve more or less said I’ll get it.’

‘But that’s *fantastic*.’ Why did he look so worried? ‘I mean, it shows how much they like you. And you’ll get more money, and we could -’ She stretched out her arms to hug him but he held her off.

‘No, listen, Jess.’ His tongue edged its way between his lips. ‘The point is the job isn’t here. It’s in Kings Lynn. Next spring they’re starting this big new road project and they want a Senior Engineer to run it. Philip Jolley says I’m the obvious choice.’

‘Oh.’

Kings Lynn - that was where? Norfolk. A long drive, but they’d just have to get up earlier. She calculated his chances. He’d been at the local office as long as she’d known him. Of course he was due for something. If not this, what else?

He was stroking her fingers now, squeezing them. ‘It’s not really a problem,’ he said. ‘Because the sea’s not that far away from the town, and we can live in one of the coastal villages – outside Hunstanton maybe. It’s very pretty.’

She looked up at him, still uncomprehending. ‘You mean we’d have to *move*?’

‘Of course we would. It’s too far to drive.’

‘Oh.’

Little Charlburgh was her home. *You belong to a place*, Jon Patchett had said. She suddenly understood him. She studied Rob’s face, saw the excitement breaking through. She needed to respond, not to spoil things.

‘It’s marvelous they asked you,’ she said.

‘I’d be crazy not to go for it, don’t you think?’ His eyes bore into hers, searching for the truth he wanted.

How could she not be generous? She drew in a breath and returned the pressure on his hand. ‘You must do it.’

All her childhood she’d moved - from one place to another, changing schools, changing friends. ‘It can’t be helped, Jess,’ her dad used to say. ‘If I could do another job, I would - you know that. We have to go with what God’s given us.’

‘But I don’t *want* to be the new girl.’

‘Of course, you don’t, petal. Why should you?’ He’d held her close so she could smell the spice of his aftershave. ‘But think of all those new friends you’ll make.’

‘They might not like me.’

‘Whenever did that ever happen?’ Her father had leaned back, looked her in the eye. ‘Everyone likes you. How could they not, eh – when you’re my special girl?’

Yet how hard she’d had to work for it. Negotiating her way through the terrible first days when everyone’s eyes were on her, then the bleak early weeks before the gentler, more comfortable months. Smiling, agreeing, being interested but never too eager: a fierce balance of distance and closeness. All the time knowing how short-lived it was. That the friends she made couldn’t last.

Now her husband wanted her to do it again. The thought sapped her energy, turned her back into a child.

Emily

She's not been welcoming, she knows it as soon as she's closed the door. An unkindness. She considers opening it again and calling after her, saying *I've been an idiot, please come back*.

Too late.

But what has she actually said? Emily leans against the wall, trying to track the words. *Go away?* It wasn't quite that bad, but it was there on her lips. *I'm busy today, but if you'd like to call another time...*? Not that either. Somewhere in between. It bruised her, the knock so sudden, wrenching her out of her silence, calling her to the door, her skin stripped away, her insides exposed

'I came... to say hello.' A voice. A figure. Demanding a response.

'What?'

She knew who she was, a pretty thing, stuttering now and apologizing, 'I, I didn't mean...

'What do you want?'

The woman's face flushed, a tide of fuchsia rising up her neck and into her cheeks. 'I thought, perhaps if I – I mean as a villager – came and said hello...' Her voice tailed to a whisper before she renewed the effort: 'Only, you're a bit on the outskirts here.'

'That is why I chose it.' Then, awful to remember, Emily closed the door in the woman's face.

She feels a cold blast of shame. Her own son's teacher. What was she thinking?

She'll say she's been ill, even drunk, if it comes to it.

She pushes her fingers through her hair, feels the skin on her cheeks. Cool English skin. Her hands are the same, pale and clear. She spreads them in front of her. There's no fine red dust lodged in the cracks, no residue from her mornings in the small Arusha garden. No scent of charcoal or the honking of distant traffic. Not a trace to bring back that brief shimmering vision of earlier, when she was kneeling there with Luke, the baby beside them, smiling up at the trees. She curls her fingers into a fist, presses the nails into her palm and feels nothing. Can see nothing. Only the dunes through the window, grey and spiked with sedge, blocking the sky.

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The tree is heavy with fruit, branches low to the ground. Pears lie rotting at the base. She steps carefully to avoid the wasps. Yesterday she was stung on the elbow. It came up red and hot and throbbing. She checks it now. The skin is hard and swollen, and she's glad of it.

Luke has a plastic shopping bag in his hand, another stands full at his feet. She has instructed him to stand clear, to wait for her to bring the pears, handful by handful, over to him. There's a raised mark on his skin where's he's caught his arm on a twig or something, but he doesn't seem bothered. Instead he appears half-asleep, his shoulders drooping, as unaware and thoughtless as the grass itself. She feels a rush of irritation, the urge to tell him to go back into the house. But that's what he always does – lurks in corners, stays silent in his room, his gaze focused inward on some coherent certainty only he knows. It drives her mad. Doesn't he need her at all?

But he's with her now. She must build on it, encourage it. She straightens, easing her back, feeling the rough skin of the pears in her hands. Picking her way around the wasps, she goes over and puts them in his bag, tucking them in so they won't bruise. It's nearly full and his arms give under the weight, so she helps him, lowering the bag onto

the grass. 'There,' she says. 'We'll take them into school on Monday and give them to Mrs Baxter. There'll be enough for you all to have one each. That'll be nice, won't it?'

Why?' he says.

She kneels and looks up into his face. 'Lukey?' His eyes meet hers. 'We'll be alright. I promise we will.' He nods, a serious thoughtful nod, before looking away. 'I know what,' she says, her voice bright, anxious now to keep him with her, searching for something to engage him. 'We could plant lilies, and some bulbs for spring. What do you think?'

'Today?'

'Well, no. But next weekend, definitely. There's a garden centre in Ippingham. We can go there after school and see what they've got.'

'What's garden centre?' He's rubbing at a blade of grass with his fingers, releasing a green liquid that stains his skin.

She smiles. 'It's like a big shop. Only they sell plants. Lots of different kinds of plants. But first we must dig the ground.'

++

He's trailing his fingers over the leaves again, catching at the blooms. People are looking. Several times she's leaned down to whisper to him not to do it. 'It might damage them, Luke. Imagine if we all did it?'

'But it's only me. No one else is touching them.' He inspects a clematis. It has small white and purple flowers. 'It's alright,' he adds, 'it doesn't mind.'

'There was a man,' she says, as they pay for carrot cake and tea in the café and carry the tray to the seating area. 'His name was Lyall Watson. He was a bit eccentric actually, but he knew a lot about nature - or at least he thought he did.' She pauses, trying to remember the title of his book. 'Anyway, he used to say plants could tell when

you were going to pick them. The electrical activity in their leaves changed, or something.'

'I expect they scream,' Luke says. 'Because they're frightened.' It's as if he's thought it already, his voice so matter-of-fact.

'Perhaps they do,' she says. What strange ideas he has sometimes. 'But then we shouldn't cut them, should we? Perhaps that would be a kind thing, never to have flowers in the house.'

'We can have the ones in pots,' he says.

'Yes, we could have those.' How good that they're together, talking about things - interesting but quotidian things - like ordinary mothers and ordinary sons, as they used to. 'Look, sweetheart, can you grab that table?' She points, and he goes over and stands sentry-like next to it.

'I expect the plants think they're going to die,' he says when she reaches him. He inspects the chair nearest the window, then sits on it and watches as she puts out the drinks and plates and stows the tray against the wall. 'But they'd come back afterwards, wouldn't they Mummy? I mean, next year.' He takes a mouthful of cake, chews it with small, careful bites. He swallows, then purses his lips, deep in thought. '*People* come back when they die too. I've seen Amy lots of times.'

She only just hears the words, he says them so softly.

'You mean in your mind, don't you, Lukey, when you're thinking about her? I do that too sometimes. I pretend,' she fights to keep her voice steady, 'that she's still here.'

'No, not like that, silly.' His voice is confident. Happy. The old Luke she hasn't seen for so long. 'I mean *really*. She crawls on my bed, and we play with the shells.'

The blow is physical. She's still for a moment, forcing it away, until she can breathe again.

‘I don’t think so, sweetheart.’

‘But she does, she comes and sees me, and I show her... what I’ve found -’

Emily stretches out a hand and takes hold of his chin, turning his head so that he has no choice but to look at her. ‘No, Luke, people *don’t* come back. You know that. You mustn’t say they do. Not *ever*.’

Even before she’s finished, his eyes are dulling, optimism draining from his face. She knows she should stop but she can’t, driven on not by shock or disbelief at what he’s said, but by a kind of envy that he is capable, in his strange logical careful eight-year-old brain, of imagining such a thing as playing happily with his baby sister and doing it again and again.

6

Jess

Perhaps Rob *had* been unhappy. For now, as she watched him do things in the kitchen or tinker with the car, she saw a new purpose to his movements. She didn’t feel he was looking away from her so much as seeing the promise of a different future, a prosperous one that he would provide.

Today he was on his laptop again.

‘Work?’

‘Well, only sort of. I’m looking at houses in Norfolk. On the coast. I want to show you what we’ll be able to buy.’

Something tightened in her chest, and she walked to the window to free it. Outside, a crimson glow was building behind the roofs on the other side of the green. On the green itself shadows lengthened, colours seeped one into another.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ she said.

‘Now? OK.’ He closed the laptop and jumped up. ‘I’ll come too.’

She stopped. ‘I thought,’ she said, ‘I’d go alone, if you don’t mind. I need a bit of time to think – just school stuff.’

‘Oh. Right.’ He looked disappointed. ‘You sure? Do you want to tell me about it?’

She shook her head. ‘No, it’s ok. Nothing serious. Just details – a lesson I’m planning.’ She hated the lie, but it appeared to satisfy him. He smiled and went back to his computer.

‘I’ll show you these later,’ he said.

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The first time she’d walked the narrow boardwalk through the reeds, it had been with Rob and his parents and their two dachshunds, Buggy and Scruff. As they’d stepped onto the boardwalk, Rob’s mum had called the dogs to heel and put their leads back on.

‘It can be dangerous here,’ she’d said.

As if sensing her fear, the animals had become skittish, shying at sudden dark patches and yanking forwards when the reeds rustled. Letting the others get ahead, Jess had stopped, caught by the murmur of the grasses brushing together in the wind. She’d loved the music of it. A rhythm that, like the ripples flowing across their tops, echoed the sea.

There’d been something caught in the grasses at her feet, a bit of ruined ribbon, some plastic stems, grey and tattered with age. One of those bunches of artificial flowers they used to sell in Woolworths and that you could still purchase in the pound shops in

Ippingham, the sort that people left at the side of the road when there'd been an accident. It floated miserably in the briny water slopping at the side of the path.

'I wonder how that got there,' she'd said.

Walking back to get her, Rob had stared down at it, an unreadable expression on his face. He'd pushed at the broken flowers with his foot. When they'd been swallowed back into the blackness, he'd pulled her forward, his hand tight on hers. 'Come on,' he'd said. 'We don't want to hang around here.'

Today the reeds were denser, taller, but she could see the cliffs. That was where she needed to go, where the birds hung low and you could see the ocean's slide over the curve of the earth. The sun had gone now, but there was still plenty of daylight. As she walked along the boardwalk that branched towards the cliff's edge, the looming mass of St James chapel made the sky suddenly gloomy. She looked up. A ruin, deserted. How it hung onto the cliff she had no idea.

She was out of breath when she reached the top, the muscles in her legs tight. It was colder than she'd expected, the wind of the sea biting into her skin. She glanced toward the gravestones at the side of the ruin, roped off because so close to the edge. From where she stood it was impossible to read them, though people said the inscriptions had faded eons ago. Relics of the medieval city, she supposed. Often, when she came here, she liked to gaze down on the steel-battered sea and picture a quayside piled with herring and oysters; boisterous sailors shouting in strange tongues; fat burghers and their extravagantly gowned wives. But today, as she tried to conjure the images, they were frightening, distorted and imprecise, strange bright figures that laughed at her.

She stood on the edge of the cliff, observing the darkening beach below. It was her own anger speaking back to her, her own fear. Rob wanted to leave. It muddled her.

A group of walkers appearing from the dunes brought her back into the present. She watched their dogs barking and leaping in the shallows, one chasing the other and then turning and being chased. As a child she'd always wanted a dog, a bitch with litters of puppies that she'd gather into her lap and who loved her, like people said they did, unconditionally. She leaned forward. There was another dog there, it had swum out into the sea. She felt a quiver of panic, the need to shout and warn its owner.

She narrowed her eyes, trying to make it out in the water, while the walkers moved on, chatting, engaged with one another, as if the animals could take care of themselves. She supposed dogs *did* drown along this shoreline. People too. Hundreds, of course, when the storms had broken the cliffs and washed Old Charlburgh away. How odd that Rob, the villagers as a whole, never mentioned it. As if it were a stain, and they wanted to rub it out of their history.

At last the animal came bounding out of the water, its thick black fur matted against its body. It stopped and shook itself and the walkers laughed and jumped back before calling for the other dogs and heading back to the village. She glanced up: the clouds were thickening, leeching colour from the air. Only a sharp line of gold lay narrowing on the horizon. But there was time - a minute or two, surely? - to sit in the chapel, to feel the comfort of its eloquent old walls.

It had taken a year to make the leap of faith that being Rob's wife entailed. A hard leap - given everything - to trust in this new permanent thing. Through all the mortgage negotiations on the cottage and the excruciating weeks of waiting before moving in, she'd assumed Little Charlburgh was where they'd stay. No more saying goodbye to half-made friends and eccentric neighbours, no more packing-crates and removal vans. Now she could be like other people. And settle.

She was sitting on the remains of a buttress, its surface still warm from the sun. Letting her hands trail against the stone she took in what was left of the chapel: its three half walls, the raised section where the altar had been, the archway that hung perilously over a non-existent doorway. Somewhere she'd read that the old city's lepers had been housed here, their cots facing eastwards so that when they woke, they could give thanks to God for allowing them to live another day. She wondered if that was really what they'd done. If, instead, they'd simply been grateful for human sanctuary and care. What did leprosy look like anyway? She remembered a movie, *Ben Hur*, the women's skin mottled and ugly-looking. Blisters, she supposed. Lesions. No one spoke about it these days, yet it existed still in Africa.

She leaned back, raising her face to the sky. There were no stars yet, only a half-moon floating silvery and sweet in the purple evening. Perched on the cliff top like a giant bird, this place had absorbed the past, layer upon layer. She slid her fingers along a crevice, feeling the roughness of the dust gathered there. They must be everywhere, these grains of unknown things: on the shingle, washed by the sea, dancing in the wind. She brought her hand up, leaning forward to inspect it through the fading light. These were the microscopic remnants of the departed she could see, the skin of the dead on hers.

What was it Claire had said? A hooded figure on the seashore? Someone in a grey cloak? Clichés of course.

Jumping up, she ran to the edge of the cliff and looked down. She was shivering. Cold. Night was closing in, and the path was dangerous. She needed to go.

++

The houses were solid square things that sat on individual plots but looked just like their neighbours. None had been built before the millennium. She remained silent as he

pointed them out, nodding at features of individual houses: conservatories, a double garage, an en-suite or two.

She could say something, of course. *I prefer old houses. Places with character.* But even that was too much. There hadn't even been an interview yet. She put her hand at the back of his neck, and he leaned into it.

'I'm proud of you,' she said.

After all, they might not even appoint him.

++

At school it was as if she'd taken a step away from the class. How was she going to tell them? *I might be leaving. I'm so sorry.* Though she worked to hide it, they picked up the change, as they always did, like animals scenting the air.

It wasn't just her of course. It was lots of things. Whitney's dad, the new boy Luke – who they treated not just as an outsider but as an interloper who had no right to be there. Despite all her efforts, they excluded him, were quietly unkind. Even the weather, turning from summer to cold, meant they didn't get out so much. There was a growing reluctance to respond, a near-glutinous lack of energy.

But it was Whitney who worried her most. For moments at a time, she sat staring unseeing at her work, or gazing out of the window at the slate-grey sky. She quarrelled with Kyra and Molly and Viola, made friends with them, and then fell out again. Sometimes she tagged on to her cousin Tom and his gang, and laughed at their jokes, egging them on. At others, she turned her back on them with disdain. This was not the Whitney Jess knew at all. The only person the little girl seemed to make any real effort to approach - bizarrely, since Tom and his crowd were so hostile to him - was Luke Bayely. More and more she hung around him, watching him doing things, whispering to him in corners.

And because Jess's management of the class had become less focused, her response more tentative, it wasn't Tom or Oliver, usually the worst behaved, or even Jerome, who wriggled under her skin and stung. But the obedient ones, polite and dutiful children who'd become crabby and erupted with sudden fights and tears.

'It's not fair,' Robin said, when she let the others go ahead of him to get their Lego during Golden Time. 'You *always* make me go last.'

'You know the rules, Robin. Table by table. When each one is tidy and ready.'

'It's *him*,' Robin said. 'It's his fault.' He pointed angrily at Luke who was sorting out his exercise books, placing them one by one on a pile, checking the front covers were uppermost.

'That's not kind, Robin.'

'Well I don't *want* him on my table.'

'*Robin*.'

'Well I don't.' He pushed at the books, sent them scattering.

++

Now it was Friday, the last numeracy session of the week. Several of the children were sniffing and coughing, made miserable with early autumn colds. Jess switched off the whiteboard and turned to them.

'I know you're tired,' she said. 'I am too. We'll read a story, shall we? Would you like that?'

She smiled, watching as the class settled themselves cross-legged on the floor.

'Luke,' she said, in a sudden moment of inspiration. 'Why don't *you* get our book today? Get one that your mummy's written. You can choose whichever you want. We like them all, don't we?' She beamed at the children.

After a moment of stillness, he stood up. But his movements were oddly heavy, like a slow-motion replay on TV. He walked to the shelves, took one of the novels and stared down at its cover. The children began to fidget.

‘Thank you, Luke. Bring it here.’ she said.

He didn’t move.

‘Luke?’

Lifting the book, he opened his fingers and let it drop to the floor.

She kept her voice level. ‘Can you pick it up please, Luke? That’s not really a good way to treat books, now is it?’

It lay on the carpet, a picture of Medea surrounded by the bodies of her dead children staring up from an open page. Luke gazed at it dumbly then ran to the side of the room and leaned into the wall, bringing his arms up to hide his face.

She suppressed a twinge of irritation. What was the matter with the boy? She thought of his strange, spikey mother, her bizarre response when she’d called round. Then all those pears, so many Jess had ended up taking them to the staffroom.

There were whispers, stifled sniggers. Whitney, curled cross-legged next to where he’d been sitting, looked almost frightened.

Jess rose and went over to him. Huddled into the wall, he was a picture of misery. Those ‘family issues’ Richard had mentioned – what were they?

‘You can stay there, for now, Luke. When you feel better, I want you to come and sit down with the others.’ She picked up the book, smoothed its pages flat and took it back to her chair.

The children’s grumbling took a while to fade. Caught up in the drama of Luke’s actions, they didn’t want to let it go. In his corner, Luke was picking at a button,

undoing it, and doing it up again. She held up her hands and waited. Then, bending to the book, she began to read.

Clouds turned the sky to night, and lightning forked on the far side of the bay. The gods were angry. The nurse looked up, searching the beach for the children. She must get them back to the palace before the storm broke.

++

‘You know,’ Jess said to Claire, when school had at last finished and the children gone off for the weekend, ‘what it’s like when you’re in Piccadilly Circus and you’re tired and want to go home and everyone around you is talking in a different foreign language?’

‘Not really, I’ve never been there. But I can imagine. What’s wrong?’

‘My class. It’s like that at the moment.’

++

A cold day, she could feel it: damp and autumnal. Beside her the clock said 7.08, early for Saturday. She swung herself out of bed and went to the window, tucking her head between the curtains. She was met by a wall of white, everything hidden under a thick layer of mist.

No matter. They would go anyway. It would be months before she could catch the tide this low again. Behind her Rob yawned, stretching himself awake.

‘Come back to bed.’

‘You said you’d help me look for shells.’

‘Oh God, did I?’

He groaned. Pushed back the covers.

++

The sea was veiled, its sounds muffled. Visibility twenty feet at best. There was no sign of the fog lifting. Jess pulled her jacket closer and zipped it up. Already the air had formed beads of wet on their clothes. Flotsam rose suddenly before them: a splintered wooden crate, a row of metal containers strung together with rope. Early walkers appeared briefly at the edge of their vision then vanished. Health enthusiasts, locals from the big houses by the reeds, loomed wraith-like and ran shivering in the direction of the ocean. Jess waved and called out a greeting, but soon they too were lost from view, their voices deadened.

Wading through pools of left-over sea-water, she and Rob made their way down the slope of the beach. It was impossible to know how far they had to go, how far they'd come. All they could see were the outlines of the swimmers' footprints left in the sand.

'You're soaked,' Rob said. He leaned to touch her hair, and she touched it too, felt its cold frizzy wetness. She didn't mind. It was beautiful, this hushed white world that gave them nothing back.

They walked on. The groyne loomed black and boney to their side and then disappeared. They had reached the point of the lowest tide. The ocean slid in and out of view. She looked down. At their feet was a carpet of shells, a wide band of pinks and greys and pearl, fading into the fog. Dropping to her knees, she took some up and cupped them in her palm. Pretty things. Delicate and perfect. How long they had lain there, she wondered. Decades. Maybe even centuries.

'All this time...' she said, 'yet no-one's ever seen them.'

'Until now,' said Rob. He bent to pick one up. 'Oh, a periwinkle. Loads of those on the beach. But *that*,' he fished round with his fingers and held it for her to see. 'It's called a baby's ear.' It was smooth, rounded. 'You don't get many of those on this bit of the coast.'

‘You know about them?’

‘Grandpa Baxter was the expert – because of being a fisherman. When we were kids, he was always bringing Mel and me down to the beach.’

Grandpa Baxter. She’d have liked one of those.

She uncurled her palms, showed Rob each of her finds in turn, letting him identify them: *slipper shell*, *cockle*, *angel’s wings*, the names almost as pretty as the shells themselves. There were some he didn’t know, some he said he’d never seen himself.

‘Will you take them into school?’ he asked when they’d done.

‘A few,’ Jess said. ‘I think it might be good for Luke. There was an incident on Friday.’ She told him about the book. Even now, she couldn’t fathom it, Luke’s sudden panic and misery.

‘You need to talk to Richard,’ Rob said.

‘I will.’ She placed the last of the shells in her pocket. Ahead she could see the sea, the ripple of the water as it hit the sand, the tips of tiny waves. The sun was breaking through, the mist evaporating.

++

She was aware of Luke watching as she lay out the shells at the beginning of Golden Time, arranging them amongst the fishermen’s netting and driftwood on the nature table. When she’d finished, he elbowed through, ignoring the other children. There was a moment of tension as Jerome and Tom and Oliver pushed back, their voices raised in protest. She touched each of them on the shoulder and shook her head. *Let him be*, her glance said, *you must make allowances*. It was what she was always asking these days, one way or another. She nodded at the class to show her approval.

Luke stared at the shells, looking critically at each. After a few seconds, he picked one up and took it back to his table.

‘Hey, that’s not allowed,’ cried Kyra. Other voices joined in. Oliver’s, Tom’s, Jerome’s.

Jess walked towards him. ‘What do you want it for, Luke?’

‘A picture,’ he said. ‘I want to do a picture.’

‘Then you may, Luke. It’s a lovely thing to do. But in future you must ask first.’ His eyes darted backwards and forwards across the room, refusing to meet hers. ‘You’ll put it back when you’ve finished, won’t you?’

He seemed hardly to have heard her. Already he was crouching over his drawing, becoming lost inside a force-field of concentration. Only when the bell rang for the end of school did he emerge, sitting suddenly upright and blinking as if he’d just come to after a long sleep. As the others went for their things, he rose from his seat and headed for the table. Later, when she looked at his desk, the picture had gone.

It was Whitney who found it. The next day during break, she sidled over and tugged at Jess’s sleeve.

‘What is it, Whitney? Have you lost your coat again?’

‘Luke’s picture, Miss,’ she whispered, more animated than Jess had seen her in weeks. Through the window, she could see Luke under the chestnut tree, several feet from where Tracy stood on duty. He was examining the bark and talking to himself. ‘He’s put it with the shells. You’ve got to come and look.’

‘Have I? Ok.’

‘See. It’s brill, init?’ Whitney said.

Jess leaned forward and slid the paper out from where it was half hidden under a piece of driftwood. As she unfolded it, she understood Whitney’s excitement. The

drawing was excellent. Way beyond the standard she'd expect from an eight-year-old. The angel's wing, its edges battered, its stripes as light and delicate as on the shell itself, lay clearly before her. Luke had even captured the pearly flatness of its interior.

'Wow,' Jess said, beaming down at her. Whitney was right to alert her. 'Brill's definitely the word.'

++

'Jess?' Richard called as she passed. Tracey stood behind him, reading a folder. 'I'd like a quick word about Luke.'

Jess slid in, stood in front of his desk. He motioned her to a seat.

'How's he doing?'

She glanced at Tracey. 'OK, actually. I mean it's taking a while. But he's clever. He works hard. In fact, he's turning out to be quite a talented little artist.'

'Ah,' Tracey said, as if she'd been expecting it. 'That's a sign of being on the spectrum.'

'What?'

'Autism.' Tracey held up the folder. 'We've been checking the symptoms. Avoidance of eye contact. Repetition of certain word and phrases. Flat tone of voice. Prefers to be alone.'

'It's all rather familiar, I'm afraid.' Richard said.

'Also a feature is a precocious talent at maths or art.'

'I see.' Jess felt herself flush. She could hardly admit she'd wondered about it herself. But Aspergers, not autism. The possibility on the far edges of her consciousness, nagging but held away. 'Why isn't his father ever around? He never seems to visit.'

‘As you know, Mr Bayely’s based in Tanzania. He works for UNICEF. His wife brought Luke back to England after a family bereavement.’

‘A bereavement?’

Richard dropped his voice. ‘A little girl, I believe.’

A tightness caught her. ‘You mean the Bayelys had another child, and she *died*?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why didn’t anyone tell me?’ She stared first at Tracey and then back at Richard.

‘It’s not autism Luke’s suffering from,’ she said. ‘It’s grief.’

Richard made a *hff-ing* sound with his lips. ‘I don’t think so. There were consultations with psychologists, apparently. Both in Africa and London. Mrs Bayely wanted to keep things as quiet as possible, and I agreed. But when I heard what happened in your classroom I realised that was a mistake. There was an incident with a book, I believe.’

Jess swallowed. ‘There was – but I handled it.’

‘I’m sure you did,’ he said. ‘Apparently one of the children was frightened, one of the girls.’

‘*Frightened*?’

‘She came to see me,’ Tracey said. Jess felt a moment of cold betrayal. Kyra? Molly? Surely not Whitney? She wondered what they’d said, what Tracey thought she knew.

‘We have to think about *all* the children,’ Tracey said.

‘Of course we do.’ Anger spiked her words.

‘A child with Luke’s problems can cause havoc in a small school like this.’

‘What?’ Tracey’s capacity for drama astounded her. ‘We just need to give him time, that’s all. Just as we are with Whitney. In fact the two are becoming friends.’

Richard opened a drawer of his desk and began to rifle through it. He looked up and smiled. 'Well, keep an eye on him, Jess. Let us know what's going on.'

Yes,' she said. 'Of course.' She tried to smile back, but it wouldn't come.

++

She'd taken to walking home via the beach, letting the day ease away, the class tensions drift on the wind. But this afternoon she carried them inside her, like something lumpy and indigestible she'd eaten for lunch. It was wrong of Richard to keep the death of Luke's baby sister from her. She was the boy's teacher for God's sake. Didn't they trust her at all?

What she needed – what the class needed - was a project. Something to bring them together.

She pulled her raincoat close and slid her hands into the pockets. It was cold today, more winter than autumn, the sky heavy with approaching rain, sand skittering up off the dunes. Even the weather was conspiring against her. For a moment she considered turning back to take the quicker route home through the village and past the green. But Rob might already be home, wanting her to look at more houses online. She couldn't face it. She stood looking out at the grey-brown waves and the darkening sky. The first drops of rain hit, and she dug into her school bag for her brolly. It wasn't there.

What the hell. If she got wet, she got wet.

Perhaps, she thought, uplifted by her own recklessness, weather could be the class topic. Tornados and storms and other powerful natural phenomena. Things that were dramatic and exciting and violent. She would show them pictures of tsunamis and earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Maybe they could even explore the destruction of their own little bit of Suffolk, all those centuries ago.

Ah! She stopped. Perhaps not just now, not with Barry still in hospital and Whitney so anxious.

But a project on the old town itself? Old Charlburgh *before* it disappeared. The people who lived here - the jobs they did and the clothes they wore. The lepers and the leper chapel. The cathedral. The shipyards where they'd built warships.

She raised her head, felt the sting of rain on her cheeks. It was battering now, masking the horizon and bouncing off the surface of the sea. Underneath it were the ruins. Intact, the tourists liked to think, though she hardly knew how it was possible after so long. She fastened the top button of her raincoat and pulled up the hood. Inside it, she felt warm, optimistic.

She needed to find a special task for Whitney, perhaps pair her up with Luke, who might be persuaded to do some drawings if she asked him carefully. She herself would research the Internet, as well as arrange a class visit to the small museum that Gabriel's father ran. She stopped, excited suddenly by a new thought: she could get the children to ask questions at home, dig into family legend. What jewels they might discover.

Then there'd be posters for the wall, a display in the foyer. And, if Richard agreed - she saw no reason why he shouldn't - a mufti day too, when everyone could come into school dressed as a medieval citizen. She'd find a prize for the best costume.

The wet was soaking through the shoulders of her coat. It had probably permeated the hood too. She wasn't asking too much of them, was she? Aiming too high? Researching, writing things up, illustrating. It was a lot. But think of the National Curriculum requirements the project covered – History, Citizenship, English, Art. A bit of Science and Maths too. A big project.

They were good kids. Keen for the most part. Hardworking. They liked a challenge. So did she. It could take them right through Christmas and into next term.

She *would* still be here, wouldn't she?

She could feel the chill of the rain, the creeping dark of the sky.

6

Emily

The shells mean nothing. They mean everything. Now his teacher is doing it too, forcing her to look at the things, when there are shells all over Luke's room as if he's trying to bury himself in them.

'It's rare,' Mrs Baxter is saying, 'for a child of his age to be aware of light and dark in that way. Just look at the shading.'

Emily looks. She can see that it's good, but no different from all the others he's done. 'Yes,' she says.

'It's exciting when a child reveals a talent like that.'

'I'm sure it is.' The woman's attractive in that open man-pleasing sort of way. Perhaps Emily's thought that earlier. Sometimes she can't tell whether an idea is new or has been there all along. But Luke likes Mrs Baxter – that's something Emily's sure of, she can see in the way he holds his body. And since it's rare for Luke to take to anyone these days, she must try to be pleasant.

Mrs Baxter is examining her face as if unsure what she sees there, so Emily smiles at her. Mrs Baxter smiles back. 'We're very proud of him,' the teacher says.

Emily glances at the other children. They're in clumps by the door, talking and laughing. Luke is on his own by his locker, tidying it.

'How's he settling?' she asks.

Mrs Baxter's brow furrows. 'He's finding his way about,' she says. 'Getting to know us, and what to expect. It takes a while, doesn't it, for anyone to feel at home in a new place?' The frown eases. 'Sometimes, I still feel I'm doing it myself – and I've been here over four years.'

She doesn't mean it. Emily can tell.

'I wonder,' Emily says, 'can you possibly persuade Luke *away* from the shells. It's a bit of an obsession with him, you see. I've been trying to find other things –'

'Oh'

'I thought it had stopped, actually.'

'I hadn't realised.' Mrs Baxter flushes.

Heavens, her feeling are hurt. It's such an effort, this business of being polite. Luke has come over, is pushing his feet along the vinyl, making it squeak. It does something to her teeth. 'Luke, do you *have* to do that?'

'I like the sound.'

'It's horrible. Stop it please.'

He weaves a circle, making long slow steps so that the squeaks stop and then restart. What's the matter with the child? She would like to walk away and leave him there.

'As a matter of fact,' Mrs Baxter says, her eyes following Luke as he trails round. 'We're starting something new. I haven't told the children yet, but perhaps, as you...' She stops, apparently flustered again and waves her hands in the general direction of the beach. 'I thought we'd research the old town. It's a fascinating subject.'

Fascinating? Emily isn't sure what the word means any more. It's hard to find anything interesting. 'I'm sure it is,' she says.

'What do *you* think, Luke?' says the teacher. He has come up beside them again, his feet silent.

‘About what?’ he says. The bluntness of his voice makes Emily flinch.

‘A project. On the old town. That would be good, wouldn’t it?’

‘That might be alright,’ he says.

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

Great. They can go now. Emily starts for the exit. The teacher follows with Luke by her side. ‘You’re a historian yourself, aren’t you, Mrs Bayely?’ the woman says as Emily reaches the door. ‘I saw it on the back of one of your novels’

‘I suppose I am.’ So she’s has read her books, has she? Is aware of them at any rate. Emily isn’t sure that matters either. There’s silence. Clearly she’s expected to say something more. ‘Actually my degree was in Classics.’

‘Ah.’ Mrs Baxter pauses. ‘Then this must all be a bit recent for you. You’ll have seen the leper chapel though. The one on the cliff.’

‘Yes, I have. St Ethelred’s is it?’

‘St James. Apparently they put the beds facing the altar so that first thing in the mornings, when the lepers woke up, they could give thanks to God.’

‘Really?’ Her hand is on the doorknob.

‘St Ethelred’s is the one of the churches that got buried in the storms. At low tide you’re supposed to be able to see it.’

‘Really?’ Has she said that before?

‘They say the bells toll when something momentous happens.’

‘How interesting?’ Perhaps it is in a way. She hunts for something else. ‘Have you ever heard it?’

Mrs Baxter laughs. It’s a warm laugh, a kind one. ‘No. But I’d love to.’

At last Emily can escape. She takes Luke’s hand and lets it lie limp and cold in hers. She wants to crush it, feel the heat of the life hidden there.

‘Why don’t you come for coffee after school, one day,’ she says. ‘Perhaps I could help with the research?’

‘Gosh, yes. That would be wonderful. Thank you.’ Mrs Baxter beams.

What on earth has she said that for, when she longs to be alone?

++

Luke is holding the mobile to his ear, grunting. She isn’t sure if he’s really listening. Perhaps Simon has already hung up and Luke’s noises are aimless - you can’t always tell. If she puts her head up close to find out, he’ll have one of his tantrums, and then she’ll have to ring off anyway, to deal with it. She walks round in front of him and gestures with her hands – *let me have it, hurry up*. He pretends not to see.

She walks into the hallway. She can pretend too. That way he’ll be coming running after her in a paroxysm of guilt. *Mummy, don’t go away. Daddy wants you*.

She doubts he does actually. As far as she can see Simon is doing his best to avoid her. One call in ten days. There’ll be a story about impossible mobile links, automatic messages he couldn’t get past. But how come most of the Africans in Arusha never had such trouble? She looks at her watch. Thirteen minutes now. She needs to go further away. She opens the front door. The wind rushes in and picks up the papers on the hall table and sends them into the air, and she scrabbles to catch them. In the kitchen, Luke cries out. She hears the clatter of the phone landing on the tiles.

Bugger.

‘Luke, sweetheart, it’s OK. It’s just the wind.’ In only the few weeks he’s developed this horror of it. When she asks him what he’s afraid of, he’s never able to tell her, never able to explain why he drops to the floor and curls his arms about his head. It frightens her to see him like that. Now he’s done it again. She looks down at the top of his head, at the thin child’s fingers clasped together as if trying to hide it. She reaches

out a hand and withdraws it again. There's no point in trying to comfort him. Instead, she picks the phone off the floor and puts it to her ear. The dial tone buzzes.

She sinks down beside Luke so that he knows she's there, but doesn't touch him. She presses the ring-back button on the mobile. *I'm sorry, the person you are calling is not available.* She swears under her breath and tries several times more. At each attempt, that same stupid, supercilious voice. She slips the phone into her pocket and turns to Luke. His breathing has settled.

She touches his arm. 'Are you OK now, Lukey?' He shifts his shoulders to show he's heard. Keeping her voice low, she says, 'You had a lovely long phone call with Daddy. Now I need you to tell me what he said.'

++

The kitchen cupboards have layers of mould forming from the damp. Evil patches of blue-black that glare at her from corners and the tops of shelves. 'Flood damage from way back,' the agent said when he gave her the key. 'It's been cleaned up, but the mould'll come back. It always does.' Actually, the kitchen is a tip, as if they've only just moved in.

She surveys the tea-chests piled against the end wall. They're still packed with the stuff she kept in storage while they were in Africa. After nearly eight weeks here, she's only emptied one box, washing the plates and cutlery after each meal and leaving them to drain for next time. She knows it isn't helping with Luke. He needs order, to know where things belong. In Arusha he was forever rearranging the plates and cups and dishes according to size. A maddening task because he wanted to make sure the colours worked logically too, that the red pottery didn't touch the green, that the blue wasn't beside the yellow.

At least all the stuff here is white. Thank the lord for that.

She's on her knees, rubbing. The smell of the anti-mould spray a sharp taste coating the back of her throat. She's sent Luke up to his room, to keep him away from it, but he hasn't gone. She can see his shoes side by side on the stairs, hear the low murmur of his voice. Goodness knows where he is in his head.

So Simon is coming home? That was what Luke told her. She wonders if it was true and, if so, for how long.

'When Luke? Did he say when?'

'Soon.'

'Think carefully, sweetheart. What *exactly* did Daddy say?'

He shuffled his feet, brought his shoulders up to his ears. 'He said ' Hello Luke, how's my boy?'

'What else?'

'He said, "Where's Mummy. Can you get her?"'

It was hopeless. She closed her eyes, saw the after-image of Luke's shape against the lids and opened them again.

'*Other* than that, Luke, did he mention a date?'

'No. He said we can walk on the beach.'

It was something. 'We must look forward to that then, mustn't we?' she said.

Now Luke's sitting on the stairs, staring out through the long landing window to the sea and talking to himself.

It's good for her to be doing some thing physical: her aching arms and the stiffness in her back allowing her to think only of her body and the task she has to do. She works hard, pushing down into the heel of her hand as she scrubs, getting the scourer into the corners. Who cares if she destroys her fingernails. They'll grow again. She might even repaint the cupboards at some point. The fact that when Simon comes back – *if* he

comes back – the place might look vaguely like a home is simply a lucky bonus. It's a project to keep her busy, that's all.

Does she even want Simon here? He's avoided coming for so long, he might as well stay away. They're fine just the two of them, she and Luke. They have an understanding. She can curl in around the hole that gnaws at her stomach if she needs to, and he can get on with being himself.

She leans to rinse the cloth in the bucket then sits back on her heels. Empty cupboards, clean now but streaked with ancient paint and splitting wood-grain, stare back at her. Six done. One to go.

The wind has eased; she can see the branches of the tamarisk tree, the last of its blossom bobbing beyond the glass door. Luke will be happier now. She pushes herself upright up and goes to look for him. He's at the top of the stairs, still gazing out to sea. From where she stands, she can't see the waves.

'Sweetheart, the cupboards are nearly done. Why don't you come down and help me put things away.' He gives no sign of hearing. 'Five minutes,' she says.

++

She's more or less finished when the knock comes at the door. The dinnerware has been positioned the largest to the left, the smallest to the right in neat piles of six. In the wall cupboards she's arranged things the same, with Luke directing her from below. 'Yes, *that* way.' He's been impatient with her slowness.

She's had to admit the system is a sensible one 'I'll be able to find things with my eyes shut,' she told him.

'Why do you want to do that?' he asked.

She looked at him. 'Well, I don't actually want to. I just meant - '

But now there's someone at the door. The teacher woman perhaps. Mrs Baxter. She will pretend the cottage is empty. She brings her finger to her lips to keep Luke quiet, but he's disappeared anyway, gone up to his room. She ducks down beside the remaining empty cupboard and pulls herself into a ball. If someone looks through the window at the top of the door, they might spot her shadow. The knock comes again, and she braces herself for the sound of Luke's feet on the stairs. For once, she hopes he's lost in something. If not, she'll have to invite the woman in, be nice to her. She puts a hand over her mouth, stills her lungs. She's sure the visitor is listening for the breathing of the house. Then a click as the back gate opens, the sound of a hand trying the kitchen door. She feels suddenly ridiculous, curled up half in/half out of a cupboard. She can hardly stand up now and go to the door to greet her, a welcoming smile on her face.

'Fuck.' A man's voice.

Simon

It can't be possible. Only four hours or so ago, he was in Tanzania, talking to Luke on the phone. Now he's in her garden, swearing. She stands and peeks out of the glass door. He's moved back against the fence and is staring up at the windows, his eyes narrowed. He looks like a stranger. For a moment she hates him. How dare he think he can just walk back into her life any time he wants? She waits, watching him, and then opens the back door.

'Bloody hell, Emily, I thought I was going to have to climb in.'

'What are you doing here?'

'That's a fine welcome.' He moves forward and stands in front of her on the step.

'Aren't you going to let me in?'

'Sorry.' She laughs awkwardly and edges aside. He doesn't kiss her.

'How are you?' he says.

‘What do you think?’ She raises a hand, drops it again. ‘I’m fine. Haven’t you got any luggage?’

‘It’s in the porch.’

His hair seems thinner than before, his face more tired. His jeans and shirt look slept in. ‘It’s so odd to see you here.’ she says.

‘I told Luke.’

‘I know. He said. But I didn’t think it was *now*. I thought next month or something. He dropped the phone. I couldn’t get back to you.’

‘I was at the airport. My battery went.’

She suppresses the urge to make a comment about chargers. Instead she says, ‘Are you OK? You look tired. Shattered.’

The side of his mouth droops in acknowledgement. As he does it, his strangeness drops away and he’s the husband he used to be. She moves toward him, and he holds out his arms. ‘God, Simon, I’m glad to see you.’

‘Me too.’ She feels the heat of his body seep into hers. After a moment he straightens. ‘Where’s Luke?’

‘Upstairs. He probably hasn’t heard you,’ She guesses he has, but, for whatever unfathomable reason, Luke has chosen to stay in his room. ‘Why don’t you go up to him?’

Simon eyebrows rise, asking the question she can’t answer. She shrugs. ‘He’ll be pleased to see you,’ she says.

She goes to look in the larder. More empty shelves. They’ll have to go to one of the local pubs to eat, beans on toast is hardly going to do. She doesn’t welcome the prospect, sitting there being stared at by the locals. And now Simon is calling. She moves out into the kitchen to hear him.

‘He’s not here. He’s not anywhere up here.’

‘Perhaps he’s in the garden.’

As soon as she’s said it, she knows he can’t be.

++

Simon’s furious, incandescent. ‘What the fuck?’ he says.

They spot him the instant they reach the top of the dunes. He’s on the beach, where the shingle softens into sand. Behind him the sea spit showers of spray. For a moment Emily thinks she sees another boy there too. She stops and peers forward, trying to make sense of the misty shapes the waves make when they hit the shore, but it’s all too vague, too far away. The effort disorients her, and she feels suddenly unsteady, as if the dunes have shifted beneath her feet. Then the spray shifts, and she sees he’s alone.

‘He must have sneaked out. I didn’t hear the door.’

‘How long?’

‘I don’t know. Fifteen minutes. Half an hour at most.’

‘Christ, Emily. Isn’t it enough that we’ve -?’ He stops.

Perhaps she will hit him now, in full view of anyone on the beach. How *dare* he?

‘I’m sorry,’ he says.

She looks away. Luke’s running through the shallows, his arms out to wind.

Amazingly, he’s dancing with it, calling to it. His thin legs and foal-like body moving weightlessly through the air, his hair flowing round his head in a halo of curls. Every so often he stops and claps his hands, and then the dancing starts again as the wind’s catches him with its music. There’s no terror, just delight. Abandoned, exuberant delight. She hasn’t seen him like this in years.

A lump rises into her throat, and she can't speak. She reaches out to stop Simon moving. He turns and stares at her, fury still etched on his face. 'Leave him,' she says. 'Just for a moment. You've no idea how hard it's been.'

It's his being there, she recognizes, that allows her this freedom. Alone, she'd rush to grab Luke's arm, drag him away. There would be tears, screams. Almost certainly a humiliating tussle. He would disappear into himself for days.

'I'd like,' says Simon, 'to say hello to my son. If that's alright with you.'

She withdraws her hand and follows him down. It will be no different between them. She should have known.

Jess

They were passing the farms, the scent of the pigs earthy and intense. Jess opened the package on her lap to expose the fluffy pink elephant she'd bought for their youngest niece. Rob glanced across. 'It's ghastly,' he said and focused back on the road.

'Do you think so?' She turned it round to see it from different angles. 'I think it's sweet. I'd have loved it.'

'Shall I buy you one?'

She laughed. 'No thanks. I've got you.'

'Oh, nice.' His free hand reached across and squeezed her knee. 'I'm glad you're coming.'

'Me too,' she said.

'What were you meant to be doing anyway?'

'Seeing Emily Bayely – you know, mother of the new boy.'

'At the *weekend*?'

'We're researching Old Charlburgh.'

'What on earth for?'

She studied his face, trying to make sense of the hostility she caught in his tone, but he twisted away, checking the junction. 'It's important,' she said, keeping her voice level. 'The kids should know about their past?'

'They already do.'

'No, they don't. They know Old Charlburgh was destroyed by storms. That's it. Full stop. They know nothing about the city itself – it's *life*.'

He shrugged. ‘They’re kids Anna. They have play stations and X-boxes. Do you really think they care?’ He pulled out into the main road. There were more pigs opposite, huge and pinky-grey, their snouts buried in the dust.

‘Yes, I do actually. Or rather, I think they should. It’s their *history*.’

‘It never mattered to me...’

‘What about the ghosts?’

He made a strange noise with his lips. ‘I told you, I was joking.’

She fought the urge to reply. It wouldn’t help. It was as if he resented her interest in the village, her commitment to it.

‘Anyway,’ he said. ‘We might not be here much longer.’

The new job. She’d tucked it away. Now he’d brought it back out, blocking her vision.

++

Mel grinned, a child at each hand. They strained forward. Rob, his cheerfulness restored, knelt and hugged them both. The hallway was hot and littered with toys. It smelled of garlic and strawberry jam. Jess stepped into the fug and kissed her sister-in-law.

‘We’re not late are we?’

‘I got my Spongebob torch,’ Nathan’s four-year-old fist held up something yellow and plastic and waved it at her.

‘Wow,’ Jess leaned to see. ‘Can you show me how it works?’

‘You saw it at Christmas, silly.’ Nathan’s voice was scathing.

Mel tapped him on the head. ‘Hey mister,’ she said.

He pressed a thumb against a button on the side of the tube. Nothing happened. He stared into plastic at its top and frowned. Mel took the toy, shook it hard, and handed it

back. 'Battery,' she said. The torch sent a thin beam into Jess's face. There was a pressure on her legs. She looked down to see Beth gazing up at her, a piece of tinsel tied in her hair. 'Say hello to Aunty Jess, Beth - and let her come in.' Mel unwound her daughter from Jess's calves.

'Matt working?' asked Rob.

Mel shook her head. 'Don't ask!'

In the kitchen there was pasta on the stove, some kind of sauce bubbling in a red Le Creuset.

'Kids' grub, I'm afraid.' Mel said.

'Yummy,' Rob rubbed his hands. Nathan, who had dropped the torch somewhere, rubbed his hands too.

Jess watched them together. For all that Rob liked to think of himself as a man's man, when he was at Mel's something changed in him. He loved the steamy kitchen, the noise, the toys scattered over sofas and carpets. Even the nappies discarded in a corner of the bathroom and the crayon marks on the walls didn't put him off. It was about family, for him. The chaotic safety of it all.

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'Go on,' Rob said. 'Ask her.'

He was sitting at the head of the table with Alice leaning against his chest. In one of her hands was a half-chewed carrot, in the other the pink elephant.

Mel was everything Jess had once imagined a mother should be. Like her own might have been had life been different. A picture nursed like a sweet bruise all her childhood years: a brother, sharp and funny like Nathan; a baby as giggly and plump as Alice. Tangles of laughter and love. And her at her mother's side, the big sister, helping. She swallowed, recognized the envy wrapping itself around the fiction. How did you

mother? She didn't know. Yet Mel - in this wonderful warm, sprawling nest of a house – mothered as if she'd been born to it. Which, Jess supposed, she had.

There must have been a time when Rob imagined that she, Jess, would be like that.

'Ask me what?' said Jess.

'We've decided to have the children christened,' Mel said.

'Mel wants you be Alice's godmother.'

'Godmother?' Jess parroted it stupidly.

Rob lifted Alice to a standing position on his knee. Her legs buckled and straightened against him. 'Godfather Rob and Godmother Jess.' Rob held each of Alice's hands, balancing her. 'What do you think of that, little puddle?'

Mel's eyes were on Jess's. 'Please say yes.'

Godmother. The word frightened her. It was why she was a teacher. Keeping the distance, keeping it safe. Alice was gripping Rob's fingers, pulling them towards her. Above the sheen of her hair, Rob beamed.

'Of course,' Jess said. 'I'd be honoured.'

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'Do you want this to go in the dishwasher?' Jess indicated the Le Creuset, crusted with dried sauce.

'No need. It'll soak.'

Mel sat with the baby in her lap, undoing the buttons on her blouse. Alice's legs kicked up once, twice, and then softened as her mouth found its target. Her eyes filmed and began to close. Mel stroked a cheek. 'No-oh, Alice. Not yet.'

Godmother? Jess had no idea what the word meant. If it is was what it seemed to suggest – a mothering of the child's moral upbringing, as a sort of Christian compass, then she was doubly ill-equipped.

Mel's eyes were on her. 'What's is it?' she said.

'Nothing.'

It was the intention that mattered, the commitment behind it. Did she have that? She leaned against the stove and closed her eyes, letting the warmth soak into her. She could hear the children calling out in some other part of the house, the dim echo of Rob's laughter, And Matt's too now. She guessed they were in the playroom. Here, there was only the ticking of the kitchen clock and the sounds from Alice's lips as she sucked.

'I've never been, you know, confirmed,' she said. 'Does it matter?'

'Crikey, no idea. No one mentioned that.' Mel grinned. 'Maybe don't tell the vicar.'

'I didn't realize you and Matt were churchgoers.'

'You're joking? Haven't been to church since we got married.' Mel wiped the baby's chin with a bit of muslin and shifted her position. 'But, oh, I dunno, it just seemed a good thing to do. Cover our options so to speak.' She was quiet for a moment. 'But it kind of extends the family, doesn't it? All those godmothers and godfathers looking out for the kids. I like the thought of that.'

'I suppose. Yes.'

She'd had a friend once. Drusilla – the name as charmed as the world she inhabited – who'd taken her home for tea. The house had been overflowing with broken toys and sagging sofas and an unbelievable troupe of beautiful, disorderly children: three brothers and three sisters whose mother had shouted and laughed as if she were one of them.

'Why is it just you and me, Dad?' she'd asked when she got home. Even as she'd spoken she'd known it was unkind, but the question had burned a hole in her chest so big it had climbed out all on its own.

But, instead of being angry, or answering in the toneless voice he used when she pushed him to the limit of his patience, he'd cried, his face crumpled like the cellophane from his cigarette packet when he threw it on a fire.

'It's what God gave us,' he'd said at last.

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'Do you *believe* any of it?' she asked.

'What, the church stuff?' Mel was leaning back into the chair, her eyes closed. Now she opened them again. 'Yes. I think I do. Jesus. Forgiveness. Heaven. What's the point otherwise?'

Point? There was plenty of point, Jess thought.

Mel was staring at her oddly. Alice made a grizzling sound, and she shifted her to the other breast.

'You believe there's life after death?'

'Crikey. You're getting earnest. But sure, why not? There must be more than all this.' Mel shifted an arm, the best she could do to gesture to the kitchen and the world beyond. 'Anyway, what about mediums? Ghosts? All those unsettled spirits that can't find rest.' Her face became serious. 'There was a boy at St Margaret's when we were there, he used to see them. Hasn't Rob said?'

'Who used to see what?' He was standing in the doorway, Nathan hanging on his arm. 'Nate wants jellybeans.'

'He can't. He's not allowed them after supper, he knows that. Nathan, it's bedtime. Go and tell your dad to take you.'

'I can put him to bed if you want. What d'ya think, Sponge Bob?'

'I have to have a story.'

'Of course.'

Nathan beamed.

‘What am I supposed to have told her?’ Rob said. He turned to go.

‘About that boy at school.’

‘What boy?’

‘You know, the one who disappeared – he was in your class. Didn’t he see ghosts?’

The lines between her eyebrows deepened and then eased as memory dawned. ‘Jimmy Carter. That was it.’

‘No, it wasn’t,’ Rob’s voice was flat. ‘His name, if you must know, was Jimmy Henson.’

‘Of course. Henson. Jimmy Henson. I’d forgotten that. He saw ghosts, didn’t he? I’m sure he did.’

‘Did he?’ Rob’s tone was cold. He bent his head to Nathan’s. ‘Come on, soldier, time we sorted you out.’

The women exchanged a look, listening as the two mounted the stairs.

‘Crikey,’ Mel said, ‘What’s got into him?’

Jess shrugged her shoulders. Another example of Rob’s growing edginess. She wanted to tell Mel about the new job, but it felt dangerous, as if talking about it would bring it closer.

‘What happened to the boy’ she said instead.

‘Jimmy whotsit? Oh God, yeh. He *did* see ghosts, I remember now. He’d stand in the playground talking to them, though no one believed him. We just thought he was mad. Then one day he disappeared. They said he’d gone into the reeds, but I don’t think he was ever found.’

‘Jesus.’

‘Yeh, I know.’

‘His poor parents.’

‘There was no mum, just a brother I think, and his dad. I don’t know if that makes it worse, or better. They had the hut by the car park – the one where they sell crab nets and ice creams and give out the tickets.’

‘Where was his mum?’

‘Good question. I don’t know. I think she might have died.’

The plastic flowers they’d seen that day. Grey and mucky and sliding in and out of the mud by the boardwalk. A real remembrance then.

‘Jimmy *was* totally barmy, you know.’ Mel pulled at her blouse, closing the buttons. ‘After a while, the dad left the village.’

‘That’s so sad.’

After a tragedy like that, maybe it was all you could do. She wondered about Emily Bayely. Had she fled too? Escaped Africa because it was the only way to bear things?

‘Come on,’ Mel said. She rose and thrust Alice towards her sister-in-law. ‘Practice being God-mum. I need to see that Beth gets to bed.’

Alice’s plump little body settled itself in Jess’s arms. The baby was almost asleep, her eyelids heavy, her hands curled into fists. Through the unblemished softness of her skin were the tiny blue veins that kept her alive.

Emily

A door is banging. Or a window. She can't bear it another second, and pushes herself off the sofa to track it down. As she mounts the stairs she's assailed by the stink of the sea, brackish and bitter, as if a mass of rotting seaweed has been deposited on the shore and the wind, catching it, has chased it reeling into the cottage. Through the landing window she can see the tide half-up, the beach cold and empty and grey.

The door to Luke's bedroom is open, as are the windows, one crashing into the frame and swinging out and in again. It's unlike her fastidious son to leave it like that, but she supposes he must have. A new waft of the stink hits the back of her throat, and she almost gags. She imagines a kraken or cetus, dead for centuries, its putrid remains floating to the surface, the contents of its stomach disgorged onto the sand.

She holds her breath. Bangs the windows shut with a swing of an arm.

The sound of the waves is muted, as if she's donned earmuffs, but the scent is still there, thick as a fog. She closes Luke's door behind her with a shudder. The smell lingers on the stairs and wafts through the hallway. It's only when she's back in the sitting room that there's any relief. She sits on the sofa, lets herself breathe.

How dull this room is. The walls empty, the shelves and mantelpiece still bare. Simon's voice rings in her ears. 'Still no pictures then? It's time Emily, surely?' But he's travelling, so it's easier for him. 'It's our *home*,' he said, as if he lived there. She allows herself a smile though there's no humour in it. The place offers a kind of protection against the world, but that's as far as it goes. She has no love for it, no sense of ownership. She goes to the bureau, a strange old-fashioned thing with a sloping top,

and stands in front of it. The box is in the bottom drawer. She doesn't know if she wants it or not. But it's too much – attracting and repelling at the same time - and she crouches to get it, to break the spell, fingering the picture on its lid as if it were alive. It's an eagle, a Bateleur. Seen in Ruaha their first holiday there. A beautiful thing.

She sits with the closed box on her knee, alternately staring down at the image and gazing blankly out towards the dunes. It may be enough to hold it there for a while and then put it unopened back into the drawer as she usually does. After several minutes, she pulls off the lid, laying it eagle-down on the coffee table, and gazes at the box's contents. At the top is a photograph of Luke as a baby. He's in his high chair looking up at the camera, a set of Simon's car keys held up for inspection in his small fist. The first of Luke's obsessions, those keys, though she hadn't seen it at the time. Very slowly, she slides the picture out of the way, as if what lies below it might ignite and set her aflame. Even so, the burn is piercing and sudden.

She's known it was waiting, but not like this. If she weren't already sitting, she'd be on the floor. She feels the room sway and tries to hold herself still. Something's happening to her body, turning it to marshmallow, turning it to nothing. In the terrible heat, her bones have become ash.

Mid October, not yet half term. More storms creeping up from the east, the waves angry, the winds rattling chimneys and windows and making the trees moan. Even from as far away as St Margaret's, Jess could hear the sea pounding the shore.

At his desk, Luke's head was down, his body quivering with anxious intensity. Whitney was beside him, peering at a book on the table. As Jess approached, the two looked up. 'Coastal Erosion,' said the heading at the top of the page. There were illustrations of crumbling cliffs, arrows that indicated wind directions and the upward surge of the ocean. The volume, on geology from the 'Science is Fun' series in Year 6 library, was advanced.

'It's not here,' said Whitney.

'What isn't here?'

'Flooding,' Whitney said.

'Not *flooding*.' There was frustration in Luke's voice.

'What then? I might be able to help.'

'It's that leper-chapel,' said Whitney. Luke's stared at her. 'But that's what you *said*.'

Was this a genuine friendship now, Jess wondered. She hoped Luke was kind to the little girl. He leaned forward, cutting Whitney out, his breath warm on Jess's cheek.

'When's it going to happen?'

'When's what going to happen?' She met his eyes but let her glance include Whitney too. The little girl looked close to tears.

There'd been no news of Barry for several days. A long job, Hugh had said. Jess touched the girl's arm. 'Why don't you go and get the history books out of the cupboard and put them out on the tables? That would really help.' Whitney hesitated. 'Go on, sweetheart.' When she'd gone, Jess turned to Luke. 'Now, Luke, what's worrying you?'

'I'm not *worrying*,' he said.

'So, what is-?'

'The boy *said*.'

Boy? Tom? Oliver? She waited.

'Luke?' she said at last. 'What boy? What did he say?'

He shook his head, as if her refusal to understand was intentional. 'The leper chapel - it's going to come *down*.'

'Well, I suppose it will, one day, yes. But not for *centuries*.'

He sat back, disappointment clouding his eyes. It didn't seem to be fear he'd been feeling at all – but anticipation. Did he *want* it to happen?

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Yet he seemed worried by the storms. A fear that grew as the days shortened. Today the gales were particularly bad, slamming things shut, screaming through the trees. When his mother arrived late, to collect him, Jess took her aside.

'This weather, it seems to frighten him. Look.' He was standing at the back of the room, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. At every blast of the wind, he flinched.

'Sometimes it does.' But then he leaves his windows open at home and doesn't bother in the slightest... I've no idea what going on in his mind.' Emily Bayely frowned. 'Hurry up, Lukey, we're late.'

Luke let out a cry as a gust slammed into the upper window. 'Come on, darling,' his mother said. 'Don't be silly, please.' Another blast followed, and he cowered into the

wall. Above them the window flew open and crashed back against its frame. There was an electric crackle as the glass split and a web of lines spread across the top pane. Jess caught her breath waiting for the splinters to fall.

They didn't come.

'It's alright, Luke. I think it's safe.' She pointed to his locker. 'Now, why don't you go quickly over there and help your mummy get your things? She might have forgotten where they're kept.'

Curved into the wall, he was deaf to her, his face sunk inside itself, staring out at nothing. He seemed to belong to another world. She felt an impulse to go to him, to pull his body into the warmth of her own and back into the present.

His mother's job.

Touch him. For god's sake, give him a cuddle.

Only then did Emily speak. 'What's *wrong*, Luke?' The words were more exasperated than loving. 'We've got to go.'

'Please,' Jess said. 'There's no rush.'

'There is actually.' Emily's voice was sharp. 'We have to be somewhere. Come on, Luke.' He seemed not hear. Emily closed her eyes, drew in a breath.

'Luke,' she said again.

He stood upright.

'Fuck.'

The word was said with all the explosive power an eight-year-old could give it. It echoed round the room, seeming to silence even the gales outside.

The sound faded, and the wind renewed its force, battering against the roof. A tile clattered and crashed to the playground. A sudden stink of ocean. She glanced up at the

broken window. It held. But the air in the room had chilled, as though a door had opened and winter had come.

She walked over and stood beside him. She felt ice cold, as if Luke's misery had risen and lodged in her insides. 'It's alright,' she said. 'Everything's ok.'

Emily moved too then, a sudden flash of energy. 'I've had enough of this,' she said, and she grabbed her son's wrist. At her touch, his stiffness broke. He became slack and floppy, like a ventriloquist's dummy after the performance was over. He seemed to be dragged sideways across the room, but perhaps it wasn't so, for it happened fast. Jess was sure only of the long squeak of his shoes as they caught the lino.

At the door, Emily turned and spoke. Perhaps she was apologizing, but there was no way of knowing. The words were indistinct. She pushed Luke's arms into his coat and pulled him outside, letting the door crash shut behind them.

'Oh my God,' Jess said.

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The next morning the gales had slackened to a gusty squall. The gardens that edged the lanes down to the sea were littered with leaves and broken branches, the shoreline scrubbed white and bare. The waves had forced away the shingle and exposed a pure layer of sand. Jess stood and gazed at it. The beach could have come from nowhere, from the beginnings of the world.

As she made her way along the path at the top of the dunes, she spotted a figure further up the beach. Below where the leper chapel sat dark on the edge of the cliff, a child was dancing, calling out to the wind. One of the traveller children perhaps, sent out to find what the seas had washed up. He seemed so happy, so at one with ocean and the vast deserted beach.

She squinted against the early morning sun and saw with a jolt that it was Luke. No wonder she hadn't recognized him. She remembered Tracey's words: *a child with Luke's problems*. If only she could see him now.

Jess waited for Emily to appear, but there was no sign of her. Luke was alone then. She waved and called out but he seemed not to hear. There was no sign of his terror of yesterday, of the angry little soul who had cowered against the wall. Instead, he was swaying and pirouetting and holding out his arms to the wind.

Sensing her presence, Luke slowed. As she reached him his limbs became still, his shoulders taking on their now familiar hunch. What a strange little figure he was in his tan coloured dungarees, his stripey pyjama top ballooning round his neck.

'Hello Luke. What are you doing here?'

He gave her a grave look. 'I'm not allowed to tell you.'

'Is it a secret?'

He looked round anxiously. 'You've made Alwin go away.'

She followed his gaze, expecting to see a figure departing down the beach. There was no one.

The boy, Luke had said.

'Alwin - that's an unusual name. He isn't from school, is he? Does he come from the village?'

Luke shook his head. She looked back towards the dunes, but there was no sign of life. 'Does your Mummy know where you are, Luke? Only, school will begin soon - I'm on my way now - and you don't have your uniform on yet.'

He frowned, thinking. 'Actually,' he said at last, 'it might be on my bed.'

'Good. Then we'll go home to get it, shall we? If you can get changed quickly, we'll walk up the hill together. Save your mummy a journey. What do you think?'

He nodded slowly. 'We'll have to ask her first.'

'Of course.'

She spoke it kindly but she felt impatience rising in her chest. This was the second time she'd found him alone on the beach. What was his mother thinking of?

Emily

Emily watches as Jess closes the gate, coming back to check the catch has fully caught. Surely she doesn't think *that's* going to stop Luke. Even if it had a padlock, he'd climb over it. You can't force a child to stay inside, and you certainly can't force Luke.

Jess turns to wave. She's smiling, silly woman. Two visits in one day, a cup of Earl Grey, and she thinks they're old friends. Emily doesn't know why she offered to help with the project, but at least she's done it now – though what choice did she have after this morning when the woman turned up with Luke in his pyjamas. All day she's spent on her laptop, checking JSTOR and the BL, fighting the dodgy internet connection, the work irritating her, pushing into thoughts that she needs to keep clear. But the research is complete. Printed out and handed over. Perhaps now she won't appear such a monster after that awful business with Luke and the gales.

He's disappeared again of course, up to his room. Sulking. 'If you go off to the beach like that one more time, I'll take away all your shells,' she's warned him. '*All* of them, do you hear me, Luke?'

For once he locked eyes with her, his gaze cold. He hates her, she's sure. And why shouldn't he? After all, she brought him here to this unfriendly village and their cold drab house beside the dunes.

Perhaps it's for him, then, that she's done the research. Because, for all that it isn't Arusha, or the slopes of Kilimanjaro with their zebra and buffalo and dik-diks, the landscape they inhabit *is* something he's responded to. And who knows, it might even do some real good. Perhaps one day he'll become a geologist or a marine engineer (do

they have such things?) and she'll look back and say, 'That was where it all started, do you remember, Luke?' And he'll smile at her.

She shakes her head, feels the shudder travels down through her body and into her toes. Collecting all those ghastly shells, saying they 'talk' to him. And the thing he said about Amy.

She opens the fridge. It's almost empty save for a couple of bottles of wine and the salmon she's bought from the Co-op. She'll keep that for tomorrow evening when Simon is back from London for his last supper before returning to Africa. Last supper. It almost makes her smile. Who's the betrayer? *Well you are, Simon. Because you're never here when I need you.*

There's a box of local free-range eggs, too, stowed in the door, some fish fingers in the freezer. She wonders which Luke would prefer. If she gets it wrong, he'll refuse to eat at all.

She calls up to him, 'Luke! Fish fingers or omelette?' There's silence. She calls again. Still no reply. In sudden panic, she runs up the stairs, peering out of the landing window as she passes. The lane's empty, the dunes deserted. At the top of the stairs his school bag sits abandoned.

The floor of his room is covered with shells. Hundreds of the bloody things. She thinks he's thrown them there in anger until she sees there's a pattern to it. They're carefully arranged in ever-widening circles of the smallest to largest, radiating from the centre to the sides. She feels a wave of nausea. The shells surround her like talismans. Sitting in the midst of them all, the largest shell in his hand, is Luke. He looks like a little pagan god.

His glances up and then away again. She might be a passing moth, a moving glimmer of light. She feels a low ache of loneliness.

‘Luke,’ she says. ‘Isn’t there something else you could be doing?’ She can feel an edge of panic in her voice and slows it down. ‘What about drawing? You’re good at that. You could draw a picture for your project at school – what about the view from the window – the dunes and the sea. Or - ’she searches for anything that might engage him. ‘What about cards? We haven’t played cards for ages.’ She waits, but he sits there mute, his fingers rubbing at the shell. ‘Please, Luke, I’m talking to you.’

At last he turns to her. ‘It’s for Amy. I told you.’

If only she could cry. There’d be comfort in that. But these non-conversations with Luke cover her in something hard she can’t break through. Perhaps they’re the same, she and Luke, when it comes to it. Yet he has Amy. She can’t forgive him that.

She rises, the sudden abrupt movement makes his eyelids flicker. ‘Clear this up please,’ she says. ‘I want you down for supper in fifteen minutes.’ She shuts the door behind her. It’s a statement of sorts. As she passes the schoolbag, she picks it up and takes it with her.

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She knows her anger is unfair, undeserved. No one brings such things on themselves. *Spasmo*, the note says. *Retard*. *Gaylord*. *Cunty boy*. She found it amongst his PE clothes, a list of insults so varying and cruel, it’s like a shortage of air in the room. And yet she’s angry with *him* – as if he’s failed her, as if he’s telling her that *she*’s failed him.

She looks at the note again. The range of writing and colours suggest most of the class have had a hand in it. How could they? Even *Teacher’s pet*, the mildest epithet, a neatly written addendum at the bottom, damns him. Poor silly boy, why on earth has he kept the thing?

He's on the stairs. Quickly she slides it into her pocket. She moves to stir the beans, check the toast - even breaking and mixing eggs seem suddenly too much – but now she wishes she'd made more effort. Maybe, she thinks in sudden hope, he hasn't even read the thing: if it's been slipped into his bag at the end of school, there might not have been a chance.

Luke is watching her from the doorway. She meets his gaze.

'Beans,' she says. 'I thought we'd have beans.'

Emily had done a great job. There was stuff on the fishing fleets, the ship-building yards, the cathedral, even the monastery - of which the ruined leper chapel had once been part.

‘Don’t know why you bother. It’s for tourists, really,’ Rob said.

‘God you’re a funny lot,’ she replied. ‘Thousands of people were drowned, and none of you care.’

‘Jess, it was seven hundred years ago.’

And yet the PhD students came, and the geology researchers. Long-haired earnest types who rented rooms and went diving with oxygen tanks on their shoulders. The village welcomed them because they brought in money. But there was no curiosity about their work, no engagement with it.

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It had been a raw winter’s day, cloud cloaking the sky. ‘You don’t mind this, do you, pet?’ Rob’s mum had said. ‘I’ve so missed the sea since we’ve been in Norwich.’ She’d marched out, meeting the wind head-on, letting it whip at her uncovered hair. Jess’s scarf had been double wrapped, her hands deep in in her pockets.

‘It’s wonderful,’ Jess had said, meaning it despite the cold and her streaming eyes.

Rob’s father had stopped, reaching out an arm, his other hand cupping his ear.

‘Listen.’

She’d strained to hear, picking it up past the wind and the drum roll of waves: the tolling of a church bell, a muted, strangled sound.

‘That’s coming from St Ethelred’s.’ He’d pointed across the water, and she’d followed his gaze. Nothing but the iron-grey sea, the gulls dipping and screaming. An expanse as empty and bleak as the sky. ‘Old Charlburgh,’ he’d said.

‘Old Charlburgh. It’s *there*?’

‘Yup. Right there. And when you hear that bell, it’s a warning. Something’s up.’

She’d shivered, enjoying the mix of fear and excitement. ‘Take no notice of him, dear,’ Rob’s mum had said. ‘It’s all nonsense.’

‘Got you going though, Jess, eh?’

She’d banged her hands together to warm them. ‘So where’s it really coming from?’

He’d laughed at her seriousness. ‘Frogstanton. But sounds funny, doesn’t it? Sort of drowned?’

‘Just leave it, Dad,’ Rob said. And though his mouth had lifted at the corners, it hadn’t been a smile. Not really. If it had been her, she’d have wanted to tell him.

++

She placed her pointer on the map, indicating the chandlers’ shops and fish-packers’ sheds, the municipal halls, the churches and the inns.

‘All these,’ she said, ‘were here.’

‘It was *our* families what worked there, wasn’t they, Miss?’ said Whitney

‘I guess it was, Whitney. Your ancestors.’

‘Our *ancestors*,’ Matthew tried out the word.

‘That’s right.’

‘And they got drowned?’ Whitney looked troubled.

‘I’m afraid they did. You see, the storms changed how the sea came into the harbour, and then some bad men from Ippingham came and made things worse by

attacking the men who tried to fix it. So when the next storm came, the sea came even higher, and.... Well, we all know what happened then, don't we?

'They're not ancestors,' Luke's voice was low from the back of the room.

'What do you mean, Luke?'

'Drowned people *die*. They can't have babies.' His eyes were fixed on the map behind her.

'They didn't *all* die, boxhead.'

'Oliver!'

'Well, what does he know?'

Luke was still staring away from her, his face closed. But she smiled at him anyway, hoping he'd hear it in her voice. 'Some people must have escaped, mustn't they? Otherwise, how could any of you be here at all?'

'*He* could.' Jerome said. 'They're not his ancestors.'

'They're not mine either.' Trust Jerome to move in and twist the knife. She stepped away from the whiteboard, began pacing through the rows to pull back their attention. 'You have a very exciting, very important history. Everyone who lives here is part of that.'

They needed to see the village's past as theirs to *share*. It was an important thing, she knew better than most. For years, drifting along in an ongoing present, it had been as if she didn't have a history at all. All those moves: Brighton, Grange-over-Sands, Hull, Northampton, a series of noisy faceless boroughs around London. A flat here, a terraced house there. A small modern box on the outskirts of Bedford. She hadn't belonged in any of them. Even her friendship with Drusilla hadn't lasted.

History mattered. It rooted you.

But she wasn't rooted, was she? That was what Rob was telling her. The room tipped suddenly, and she found herself stepping forward for balance, reaching out to the bookshelf for stability. She pushed at one of the novels, pretending to straighten it. The action cleared her head, and she became aware of the eyes of the children, waiting.

She forced a smile, 'Little Charlburgh belongs to the people who have made their home here. All of us. But those of you who *were* born here, I'd like you to go home, ask your parents what they know about the village history, and bring their stories in to share tomorrow. And, Luke -' She was close to him now, looking down at the ragged tawny hair. 'I have a special job for you. Could you draw us one of your lovely pictures please - about anything to do with the old town that you want. Yes, Oliver, what is it?'

'My mum and dad don't have no stories.' Oliver said. 'I asked. They says we should do *proper* history.'

'We'll have show them this *is* proper history, then, won't we?'

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The next day, it wasn't a picture Luke gave her but a piece of writing.

Charlburgh was once one of the biggest and busiest ports in England. It had a big industry of fishing and shipbilding and they bought wool there and firs for the rich. There were boys who were in boats called curicles who went to get money from the ships. The town got damaged in the thirteenth century because of inclemant weather conditions when a huge storm with heavy rains and huricanes broke into the cliff and made them fall down. Old Charlbrouh was the capital of the Kingdom of east Anglia and there were anglosaxon bishops. It had hospitals and grand buldings and even a place where they made money called a mint. Also it had a harbour that was sheltered when the ships came but the storm made it move and it lost its rasindettrar. When they tried to make it

better the people came from the village. They brought their flails and their gysarms and there was hacking and killing so they couldn't mend it. Then another storm threw its worst at it and everything got drowned. and all that was left after was farm houses. But really it was the villagers did it, being jelous. That was when it got the name of Old Charlbruh not just Charlbruh. It is called Great Britain's atlantis. Atlantis is an island that didn't exist in Plato.

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He was over by the Seashore Table, looking at a piece of fisherman's netting, examining the knots in the mesh. The air seemed to still as she approached, as if he'd been waiting.

'Luke, your report's wonderful. The curricles and the weapons – I didn't know about those. Did you find out on the Internet?'

He dropped his gaze. 'Not really.'

'Oh. Where then? The museum?'

'No.' He shifted his head, jutting out his chin. The blue of his eyes stayed hidden.

'The boy told me'

'What boy, Luke?'

'Alwin...' His voice shrunk to a whisper. 'Alwin told me some things.'

That name again.

She could smell the sea, its reek overpowering, filling her nostrils and spreading through the room. There was salt on her tongue, it's taste sweet and opaque. For a moment she thought perhaps her gum was bleeding and touched a finger to her lips. There was nothing there. She swallowed and looked round. There was a shift of something in the air, a blur, as if reality were folding in on itself, collapsing into darkness. She thought maybe she would faint.

Beyond it all she could hear the other children hanging up their coats, unpacking their bags, chatting.

‘He’s not here,’ Luke said.

And as he spoke, the room cleared and became normal again. She blinked, rubbed her nose. Felt the flutter of her heartbeat settle.

‘Of course not.’ She looked down at the report, a haze of grey. ‘This is proper research, Luke’ she said at last. She caught a word or two, let it jog her into clarity. ‘And *bishops*. How grand it must have been.’

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‘You’re very quiet.’

‘Am I?’

It was the wind. It must have been. A sudden swirl of it bringing the sea up the hill and into the classroom, fooling her.

They were silent, eating. After a moment he balanced his fork on the side of his plate and leaned forward to touch her hand. ‘I love you, Jess.’

‘I love you too.’ She looked up at him, puzzled.

‘I’m on the short list,’ he said.

‘Ah.’ She put her fork down too. Swallowed a mouthful of fish; it was tasteless and dry. ‘When’s the interview?’

‘Fifth November.’

‘Guy Fawkes.’

A night when the whole established order of things had been threatened.

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‘Them’s amazing.’ Whitney peered over her shoulder at the drawings.

She looked up to see if Luke had heard. He was by the library shelves, his back to them, rearranging the books. Gabriel, too, came to look and he let out a low whistle. ‘Wow,’ he said. ‘Bet my dad would like them.’ When Luke turned round, she saw he was blushing.

But the others ignored the exchange. A new tactic was developing, designed to suggest Luke didn’t exist at all. She watched as the children moved about the room, nearly collided with him and then, without glancing up, swerved away. Luke looked with puzzlement at their retreating backs and then returned to his work. The third time she saw it she called the culprits to her desk.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’

‘We ain’t doing nothing,’ said Oliver. His lip pushed into a pout.

She smiled a steely smile. ‘Exactly. You aren’t doing *nothing*. You’re doing *something*. I know exactly what it is – and it’s rude and unkind.’

‘Don’t know what you mean, Miss,’ Jerome said.

‘Yes, you do. Don’t let it happen again.’

They shrugged. She stood back, indicating she was done with them. She hoped it would be enough. As they turned to go, she spoke again: ‘Oliver, go to the boys’ toilets please, and take off the t-shirt you’re wearing under your uniform. You know the rules.’

It was a kind of revenge. He needed to know there was a line.

++

In Friday’s art lesson she laid out the cardboard and newspaper and fabrics, demonstrated how to make papier-maché. ‘We’re going to build models,’ she said.

‘What of, Miss?’ From under her dark gypsy hair, Whitney’s face shone. She was picking up, thought Jess. At last.

‘Anything you like, as long as it’s sort of local. You could make the church. Or one of the buildings from the old town that you’ve seen in the pictures I put up.’ She saw doubt on the boys’ faces. ‘Or maybe a farm where your ancestors lived.’

‘Cool,’ said Matthew.

++

Despite her warning, the children were still playing the same cruel game, though it was more covert now, more careful. If they saw her looking, there were elaborate gestures of politeness - *No, you first, Luke; after you*. But when she watched them from afar, she saw the last minute switching of their paths as Luke loomed into view, the deliberate groupings that excluded him.

It was as if he occupied a space separate from the rest of the class. Like someone in a photograph where two images were imposed, one on the other. In this case, there were the same long thin windows and high grey walls in the background, the same tables and lockers and posters at the sides. But as if they were recorded at different times, for different reasons.

Only with Whitney and Gabriel were things normal.

Whitney was beside Luke now, her excitement uncontained. ‘You seen this, Miss? It ain’t half clever.’ She waved an arm towards Luke’s model, at the clearly visible central street of Old Charlburgh, the half-finished Guildhall, the beginnings of St James Monastery.

‘I have Whitney. It’s good, isn’t it?’

‘Can it go in the Christmas Fair?’

‘Of course.’

‘No,’ Luke said.

‘But things always goes in the Fair.’ Whitney turned to him. ‘It’s so our mums can see.’

‘No,’ he said again. He shifted sideways so she was no longer in his view.

Whitney studied Luke’s back, her eyes fixed on the apron strings that criss-crossed it. After a moment, the edges of her mouth dropped in silent acceptance,, and she turned away to rejoin the others. To Jess’s dismay, their bodies blocked her, isolating her too.

‘Go on, Luke. If we put it in the Fair, your mummy can see how clever you are.’

It was more for Whitney’s benefit than anything. A mistake. There was a sudden jerk of Luke’s arm, a strange distortion of the air. Something hard and white arced in front of her and hit the wall at her side. She gasped, crying out despite herself.

The glue pot Luke had thrown was broken. She watched mesmerized as a pool of gloop oozed across the carpet. There was silence, then a snigger from one of the boys. Within seconds the whole class was rocking with laughter.

Helplessness spread through Jess’s bones. It gave her a headache, a split in her vision as jagged as a migraine.

Emily

She's Sisyphus, on her hands and knees, pushing the boulder up the mountain, her shoulders aching, her neck on fire. Knowing there's no point to it because once at the top, the rock will fall and she'll have to trudge back down to the valley to start the whole miserable business all over again.

It's how she feels every morning. Just the effort of waking, of dragging herself out of bed and into Luke's room, stepping over all those bloody shells, making sure she doesn't upset the way he's laid them out. And then, while he's in the bathroom, getting his clothes out, leaving them so that his underpants are on top of his shirt and his socks are below his trousers, because any other way and he might refuse to put them on.

'I can do it Mummy,' he's said more than once but the voices inside her have been louder, telling her she must arrange them herself. Just as she must make his porridge in the microwave and pour on the honey – one teaspoon and not a drop more, or less – and wrap his snack in cling film, putting it only in the plastic box with the red airtight lid, and never ever in the blue one. And to put his shoes right next to the front door and not a millimetre in.

This morning, she doesn't want to do it. Not any of it.

When she looks up he's there standing beside her pillow, gazing down at her, a blur through her half-closed eyes.

'Mummy,' he says. *'You've got to get up.'*

'Dear God, what's the time?'

He holds out the clock.

Reaching for her glasses, she puts them on. A quarter to nine and she isn't even dressed. She props herself on her arm. Her thoughts jumble, mix themselves up like jigsaw pieces.

'Today's a special day,' she says. 'We'll spend it together.'

'But it's school. It's the museum day.'

Shit. She's forgotten. Let it fly out of her head. She's meant to be going too. Fool that she is, she's promised Jess Baxter to be an extra adult to shepherd the children. 'It might be good for Luke,' Jess said.

Emily'd been tempted then to mention the note, but she didn't. She's kept it though, rolled up in the pocket of her grey handbag. Only once has she taken it out, looked at it. *Scumbag, Spasmo. Gaylord*. Ugly words. So why hasn't she thrown it away. Torn it up and burned the scraps? Evidence. That's why. So she can wave it in front of someone's face: one of the mothers, that awful Mrs Tierney, even Jess Baxter. Look, she can say. It's the village. It's *them*. Not us.

Luke is staring at her. 'You've got to get up,' he says.

But now the telephone's ringing too, it's over-loud screech echoing in the downstairs hall. Briefly she wonders if it's Simon, and she shakes her head at the thought. Fat chance. Anyway, the voice in her head is telling her it'll be Jess herself, wanting to know where they are.

'Get an oaty biscuit,' she says, as she jumps out of bed and heads for the door. 'Quickly. There isn't time for breakfast.'

'I had porridge,' she hears him say. 'I did it in the microwave.' She turns and stares at him and the telephone stops.

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‘I’m so sorry.’ She’s panting as they reach the classroom. The children are in their coats, gaping at her. There’s a murmur, a shifting of feet and bodies as she pushes Luke into the room. She goes to the teacher’s desk and sees that Jess Baxter is smiling, looking relieved.

‘I’m so glad you’ve made it,’ Jess says. She glances towards Luke. ‘Problem this morning?’

Emily can guess what she’s thinking and she goes with it. There’s a flash of guilt, but it’s easier, less damning. She hopes she doesn’t look too disheveled. Not that she cares - but she hasn’t showered. She’s hardly even washed. Splashed some water on her face and shoved on a bit of eye shadow. They’ll have to put up with it.

‘We’re almost ready, as you can see. The Deputy Head was going to come instead, but I’ll be delighted to tell her she’s not needed.’ Jess motioned to one of the other children. ‘Robin, go to 5T’s form-room and tell Mrs Tierney that Luke and his mummy are here, will you please?’ The boy nods and goes off. She smiles at Emily. ‘It’s just you, me and Miss Henderson,’ she says. ‘It’ll be fun.’

Emily’s almost glad she’s come. Feels for a millisecond a lightening of the load she’s been carrying.

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The children look at her with suspicion. But Jess Baxter will have none of it. She has broken the class into three groups, one for herself, one for Claire Henderson, who seems pleasant enough, and one for Emily. Emily scans her list. Robin Jeffreys and Matthew Jackson she’s heard of - she thinks one of them sits next to Luke. Then there are two other boys and four girls who, although she doesn’t know them, she’s seen about the village, on their roller skates, or charging out to their mothers at the end of the day. Despite their wariness, they look to be perfectly normal kids. Hard to think of them writing those things.

Luke himself is in Jess's group, along with Gabriel Harding and the girl, Whitney, who's often hanging around when Emily comes to pick Luke up. An unusual child, small and dark, like a changeling creature. She's heard about her father and his horrible accident: a chain saw was it? Something like that. From time to time the girl lags back, her almost black hair flopping ribbon-like on her shoulders. She tries to talk to Luke, point things out, but he's tolerating her, no more. His head is up, staring forward as if he has something weighty on his mind. Twice Gabriel Harding drops back but Luke's response is cursory. Emily wants to shake him, make him normal.

But then, look at *her*. She's not normal. She's shaking, nervous, though she hopes she's hiding it. She wishes she hadn't come – wants to be back in the cottage, in the bedroom, under the duvet, sleeping. All these children? Presumably, they wrote that awful note. Yet here she is, walking behind them, shooing them along like an ordinary mother does, like a mother who cares.

It's the girls she finds hardest. Whitney, especially, breaks her heart. Not that Amy would have been like that. Amy was blond, a fairy child, a wriggling, beautiful ball of warmth and milky scent. A sound escapes her lips, it's a cry, breaking through despite herself, and she turns it into a cough, leaning forward, pretending. Then she straightens and forces a smile because Matthew has turned to look at her, and dabs at her lips. Matthew gives an awkward smile back and turns away. She swallows, hopes no one else has seen.

Inside the museum it's better. After Joe Harding's welcome, there are displays to look at, information plaques to read. It calms her. She realises how much she missed the first time she came, how much is packed into this tiny building. She feels a frisson of interest and gazes at a facsimile of the harbour - a sprawling space of ships and warehouses and strange wooden machines - wondering if she's seen it before. How

clever those people were and yet how primitive, so little achieved in all those centuries since the Greeks.

Every few minutes she counts the red bands that indicate a child is part of her group. They're all impatient, anxious to get on, certain the next exhibit is more likely to fulfil their appetite for entertainment. She feels a kind of pity that they can't do what Luke does: linger and study and absorb. They have quizzes to do, worksheets to fill in, and she watches as they dash down one-word answers. The braver, more sociable, amongst them ask for her help, and it makes her feel useful. As she looks over their shoulders, she can't help examining their handwriting and wondering.

There's another child at her side. When she looks down she sees it's Luke. What are you doing here?' she asks. 'You're supposed to be with Mrs Baxter.'

'She won't mind.'

'I think she will.' She sees Jess at the edge of the partition, eyes scanning the room.

'Oh there you are, Luke' Jess says. As she comes over to get him, Emily knows what she's been thinking.

Luke is looking at the harbour. 'I recognise that,' Jess says.

'Yes,' he says.

'Yours looks very much like it. How clever you are.'

'They called it Ship Yard.'

'Did they? A very apt name, don't you think, Mrs Bayely? Did you copy it from one of the leaflets Gabriel brought in?'

'No,' Luke says. The tone is abrupt.

'Luke,' Emily says. She feels herself blushing. 'Answer nicely please.' He stares at the floor.

'I just knew,' he says. 'It was there in my mind.'

Emily glances at Jess, and their eyes meet.

She's dog-tired. She needs to lie down.

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He's sitting cross-legged on the floor, bent over the note-pad balanced on his lap. His pencils are set out in a row, light to dark, at his side. His head is down, his left arm busy shading something in. She wonders if it's because she came to the museum the other day that he's honouring her now with his company. Perhaps it's done some good after all.

He replaces a green, takes out a purple, and adds touches of it to the sea. 'Daddy says we should go to Granny's and Grandpa's,' he says suddenly.

'For Christmas, you mean?'

She hasn't really thought about it. But three days with Simon's mother and Simon not there to act as a buffer? She doesn't think so. 'I'm afraid they're too old, darling. They don't want us around.'

'Yes, they do. Daddy told me.'

'That's alright for Daddy to say but he's not here, is he?' She smiles to soften the words. Inside, she's furious that Simon can't come home, but not surprised.

Increasingly she wonders about the point of him - as a husband, as a father. All those kids in Africa. Hundreds of thousands? Millions? What chance does Luke have? Or her?

She gazes down at the top of Luke's head, at the way his sandy-brown hair splits at the crown just like Simon's. No, she can't go to her parents-in-law. Besides. Luke hardly knows them. They visited Arusha once, when he was a baby, and twice she and Simon and Luke drove up to Berwick during trips back to England. That's the sum of it. They never even met their granddaughter. The thought brings a sour taste to her mouth.

'How old are they?' he asks. 'Are they more than ninety?'

‘No, sweetheart.’

‘Are they more than eighty?’

God, she has no idea. She guesses. ‘Grandpa’s 76 and Granny is 75.’

‘That’s still very old.’ Luke says.

She laughs, observes that it’s happening and allows herself to enjoy it. Then she watches as the feeling fades. ‘We’ll stay here, just the two of us. Snuggled up in front of the fire. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, if we had a fire?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says. ‘Will it stay in the fireplace?’

‘Gosh, Luke, the things you worry about.’ She stops before she says more and reaches an arm up into the standard lamp instead, and turns it on. ‘Is that better? I’m sure you can’t see properly.’ But within seconds he’s gathering his pencils together, putting them back into his pencil case. He stands up.

‘It’s no good now,’ he says. ‘There’s dark in the way. I can’t see.’

She leans forward. ‘It’s shadow. All you have to do, Luke, is move into the light.’ But already he’s on his way out of the room. She listens as he stomps up the stairs, hears the thud of his bedroom door. A wave of loneliness engulfs her. After a moment she gets up and goes to the cupboard. One whole bottle of wine left. She opens it, finds a glass and pours some in.

Shit, she thinks, as she sits back down.

Shit.

Jess

Only Gabriel remained in the classroom. When his mother arrived he guided her over to the table where the half-built models were and pointed to Luke's. Jess followed them.

'It's good isn't it?' Gabriel's mother said.

'Very. Gabriel helped, didn't you?'

Gabriel shrugged. 'A bit,' he said.

'We thought - didn't we Gabriel? - that Luke might like to come to tea.' Mrs Harding looked round the room. 'I've missed him, haven't I?'

'Afraid so.'

'Dad says he can go in the museum, if he wants.' Gabriel gestured towards the model. 'To give him ideas.'

'He saw how keen Luke was,' said Mrs Harding.

'That's really nice of him. I think Luke would love it, don't you, Gabriel?'

'Suppose so,' said Gabriel. He didn't look terribly enthusiastic. She wondered if he feared what the class would say. Despite the museum visit and the shared project with the models, the mood in the classroom was much as ever, the 'game' of ignoring Luke still played with a subtle but focused energy. True, Gabriel occasionally went over to watch Luke at work, handing him bits of cardboard or wood, or pointing things out from the book, but they were hardly friends.

Gabriel moved away to get his coat, and his mother dropped her voice. 'I feel sorry for Luke. It sounds as though he's having a tough time.' The words were surprising. Jess had supposed no one in the village cared.

'This was on the floor.' Gabriel was back, something in his hand.

‘What is it?’

He held it out so they could see. ‘Luke made it.’

It was a figure fashioned from an old clothes peg, the sort with a split in the middle that she imagined people used before the second world war. The shoulders had been widened with papier-maché, as had the head, and there was brown wool for hair. A narrow plait of coloured threads formed a belt around a tunic-like top and brown trousers. In the centre of the belt was a tiny shell, suggesting a buckle.

‘Not quite the right timeframe, I shouldn’t think,’ Sarah Harding said. ‘But it’s very clever.’

‘I haven’t seen it before.’ Jess took it, letting it warm her hand. The boy’s button-black eyes scrutinized hers, their expression solemn. She felt an odd sense of pity for it and scanned Luke’s half-made streets for where it might belong. ‘I think here, don’t you?’ she said, placing him in the central square.

‘There, it’s happy now,’ said Mrs Harding. She took Gabriel’s hand. ‘We’ll ask Luke first thing tomorrow, shall we?’

Jess smiled. Beside her, the round peg-face of the figure watched them go.

Emily

She reaches for the pillow and pulls it towards her. It's still there, that hint - not of Simon exactly - but of his aftershave or shower gel, as if he sprayed it directly onto the cotton instead of on himself, as if allowing it to mix with his own scent was a step too far.

She pushes the thing away. Weeks since she's washed the bedding. Not that she cares. But it's time to get him out of the room. What's the point of holding on to someone who's no more than a few droplets of Hugo Boss - or whatever it is - on a grimy pillowcase.

She sits up and drinks what's left in the glass. The wine is dull and warm, and she runs her tongue round the outside of her mouth. It feels sticky, crusted as if she's been sleeping. Perhaps she has. The sun, a glitter through the half-open curtains, hurts her eyes. Another day wasted. Since she's done the research for Jess Baxter what has she achieved? Nothing. What time is it, anyway? She bends to see. Half past two. No need yet to rush for Luke.

She sighs and lets herself slide down onto the bed, bending her head again to the pillow, retracing the scent. Chemical, not personal. Not *Simon*. But then what does he smell like anyway? The real core of him, the part that once got under her skin and stayed there no matter what. Where was that? How long since she's been close enough to find out? She remembers the cool of his fingers the night before his return to Tanzania, the smooth skin on his face from his shave. That wasn't it. The tenderness not

there, even though she knows he searched for it, touched her with the remnants of love. They turned aside in the end, stared up at separate ceilings.

Really, she'd like to cry, to give herself that relief. But since Simon has left, she hasn't had the energy. She tries now, willing the tears to come, folding her face, giving it up to the distortions of grief. She feels the pulled-down lips, the gaping mouth. But the tears aren't there. Instead she'd become a mask, a *prosopon*. A character from a Greek play.

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She feels better for the walk, can sense the blood moving round her body, feeding it. Under her thick brown coat, she's almost too warm. As she turns the corner into St Margaret's Street, she slows seeing the group of women at the gate. So, the bell hasn't gone yet? Normally she arrives just as the children pour out of the classroom, breaking up the chattering gaggle of mothers. It allows her to wait unobserved through Luke's complicated end of day rituals. Not that she's stared at exactly, because the women hardly ever look at her. Instead they exude a cold and calculated awareness that makes her insides hurt.

When she mentioned it to Simon, he laughed. 'Don't be silly, Em. Village people are like that. You just have to give them a chance. They're probably a bit in awe of you.'

'Why?' The thought seemed ridiculous.

'Well, being an author. Speaking like you do.'

'They don't know how I speak, they've never heard me.'

'They'll thaw. Be nice to them.'

She's wary of the villagers, that's the truth of it. What does she want with gestures of friendship, pretences of welcome? She's too raw, too damaged. As things are, they knew nothing about her. It's easier.

As she nears, she's conscious of heads that half-turn and then jerk away, a drop in the women's voices. She can imagine what they're saying. *Look there's that woman, Luke Bayely's mother. Stuck up bitch.*

But as she approaches the gate she realises they're talking about the Old Charlburgh project, complaining about it. One woman is suddenly loud, her voice shrill as a police siren. 'All that digging up the past, what's the point?' She sniffs, catches Emily's eye and looks away.

The words feel pointed, personal. Emily wonders if they know she's been involved. How horrible their attitude is – do they have no respect for history, no interest? She loved it once – a long time ago.

She draws away, pulls the coat closer as protection. The women are blind anyway. Ignorant and blind.

As she jams her hands in the pockets, her fingers close round the paper she found in Luke's bag. A warmth of a different kind flares and takes shape within her. An anger so deep she can see the colour dancing at its edges. Now *that* is something to confront them with, the glittering force of her outrage: 'Is this what you encourage your children to do?' 'Is this how you bring them up?' For three weeks the note has lain there, hot and fiery, the words burning through the fabric of her coat.

She slides the paper from her pocket, but then she shoves it back. What stopped her before stops her now: Luke himself. Dangerous to make an issue of it, draw attention. He hasn't even seen it as far as she knows. A bell clangs across the playground, and she withdraws her hand. Swallows the anger down. She doesn't want it. It's too bright.

Beigeness, greyness: that's where safety lies.

Thank God they're still in their huddle, their heads close together. She begins to edge past. The thing now is to get to the classroom, hurry Luke along, and make sure

the pair of them are well on their way home before the rest come milling out. As she pushes open the gate, a hand holds her back. She looks round. A woman, out of breath but smiling.

‘I’m so glad to have caught you at last. I’m Sarah Harding – Gabriel’s mum.’

Rain blackened the sky, dripped miserably from the broken guttering. The fluorescent light flickered above her head.

‘Luke? On the beach?’

‘At the waters edge.’ The chair creaked as he sat.

‘How on earth?’

‘That’s for you to tell me.’ Richard pressed his thumb and forefinger against his brow and slid them together. ‘You’re his class teacher.’

‘But he was in school.’ The rain crashed against the window, turned it into a waterfall. ‘I mean, Jesus - Is he alright?’

‘He’s with Jon Patchett. He found him.’

‘*Jon Patchett?*’

‘Exactly.’ Richard’s eyes were sharp specks of grey in his white face. ‘It doesn’t look good, does it, when a school governor telephones to tell you he’s discovered one of your pupils half-drowned on the beach in the rain?’

‘But...’ Luke was in the classroom, waiting for her to start the numeracy lesson. Surely he was. She’d seen him there from this morning, his pencils and ruler lined up on the table in front of him, his hair still wet from his walk to school. She leaned against the desk, her legs weak.

‘Are you sure he’s alright?’

‘I think so.’

‘How did he get out of the building? Didn’t anyone *see?*’

‘I was hoping you’d tell me that too.’

‘But I’ve no idea. I mean I saw him first thing.’ He’d been staring at his model, planning some new development she’d supposed. ‘He was at registration. I entered him present.’

‘No, you didn’t’

‘I did’ She felt the creeping fog of doubt. ‘I’m sure I did.’

He picked up the plastic-covered record from his desk and opened it so she could see.

The ‘A’ for absent. There was no mistaking it. Not quite as neat as it might have been perhaps, but her handwriting, her elongation of the downward line of the ‘A’. He frowned. ‘Luke didn’t turn up in the hall for P.E. – but then Saul wasn’t expecting him because he’d seen the register. And Jane Bolton wasn’t worried when he didn’t turn up for singing. Which means his absence went undetected for over two hours.’

He stressed the last words as if she were hardly listening.

‘He was in assembly. I saw him.’ Just after the start of the Save the Children DVD about Africa and malaria. His profile caught by the light from the screen, his eyes fixed rigidly forward. She’d watched him, wondering what he was thinking, what memories were being stirred. Had felt a pang of sadness for him.

‘He must have slipped out in the dark,’ she said.

Richard frowned, pulled himself upright in his chair. She felt like a child, waiting for his judgment.

‘If you hadn’t made a mistake in the register, we’d have known. We’d have been after him.’

She said, because she needed to say it before he did: ‘Is this a disciplinary matter?’

‘It is. Yes.’

She nodded.

Negligence? Unprofessional behavior? Bringing the school into disrepute? It didn't seem real. *Couldn't* be.

Because of her mistake – *had* she made a mistake? - it would be seen as Richard's fault too. He was the Head, after all. She could see the headlines in *The Mercury*, a possible item on the East Anglian TV news. *Boy Disappears from School: Almost Drowns*.

And perhaps he *had* almost drowned: that was the terror of it. Luke a practical child, even quite sensible at times, but Jesus, crossing Felix Street alone, wandering through the reed-beds, pottering along the sea-shore in the pouring rain when the tide was coming in. And she'd let it happen.

Of course she deserved to be fired.

'Do you think,' she said, her voice almost a whisper, 'that Jon Patchett will say anything?' He was a newsreader, a journalist, after all. And this, she supposed, feeling sick as she thought it, was a story. 'I mean to the papers?'

Richards made a twisting motion with his lips. 'I hope not. He's Chair of the Governors. He's going to protect the school if he can.'

But his eyes made her feel uncomfortable, and she looked down at the floor. There were paper clips there, coloured ones, fanned into a flower at her feet.

Dear God, Luke was a danger to himself. There'd been a moment perhaps, during the film this morning, when something had clicked or opened or given inside him, and what had he done? Just got up from his place, gone into the foyer and, with no one seeing, undone the lock on the front door and walked away. He'd simply followed the desire that drove all that he did: his fascination with the sea-shore, the shells and the old town.

'Go to your class,' Richard said. 'We'll talk again later.'

She opened her mouth to speak and then shut it again. *The register*, she wanted to say. *It still doesn't make sense.*

Emily

She's glad she hasn't bothered with lenses today. Her steamed-up glasses give her a kind of invisibility, like a toddler playing peek-a-boo. It's an insight she immediately regrets for memories threaten, dance round the periphery of her consciousness: she can smell charcoal, some kind of rotten vegetable, the stink of it rising like a slap at her face. But Amy is there somewhere too. She stumbles, catches at a pillar that looms nearby. A lamppost, it's gritty concrete no more than a millimeter from her face. She puts her hand against it, pushes at its graininess until she feels the hurt.

A group of women hurry by, heading for shelter. They are laughing, calling out as they skip the puddles. They're sharing an adventure, and she has the sudden wish to speak to them, to let them pull her back to wherever it is she should be. But they rush on, becoming no more than a smear on the landscape.

She is sodden to the bone, shivering. But she leans against the lamppost anyway, puts her face to the skies. She wants to feel the rain driving into her, washing her clear. There's someone else coming towards her now. The dark shape of an umbrella waves over his head, there's a child with him, and she's in their path. She pulls aside but the man stops, and she can tell, even through the mist of her glasses, that he wants to speak to her. When she turns to face him, she realises the boy, under a too-big shiny yellow coat she's never seen before, is Luke.

She cannot move.

‘Yours, I believe,’ the man says. He pushes Luke forward. ‘I found him on the beach, right at the water’s edge, collecting shells in the rain.’ She is vaguely aware of having seen him before or hearing his voice. Something, anyway, is familiar.

‘He’s meant to be in school.’ Her words are an accusation.

‘Well, as you can see, he’s not.’

She crouches to take hold of the yellow coat. It feels waxy, rubbery. Expensive. Below the fine stitching at its hem she can see Luke’s shoes are sodden, oozing.

‘Luke, what are you doing? Why aren’t you in school?’ The fact of his being here is too much to take in, doesn’t fit with any kind of logic she’s able to use. Then she thinks that perhaps they’ve sent him home, because he’s been naughty, or the roof fell in, or the school burnt down.

And he’s eight. Only eight.

Then she knows that he’s walked out all on his own: made the decision and left the building. No one has any control of him at all.

Her heart bangs in her chest, and she thinks the man must hear it. Still she can’t see properly. ‘Luke, look at me. I need you to answer.’ She pushes hair out of her eyes, rubs at the spectacles with her free hand. As the lenses clear, he raises his head. His eyes catch hers then focus on something beyond, through her skull and out the other side.

She feels a renewed flutter of panic and wonders if she’s dreaming, if she’s going mad.

‘You found him on the *beach*?’

‘Afraid so. I could see him from the window. It was bucketing down. So I took the coat.’ He gestures towards it. ‘It used to be my granddaughter’s. We went to your house, but no-one was there, I was just taking him up to the school.’

‘What’s the time?’ Perhaps it’s the end of the day, and she’s forgotten to fetch him. Perhaps he waited and waited, and then he gave up.

But it's daylight. Even beyond the rain it's daylight.

The man's looking at her oddly, as if he doesn't understand the question. She tries again. 'Please,' she says. 'The time?'

'Twenty past eleven.' His voice is patient as if he's humouring her, but her heart steadies. She hasn't had a blackout, that's something.

Now she knows who he is, the man looking down at her from under the big umbrella. He's on television and he lives in one of the grand houses by the reedbeds. When he walks on the beach with his dogs, it's as if he owns it.

He moves to the side of the pavement so he's no longer in her way, and she feels rather than sees his gaze of casual concern. 'Well, now you're reunited,' he says, 'I think you should take this fellow home.'

She nods mutely. It's all she wants now, to get her son back into the warm and the safe, to get herself back there too. Yet she needs to ask about returning the coat, about how he knows where she lives, about what Luke is doing standing in front of her in the middle of a school day. None of the questions shape themselves. 'Thank you,' she says.

He nods and half turns to leave. 'Will you be alright?' he says after a moment. But it's for form's sake, she can tell. He wants to be back home too. As he walks away, she's overcome with embarrassment. He trails visions of dinner parties, people's laughter when he tells the story. *They're both barmy*, he'll say.

She takes Luke's hand, and he lets her. Even though he keeps his fingers stiff, unresponsive, they're surprisingly warm.

'You're ever so wet, mummy,' he says.

His voice is soft, good-natured. The boy he was. She stops and looks down at him, watches the rain drip onto his shoulders from the shiny yellow hood.

It was after school. The sun mocking, as if there hadn't been rain at all. 'It's up to the Governors.' Richard brought his index fingers up, pressed them in the space between his eyes and then released them. 'There's a meeting on Monday.'

'I see.'

'The important thing is not to let this happen again. We already know that Luke is ... well, let's call him *unusual*. We're going to have to keep a sharper eye on him.'

'Yes.'

'We've been lucky.'

'Yes.'

He nodded, dismissing her. As she headed for the door, she felt him watching. 'Jess,' he said. 'You know it's possible that Luke altered the register himself.'

She gasped. 'I don't believe it. He's not even eight yet.'

He turned to his computer, began to type. 'He's capable of anything, that one.' he said. He spoke as if he believed Luke wasn't like a normal children, that he was hardly a child at all, but something alien, unknowable.

Emily

It's hot, dry. A breeze sifts through the window netting. Over Amy's cot strings of shells arch loosely like long necklaces, away from a central hook. The air catches, and the shells clink together prettily, making a kind of music. Emily reaches down and touches the baby's skin. Although she's naked except for a nappy, Amy's flesh is burning, her face flushed. But the shells are working their magic, and she's gazing upwards, her legs and arms moving as if she wants to take hold of them herself. Beyond the end of the cot stands Luke, his face lit, a mixture of triumph and delight.

'She likes them, doesn't she?' Luke says. His shape is unclear, like a mirage, his smile widening and widening until it fills the room.

'Of course she does, sweetheart. You've made them so beautifully.'

The smile slips and turns downwards. It's warning her. The cot is rocking and beginning to tip. Amy slides downwards, through its non-existent end and into the well of the room. Emily knows she must catch her; that if she doesn't, something terrible will happen. She can feel the straining in her muscles, the desperate need to heave them into action but she can't move. She can't move at all. She can hardly breathe. All the time the room's rocking, and Amy's little legs and arms and bottom are crashing into things, the wardrobe, the chest of drawers, the open catch on the window. There's a thud at each encounter, and Emily's stretching out to block them. Only she isn't. Because there's a blackness around her that she can't reach through.

She sits up with a jerk, fights for air. Gasps when it hits her lungs.

There's silence. Then a soft shuffling. Luke is standing behind the sofa, his fingers doing something to the cushions, only she can't see him properly. She blinks, tries to speak but her throat closes, stopping her.

'You're crying, Mummy' he says.

She'd been dreading the service, the eyes of Mel's village friends, who she'd imagined would be watching her, judging her for allowing a child to wander off from school. Not that they cared about Luke. No, they'd be worried for their own children.

In the midst of that dread, she'd forgotten how much she liked churches, the way they recalled safer times when, as part of the choirs of the various schools she'd attended, she'd learned the hymns and carols, taken part in the ritual. Not that she believed any of it. No, it was dangerous, undermining. But that sense of community, the traditions that fed it: when you didn't have those in your life - well, they were worth something.

This church was the most lovely she'd ever seen. She gazed up its faded timbered struts, the vast wooden roof, the expanses of glass – none of it dark or narrow like the churches she'd gone to as a little girl, but open and clear, so that light flooded through as if it were summer.

They were beginning a hymn, Rob beside her holding the book so she could see. She knew it anyway:

Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King.

'Are you yourself a follower of Christ?' the vicar had asked as part of the baptism, and Jess'd said yes, even though it wasn't true. That had been when Alice had fallen asleep in her arms, the baby's lashes fluttering almost imperceptibly as she dreamed.

'The earth is not too low. His praises there may grow.'

Her words, soaring out into the vast space of the roof, were lost in the combined voice of the congregation. Even Rob, a reluctant singer, was contributing with gusto, his head thrown back as he reached for the higher notes. She caught Mel's eye, and they exchanged a grin.

She spotted Tracey and Julian, a couple of rows from the front. Of course the Tierneys would come, they knew everyone, belonged everywhere. Two weeks since the incident with Luke, and Tracey would still be relishing it. 'You poor poor thing,' she'd said as Jess had waited numbly in the staffroom after school while the governors discussed her. 'You must feel so guilty.'

Like swallowing something sour.

Half an hour later she'd been called in. Stood like a naughty child while they'd read out their findings. But it had been a reprieve. 'Your excellent record so far -' Jon Patchett had said. The humiliation of it there again now, breaking into her joy, nagging at her insides.

Tracey was staring at her, as if she'd been reading her thoughts. Jess smiled, fighting her away. She wanted it to be a big wide, I'm-proud-to-be-where-I-am-holding-my-goddaughter sort of smile.

Goddaughter.

She felt Alice's weight shift and glanced down. Above the pink flowers that edged the neck of her christening dress, the baby's eyes were wide, fixed on something beyond Jess's head. She was looking at the figures that leaned out from the roof timbers. They were of a pale wood, some ancient oak made smoother and softer through the centuries. In the dancing, dewy light, in the tiny motes of dust that swirled around them, they looked almost alive.

They watched together before Jess bent to kiss her goddaughter's forehead. 'Angels,' she whispered, 'They're flying.'

++

'Ugh!' Claire peered inside the cup she'd picked up from the staff-room table.

'Disgusting.'

'Paper mugs, then.' Jess said. She took two from the shelf and spooned in coffee.

'We're running out. Is there any more?'

'Bottom cupboard.' Claire stuck the dirty mug under the tap, swilled round the inside with a brush and propped it on the drainer. 'How was the christening?'

'Lovely. St Ethelred's is beautiful.'

Claire lowered her voice. 'See. I told you.'

'Was I being *very* silly?'

'A bit.' Claire grinned. 'You'll get broody now.'

'Jesus, don't let Rob hear you say that.'

'Why not? I thought he wanted children.'

'That's the trouble. He'd have a whole regiment of them. Tomorrow.'

Claire was ready for a family, you could tell. In April, she'd marry Hugh and then, in no more than a year or so, the babies would be there - blond and cheerful, like Claire herself - smiling at the world.

'But you love kids.' Claire said. She rose to pull something from her bag.

'I suppose.' Jess gazed into the swirling grains darkening the top of her coffee.

There were many kinds of love. Most people seemed to know what was meant by each of them, but she wasn't sure she did. There were lots of things she loved. Coffee ice cream, for one. Sunsets. She loved Rob and she was grateful he felt the same for her.

But had her mother loved her? Unlikely, given she'd buggered off before Jess was two-years-old, and never come back.

Then there was Dad. Mild, quietly-spoken. Not once had she heard him complain. When he'd known he was ill, he'd wanted more than anything to make Jess strong and secure enough to manage alone. That was love – a generous, decent, responsible love that expressed itself by letting go. But it filled her with fear: in the end, when you loved someone, whether they wanted to or not, they ended up leaving you.

The thing about being a teacher was that you got children temporarily. It was a pattern she'd grown used to: meeting people, making friends, moving on. It made sense.

She looked up, met Claire's eyes. 'Anyway,' Jess said. 'We might be leaving. I couldn't possibly get pregnant now.'

'*Leaving?*' Claire put down her coffee.

'Yes. Didn't Hugh tell you? Chief Engineer on a new project in Norfolk. Rob's on the shortlist.'

'Hugh did mention it. I didn't realize it meant you'd actually *live* there. Shit -' Claire leaned forward, hugging her mug. 'But Jess, *leave?* I mean... You love it here.'

'I know.' Now the word worked. Love for a place. She'd never had that before, but she had it here. 'Perhaps they won't want him.'

'They will. Hugh says he's their golden boy.'

'Then I won't go.'

'Good for you, girl. You tell him,' Claire said.

'Any coffee?'

Jess spun round. Tracey. Had she heard?

'Loads,' Claire said. She indicated the new jar.

‘Lovely christening,’ Tracey said brightly. ‘Though how Mel copes with *three*.’ She contorted her face in an expression of horror. ‘Shame we couldn’t come back for drinks. But we’d been invited to the Patchetts.’

‘The Patchetts?’ said Claire. ‘Nice.’

‘The new vicar’s a bit odd, don’t you think?’

‘Is she? Why?’ Jess had liked her.

‘Those scratches on the church door – can you believe it, she got someone in.’

‘What scratches?’ How galling to have to ask, to show her ignorance of local things. The question had come out before Jess had time to stop it.

‘Haven’t you seen them?’ Claire made a claw shape with her fingers. ‘Deep black gouges in the wood. Spooky.’

Jess shook her head. ‘What are they?’

‘The black dog,’ said Claire.

‘Is that the one you’re not supposed to mention?’ Jess dimly recalled a folk story she’d heard Rob’s father talk about. ‘Black Sh..’

‘*Shhh*.’ Claire put her hands to her lips.

‘God, Claire, not you too.’ Tracey poured a jet of steaming water into the cup. The water hit the side, and it threatened to topple. She caught it just in time. ‘Ouch.’ She sucked at the scald.

Claire grinned.

‘Stupid superstitious nonsense.’ Tracey withdrew her hand from her mouth and looked at it. ‘And yet the vicar gets this Professor of Chemistry from UEA to come and have a look, can you believe it? Anyway, it turns out they’re almost certainly burn marks. Probably from lightning during the great storms.’ She sat down, tucking her legs

together, and sipped at her coffee. ‘She should’ve saved the church’s money. No one really cares about such rubbish.’

‘Jess does,’ Claire said.

Jess smiled. Thursday was Halloween. It was a brilliant thing to talk about in class – with just the right amount of spine-chilling ambiguity. Local too.

++

She showed them the pictures she’d taken, edited and blown-up with iPhoto, framing the church door in a grey mist, fading the colours so the scratches looked more pronounced. They stared at the images, their voices high with excitement. ‘It’s the black dog, Miss. It’s Black Sh..’ But she silenced them, stopped them saying the words. It made it more thrilling, and they shivered with the horror of it and made scared faces.

‘Did them Old Charlburgh people really believe those things?’ Tom asked.

‘They sure did, Tom. If they were ill, say, they might go to a witch or a magician. They didn’t have doctors in those days. And it’s quite likely they thought the terrible storms they were having were some sort of message from God. Can you imagine that?’ They shook their heads. ‘You see, they weren’t educated like we are – they didn’t know the things we know.’

‘What else, Miss?’

‘Well, crows.’ She flapped her arms as illustration. ‘Those big black birds that the farmers get so cross about? Believe it or not, they were seen as agents of the devil. But no one dared say it – the word, I mean. Devil. They thought something terrible would happen.’

‘*You* said it.’

‘Yes, I did, didn’t I?’ Was she laying it on too thick? She didn’t want to frighten them. Just a frisson, an enjoyment of it, like something scary on children’s TV. She

smiled. 'But we live in the twenty-first century, we know which things are real and which aren't. We have *Science*. We understand loads and loads of things they never even dreamed of.'

They looked thoughtful, considering what she'd said. It was Kyra, logical as ever, her eyes huge behind her spectacles, who spoke first.

'But them scratches on the door?'

'Ah, well I can explain those too. Do you want me to tell you? Yes, Whitney?'

Two single spots glowed red in the white of the girl's cheeks.

'What about the skeletons? The ones by the leper chapel.'

'Oh. You mean what's left of the old cemetery. What about them?'

The mood was changing, the anxiety in Whitney's voice darkening it, taking it somewhere else.

'Well, I don't like them.' Whitney lips trembled and she sat down again.

There's was a moment's silence, then Oliver said, 'There's skeletons everywhere, dafty. That's what you get in graves - dead people.'

A wave of laughter broke through the room, and the tension in Whitney's face eased. She blushed, gave a self-conscious smile. All the children were talking now, and Jess let them. After a moment Gabriel's voice cut through the hubbub.

'My dad says those tombstones are from the time of the old city.'

'That's right, Gabriel,' she said. 'Though I think most of the graveyard fell onto the beach centuries ago.'

'There'll be bones there then,' Oliver said.

'*Don't*.' Whitney's voice was a whimper.

'There's nothing to worry about, Whitney. If there were, I think we'd have heard, don't you?' Jess broadened her look to bring in the whole class.

‘Might of. Might of not.’ Oliver’s face brightened. ‘Them other bodies - they’ll fall over the cliff too one day. Then there’ll be skeletons and bones and blood.’ He rose and waved his thin arms in the air, bringing more laughter.

Luke stood up, his face pink with outrage.

‘Don’t laugh,’ he said. ‘Dead people talk to us.’

The children stared at him. They seemed unsure how to respond. Then they turned away, raised their eyebrows, shook their heads. Stupid boy, their glances said, but there was unease there too, a fear they were fighting away.

Jess gave an awkward laugh. Time to pull them back. ‘Well, that’s enough silly stories for today,’ she said. ‘Time to get out your reading books.’

‘It’s not silly,’ Luke said. He dropped his head and huddled into his seat. Next to him, Whitney put out a hand in comfort, and he pushed her away.

Jess closed her eyes. *Idiot*, she said to herself. *Idiot*.

++

The bell had gone and the class was queuing for the playground. Luke was unusually excited, hopping from foot to foot. The door opened, and Jess watched as he began to press forward, sticking out his elbows and forcing the others aside.

Ahead of him, Tom turned and shoved him back. ‘Watch it!’

Luke ignored him.

‘Luke! Tom. Both of you, that’s enough.’

Luke pushed onwards, part of the surge of children emptying into the playground. He was almost frantic.

‘Luke!’

She saw him hesitate, doubt clouding his face as he battled between the requirement to conform and the overpowering pull of the outside. His eyes flicked forward and back. At last he turned.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘Now, both of you. Come here please.’

They did as she bid, but Luke’s face was red with impatience. ‘The boy -’ His voice was shrill. ‘He’s *waiting*.’

‘Luke, I need you to calm down.’

His face contorted. Battling still. She waited.

‘He’ll be *angry*.’

‘No he won’t. Look, he’s over there.’ She pointed to where Gabriel was standing under the oak tree with Matthew, examining something on the ground. ‘You can go and talk to him in a minute.’

‘Not *him*.’

Luke gaze moved past the tree and toward the railings. She could see a row of bushes, yellow leaves drooping. A shadow below shifted and stilled. She peered again. Nothing.

‘*Please*.’ It was a sob.

What was the point? He wasn’t listening, and now both boys were missing their break. Defeated, she flapped her hands. ‘Go on,’ she said. ‘Both of you. Go and play.’

Luke fled, disappearing behind Molly and Krya who stopped talking to watch him. Moments later he was in the corner of the playground, the buttons on his coat done up all the way to his neck. His head was tilted as if listening to something. But he was alone.

Anything might happen, Tracey had said. An exaggeration of course. But managing him, and the class's reaction to him, was like pushing a wheelbarrow over hard terrain, the wheel sliding in the wrong direction or locking and refusing to move.

And then there was Whitney. More than once the little girl had fallen asleep during lessons.

'It was Carl's feed. He wakes up,' she'd told Jess one day.

'What about your mum, Whitney?'

'She gets poorly.'

They'd talked about her in the staff meeting. Decided not to interfere just yet. 'It's a hard one to call,' Richard said.

Jess peered again through the window. Whitney was standing to one side, looking at Luke. Her yellow ribbon was undone, and her hair hung in black tendrils across her face. She was thin. Fragile as a sylph.

Emily

As she rounds the bend in Hinton Lane she can just make out the group outside the cottage. Hoods hide their faces. In the draining light they look spectral, menacing, like the souls of Tartarus she's once described in a novel. Luke sees them too and stops. She reaches for his hand and tells him it's OK.

They're only kids. As corporeal and alive as she and Luke. Even so, she doesn't want them there. She knows what gangs like this can do: has seen them in the centre of Arusha, hanging round the bars; in Oxford, drifting into town from the Cowley Road estate.

A pulse rises and quickens, but she won't give in to it. She's a strong woman. And sober. It's what she writes about, after all – or used to: boys full of bluster, full of bravado.

She keeps her steps bold and pulls Luke with her. He lets it happen. 'It's alright,' she says. 'We'll go straight past them and into the house.' But someone has put a bicycle across the gateway and the path is blocked. Emily stops at the edge of the group and waits. It takes all she has. They're boys for god's sake. Just boys. No one speaks. They look at her, eyes glittering from under the dark of their hoods.

'Hello,' she says. She is not shaking. Her voice is controlled. 'Can I help you with anything?'

She guesses there are seven in all though she refuses to look carefully enough to check. They're younger than she thought, perhaps twelve or thirteen, except for one

who stands astride his bike, his legs a little too long for it. He's wearing a baseball cap not a hoodie, with the peak turned the wrong way round.

'Mrs Bayely, I presume?' he says, his attempt at an RP accent a caricature of hers.

'I am.' She puts out her hand. If she forces herself to be polite, perhaps he will be too. 'And you are?'

'Don't you know? Oh, you will.' He ignores the hand.

She feels a flash of anger. 'I will, will I?'

He makes a strange sound, a half laugh, half snort. He looks round, waiting for the others to laugh too. When they do – an exaggerated snigger - he says, 'That's me, see. Will. Will Sutton.'

She swallows. She doesn't think it's funny, she thinks it's silly and rather frightening. 'Well, Will,' she says, her voice still firm. 'If one of you can move the bike please, my son and I can get into our house.'

'Oh dear.' His look is innocent, almost affronted. 'Is it in your way then?' Slowly he turns his head towards the smallest boy, a thin youth with sharp tufts of hair that rise vertically above his scalp. There's a half-smoked cigarette between his fingers. 'Go'on, then, get on with it. You heard the lady.'

'It's broke,' the boy says. He brings the cigarette to his mouth, puffs on it and blows out a stream of smoke. It drifts towards her, and she forces herself not to cough.

She can make it out in the gloom, the chain fallen from the hub, lying across the pedals and sagging to the ground. But she's sure that's no reason not to move the bike. The others are watching. They're not threatening, just immobile. This is Will's game, and the other boy's. The rest are bystanders.

She turns to them. 'Are you from the village?' Perhaps if she shames them, reminds them who they are and where they belong?

‘Might be,’ says one.

She’s beginning to panic, feels it in her body, her vision closing so that everything not in its centre is a shadow, a blackness. She takes a deep breath, holds it in her chest, presses tight round Luke’s fingers, pulling him close. He’s biddable, quiescent, and she’s grateful. The important thing, she knows, is to see what the boys look like. The colour of their hair, the shape of their features, the clothes they’re wearing. Because there’ll be photographs at Ippingham police station: *Yes, that one. That one too.* But she can’t. She can’t focus.

And then the second boy is moving, the one with the spikey hair. First he seems to be coming towards her, towards Luke, but then he veers back, bends and lifts the bicycle upright. It must be some sort of unspoken command because the other youths move aside, twisting their own bikes into a kind of guard of honour. She keeps a tight hold of Luke’s hand as the two of them pass through the row of mocking eyes and into the garden. This is a trick, she thinks, the boys will rob them, attack them.

But now she’s at the door. She can’t find the key, scrabbling in her bag, her hand catching on the zip-pull of her purse, on the scissors that fell to the bottom weeks ago. She closes her fingers round their handle. She has a vision of pulling them out, turning with them in her hand, letting them glint in the light from the porch. But what will she do? Stab a child? She lets go. She’s found the keys anyway, the little African carving they’re attached to scratching at her knuckle.

At last the door’s open, and she pushes Luke inside. She goes to follow him but a hand reaches out from behind her and prevents the door closing. There’s a tattoo - a dog’s head? - across the wrist. She turns to find Will grinning down at her with his crooked white teeth.

‘We got summit for Lukey-boy,’ he says. It makes her cold hearing Luke’s name coming from his mouth, but she’s transfixed, unable to move. At least Luke is inside the house. She wants him to slam the door, pull it from Will’s grasp, but she knows he won’t. She sees one of the smaller boys walking up the path. He has a carrier bag in his hand. Will takes it and gives it too her.

‘For shell-boy,’ he says. ‘Keep him occupied.’

‘What?’

But he’s turned and walked back towards the gate. They all have. She watches as they pick up their bikes. It’s hard to see them, the light from the porch too dim to reach. After a moment the lane becomes silent, and she knows they’ve gone.

Luke’s looking at her. ‘Are they bad boys?’ he says.

‘Yes, I think they are. You must keep away from them Luke, do you hear?’

He nods. She’s surprised at how compliant he is.

Luke is peering into the bag. ‘*Don’t*’ she shouts, but it’s too late because he’s digging in. She imagines pig manure, razor blades, worse. He stops, and lets his arm hang suspended, half hidden by the word ‘Co-op’. When he pulls it out, his palm is full of bits of shell. Tiny shards of pink and pearl, Fragments and splinters. At times it’s almost dust.

She looks at his face. It’s full of disappointment. Full of grief.

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She’s made omelette. It’s satisfied her to break the eggs, to feel the sliver of albumen over her fingers, to see the swirl of the yoke as it breaks. She would like to break other things, the Pyrex bowl she’s mixed them in, the glazed doors to the wall cupboard. There are windows too, and glasses. She could smash those. Throw knives, cookery books, plates. Make it into an art form.

But she doesn't. Instead she watches the eggs as they solidify, scrapes the base of the non-stick frying pan with a fork. She sees Luke at the door and smiles at him. 'It's OK,' the smile's supposed to say. 'It's just us now. We're safe.' But he drops his head and pads away, his feet silent on the stairs.

Safe? Of course they're safe. They've had an encounter with some local youths, that's all. Kids hardly out of short trousers. It happens everywhere. All the time.

Dead people talk to us is what Jess Baxter told her he said. It's like a line in a film. Not just Amy then? *People*. The word sends a chill through her body.

She bends to peer at the wine bottle. Almost empty. She could throw that too, toss it overarm at the kitchen door, place it centrally through the middle pane. *Howzat!*

She could, but she needs to drink what's left before she does.

She empties it into the glass. An inch - hardly worth having. There's another bottle in the cupboard, but she's promised herself.

They know Luke's name. They know about the shells.

Her phone's on the kitchen top. She picks it up, and the screen flashes – telling her the time, asking for the password.

Nothing else.

She thumbs in the number. *1506*. The date of her and Simon's wedding. Scrolls into favourites and presses beside his name.

It's ringing. A victory of sorts.

But her triumph dulls. Because it goes on. And on. And then it stops. Not even a voicemail option.

'Fuck you,' she says.

The weather had turned colder, the wind off the sea stinging her eyes and cheeks. But she needed the walk, the pebbles hard under her feet. Two weeks now since Rob's second interview which, he'd seemed sure, had gone well, had been convivial like old pals planning an adventure together, but still no definite decision, nothing in writing. He was edgy now, morose. Ready to snap.

She took off her woolly hat, felt her hair whip at her face. She too would like to know what the Board had decided. Better to face the truth than pretend it wasn't there. A quick cut and then the transplant. Kings Lynn? Hunstanton? It didn't matter. She hated it either way.

Something moved across the sky, and she narrowed her eyes. A marsh harrier. The first in weeks - the upward curve of its wings, the sudden ferocious beating against the air, the levelling down into a glide.

Of course there'd be harriers in Norfolk. Just as many. And other birds too. Little egrets, bitterns, buntings. And there'd be long open beaches. Deserted, just as here, and stretching out forever.

And yet.

'I don't understand you, Jess,' Rob had said.

'But I've made this my *home*.'

'For me,' he'd said - and she'd felt an acid flash of anger at his implication - 'home is where *you* are. Where we are together.'

Unfair. How could she reply to that?

The finished models sat in a row along the tops of the cupboards. Luke's, at his own request, pushed to the back. This week the children were doing Christmas cards and decorations. Already, snowmen and santas hung from ceilings and were stuck to walls. Even Luke joined in, pasting a cardboard Christmas tree to the side of his locker.

Molly said, 'Was there Christmas in Middle-aged days?'

'Yes, of course. But they didn't have turkey. Rich people had goose or even swan. Poor people had – well I'm not sure what poor people had. Rabbit, I suppose. Wild boar if they were lucky. But,' she smiled, licked her lips, 'I think everyone had mince pies.'

'Pickled herrings,' Oliver said. 'Eels.'

He drew an eel in the air, gestured its wriggling body. He liked to think of himself as a rebel, but he knew things, listened. She wondered what would happen to him. To avoid following in the footsteps of his brother Will - so angry and bored, sneering at the world – he would need to use his intellect, to have a purpose.

But if she had to leave...

'They had pottage,' Gabriel said, and she found him among the faces. 'My dad says it's made with peas, or oats.'

'They ate *wrasse*,' Luke said, suddenly loud. Heads swivelled to look.

'Wrasse? Is that something to eat? I haven't heard of it.'

'It's a fish,' he said. 'They had it for feasts and things.' Aware of the class's attention, his voice sunk to a whisper. 'With galingale.'

'Galingale?' she said. 'Wow, thank you Luke.'

'He's making it up,' said Tom.

She frowned at him, silencing his protest. She'd never heard of either wrasse or galingale but she'd bet her monthly salary it was true. Glancing back at Luke, she saw his head was down, as if all he wanted was to slide out of sight.

++

The Head stood for a moment gazing at the playground. 'Why on earth does Jerome Cooper always have to look such a little gypsy,' he said. 'Doesn't he *have* a school uniform?'

'He's wearing it.'

'He *is*? You wouldn't know. Have a discreet word with his mum, will you?' He moved away, walked over to the models. 'I came to see these. It's good work, Jess.'

'Thank you. They've enjoyed it.'

'And Luke? No more wandering off?'

She flushed, shook her head.

'So, how's he getting on?'

'Pretty well, actually. He's a proper little researcher.' She warmed to it, glad to be able to recount something positive. 'Goodness knows where he finds the stuff he comes out with. This morning he mentioned a fish they used to eat. Wrasse? Does it mean anything to you?'

He nodded. 'It does. There's plenty in the seas around here. I can't imagine anyone eating it, though. It's disgusting.'

'He says they cooked it with something called galingale.'

'Maybe they did.' He shrugged, moved to the door. 'I don't know what that is. Still, I can see you're doing great things with him. I knew you would.'

She smiled, pleased.

‘He’s certainly clever.’ At the door, he gestured to a picture of Whitney’s on the wall. ‘Brave little thing, isn’t she?’

Jess nodded, but the comment about Luke dismayed her. The tone implied his cleverness was a curse, or something he used against them. She walked across to his model and looked down, making out the dockside, a central square, some municipal buildings. He was a talented. Special.

The figure of the medieval child had been tossed to the edge of the shelf. Oliver’s doing? Jerome’s? Maybe even Tom’s. She’d found it discarded on too many occasions. Perhaps they shared the task between them, an unkindness they’d agreed upon, moving it whenever they got the chance. She’d like to bang their heads together, make them *realise*. She picked it up and examined the figure for damage. Battered and dusty, with the fabric of its pantaloons already fraying, it lay in her palm, its dark eyes staring upwards, returning her gaze.

What a strange thing it was, almost chilling. She put it back in the centre of the town square and began to busy herself tidying the classroom.

Soon the bell went, and the children trooped in, Luke trailing at the back. His coat was buttoned, as ever, right up to his neck, and she felt an unexpected pang of affection for him. With any other child she might point it out, perhaps even tease him a little. But she didn’t dare with Luke. Who was the boy he’d been so desperate to meet in the playground that day? Had it been Alwin, the name he’d mentioned before? It might be useful to find out who Alwin really was.

Luke was walking in her direction, but she knew from the set of his face it was the model he was intent on and she moved out of his way. He didn’t glance up but instead reached for the boy-figure she’d left in the central square and moved it back to where she’d found it, face down on the table.

‘Why did you do that, Luke?’ she asked quietly.

‘It’s where he wants me to put him,’ he said. He didn’t look at her. ‘That’s where the sea is. He’s drowning.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Right.’

It didn’t feel right at all.

++

They were in the bay next to the bookshelves. From there she could watch the class whilst listening to individual children reading aloud. Luke was finished now, ready to return to his desk. ‘Well done, Luke,’ she said. ‘You read very well.’

As if he was pleased with the compliment, his eyes flickered up and caught hers. She smiled. ‘Can I ask you a question?’ She formed her words so they sounded gentle, not interrogative, and he waited. ‘That figure you made, of the boy – why is he drowning?’

He frowned, surprised, and then his face rearranged itself as if the answer was something so obvious, he’d never really thought about it. Finally he said. ‘He wants to be with his brother - under the waves.’

‘I see.’ She didn’t think she did. Was he saying the boy was drowning voluntarily? *Killing himself?* She took in a breath. ‘And why’s that, Luke?’

That was easier, his answer ready. ‘Because everybody got made to go there by the storms, of course. He got left behind in the leper place.’

‘I see.’ She supposed someone of Luke’s sensitivity might just imagine such a thing. It was chilling. *What if...* She hardly dared let the thought form itself in her head.

‘It wasn’t his sister he wanted to find, was it?’ she said

He narrowed his eyes, perplexed. ‘He hasn’t got a sister,’ he said. His voice was matter-of-fact.

‘Not a little sister, maybe?’

‘Oh no. Just his brother. And his mummy and daddy. They’re under the sea too.’

She sat back, smiled to let him go back to his seat. Perhaps it really was just Luke’s lively imagination - it was hard to know. A gentle word with Emily might be good.

++

The car windows were down, the air almost wintry. To their left, Jess could see the tops of the reeds waving green-blue in the breeze. She’d listened to them as she’d lain in bed, their murmur audible above the soft tumble of the sea. But it was the forest she was looking forward to. No colours now, but still beautiful, individual trees carving shapes against the sky.

‘You packed the binoculars?’

‘Of course.’ He half turned to look at her. ‘This is just the best thing to do. A long, brisk, birdy, walk. To clear my head for tomorrow.’

A planning meeting with the directors. He was excited now, impatient in his preparation and waiting only for the formal offer of employment from HR before cracking open the champagne.

‘I’m proud of you,’ she said.

‘So, sorry,’ she imagined them saying. ‘We’ve decided against using you on the Norfolk project. You’re much too valuable here.’

‘Did you look at those houses the agent sent through?’ he said. ‘I’ve forwarded the link to your laptop?’

They were modern houses. Solid, but without character. One, with a large garden and a double garage was considerably more than she’d thought they could afford. She couldn’t imagine living in any of them.

‘I don’t want to tempt fate,’ she said.

He chuckled, pressed down on the accelerator. 'You're right. Anyway, today is a day for us. And the birds.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Us and the birds.'

++

They saw a bearded tit. Her first ever. They'd scoured the reed-beds for these, spent hours in the hides in the Char Estuary Nature Reserve. Now on the edge of Minsmere, before they'd even paid their entrance fee, there it sat on a holly bush, its long orange tail bobbing.

'It's not really a member of the tit family at all,' Rob whispered. 'It belongs to a family of its own.'

'Where's its beard,' she whispered back and peered closer, but it was too much and the bird darted away.

Rob watched it disappear. 'It doesn't have one. Did you see the little black moustache?'

She laughed, her breath making steam in the cold air. 'Not a tit and not bearded. No wonder they're hard to spot.'

He reached out and entwined his fingers in hers, warming them. She squeezed back. She was being too harsh on him. Perhaps rather selfish. What he'd said the other day - *home is where you are, where we are together* - it was a tender thing.

The ground was soft underfoot, leaves mulching into the frost-melted earth. They hopped over puddles and tiptoed over marshy bits, caking their boots and the bottom of their jeans in mud and rotting vegetation. When they reached the bittern hide they slid through the door. The interior, damp and smelling of old timber and fungus, was already occupied. The seated figures turned as they entered, light catching their faces, making them ghostly against the musty dark.

‘Look Dad, it’s Mrs Baxter.’ A voice she recognised.

‘Gabriel? Mr Harding?’

Rob lifted a hand in acknowledgement, shining his torch into the corners.

‘A bit cold for adders.’ Joe Harding pushed back the hood of his parka to see them.

Edging closer to the side, he motioned Gabriel to follow so the two newcomers could sit.

‘Anything interesting?’

‘A couple of curlews. Lots of cormorants.’

‘There’s an avocet,’ Gabriel said. ‘Well, I *think* it’s an avocet. It’s black and white anyhow.’ They looked.

‘It is. Great spot, Gabes.’

Jess settled herself on the bench and leaned forward to scan the estuary. The tide was low, revealing acres of mud flat and sand. Several waders, too far away for her to identify, pecked in the shallows.

‘Is that a sandpiper. Look. Over there?’ A flash of white caught the sun, disappeared and came back into view.

Rob followed her finger. ‘Too small for a common sandpiper.’ He leaned forward.

‘Oh my God?’

‘What?’ It looked ordinary enough.

‘It’s a little stint. Haven’t seen one in ages.’

Gabriel had binoculars to his eyes, trying to get the bird in his sights. His father reached to steady them. ‘Wow. I’ve got it. Can I put it in my book now?’

‘You absolutely can,’ Joe said. ‘You’ll have more than me soon.’ He turned to Jess.

‘Didn’t know you bird-watched.’

‘I’m a learner,’ she said. ‘Still got my L-plates.’

‘She’s better than most of the villagers.’ Rob said. ‘They couldn’t recognise a blackbird.’

‘Luke Bayely can,’ said Joe. ‘He came to see us again yesterday. He’s a very clever lad.’ He eyes were focused through the slits of the hide.

‘We’ve got lots of clever boys in our class, haven’t we Gabriel?’ She smiled at him through the gloom. The stint was still there, half visible in the reeds, and she tracked it working its way along the edge. It vanished into the dark of the marsh, and she lowered the glasses. ‘Luke loves the museum - he’s learning so much about the old town. Have you been coaching him?’

‘Where’s it gone?’ He scanned along the edge of the water. ‘Coaching him? How?’

‘Well, wrasse for a start. Did you tell him about it? Or galingale?’

‘He knows about that does he? *Cyperus longus*. I’ve only recently discovered it myself.’ He shook his head in amazement and then peered forward, adjusting the focus on the binoculars. ‘Woa, there it goes.’

‘Da-ad, you’re scaring them.’

He placed a hand on his son’s arm, his voice dropping back to a whisper. ‘Sorry Gabes.’

A sweet relationship. Warm, respectful. Jess felt unaccountably sad.

++

They were walking back towards the main track, wading through puddles, letting the water wash the mud from their boots.

‘Wait.’ Rob placed a hand on her arm. ‘Let them get ahead.’

‘Who?’ She saw them then, a group of men making their way along the edge of the reserve.

‘Travellers.’

‘How can you tell?’ She squinted to see better. They could have been anyone, in their jeans and jerkins and leather coats.

‘Jess, please, just wait.’

‘What on earth for?’ She moved to go forward. ‘I want to talk to them.’

He grabbed her arm. ‘Jess!’ She pulled away, aware of the alarm in his eyes. ‘Don’t you dare,’ he said.

She remembered his words from the summer. *The pikeys. They’re trouble.* She hated the narrow-mindedness she saw in him sometimes. ‘I just want to ask them something, that’s all. I want to know if there’s a child called Alwin in their group.’

‘What?’

‘I think he’s a traveller. He’s a friend of Luke Bayley’s’ She felt a twinge of guilt, a sense of Rob’s growing resentment. A day away from work, they’d promised themselves.

The men had vanished inside the tangle of the wood. She stared after them, into the dark of its interior. ‘We could go and find their caravans. Please, Rob. I bet they’re not far from where we’ve parked.’

‘Bloody hell, Jess.’ He pulled her round so she was facing him. ‘You scare me sometimes,’ he said. ‘You really do. You can’t just wander into a gypsy camp. They’ll eat you alive.’

He was exaggerating. They were perfectly ordinary people. If she was polite, asked nicely, they’d give her an answer.

++

As they emerged onto the heath into the glare of the early December sun, they spotted Whitney. Crouched amongst the grasses and suckers at the foot of a big oak a hundred

yards or so up the track, she looked elfin, unreal. Even under her faded pink parka, she seemed like something from a child's story with her ribbons undone and trailing over her shoulders. From the smudges on her face, Jess suspected she'd been crying.

'Whitney, what are you doing here, sweetheart? Where's your mum?'

'At home, Miss.' Whitney coughed weakly.

'Are you feeling poorly?'

'No, thank you Miss.'

Jess smiled, crouched down beside her. 'Why are you here alone? Does your mummy know where you are?'

'I'm with Tom, Miss, and Oliver. And Will.' She looked round.

'Are you? And where are they?'

Whitney leaned forward and lowered her voice. 'They hid when they saw you was coming.' There was smoke on her breath.

'Have you had a cigarette?'

'No, Miss. Not really.' Jess caught the glance down to the base of the tree. A half-smoked stub lay on the flattened grass, hastily stamped out. 'I only had one go.'

Jess stood up. 'Oliver, Will Sutton? Are you there? Come out please.' She turned back to Whitney, 'We can't leave you here on your own.'

'I'm not, Miss. Honest. They're over there.' She pointed. Just visible through the thicket opposite was a den built from ferns and broken branches. Already Rob was pushing back the brambles to get through.

'Oi, you lot. Out of there.'

Beyond the sound of the trees moving in the wind, there was silence. Then came a crackling and a low murmur of voices as Will Sutton emerged grinning from the undergrowth. Behind him Tom and Oliver stumbled out together, sticks in their hands.

‘Lo Mr Baxter. ‘Lo Mrs Baxter.’ Will was tall, Jess realised, almost to the point of manliness. One of those heavily built 14-year-olds who get picked for the rugby team or to train as a boxer. He was confident too, his words ringing out across the clearing.

‘Been for a nice walkies, have you?’

Three years since he’d left St Margaret’s. He’d been trouble even then.

‘That’s quite a camp you’ve got there, Will.’ Rob said. ‘You come here for a smoke do you?’

‘Sometimes. But I don’t need to hide nothing. We comes here to watch the birds.’ Behind him, Oliver and Tom suppressed a giggle.

‘I hope you haven’t been sharing your cigarettes with Whitney,’ Jess said.

‘Not a good idea, Will,’ said Rob.

Will shrugged. ‘Kids, these days.’ He addressed Rob as if Jess weren’t there. ‘You put yer fag down and the moment you’re not looking, they’re taking a drag theyselves.’ He strode over and looked down at the cigarette. ‘So that’s where it got to.’ He ground at it with his heel. ‘Got to be careful we don’t start no fires, eh.’

Jess felt a curl of anger. ‘We’re taking Whitney home.’

‘What for?’ It was Tom. He appeared suddenly worried, stepping forward so she could see him properly. Beside him, Will’s eyes were scornful. ‘I’m looking after her,’ Tom said. ‘She’s my cousin. She’ll be alright.’

‘Some cousin, Tom - to leave her out here on her own and let her smoke cigarettes. Have you been smoking too? Perhaps I should take you and Oliver home as well.’

It was Oliver who spoke. ‘Us, Miss? We never.’

‘Well, be sure you don’t.’

He nodded sagely. ‘I’m not so daft,’ he said.

‘She’s coming with us,’ Rob said to Will.

‘Don’t matter one way or t’other to me.’ Will turned and headed back into the camp, jerking his chin at the boys. ‘You with me, or not?’

‘There’s nothing you can do,’ Rob said, sensing her fury. ‘He’s going to brazen it out whatever you say. And if you make Tom and Oliver go home they’ll be back here within minutes.’

He was right. She nodded to them, *Go on then*. They disappeared towards the trees. ‘Right, Whitney, let’s get you back to your mum.’ Jess reached out her hand.

‘She don’t want me,’ Whitney said miserably. ‘It’s her envelope day. They go on the floor.’

‘Envelope day?’

‘She puts things in them. Brochures and that. For money.’

Jess searched her face. ‘Whitney sweetheart, you’re a long way from home. You’re cold. And you’ve been smoking. It’s not good for you. You’ve got a bedroom, haven’t you? You can play there - or in the garden?’

‘Spose.’ Whitney shrugged her shoulders. ‘But you’ll have to say you made me come. Or she’ll be cross.’

Jess exchanged a glance with Rob. ‘We can do that, can’t we Mr Baxter?’

‘Of course we can,’ he said.

++

Wenda Tydeman opened the door holding onto the collar of a large white dog. Her face was pale, her hair pulled greasily to the back of her head. In the hallway behind her stood an empty pram and several partly-opened cardboard boxes. The dog strained forward, and she pulled him back. ‘Sorry, he don’t like visitors. Homer! Stop it.’ When she saw Whitney, she frowned. ‘What you doing here, Whit? She’s not hurt is she? Not in trouble?’

‘We found her on the heath,’ said Jess. ‘Up by Tinkers Row with Tom and Oliver and Will Sutton. She’s fine. She just seemed a bit far from home, and a bit miserable. I’m afraid the boys weren’t exactly looking after her.’

‘Them damned kids,’ she said. ‘I warned them.’

‘She told us you said it was OK. But ...’ Jess let her voice tail off.

‘I said they was to keep her near.’

‘I’m sure you did.’ Jess smiled.

Mrs Tydeman gave the dog another tug. ‘Get inside then, Whit. You better find something to do.’

‘I can go and call for Luke,’ Whitney said, suddenly bright. ‘He might want to play.’

‘What’d I tell you about him?’ Her mother’s voice sharpened with dislike. Jess bit her lip, suppressing an urge to respond. She’d wanted to ask about Barry too, but already Wenda Tydeman was pulling Whitney inside and preparing to shut the door.

‘I expect Luke’s busy with his mummy,’ Jess said. ‘You’ll see him tomorrow, Whitney.’

Whitney gave a small shrug of acceptance. ‘I can do envelopes instead.’

‘No you can’t. You don’t fold straight.’ Mrs Tydeman nudged the dog with her toe, and it gave a last suspicious look before lumbering off into the hall. ‘You can go and see to Carl,’ As if on cue, a wail came from the back of the house, and she closed her eyes in despair.

‘You must go,’ said Jess. ‘Bye then. Whitney, I’ll see you in class.’

The child nodded, her violet eyes serious under the dark pixie hair.

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As they walked back up the track to Tinkers Row the shadows lengthened and the sky began to darken into night.

Rob looked at his watch and quickened his pace. 'We better get a move on.'

'We couldn't leave her there,' Jess said.

'Of course not.'

Someone was standing at the edge of the car park as they reached it. She had the sense he was interested in them, or Rob perhaps, though it was hard to tell in the gloom. She nudged Rob's side. 'Over there - that man. Do you know him?'

Rob turned, and the figure disappeared into the trees.

'Where?'

She indicated where he'd been standing, the line where the oak trees stopped and the denser, darker pines began. 'He was watching you.'

Rob snorted, took her arm in his. 'I very much doubt it. It'll be one of the travellers. Their camp's just behind those trees. I told you – they're trouble.'

Perhaps he was right. They seemed mysterious. Even menacing. It didn't put her off.

Emily

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nfdn,.dsjadjlk

Her fingertips tingle from the pressure of their mad run along the keys, and a nail's split. She closes the laptop with a jerk, tears off the broken nail and then curls both hands into fists, pushing them hard against each other so they hurt.

Inside she's numb. Flat. An inert mass of something unnamable and unrevivable.

On the shelves there are copies of her books. Five in all, unpacked last Friday as if they might offer some kind of inspiration or hope. But they won't. They're tacky, worthless. How can she have thought otherwise?

She pulls them from the shelf and arranges them in a row on the table in order of their writing. Lurid pictures on the covers: boys with flaming swords, women with snakes curled in their hair, birds like giant vultures. She flicks through, pauses on a page here, an illustration there. The writing's mundane, the colours vulgar. There's no merit or finesse. Everything's aimed at persuading purchasers to buy.

She turns one over.

Independent on Sunday: Brings myth and legend into the 21st century.

The Times: Needs to be in every school and every library.

The Guardian: Bayely has a rare insight into how children's minds work.

She laughs out loud. *As if.*

'Take your time, Emily,' Paul Martin said. 'We understand.' He doesn't. Anyway, time's not the issue. The issue's motivation. Interest. Giving a flying fuck.

She rises and takes the books over to the fireplace where she puts them in a pile on the hearth. Settling back on her knees, she lifts the one on top, *The Boy who Flew Too High*, and pulls the pages from its spine. There's a tug of resistance, and she reduces the number of sheets between her fingers. It gives with a *thrrrupppp* she both feels and hears. She rips at the pages, tearing across them again and again, until she has a heap of strips that she lifts between her cupped palms and lays in the grate, arranging them so the air can get in round the sides. She does this several times until the cover's empty, then she tears this too and tucks it below the rest.

Once she's thrown in the lighted match, the flames are fierce and immediate. They rise so high they disappear into the chimney itself. She hadn't intended to set the whole bloody house on fire. Yet she feels disappointed when the flames just as quickly die back and the fire dwindles to nothing. She digs at it with the poker, blows at the embers. They crackle and fade.

'Fuck.'

She looks round. Fire-lighters. That's the thing. They're in a drawer in the kitchen. She rises to retrieve them, pushing aside the bills and other correspondence she's stashed away in the same place. She tears up the next book, adds it to the remains of the first, and this time the flames are strong and insistent. By the time all the books are gone, she's begun to giggle.

It's mad – perhaps *she's* mad. If she gives in, she might go on and on until it's swallowed her up. It's a temptation.

But she fights it, pushes down into her chest to stop the rising excitement. A phrase the Tanzanians use dances at the edges of her thinking. *Hukupata nguvu za*. It's not quite right. She tries to grasp it, but it won't let her.

Christ, she's exhausted.

No matter. She's free of writing now. Done with it.

She liked it when Rob went to the pub. She could hear the sea as she worked, the *shrush shrush* as it slid against the shingle, the quiet moan of the wind.

Pictures from the Internet littered the floor. Storms and breaking cliffs. Hurricanes. Tornadoes and floods. Anything to do with the wild patterns of the earth. Now that Barry was out of hospital and Whitney more like her old self, the topic was safer. Besides, the kids were asking questions, spurred on by their knowledge of what happened to the old town. She arranged three of the photos on a sheet of charcoal-coloured sugar paper. Reaching for the glue, she became aware of men's voices outside, a low worried murmur that only now forced itself through.

Before she could move to the window to look, someone banged on the door. She heard Rob's voice, clear and sharp, in the midst of it all. 'Wait here.' There was the rattle of the lock and within a second he was in the room. His face had that sharp-eyed, competitive look that men get when they're responding to a crisis.

'What is it?'

'Gabriel Harding. And that new boy, Luke Bayely.' She caught the tightness in his voice. 'They're missing.'

'Both of them?' She stared at him stupidly. 'What, together?'

Julian Tierney's rugby-player's head loomed over Rob's shoulder. 'No one's seen them since teatime. They were at the Harding's house.' His glance flicked down the length of her and up again. She remembered the dressing gown she was wearing and pulled it tight around her.

‘Where would Luke go?’ Rob said. He seemed sure she would know.

Behind him, Julian’s eyes scanned the hallway. She wondered fleetingly if he thought the children might somehow have crept inside and be hiding there. ‘He’s taken Gabriel,’ he said.

The words chilled her. Then a surge of annoyance on Luke’s behalf rose and took over.

‘Why? Why on earth would you think that Luke’s *taken* Gabriel?’

‘For God’s sake, Jess.’ Rob’s cheeks flushed. ‘You know them better than most. Gabriel wouldn’t just wander off. He’s a sensible kid.’

So, it was decided. Already the consensus was that something ‘had happened’, and Luke had caused it. She glanced at her watch. How long would the boys have been gone? Three hours perhaps? That was worrying. Frightening even. But the expressions on Rob’s and Julian’s faces already suggested a major incident, possibly a real tragedy. It seemed inappropriate. Boys got caught up in things. They lost all sense of time.

‘They’ll be alright.’ She said it to calm the men; she had no idea if she believed it.

‘They’re bound to be nearby. Has anyone looked in the museum?’

Of course they had. The place had been scoured. They weren’t at Luke’s either. His mother, Julian curtly informed her, was out and the house closed up.

‘They should phone her.’

Julian lips twitched. ‘She’s gone to London. Luke was staying overnight.’

She felt a stab of panic, a flash of guilt at her own casualness. Only a few weeks ago the boy had been found wandering on the seashore. At this time of year, the tides could be unpredictable, dangerous. What if he was there now, Gabriel with him? How stupid of her to stand there trussed up in her nightclothes.

‘Jess, you know him,’ Rob said. ‘Where would he go?’

‘Go? God, I - perhaps – the beach?’ She was at the door, willing them to leave.

‘The beach? In the *dark*?’

‘He went before, didn’t he? It was daytime then, but. -’ Her throat tightened at the thought. ‘I suppose he might.’

Lights flickered through the open porch. Torches. It made the night seem blacker. Someone was organising groups, sending them off in different directions. She wanted to be out there too.

‘Has anyone been there? The beach, I mean.’

‘I don’t know. I think so.’

‘Give me a second. I’m coming.’

++

For early December it was mild, almost balmy. The sand shone a ghostly white, and the foam at the waters edge was white too, like a border of lace being blown in out, in out, by the sleepy sea. The scene was peaceful almost to the point of benevolence. At any other time, it would have been magical here. A place for lovers.

And so it had been for them in her early days in Little Charlburgh, Rob taking her hand, the pair of them wading into the night. It had been romantic. Wonderful: the moon high and bright, guiding their way.

She felt a moment of calm. Perhaps, she thought, she had caught the men’s panic. Just because Luke had wondered off to the sea before, it didn’t mean he’d done it this time. And he was with Gabriel, who was sensible, practical. To search the beach was necessary. But a formality surely?

From the top of the dunes she could see flashes of torch-beam, hear the murmur of voices. Two groups were there, one searching the edge of the northern shore, the other

near the jetty. It would be best if she turned right, go past the huts to where the dunes ran out and the cliffs began.

Maybe someone had searched already, but she explored anyway, moving through the gaps between the huts, ruffling her hands in the sedge grass that grew like weeds from the concrete bases. It was possible the boys had come earlier, when there was still a glimmer of daylight, had hidden somewhere and then curled up to sleep. She imagined the sudden soft touch of Luke's hair, or Gabriel's tufty little scalp – she imagined their delight at being discovered, and their disappointment.

It was the wistfulness of the image that shook her out of it. These were thoughts to associate with ordinary boys, like Matthew or Robin or Oliver. The awful thing was, despite his obsessions, his rigid predictability at school, for Luke, anything was possible - you simply couldn't tell.

Frightened now, she moved on, pressing her face to windows, directing her torch inside. There were folded up chairs and battered tables, kettles and mugs and jars used to put flowers in, bits of old ticking or blankets. There were sofas, a set of kitchen cupboards, a stack of surfboards and wetsuits. Ordinary pedestrian things, detailing people's lives. Sometimes the light from the torch shone the mask of her face back at her, and she saw her own empty eyes, her own ghostly cheeks. That was when she tried the doors in sudden panic, rattled at their locks and padlocks. She felt an easing of her heart when one opened and she heard sounds inside. But it was only a rodent scampering behind old decks chairs, teasing her.

There were no other signs of life. No sign of Luke or Gabriel.

Her torch flickered. The moon slid behind a cloud and darkness closed like a swamp. She felt the hairs rising on her neck, the cold break of sweat in her armpits. She shook the torch, pressed the switch on and off, and then on again. Nothing. She was a child

again on the tube, Dad's face beyond the window, the door closing between them. A terror so great she'd wet herself, felt it trickle down her legs.

I'll never see him again, she'd thought.

Her chest was tight, her heartbeat a tide in her ears. *Stop it*, she told herself. Be positive. Be strong. Yet how could she not be frightened? The boys were out there in the darkness. Lost.

'Luke,' she hissed. 'Gabriel. Where are you?' The grasses brushed her arms, caught round her feet. She pulled at them, but the sedge cut into her shins and dragged her down.

'Please Luke,' she pleaded. *Please.*

Maybe it was too late, maybe there was no point in the searching or the calling or the waiting. The boys could be lying nearby, their bodies intertwined and broken, their trusting little faces gazing sightless at the blackened sky.

A surge of anger, so strong she was unable to move, took hold of her body. What was Emily Bayely doing leaving her little boy with people he hardly knew. And Sarah Harding too – why had she not been watching them?

There were murmurs, voices, growing louder. She rubbed at her eyes and peered through the grasses. A group of villagers were making their way up the beach below her, their torch-beams zig-zagging across the shoreline. Had they heard her calls, the edge of hysteria they'd contained? She was suddenly ashamed of her weakness and the darkness of her thoughts. Rising, she shook her torch again and pressed the button. Nothing.

There were people in the reeds too. Not far from where she'd been. She could see them, moving monochrome in the flashlights – the occasional arm, the outline of a head. They must be working their way along the edges of the boardwalks, directing their

searchlights into the black, brackish water. Her heart beat hard in her chest. Don't let them be there. Please.

She stopped, recalling the boy in Rob's class. She remembered his name: Jimmy Henson. A lonely child, Mel had said – isolated and different - as Luke was. *Lost forever in the reeds.*

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A police car stood in front of the post office, its blue light flashing. Another waited at the end of Sugar Lane. Someone had rigged up a spotlight that shone across the green. Tracey Tierney was there, She gave Jess a cold glance.

Now things would be organised, the boys found. She'd been silly, melodramatic. Children went missing all the time and rarely came to any harm. She headed over to the centre of the Green and saw the tall figure of Joe Harding advancing towards her. She stopped to wait. In the arc light the shadows under his eyes were huge, his face skeletal. When he spoke, he was out of breath.

'You don't have any idea where they might be?'

She shook her head. 'Luke has a thing about the beach.' She saw the intensification of his alarm and hurried to reassure him. 'But I don't think they'll have gone there in the dark. Honestly. I've just come from there myself, and there are dozens of people searching it now. Dozens.'

'I feel so bloody helpless.'

'I know.' She touched his arm. 'What about Luke's mum? Is there any sign of her?'

He shook his head. 'Not a whisper. God, I wish she'd switch her phone on.'

'They'll turn up. '

‘I hope so.’ The tone was grim. He moved to go and then stopped. ‘If you get the chance, could you possibly - it’s Sarah, she’s in a dreadful state. There are things she keeps asking – about Luke. Perhaps if you -?’

‘Anything, if it’ll help.’

‘Thank you. She’s at home. The police have said she has to stay there - for when the boys come back.’

‘Cookies and cocoa and a serious talking to?’

‘Exactly.’

The front door was unlatched but she tapped on it anyway. 'Mrs Harding? Sarah?'

'It's open.'

Gabriel's mother was by the sitting-room window looking down to where Sugar Lane met the village green. Beyond were the lights, the odd figure in silhouette as it passed across the end of the road. She twisted round, registered Jess's presence and turned back. 'You don't have any news, I suppose?'

'I'm so sorry.'

'I have to watch.' Her voice was jerky. 'I can't help it.'

'I'd be the same.' She wondered if it was true. Her own mother wouldn't have been there at all.

'Did you see Joe?' Sarah's face looked even thinner than her husband's. Her eyes were dry, empty. 'Did he ask you to come?'

'Yes.'

'He thinks I can't cope. I can of course.' She gave a hollow laugh and turned back to the window, pressing her cheek against the glass. Jess waited, but Sarah seemed to have forgotten what she was going to say. Her hand gripping the curtain was a white fist. She looked very young suddenly. A different woman from the one Jess was used to seeing.

'He left his shoes.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Gabriel, he went out bare-foot. He didn't have any shoes on.'

'Are you sure?'

‘The ones he was wearing to school – he took them off. They’re by the door.’ Her voice broke, but still she didn’t look round. ‘All the others – his wellingtons, all of them, they’re still here.’

‘Oh.’ Jess sought for something comforting to say. Nothing came. ‘Perhaps he forgot,’ she said at last. It was stupid, empty.

‘Forgot? I hadn’t thought of that. Perhaps he was excited about something.’ The possibility seemed to bring her back into the room. She pulled herself up straight. ‘Still, it’s not too cold out, is it?’ she said briskly. ‘He’ll be OK.’

‘Of course he will.’

They were silent. Sarah’s eyes fixed again beyond the window, Jess behind her, watching too. There seemed to be plenty of activity: torch beams that moved and jumped, a blue police light dimmed for a few seconds then switched back on, there were shouts, a loud hailer announcement asking people not to go searching alone.

‘I like Luke,’ Sarah said.

‘So do I.’

‘But I don’t feel I know him.’

‘He’s not easy *to* know. I think one just has to accept him.’

‘They seem to believe it’s his fault.’ She turned and squinted at Jess through the gloom. ‘Do *you* think he’s taken Gabriel off somewhere. Done something...’ her voice caught, ‘...with him? Do you think he could do that?’

Jess shook her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t. The boys have got lost in the woods, that’s all. Or they’ve wandered onto the beach, or the heath, and they can’t find their way back in the dark.’ Did she really believe this? She certainly wanted to. What else *could* she say? She carried on, forcing conviction into her voice. ‘It’s a mild evening.

Gabriel's a sensible child and he'll know it's safer to stay put than to try to find his way home. Luke,' she stopped, took a breath, 'will follow his lead.'

But the words 'done something' still rang in her ears. Splinters of doubt pricked at her chest. However much you liked Luke, however much you admired him - and she supposed she did in a strange sort of way - who knew what he could do? What strange little conventions he lived by? There'd be nothing spiteful in it. But with Luke, normal rules, normal reason, didn't apply.

Sarah had become no more than a shape against the window; she seemed to have left the room, wishing herself amongst the searchers and leaving Jess behind. When she spoke again, her words were faint, like a plea.

'I think there was a death. In the Bayely family, I mean.'

Jess was silent. The arc light on the green flickered and recovered.

'It's true, isn't it?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Who?'

'I'm not supposed to say. I'm sorry.'

Sarah gave a slow shake of her head. A lock of hair fell on to her shoulder from its clip at the back. 'I know anyway. It was something Luke said. It was a child, wasn't it? A baby.'

How could she say nothing? It was ridiculous. 'Yes,' Jess said.

'His poor mother.' Sarah turned back to the window, leaned her head against the glass. 'Christ, where *are* they?'

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There was a clatter from the front door. Sarah rose and moved to the hallway, her face transformed in hope. It was Joe, a policewoman beside him. Joe shook his head. 'Not yet,' he said. 'This is Angela Walker. She's come to sit with you.'

Sarah turned away. 'I don't *need* anyone to sit with me. I need to go and find my son.'

Joe caught her arm, turning her so she had no choice but to look at him. 'Darling, please. You have to wait here. There are lots of police now. They're combing the heath. They'll go everywhere.'

'Oh God.'

'That's not bad, Mrs Harding,' the policewoman said. She stepped forward and touched Sarah's arm. 'It means if Gabriel's there, they'll find him. They'll find both of them.'

'Shouldn't you be with them?'

'I'm your family liaison officer. It's procedure. I'm your link with what's going on.'

'Procedure?' Sarah's tone was dry. 'Do you have lots of missing boys then?'

'From time to time.' Angela smiled. 'But we usually find them in the end.'

'Usually?' Sarah's eyes were dull.

'Always. In my experience. And I've been with the force eleven years.' She lowered herself onto the sofa. 'Why don't you come and sit down, Mrs Harding. Talk to me about Gabriel.' She glanced up at Jess, a question on her face.

'I should get back out there,' Jess said.

'Thank you,' Sarah moved towards her. 'Thank you for coming.'

'It's nothing.' It seemed a weak thing to say. Jess squeezed Sarah's hand. 'It'll be OK. I'm sure of it.' Her voice caught in her throat as she spoke.

++

This time she'd try the Bayely's own house. There was a shed in the garden. Perhaps for some reason they'd decided to go there. Might Luke use it for a den? Or perhaps he'd built a camp at the edge of the woods at the back where the briars were tangled? She glanced at her watch. Dear God, ten to eleven already. Six whole hours.

Hinton Lane was quiet, the low moan of waves on the shingle the only sound. If people had already searched here, they were long gone. The one streetlamp cast a rusty glow over the stony roadway then there was darkness. The three bungalows at the village end of the lane looked deserted. She wondered if their occupants were out searching or if, insensitive to the drama unfolding around them, they'd already gone to bed. She wanted to wake them up, demand their help. She stopped, peered down a driveway and then moved on, the firs to her right looming tall as her torch caught them. Silver branches materialised like the plumage of spectral birds and then melted back into the night. The scent of the sea, strong and pungent, filled her nostrils and throat. She shivered: beyond the scope of her torch beam, there was a whole world about which she knew nothing. A world in which animals and birds foraged and slept and watched. People too, possibly. The skin at the back of her neck prickled. Her clothes were clammy and stuck to her. She felt tiny, insignificant, a forgotten part of the night.

She stumbled and caught herself. Bloody potholes. Ahead, her torch caught the side hedge of the Bayely's front garden, a twisted snarl of dead leaves and twigs. She stopped, momentarily comforted, but there were no lights beyond it and the gate was firmly shut. As she slipped her hand round the top to find the catch, terror caught again at her throat and made her stop. The silence was powerful, overwhelming; the stench of the sea a flannel held over her face.

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Tilly Barker had opened the tearoom. It was packed with grey-faced searchers. The bustle and anxious excitement of earlier giving way to something closer to despair. They sat, tunnel-eyed, as rain battered the roof. A clock on the wall said twenty-five past three. At a table near the entrance, Jess clasped a mug of tea in her hands, warming them. Claire and Hugh were opposite, both staring down at a bacon roll, butter and bacon fat merging in a yellow ooze.

‘Well, if you’re sure,’ Hugh said.

‘You have it. I can’t face it.’ Claire pushed it towards him. As the front door clattered, she looked up.

Jess turned, following her gaze. It was the latest team of searchers to return, shaking out umbrellas, pulling off cagoules and raincoats. Some were soaked, their hair plastered to their heads. Rob came in last, his face grim. He was wet through, water dribbling in rivulets from his scalp onto his face. ‘Hopeless,’ he said, as he pulled out a chair beside them. ‘It’s throwing it down.’ He grasped the proffered tea from Jess’s hand and took a long gulp. ‘They’re telling everyone to go home, to come back when it’s light.’

‘They *can*’t.’ Jess’s retort was almost a cry. To stop now was criminal. ‘The boys are out there. They’ll get hypothermia.’

‘The police are staying. But sweetheart, no one can see a thing. It’s dreadful.’

‘I know. But we have to go on.’

‘It’s three hours,’ Hugh looked at his watch. ‘Give or take. And the forecast is that the rain’ll stop. Meanwhile,’ he pushed the remains of the bacon roll into his mouth, and stood up. ‘We need to get some kip. Come on Claire.’

Jess watched as the two made their way to the door. As they reached it they stopped, spoke to someone coming in and then turned, pointing towards Jess and Rob. It was Jon

Patchett and Joe Harding. Aware of Joe's presence, the villagers looked up, some rising from their seats. There was a general air of renewed energy, of possible hope.

'We've found Luke,' said Jon Patchett, addressing the whole room. 'But no Gabriel yet, I'm afraid.' The wave of relief she'd felt at his first words died away.

No Gabriel.

Those standing sat down again. Many shook their heads, turned to one another with angry murmurs of concern. It was clear the discovery of Luke was of no comfort to anyone.

Joe's face was white, his body bowed with fatigue.

'We need you Jess, please,' he said, approaching them. 'Can you come?'

'Of course,' She exchanged a quick glance with Rob.

'Shall I come too?' he said.

'Better not,' said Joe. He lowered his voice. 'The boy's terrified. We thought maybe if Jess talked to him,' He raised his arms in a gesture of helplessness, bit down hard on his lip and looked at her. She felt his distress engulf her like air. 'If you could just –'

At least she could try.

She needed food, sleep. But she could give herself neither. When she stood up, she was surprised to find that her legs held her.

So Luke was safe. That was a huge thing. But Gabriel? Trusting, gentle Gabriel? Dear God, where *was* he?

Jess

25

They'd found Luke, Jon Patchett told her, shivering in a corner of the chapel. Unable to move. Unable to speak.

'How on earth did he get there? The thought chilled her, the rocky pathway so skittery, the angle almost perpendicular.

'God knows.' Away from the centre of the village, Jon Patchett's foot pressed hard on the pedal.

'He talks to you, doesn't he?' Joe turned his head so she could hear him in the back.

'A bit. Not much though.'

'Well let's hope he will now,' Jon Patchett's voice was grim.

She felt inadequate, hopeless. What if Gabriel had had an accident, fallen somewhere and Luke was too terrified to say? What if, as Jon Patchett and even Rob suspected, Luke had been somehow *responsible*?

Jon Patchett was driving fast, oblivious to the rain. Through the grey swirl, trees and farm gates and hedgerows flashed into view and out again. They offered no answers, no possibilities.

'He's often on the beach, you know.' Jon Patchett said. 'All on his own. Talking to himself.' They'd reached the crossroads. His shoulders twitched as he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. A milk-lorry rumbled by sending a wash of water across the front of the car. 'He's got Aspergers or something, hasn't he?' he said.

'Who told you that?' Tracey Tierney, she thought. Who else?

'Does it matter? You can tell anyway.'

‘Can you? I don’t think anything’s *wrong* with him. He’s just very reserved. Very private.’

‘Sure.’ The word was loaded with sarcasm. ‘He doesn’t look at people, he doesn’t talk. That’s pretty strange behaviour if you ask me. And why the hell isn’t Gabriel with him now? I can’t help thinking that something very odd’s taken place and that boy’s behind it.’

‘Shut up,’ Jess whispered. ‘Please shut up.’

The rear-view mirror recorded his frown, and she thought he’d heard, then she saw the cyclist in front, pulling over, the frightened rabbit eyes under his rain-cape caught fleetingly in the glare as they left him behind.

‘Idiot. What the fuck’s he doing out at this time in the morning?’

‘What about the travellers?’ she said.

Joe spun round, a flash of hope lighting his thin face. ‘What about them?’

‘I think Luke might have a friend who’s one of the travellers. Perhaps the boys went off with...?’

Jon Patchett made a noise of disgust. ‘I went past their camp with the dogs yesterday. It’s a bloody tip, but they aren’t there.’ He pulled the gearstick back and the engine growled as they began the steep ascent up the hill. The rain flattened on the windscreen, masking it, and the wipers speeded up. ‘Instead of worrying about them, you need to think about how you’re going to get that boy to tell the truth.’

Even now, he was taking charge. Being the squire, knowing what needed to be done. She loathed him.

‘What if I can’t?’ she said.

He was looking at her in the mirror. She felt the bump and a slide sideways as the tyres mounted the rain-sodden slope, and caught her breath. She thought the car would

topple but it rocked back down and slid round the corner for the final section of Carston Cliff Lane.

‘My dear...’ His voice was hard, impatient. ‘You’re his teacher. You know him. Since his mother’s gone gallivanting off and left him, you’re our best hope.’

Despite the heat of the car, she felt cold, shivery.

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The cliff top track had turned muddy, its ruts turned into tiny lakes. Twice she felt the jump of the tyres, the sudden spinning of wheels, but Jon Patchett hardly slowed, and within no time, they’d reached the headland. Ahead of them, the leper chapel pushed out over the black of the sea.

They bounced to a halt beside a police car that blocked the way to the chapel. Two more were parked at the side of the track, their beacons flashing, blue-white, on-off. The crumbling walls came into view and disappeared. Dark figures stood in clumps. The place had an air of a film set. Unreal.

‘They should turn those lights off,’ she said. ‘No wonder Luke’s frightened.’

++

He was standing in a corner behind the altar, facing the wall under the covered section of the chapel. His arms weren’t up over his head, as she’d expected, but drooped close to his sides. He looked wrong in the church. Like a statue, an ornament carved for pagan worship. A WPC knelt beside him, her head level with his, a damp-looking blanket crumpled over her knees. Jess guessed it had been offered to Luke and, despite the creeping cold and the rain pouring through the open roof only a few feet away, he’d rejected it. The WPC was talking in low tones, her mouth close to his ear. His face was impassive, as rigid and closed-off as his body. Three shadowy policemen in capes stood

along the side holding torches, and the lights from the patrol-car flashed coldly on-off over them all.

The policewoman rose as she advanced. 'I can't get through to him,' she said.

'He doesn't like it when people stand too close?'

She stepped away. Sensing it, Luke's body twisted in a sudden awkward movement. His arm lashed out and hit the wall where she'd been. There was the thud of his sweater-covered elbow, the sharp crack of something else, his wrist or hand.

The woman's breath caught. 'That was his bone,' she said.

Sweat, cold and sticky, coated Jess's armpits. Her legs trembled. Someone handed her an umbrella but she pushed it away. The rain had eased, settled into a soft film that coated the air. She moved forward, bringing herself level with the altar platform, a metre or so from Luke.

'Hello Luke.' She kept her voice low. He'd curved back into the corner, his left hand hanging limp. There's a sore, a lesion of some kind. 'Are you alright?'

The police light caught his face. His eyes were wide and staring, fixed on something beyond where she stood. Whatever his anger had been about, it had faded now.

'Does your hand hurt?'

He seemed not to hear, but then he lifted it up and stared at it. He brought up his other hand and rubbed at his damaged fingers, before lifting them to his face and holding them against his nose and mouth like an animal checking itself.

'Are they alright?'

He opened the fingers one by one, forming a half fist, and closed them again.

'You've found a good place here, Luke.' She tried to use the voice she used in school, the one he responded to, to make things feel somehow normal. But the shaking

made the words shrill. She tried again. 'A special place. Do you think perhaps it was once part of Old Charlburgh?'

He nodded.

'Perhaps you could tell me about it?'

He was still again, his head to one side. She had no idea whether he was considering her question or had gone somewhere far away.

No one spoke. A bat swung into the chapel and out again, its wings cutting the air. Bats didn't like rain, she thought, as if somehow it mattered. She wondered about mentioning it to Luke but she saw Jon Patchett watching her from the shadows. As the strobe went by he frowned.

'Ask him about Gabriel,' Jon Patchett said.

Immediately she felt the tensing of Luke's body. The man's meddling had undone everything. Luke had swirled away and coiled back into the centre of wherever he went when he was frightened, his arms up covering his head. There was a sharp intake of breath from where Joe stood.

'Luke,' she said. She struggled to block out the watching eyes, tried to pretend instead that they were in the classroom or out on a history or a nature trip. 'You were going to tell to me about this chapel. Can you do that Luke?'

The police-car lit him a wan grey-blue. His head was hidden by his arms. Bits of hair tufted through his fingers.

'This is such an *old* place, Luke. From a long time ago.' The strobe swiped again and then again. Luke remained frozen. One of the policemen stepped forward and brought the beam of his torch onto Luke's head. 'Please,' she said. Though whether it was to the man or to Luke, she had no idea. She wanted to shout. To Patchett, to Joe Harding, all of them, to go away, leave them alone.

‘It’s ok, Luke. No one’s cross with you. Only it’s very cold. And very late. And you’ve only got a jumper on. Wouldn’t it be good if we could get Gabriel and then go and have some nice hot chocolate?’

There was a *tch tch* sound from someone’s teeth.

She waited. If only Luke had time, he’d come round, she knew it.

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake.’ Jon Patchett pushed past her. The Inspector stepped forward too, and the WPC, to stop him perhaps. But they were too slow. As he reached Luke he took hold of one of his hands and tried to draw it away from his face. Luke’s howl rung in the night air.

The policewoman’s eyes caught Jess’s. She shook her head.

‘Now come on young man,’ Jon Patchett’s voice was crystal bright. ‘Enough of this nonsense.’ He pulled again at Luke’s arms, trying to unwind them. The action wasn’t violent but he could have been uncoiling bits of twisted rope or old telephone wire. Jess winced as Luke’s damaged hand was gripped and the fingers eased apart.

That was when Luke bit him. She saw it in the torchlight. But she heard it too - the crunch of Luke’s teeth into knuckle.

At first, Jon Patchett did not speak. She saw his other hand grasp the injured one as he backed away. He put his fist to his mouth and licked at it, and there was an oozing of something dark. ‘That’s more like it,’ he said at last.

But Luke had horrified himself, had overstepped some secret boundary of his own. The curved outer tension in his body melted, and he became limp, slipping softly down onto the floor. He was like any child who knows he’s beaten. She felt a powerful sense of shame – whether it was for herself or for Patchett or for all of the adults standing there watching, she didn’t know.

She crouched down beside him. This time, there was no resistance and he let her hold him, his sobs breaking on her shoulder in heavy, jagged gasps. Over his head she saw the look on Jon Patchett's face, made white and bloodless as the strobe swung by. Not angry or even triumphant, but somehow satisfied. As if he knew he'd proved a point.

It was then that something fell to the floor. It must have been in Luke's pocket. Or maybe it was in his hand and he let it go. She couldn't tell. None of them saw it, just heard the ring of metal on stone. The WPC shone her flashlight.

Joe Harding knew what it was immediately. 'Good God,' he said. 'That's the pottery cupboard key. What's he doing with that? He wouldn't be able to reach it.'

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All Luke's fight had gone. He hung limply against her shoulder, a little boy again, needing his mother. After a moment they wrapped the blanket round him and took him out to sit in the police-car. Dirt and tears streaked his face. He seemed hardly aware of the screeching of Jon Patchett's tyres as they accelerated away with Joe Harding in the passenger seat, the key in his hand.

The policewoman glanced at her. 'Let's hope,' her look said.

Luke's eyes were puffed and sore-looking. In the dim light he looked exhausted. He could have done nothing cruel, nothing unkind, she was sure of it. She felt a sudden surge of fury at Emily. Why wasn't she here?

'Mrs Baxter will sit one side of you and I'll sit the other,' the WPC said. 'You'll feel safe like that, won't you?' Jess smiled her gratitude.

Luke nodded and sat quietly as the woman leaned across to do up his seatbelt. She rearranged the blanket over his knees.

'Am I ill?' he whispered.

‘Why do you say that Luke?’ Jess asked.

He picked up the edge of the blanket.

‘It’s to keep you warm, sweetheart. You’re shivering.’

He stretched out a hand as if to check she was right and made a shivery noise with his teeth.

‘Cold,’ he said.

She wanted to put her arms round him and pull him towards her but he was too much the old Luke for that now. He was trying to be strong, grown up. She fished into her pocket for her gloves and held them out. He took them and put them on, wincing softly as they slid over his damaged hand. The ends flopped from his fingers.

They were silent in the back, the only sound the hum of the car and the occasional crackle of the police radio. She stared out at the rain streaking the window, praying they’d found Gabriel, that Luke hadn’t done anything stupid or dangerous.

The night was blacker than ever, the only lights the watery flashes of hedge and wall as the headlamps caught. Every so often she glanced down at the boy beside her. He stared straight ahead, his hands in her too-big gloves clasping the blanket in his lap. As the car negotiated the narrow bridge over the Char, the radio burst into life, the static too strong for Jess to make it out. After a moment the driver turned his head and murmured quietly to the WPC.

‘He’s not there.’

Over Luke’s head Jess caught her eye, it mirrored the horror in her own.

++

The policeman drove more carefully than Jon Patchett. She guessed the way round by road to the leper chapel must be a good four or five miles longer than the route the 4 x 4 had been able to take through the tracks. It was easy to forget how far it was, climbing

up the cliff from Little Charlburgh and taking the coastal path to the ruin. But the urgency had increased, and she willed them forward faster. The car swayed as it cruised through the lanes, its movement soporific, almost hypnotic. Luke's eyes were closed, his head lolling against the seat. In the light from the dashboard his face was peaceful, innocent. His hands had relaxed around the blanket, and one of the gloves had slipped half-off.

'Luke,' the WPC said gently. 'Luke, are you awake?'

His lids fluttered and opened, his eyes drawing wide in alarm.

'It's OK, Luke.' Jess said. 'You're safe.' She looked up, caught the policewoman's eye again. She nodded as if reading Jess's mind. 'Only, we need to know where Gabriel is. His mummy and daddy are worried about him, you see. They want to know he's alright.'

His face relaxed back into half-sleep. 'Behind it,' he said. It was no more than a murmur.

'Behind what, Luke?' The policewoman's voice was soft.

'Behind the wall,' he said. His eyes closed again.

He was rambling, exhausted. Jess wondered if they should wake him again but the policewoman shook her head. 'When we get back,' she mouthed. She leaned forward to whisper in the driver's ear, and he spoke in a quiet voice on his radio.

A moment later Luke had woken anyway, his body pulled upright, his muscles rigid.

'What's is it Luke?' she asked.

His eyes were staring, fixed on the road.

'Luke?'

Jess waited, watching his arms. If he covered his head, they'd lose him.

'Will they make me go to prison?' His voice was so low she could only just hear it.

‘They aren’t going to put you in prison, Luke. What makes you think that?’

‘I bit the man.’

‘You were frightened. And hurt. Everyone understands,’ Jess said.

Luke’s arms began to reach up.

‘The police lady will tell you, won’t you, Officer? You’re not going to lock Luke up.’

‘Goodness, no.’ The woman smiled. ‘We don’t lock up little boys. Though we might need to talk to you a little bit.’ She was careful, keeping her voice neutral, unconcerned. ‘But first we’re taking you back to your mummy. She’s home now and is waiting for you. She’s missed you.’

‘Will she be cross with me?’ The arms hovered mid-air.

‘She’ll just be glad to have you back safe and sound,’ said Jess.

‘And I’ll be glad to have her safe and sound,’ Luke’s hands dropped back onto the blanket. Through its glove, his little finger rested against hers. She didn’t withdraw it.

They did lock up little boys, Jess thought. They’d locked up the children in the Bulger case. How old had they been? Ten? Eleven? And the age of criminal consent – what was that? She couldn’t remember. She shut her eyes, felt a sudden trembling of her lips. She mustn’t cry now. Mustn’t think such things.

As the car drew up into Hinton Lane, she saw his mother standing by the front gate, another policewoman beside her. Emily’s face was sallow and pinched in the light from the open door. The wave of cold fury Jess had felt earlier returned and soaked her. How dare the woman go off and leave her child like that, allow him to be so vulnerable? She wanted to leap from the car and shake her.

Appalled at the power of the feeling, she pushed her hands together to hide their shaking. It was shock, she understood that. And terror. Even now, there was no knowing

where Gabriel was. If he was safe or injured or worse. She swallowed and breathed deep.

‘Luke,’ she said, and he looked at her, his eyes dark pools in the glow from the dashboard, ‘Please tell me again. Where is Gabriel?’

He turned away and watched as the policewoman opened the car door. It was as if Jess hadn’t spoken. He took off each of the gloves and began to edge along the seat. Then he stopped, folded the gloves carefully and handed them back to her.

‘You have to promise not to say why.’

‘I promise.’ As she spoke, she knew she’d said it despite herself, despite what she knew was right.

She leaned forward to catch the words.

‘He’s behind the cupboard.’ He put his finger to his lips, as if to remind her of her promise. ‘Alwin told me.’

It was too much. She watched blankly as Luke slid along the seat. ‘Alwin? Who *is* he, Luke?’

But he’d gone from the car and was standing quietly at the side of the road beside the policewoman. He waited for his mother to reach him.

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She walked briskly. The Green was deserted, and squelchy underfoot but soon the searchers would come out again, refreshed from their brief sleep. There was an ambulance outside the Harding’s house and she quickened her pace to a run, her heart thumping.

As she entered Sugar Lane, she saw the front door open and a stretcher come out, carried by two ambulance-men. The small mound in its centre under a tin foil blanket told her that Gabriel had been found. Dear God, she begged aloud, let him be OK. She

saw Sarah follow and climb into the ambulance. Joe came out too and got into his car. Jon Patchett was there, and the two men exchanged a few words through the window before Joe reversed into the road and followed the ambulance up towards the centre of the village.

She moved forward and touched Jon Patchett's arm from behind. He turned, startled.

'So you're back are you?'

'Is he OK?'

'Christ, I hope so. He was bleeding. He's in shock. What do you expect?'

'Where did you find him?'

'There's a cellar behind the pottery cupboard. Joe didn't know it existed. No one did. Somehow they got in there. And then your little friend obligingly locked Gabriel in and buggered off.'

'Jesus.'

Alwin, Luke had said. Who *was* he?

'And Gabriel – I mean there's nothing life-threatening is there?'

'God knows. There's not much air in that nasty little place.'

She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. Despite her promise to Luke, she wanted to tell Jon Patchett about Alwin, ask him if he knew the boy. But he would be unkind, turn her questions round and use it against Luke. The words were sticking in her throat anyway, as if she'd swallowed them down and they'd got stuck there. She found she was coughing, hardly able to breathe. The smell of sea there again, clogging her throat.

'I was..' she spluttered through the cough, 'I'm..' It caught her again, and she bent forward, hacking until it was over. She straightened and wiped the tears from her eyes.

The air cleared and she took in a breath, pulled it deep into her lungs. 'I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I feel awful.' She did. Faint. Sick. Shaking.

He took her arm. 'Come on,' he said, 'I'll get you home.'

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She couldn't settle. Couldn't even sit down in the kitchen and drink the tea Rob made for her. 'I just need,' she said, 'to see how Gabriel is. I have to know he's alright.'

'As long as you let me drive you.'

++

The A & E department at Ippingham General was heaving. Two policemen stood with their backs to her, concerned with someone behind them. She went to look but it was only a middle-aged man with his head in his hands, blood caked to the side of his face. There were no children there, only babies. Their unhappy cries were like splinters in her brain.

'Please,' she said to the woman behind the counter. Can you look again?

The nurse had a phone in her hand. She pushed some papers together and returned the phone to its rest. 'Waller did you say?'

'No, I said Harding. Gabriel Harding.' Jess took in a breath, controlled her voice. 'A little boy. Eight years old. About an hour ago?'

The nurse looked up. 'I thought you said Waller. But it's Harding – right?' She peered at the computer screen, scrolled down. The phone rang again, and she picked it up. 'Can you hold, please?' She looked up at Jess. 'You sure he didn't go to Ipswich?'

'Oh God, I've no idea. I just assumed.'

'I don't think he's here, love.'

'Thank you.' Jess turned away. She didn't feel gratitude at all, she felt a cold, shaking despair. And where was Rob? Park the car he'd said - not disappear.

It was as she was going back to the exit, picking her way through sprawled-out legs and the gurneys parked at the side, that she saw Sarah and Joe emerge from a side door.

‘God, I’m glad to see you. They said Gabriel wasn’t here. How is he?’

‘Alright, I think.’ Sarah blew out a long breath, as if she’d been holding it in for hours. ‘But his feet are cut and there’s a horrible gash on his hand where he tried to get out.’ She shuddered, seemed to be reliving something of the night before. Then she smiled. ‘But the doctors say he’s OK.’

‘That is *such* good news.’ Tears pushed against Jess’s eyes. She forced the emotion back, arranged her face.

‘God knows how they found that room though,’ Joe said. He shook his head in incredulity. ‘I don’t think anyone knew it existed. I certainly didn’t.’

‘How did they get in?’ It was Rob. He’d come up behind them, car keys in his hand.

‘No idea. I can’t make it out. Luke’s clammed up.’ Joe made a ‘*what would you expect?*’ gesture with his hands. ‘And we haven’t had a chance to talk properly to Gabes yet. We had to break down the wall. God knows what damage we’ve done.’

‘As if it matters.’ Sarah was still smiling. ‘All being well, he’ll be out today. I just want him home now.’

‘Of course you do,’ Jess said. It was hard to think clearly. The night had been crazy. If she was exhausted, what were Sarah and Joe feeling? And the hidden room - it seemed like something out of a local folk tale.

And then there was Alwin.

Should she tell them now? Perhaps not. Everyone was worn out - they needed sleep, food. Later she’d mention it, find out who Alwin was. Luke’s words still rumbling round her head like a discordant drumbeat.

Go away, she thought. Leave me alone.

The mood in *The Anchor* was both sombre and exultant. She had never seen it so full. Heavy-eyed residents lounged against the bar and filled the tables, exchanging stories of the night before. The important thing, they all agreed, was that Gabriel was safe. It didn't matter that he'd been found finally in the museum itself - that had been the awful child Luke's fault. No, they'd given up their time and their sleep and gone out searching in the dark because Sarah and Joe and Gabriel were part of the village - and the village looked after its own.

'Something,' she heard more than one local say, 'needs to be done about that child.'

'They're right, you know' Rob said, seeing her frown. 'If he hadn't been found in time, Gabriel could have died.'

'I know.' She shivered at the thought. 'But he *was* found, Rob.'

'A stroke of luck.'

She had no idea if he was correct, if Luke would indeed have kept quiet. It seemed hard to imagine. The child wasn't stupid. Nor was he spiteful. But she knew Luke well enough to guess that he'd been past speech, past rational thinking.

'Devil child,' someone said behind her. She turned. It was Will Sutton. What was he doing in here? He had a pint pot in his hand. It held beer, shandy at least, but no one seemed bothered. Least of all the barman, who was leaning forward talking to him.

'It's a celebration,' Rob said. 'Leave it.'

'Did you hear what he said?'

'I did. Let it go.'

'I can't.' She moved closer to Will. 'That was a nasty thing to say.'

He laughed and raised his glass. 'Didn't you like it, Mrs Baxter? Just saying what everyone's thinking.'

She looked round. People were becoming animated, excited. Anger mixed in with the relief. One of the mothers from school frowned when she caught her eye and whispered to her husband. There was something ugly in the air. She saw again the tattooed knuckles of the dads in her old school, the shudder she'd felt when they'd sat close at Parents Evenings.

'I want to go home,' she said.

Emily

Luke's duvet, unlike everything else in the room is not decorated with shells, but is a deep grey-blue like the sea at twilight. All that's visible of Luke himself is a patch of temple and his hair sticking out over the top.

She's angry with him. Has felt it brewing ever since he returned, the urge to go in to his room, shake him awake and demand what the hell he thought he was up to. As she gazes at her sleeping son, she can't do it. Can't even touch him.

Normally he's awake at this hour anyway, doing the secret things he does before breakfast, things to do with the shells that she neither understands nor wants to. She saw him once as she peered through the crack in the door, one of the larger shells held to his ear. He was muttering something, and the delight on his face was so alien she backed away, pretended she hadn't seen.

She lowers the hand she's raised to shake him awake. A voice in her head tells her to be gentle, that he's only a little boy and doesn't understand the waste of time and manpower he set into motion, the fear and panic he caused. She's angry still, but knows how pointless it is.

Careful not to disturb him, she lifts the duvet to check his hand. The bruise is pale, with swollen ridges around a central sore. As she looks, he twists in his sleep and his wrist disappears under the bulk of his shoulder and she waits for the cry. It doesn't come.

The shells are still there in rows on the carpet. They're arranged differently now, in a mixture of lines and curves, a pattern she recognises but can't place. As she retreats to

the door, her foot catches against the edge of the chest of drawers, and Luke stirs at the noise. She turns, waiting for the grumbled sounds of his waking, but instead he brings his knees up to his chest and tucks his head further under the duvet. All she can see now is a spike or two of hair. She moves forward again, feels a sudden unbearable softening into love.

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‘What the hell possessed you?’ Simon says when she tells him. Nothing for ten days, then a call at lunchtime. His timing, as ever, exquisite.

Fury rises like acid. ‘I can’t lock him up, Simon.’

‘But letting him stay overnight with strangers? I mean, Emily, you know what he’s...’

‘They’re not strangers.’

In truth it was a leap of faith. A step in the dark. OK, Luke, she thought, let’s see how you manage.

‘He locked a child in a cupboard and then disappeared. Nobody died.’

‘So what did happen exactly?’

Perhaps she won’t tell him. Perhaps she’ll leave out the bit about the leper chapel.

‘He went up to the leper chapel.’ She can’t help herself.

‘Jesus Christ.’

She tells him about the police search too, and Jess Baxter.

‘Anything could have happened.’

‘Don’t.’ Her voice is quiet, now. She’s glad of his anger. It relieves her of responsibility. ‘It didn’t. The other boy’s fine.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Well, his feet are cut. He didn’t have shoes on.’

‘I see.’

He doesn’t, and she’s not going to enlighten him. What good will it do? What good does it do to talk at all? Luke knows he’s done something wrong, but it’s clear he doesn’t understand what, or how. The bloody thing’s happened and they’ll just have to negotiate it.

At the other end of the line, she can almost hear the shaking of Simon’s head, she knows how his face will look. ‘So what were *you* doing?’ he asks. ‘Why weren’t you at home?’

‘I went to see Paul.’

‘You’re writing again? That’s good at least.’ There’s an unexpected lift in his voice.

‘No. That’s why I went. I told him I’m finished with it.’ It felt better like that - to look Paul in the eye and mean it.

‘Why don’t you come home?’ she says suddenly.

There’s silence at the other end. She thinks perhaps the line’s cut, or he’s pressed the off button.

‘You know why,’ he says.

‘Do I? I know you’re as far away as it’s possible to be.’

‘I have a job to do.’ His voice is sharp.

‘Good for you.’

There’s an intake of breath at the other end. ‘That’s not fair,’ he says, ‘I’m sorry that I’m here and you’re there. But it was your choice. You said you wanted to be somewhere calm and English and safe. You said you needed – ‘ He stops, his words suddenly thick and she feels a moment of surprise – hope too – because just for once he’s not in control. She is aware of other sounds. A bird. Birds. She wants to ask him where he is, if it’s somewhere they’ve been together reminding him of their shared past.

But he interrupts the thought, his voice steady. ‘Em, you know I can’t just drop everything. People *rely* on me.’

The hope ebbs away. It leaves her empty. She’s been cast adrift and is floating - above his voice, above the kettle and the half-loaf of bread left out on the kitchen counter. She grabs at the table to steady herself.

‘I have to go,’ she says.

++

She’s sitting on the sofa, the room gloomy from the dull December day. She’s feeling a little better. Sometimes it’s good to say what you think.

Perhaps she’ll go for a walk. There’ll be time before she collects Luke from school – his first day back, God knows what it’ll have been like. She can put on her wellingtons and tramp through the mud on Charlburgh Heath, feel the wind on her face. She approaches the window to see if it’s raining again. It is, drizzling anyway, and the urge evaporates.

She wishes the weather were kinder here. Lighter. In Africa you forgot how grey England could be. Even the green is grey at this time of year. As is the sky, and the sea. And the landscape behind the house. The wildlife is grey, too. Or it’s brown, and that amounts to the same thing.

In Tanzania, there are impala and gazelle with fabulous white/tan markings, lions, their coats deep as corn, zebra brilliantly striped. But it’s the birds she loved best: brilliant flashes of colour swooping against the red-dun of the earth, their plumage like tiny rainbows. And on the acacia bush outside their bungalow the lilac-breasted roller, its feathers of violet and blue, turquoise and gold. It was always there, waiting to greet them when they passed.

‘Look,’ she told the children. ‘She’s welcoming us home.’

‘Hello,’ Luke called back. ‘Hello.’

But the roller wasn’t his favourite. That honour went to the wonderfully named bare-faced-go-away bird. He looked for it wherever they went. When he tried to mimic its call - *Go-awa-ay. Go awa-a-ay* - his little-boy voice could never quite capture its coarseness, turned into a chuckle.

The memory brings a smile to her lips. She is aware of the pull on her cheeks, surprised by it. The recognition is a step too far, and her body stiffens. She turns from the window.

There are only the gulls. Screaming.

‘Alwin?’ said Claire. She was packing stuff into a thick plastic bag, the sort supermarkets called ‘bags for life’, though they never were. ‘I’ve never heard of him. How old is he?’

‘I don’t know. Eight, nine maybe.’ It was what Jess had assumed. Now her heart gave a nervous leap. What if he was older? Grown up even. Her mind flashed back to the night the children had gone missing. *Alwin told me*. How was that possible? Did Alwin know something about the museum that no one else did, and tell Luke so that he could find the special entrance and open it? Surely not?

And even if he had, what would be the point? It was crazy.

‘Doesn’t ‘Alwin’ mean *anything* to you?’ Any clue would do, the tiniest hint, but Claire’s face registered nothing. ‘Perhaps it’s an old local name?’

‘Don’t think so.’ Claire lifted the bag and groaned. ‘Dear God, what have I got in here?’ She bent, pulled out a pile of folders and placed them back on the table. She turned to Jess. ‘Perhaps he’s one of the weekenders boys. Why don’t you ask Luke himself.’

‘I did. I’m wondering whether he’s a gypsy child. A traveller.’

Claire raised an eyebrow. ‘Really? They don’t tend to mix with villagers.’ She shook her head. ‘Anyway someone would have seen him. Said something. No, he’ll be a weekend.’

‘Luke sees him during school time.’

Claire frowned. 'He could be imaginary you know, this Alwin. I had a child – Selina – my first year teaching here. She was an odd little thing. She used to claim she saw a boy. In school, at home. It became a fixation.'

'What happened to her?'

'It was sad. Her mother had died. In the end her dad married again - someone from Norwich – they moved away.'

'And he really was imaginary, this child she saw?'

'Oh yes. Definitely.'

It was, Jess suspected, a different sort of case. Luke could be very specific about Alwin: the boy had limitations, restrictions. And while children often blamed make-believe friends for their own wrongdoings, they didn't tend to imagine them waiting outside a classroom and getting impatient. A friend who wasn't real would simply turn up when and where he was needed.

Alwin was far too human.

++

'Why does it matter so much?' said Rob. They were in bed, lying side by side.

She wanted to tell him but the words wouldn't form themselves. She didn't know if it was fear of Rob's judgement, or something else, but she couldn't speak. And yet it nagged at her. 'I suppose,' she said at last, 'it's after what happened with Gabriel. Luke's having such a rotten time. The class hate him – and Gabriel's dropped him, of course. All the parents are suspicious, I mean they're *nasty* to him, Rob. You heard what Will Sutton said - 'the devil's child'. It was horrible. But if you saw the way everyone looks at him -' She stopped, remembering how the mothers had ushered their children past Luke at the end of school, giving him and Emily such a wide berth it was

as if they were diseased. 'They're so isolated in that cottage. No one ever visits them. And this boy, Alwin, whoever he is – I know it's silly, but he worries me.'

'Do you think he's involved somehow in what happened with Gabriel?'

She stared at the ceiling, at the dark split of the beam. This was her chance. The beam blurred and cleared. She felt a pain in her head and reached to rub at it. What had she been going to say? She couldn't remember.

'What?'

'Alwin? Was he there too?'

'I've no idea,'

'But you said -'

'Oh' She rubbed her head again. 'I want to find him, that's all.'

'And then you'll talk to Luke's mum?'

'But she doesn't know about Alwin. Luke said it was secret.'

Rob shifted onto his elbow so that he was looking down at her. 'I can't believe you sometimes,' he said. 'Think about what Luke did. What if he does it again? You *have* to talk to her.'

Rob was right of course. 'I will,' she said. 'Honestly. But please lie down, Rob, you're crowding me.'

He heaved a sigh and settled back onto his own side of the bed. 'You have to.'

'I know.'

So why, every time she tried tell anyone what Luke had said, did something *stop* her?

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The reeds were broken, their edges curled and sodden. The wind was whisking them up, rubbing them together so they made long, drawn-out sighs. Below their moans, Jess could hear the grunt of the sea throwing itself wearily against the shingle. She stopped

and looked ahead: where the marshes met the eastern rim of Charlburgh Forest, a plume of smoke twisted and thinned.

She stepped up her pace. If she didn't take this chance, it could be weeks before there was another. But as soon as she entered the trees, they began to close around her, stealing what light there was left. The chthonic damp of the earth and the rotting leaves hit her nostrils, and she shivered. She looked up, searching the strip of sky that sat above the line of the track. It was grey, overcast. She'd walked this route many times yet she felt ill-at ease, as if, without Rob beside her, she might lose her way. But it was OK. There ahead was the clearing where the forest ponies fed, and the oak tree and the tree-hide. Besides, there were way-markers everywhere, coloured posts that even in the dim light, showed up. There was nothing, she told herself, to fear. Anyway she was nearly at the camp. For as the forest was growing thinner, the smoke was becoming thicker and more pungent. The thought of people nearby, of men and women going about their business, cooking and washing and making things, was reassuring, a comfort.

Surely they'd be kind to her? Decent at least? After a couple of hundred metres, she spotted the opening. Through it, she could see two women bent over a kind of barbecue contraption, like the sort she'd seen on the jetty sometimes when the village held a party there. At the sound of her approach, the women rose and faced her, their expressions impassive. To their side, arranged in a semi-circle under the trees, were several caravans, some tents and an ancient VW campervan decorated with daisies. The women watched as she picked her way towards them, avoiding the discarded bikes and old tyres, the mounds of firewood, and a doll's pram with a yellow crocheted blanket tucked into its corners. She arranged her face in a smile, but their looks were stony, resistant. Despite herself, she was trembling. There were other eyes watching too: a whole gamut

of them, ranged around the open area before her. Men mainly, some seated in front of a tent, others in a group at the far edge of the camp, and a leathery-faced fellow who poked a screwdriver into what looked like a bit of engine. He was the only one who didn't glance up. Near the caravan to her right, and seated on bits of fallen branch and tree, was a group of children, the oldest no more than five or six. Above their scarves and bright, heavy pullovers, their dark eyes watched her nervously.

Briefly she wondered if they were the kids she and Rob had seen on the dunes that time, but she couldn't tell – in the fading light, their features were sharp, their skin almost spectral, as if they hadn't eaten in days. It was a silly thought, and she shook it off, remembering Rob had told her how wealthy the travellers were said to be. Besides, the women were cooking, weren't they? She could smell the meat from here.

'Is there something you want?'

It was the elder of the two. Her voice was deep, the words said slowly as if she expected an apology rather than an answer. The men remained grim-faced, the children quiet.

'I'm sorry to intrude but I'm looking for someone - a boy.' Beyond the clearing the forest was gloomy, impenetrable. More forcefully, Jess said, 'He's called Alwin. I don't know his surname.'

The woman regarded her silently, then she said, 'It wouldn't help if you did. We don't use them here. We belong to nature.'

'Oh.' Jess was suddenly nonplussed. 'Well then, just Alwin. Is there an Alwin?'

'Who wants to know?' It was one of the men. He'd risen from his cross-legged position by the tent and was moving through the clearing towards her. What she'd thought was a thick sweater over a potbellied stomach turned out to be a baby strapped to his chest. He spread a hand over the back of the sling, and the child made a

whimpering sound. The man's tone was sharper than the woman's, more impatient.

Dreadlocks hung in untidy clumps across his shoulders.

She forced her voice to be strong. 'I'm Jess Baxter. I teach at the primary school in the village.' Immediately she wished she hadn't said it. Travellers didn't think much of teachers, she knew that. She'd heard Tracey say how glad she was they were allocated to the Frogstanton Primary, rather than St Margaret's.

'Not that they ever go, of course,' Tracey had said.

The quiet in the clearing was intense. She looked round, and the watchers returned her stare. When she tried to smile, the muscles of her mouth refused to work.

'St Margaret's - I wouldn't send a dog there.' The man curled his lip, darting a glance at the fellow with the screwdriver: the old man's fingers were busy with a piece of orange tape, winding and unwinding it around the screwdriver's handle.

'It's not a school thing.' Could they hear the tremor in her voice? She coughed to cover it up. 'I just want to see the boy, Alwin. Please.'

This time the man laughed. 'Fancy that, Dad? You hear who she wants?'

The old man's hand stopped moving. Slowly he raised his head, looked at his son, and then away again.

Her voice sank to a whisper. 'He's here, isn't he?'

The younger man was too close. Despite the baby between them, she could feel his breath, smell the heat of his body. She shifted her weight onto her back foot, unable to stop herself, and his face slid into a grin. 'Please, if you could just tell me. It doesn't matter if I can't talk to him.'

The silence was absolute. Even the trees seem to be watching, their empty branches on some kind of alert. The urge to run was almost overwhelming. She swallowed and

cleared her throat. The narrow stares of the children fixed on her through the gloom.

She turned to the women. 'Please' she said.

The light was fading fast, her breath the only sound in the whole of the forest. She swallowed again. The women turned away and resumed their tasks.

'Getting dark, innit?' the man with the screwdriver said suddenly. 'Want me to help you find your way back?'

Was he threatening her? She wasn't sure. 'I'm fine, thank you,' she said stiffly. 'I just wanted to establish if there was a boy called Alwin here, that's all. I'm sorry I intruded.'

The younger man gave a sharp, dry laugh. 'Oh you wanted to *establish* it, did you?' As he spoke, the baby's arms shot out from its sling in surprise. The man bent forward and murmured into the child's ear. When he looked up, he said. 'Just *establish* this, Miss Teacher – if we did have an Alwin here, we wouldn't tell *you*.'

++

'You only just home?' Rob pulled his briefcase from the back seat of the car and stood under the street lamp to wait for her kiss.

'Long day.' Thrusting her hands into her pockets to hide their shaking, she moved towards him, glad of the dark.

'You're shivering,' he said. He touched her cheek with his fingers, lifted them to her forehead. 'Sweetheart, are you ill?'

The tenderness of the gesture almost undid her, and she pulled back. 'My throat hurts.'

It did. She'd run, the air tight in her chest, to the car park, driven the five miles back like a madwoman. The atmosphere in the travellers' clearing so loaded with hostility, it had robbed her of breath.

Later, tucked up on the sofa in her dressing gown after a supper prepared by Rob, she cursed herself for her foolishness. She was warm now, safe. She'd been stupid – a little girl frightened of the dark, of the bogeymen who lived in the forest. Nothing had happened. No one had touched her. No one, really, had even threatened her. Yet she'd been overcome by terror and fled, the travellers' laughter ringing contemptuously in her ears.

Even so, the extent of their anger shocked her. 'I wouldn't send a dog there,' the man had said of her school, the words loaded with venom.

Alwin was a name they recognized, she was pretty sure of it. 'Fancy that, Dad,' the man had said. As if it *meant* something.

Emily

She wakes to the rattling of the front door. Luke's up. Muttering sometimes, and shouting, demanding to know where she's hidden the key. She's about to tell him to be quiet and go back to bed when she remembers her promise that they'll walk first thing. She pushes at the bone between her eyebrows to force away the ache of last night's wine and stumbles down to him, too tired to be angry. Hasn't she sworn to herself that there'll be no stand-off between them, no excuse for him to sulk? Not over Christmas.

'As soon as it's light, OK?' She pulls a packet from the cupboard and pours porridge into a bowl. He eats it with a teaspoon of honey as he always does, downs a glass of orange juice and goes to stand, patiently now, in the hall.

Tucked into the corner at his side is the tree. She's made an effort, bought baubles in Ippingham and looped them over branches. In the gloom they look cheap, almost tawdry. 'Shall we switch the Christmas lights on,' she says.

He doesn't look round. Pulls at the door handle instead.

++

She's expected the cold slap of wind, the grey misery of rain but when they get outside, everything is flat and limp. Cormorants line the groyne like a row of humped-back witches, and a sluggish tide seeps into the shingle like oil.

But there's something else. A heaviness. The stronger-than-usual reek of the sea is there again, coating the back of her throat and making her cough. The cloud-thick sky is pressing down hard on the shoreline, smothering it. She feels nauseous, suffocated, and shakes her head in an effort to unlock her foggy brain. Only Luke has energy, his

anxious eyes darting this way and that, searching the beach. She takes in breaths of air, pulling them in deep to clear her lungs and watches as he turns to face the sea, scanning the horizon and the dull oleaginous water.

‘What are you looking for, Luke?’ She reaches out a hand towards his shoulder, and something shifts behind him, a movement like a curtain swishing when it’s touched. It halts and confuses her. She peers towards it, and her vision clears.

He follows her gaze, his eyes darkening. His face is blank, closed. ‘Nothing,’ he says.

She’s hungover, perhaps sick, but even so the flatness of his answer catches her in the chest. She lowers her hand.

‘You miss Amy a lot, don’t you?’ It comes from nowhere, yet it’s been there all along. Not the question itself, but the pain of it, buried under the layer of befuddlement that blankets her brain.

His eyes seek hers. He seems to be thinking about it, weighing up possibilities.

‘She was here,’ he says.

She drops to her knees. It’s to look at him level, eye to eye. But something odd has happened to her legs. ‘Is that what you think, Luke? Is it really?’ She can feel her heart beating in her ears, the roaring of the sea despite its stillness. She’s heard his words, or others like them, many times. Yet always, *always*, it’s a shock.

‘She gave me this.’ He slides a hand into his pocket, brings it out and opens it, revealing a small curved shell nestled in its centre. It’s one of the cowrie shells he found in Tanzania – when they went to Zanzibar - that they used to make the mobile that hung over his baby sister’s cot. She remembers the dream – and the reality. The shells colliding when the breeze hit, the sound like running water.

She feels something she can't name and doesn't want to know, and pushes it away. She must concentrate on Luke. On the here and now. She rises to her feet, and the beach dips. She waits for it to settle before she turns to look along the blank emptiness of the shoreline. The sea-salt tang renews its assault, and she coughs.

This village, she thinks. This place! What has she done, bringing Luke here without his father, without the friends he had in Africa, just when he needs them most? Perhaps Simon's right: it's her. She's selfish.

Luke is standing in front of her. There's a sweet look on his face, one she hasn't seen for ages, and he holds out the shell. 'You can have it if you like,' he says.

A lump rises to her throat, and she can't speak. She doesn't take it but bends forward to look. She can tell from the spots that curve round its back that it's a tiger cowrie, a symbol of wealth and prosperity. A symbol of the ocean too. Of its power.

He must have had it secreted away somewhere - in a drawer, hidden behind a book perhaps. She hasn't seen it with the other, Suffolk, shells he collects so obsessively.

As they head back a group of people crest the dunes and walk towards them. She feels a lifting of the heavy air. The newcomers are looking across at the sea, chatting excitedly. One has binoculars, another a clipboard, and she wonders if they're geologists or engineers, but they look too young, too scruffy. It's Luke who stops them. 'Why are you here?' he asks.

She smiles to soften the impact of Luke's question, tells them strangers are rarely up so early. The girl at the front tells her they're inter-disciplinary students from Norwich, come to check out next term's assignment on the buried town. She has a mass of ginger hair, almost pre-Raphaelite. 'I'm doing geography,' the girl says. 'He's a poet.' She indicates a tall man with heavy eyebrows. 'And he -' she points to the third, who looks

small and young enough to be still at school. 'Is Jean-Francois. He's French and he likes anything old.'

'Do you know exactly where are the ruins?' the French boy asks. He puts up a hand to shield his eyes, even though there's no sun, and scans the dull surface of the water. The girl takes a chart from under a flap in her front pocket and holds it out. It's coloured a deep sea-blue with areas of dark shading and sudden patches of leaf-bright green. 'Those are them. It's 3-D imaging.'

Emily stretches out an arm to hold Luke back, because he's lunging forward at the girl. He seems about to tear the map from her hand. 'Luke. Calm down. I'm sure you've seen it before.'

'I haven't.' He's risen on tiptoes in his excitement. 'Oh,' he says. He looks up at the girl, at all of them. 'Where is it?'

'Where's what?' the girl says.

'The city.' He looks at her as if she's stupid. 'You said it was there.'

'It is.' She points to the mounds of green that rise out of the blue. 'That's what's left.'

'No.' He shakes his head firmly. 'That's not right. There's buildings, proper ones. Shops and churches. It's in the project at my school. We're doing models.'

'That's how it *used* to be, Luke, before the storms,' As Emily speaks she sees his face change. Sees the tension rising in him, the panic. Any moment he'll explode with it. She has no idea what the drama is about but she needs to get him away.

'Come on darling. It's time to go home.' She keeps her voice calm in front of the students. 'We need to phone Daddy.'

'It's a port. There's *warehouses*.'

The girl smiles down at him. A sweet girl, patient, but it won't help. 'No, it's ruins now. Just old stones. It's been like that for centuries.'

'You're lying.' The words come out like a spit, and the girl flinches. Luke's cheeks are pale, his shoulders raised tight into his neck. 'He *told* me,' he says. Then he lowers his head and, as if on instinct, his arms rise and wrap round it, and he drops into a ball on the sand.

'Well, I guess ...' the poet says, glancing at his watch.

'We should get a move on,' The girl folds the map, missing the creases so that it buckles, but she shoves it back under its flap anyway. She stares down at the top of Luke's head and then back up at Emily. 'Happy Christmas,' she says. She pulls at the poet's hand, and the three move away.

'Yes,' says Emily, watching them as they descend onto the beach. The girl's hair spreads out behind her, a ginger cloak that lifts from her shoulders as she walks. 'Happy Christmas,' she says much too late. She turns to Luke. He's watching too, now. There are tear streaks on his face.

'It hasn't gone,' he says. 'It hasn't Mummy. He promised.'

She regards him silently. He is so serious, so troubled. It's a ruin, for God's sake. A fucking ruin. From centuries ago. What is it about the past, about things crumbling and disappearing that he can't bear?

'Who promised?' she asks. She's expecting him to say Joe Harding or Gabriel. Maybe she'll have a word with them sometime, if ever the opportunity presents itself again, though after the leper chapel incident, she doubts it. 'Please,' she'll say. 'You mustn't tell Luke things that aren't true.'

'Alwin,' he says.

'Alwin?'

‘He was here – just now.’

‘I didn’t see anyone.’ She looks up and down the beach, it’s more for Luke’s benefit than anything. She suspects that Alwin – along with so much else - is a figment of her son’s wild imagination.

‘He hides sometimes. He doesn’t like grown ups seeing him.’ He follows her gaze. The tears have dried, and he’s almost smiling. ‘He brings me shells.’

She sinks down beside him on the shingle. Her coat is too short and the damp seeps into her jeans. ‘Luke,’ she says. ‘Please, will you stop.’ He looks at her silently, and her voice, stressing every syllable of the words in her head, rises to a screech. *‘I can not bear it any more.’*

She’s beaten, broken. The reality he inhabits isn’t hers. He’s given himself the world that he wants, and left her outside.

He’s shivering. And she realises she is too. They should get home, but she doesn’t have the energy to move. There’s something hypnotic about being out here with the oily sea stretching ahead, its utter impenetrability. It’s like her son. You can’t take it on, or challenge it. It is what it is, and you live with that, if you can.

She can hear the voices of the students. They’re out of sight in the shadow of the dunes. She’s forgotten what it’s like: to be that age, to be young and enthusiastic. To have her hair taken by the wind.

He had the laptop open as she walked through the kitchen door. ‘Look at these,’ he said. She bent over his shoulder as he scrolled down the page. More houses. Did he have nothing else to think about?

‘Wait,’ he said as she moved away. He clicked on one of the photos so it rose and swallowed the screen. It was detached, with a small neo-Georgian window to one side and an inverted v-shaped porch over the door. ‘How about that one?’

A pain jagged at her temple. Yesterday, the confirmation letter had come through. She’d hugged him, told him how proud she was. They’d opened the champagne and got a little drunk. Her more than him. All day she’d felt crap.

‘It’s a new build.’

‘No, it isn’t. It’s three years old. Terrific garden.’ She looked. There were thin geometrical borders, wintry now, but stocked no doubt with a range of uninspiring plants, a narrow path that led to a shed with a window in its side. In the centre of the lawn was a bright red swing. ‘Great for kids,’ he said.

The swing loomed up at her like an accusation. ‘It’s not really us, is it?’ she said. ‘We should get a cottage again. Or one of those old semis with twirly bits on the bannisters. A house with *history*.’

‘But this is *sort* of old.’ Rob said, pointing to the picture. ‘OK, the building isn’t, but the style is. You get the Georgian look – you have to admit it’s smart – but there’d be no work to do. Roof, plastering, all shipshape. Doors that fit.’ He laughed. ‘Windows that

don't rattle and keep you awake all night. And, Jess,' he swung round to look at her, his eyes alight with eagerness. 'We'll be able to *afford* it.'

The nausea rose and settled. She swallowed, put out her hand and touched his hair. 'Oh Rob.'

He reached out and pulled her closer. 'I know it'll be strange to leave, after you've kind of established yourself here. But we won't be *far* away - we'll still see loads of Mel and the kids. Our friends can come and stay. And there'll be the sea and beaches – *beautiful* beaches. Even better than here.'

'And my work?'

'They do have schools in Norfolk, you know.' He hesitated, pulled back a little and looked up at her. 'That's if you *want* a job.'

'I'll always teach,' she said. It was cold, decisive, as if she were denying him something. She supposed she was. Then, because he looked so downcast, she added. 'Whatever happens.'

'Of course. I only thought...' He turned back to the screen. 'Why don't we go and look. On Boxing Day? It'll be quiet then. We could tour the villages, see which ones we like best.' She would like to lie down, pull the duvet over her head and sleep. Perhaps she was ill. 'What about that one?' He pointed to another house filling the screen. 'It's in Snettisham - there's an RSPB sanctuary there. And we could look at Heacham too. And Hunstanton. They're all nice places.'

'Boxing Day?'

'Yes. Give us a chance to plan things. Think about *us*.'

'Us?'

'We neglect us sometimes. Don't you think?'

She slid her hands away from his shoulders. 'If you really think we should go.'

‘Don’t you want to?’

‘Yes. Yes, of course I do.’

She couldn’t tell him. She couldn’t say it. She hated him.

++

Her Christmas gift from Rob was so small amongst the presents for the children, she’d not noticed it. He stood behind her, watching her fold back the wrappings. Alice was on her lap, her eyes following the movement of her godmother’s fingers. She smelled of baby lotion and slightly rancid milk, warm and intimate. Her chubby hand reached for the silver ribbon and Jess stopped, winding it around her wrist so the baby could play with it. She guessed it was earrings tucked inside the box, or a broach perhaps, though who wore those nowadays? She pulled at the ribbon and used it to tickle Alice’s nose. The baby laughed and lunged for the box. ‘Can you open it Alice?’ Her fingers scrabbled at its top, gave up and returned to the ribbon. Jess opened the lid. Inside was a ring. A lozenge of tiny diamonds set in gold.

She looked up at Rob and met his eyes. ‘Oh, sweetheart.’ She brought it closer to examine the setting, saw that there were pearls amongst the diamonds. They were worn a little with age, even dulled, but somehow that added to it, gave it a kind of seriousness she found beautiful.’

She wondered where the ring had come from, what its history was. It was clearly Victorian. Strange to think there’d been a woman – *women* perhaps – who’d worn it and looked at it as she did now, with such delight. She leaned forward, tucking Alice more securely onto her lap, and slid it on her finger.

Rob regarded it proudly. ‘It isn’t too small, is it?’

‘Too small? No, it’s perfect.’ She held her hand up in front of her, splaying her fingers. ‘What do you think, Alice?’

++

Boxing Day and they woke to heavy drizzle. Rob was unconcerned. Looking up from his phone, he said, ‘It says forty per cent chance of precipitation. It’s worth a try.’

And so there they were, in grim grey Norfolk, on the outskirts of Hunstanton. She supposed the villages were pretty enough, and yet each door, each house-front and driveway they passed, seemed irrelevant, as if she were watching a screen and only later would they walk out into the air and see the world as it really was. It was strange sensation, one she hadn’t felt in years, not since her father had died. Even outside the residential areas, the flat, plain landscape and the long open skies she glimpsed beyond the rain felt alien. Yet wasn’t Suffolk equally flat - and equally grim too - when the weather was bad?

++

‘Yesterday was great, wasn’t it?’ Rob said.

‘It was.’

They were in a café in Snettisham, the windows so steamed up they couldn’t see out. She was feeling better despite it. Glad of banana cake and hot sweet tea.

‘Matt trying to sort out his new phone - he’s such a luddite.’

She laughed at the memory. ‘You weren’t much better yourself.’

‘Well...’ He made a face. ‘Bit embarrassing that Nathan had to come to the rescue.’

‘They’re sweet kids.’

‘Yes.’ He glanced down at her hand. ‘And you really do like the ring?’

‘Of course I do.’ She touched it, felt the warmth of the pearls against the diamonds.

‘It’s the prettiest thing I ever owned.’

‘It’s for the new chapter in our lives, a way of marking it.’ He beckoned the waitress.
‘Now we’ll go and have a decco at the house I showed you on the Internet.’

Her heart dipped, the sensation physical. ‘We’re not going to go *round* it, are we?’

‘Hardly, on Boxing Day. But we can look at it from the outside, get a feel of it.’

++

It was less painful than she feared. The house had been built next to an electricity sub-station, an ugly building that looked over the front garden. They stayed in the car, peering out through the rain-smeared windscreen.

‘Bugger,’ Rob said. ‘How on earth did I miss that on Street View?’ He turned to her.
‘Sorry, sweetheart, back to the drawing board.’

She returned his sad smile, hiding the strength of her relief. ‘Never mind. There’s plenty of time.’

‘Well,’ he said. ‘Phil Jolley told me May. June at the latest.’ He restarted the engine.

She nodded. That was months away. All sorts of things could happen by then.

++

‘Blast.’ Rob hit the brakes. The queue ahead was stationary. ‘What’s all this about?’

‘Accident?’

‘Dunno.’ As he spoke they heard the sirens and Rob edged the car closer into the side. The police van swung by, its blue lights cutting through the dark and illuminating slices of tree and sky and hedgerow. Something was following, and she watched as a heavy engineering vehicle, yellow lights flashing, overtook at speed. It swerved dangerously close to the ditch, sending sprays of torn vegetation into the air and down on the cars.

‘What the hell’s going on?’

Rob swung open the door and got out. He raised himself on tiptoe, twigs and bits of dead leaf raining down on him, and peered over the roofs of the vehicles in front. The driver ahead had got out too, and Jess could hear snatches of conversation, the lifted tones of questions and concern. Something had happened down on the shore; the road was closed off.

A dinghy capsized perhaps? She wondered if an ambulance had already come by, if anyone was injured. She leaned out through the open window.

‘Can we leave the car and walk, do you think?’

Rob turned at her voice. ‘I don’t think we should.’

‘Then how are we going to get back into the village?’

‘We’ll back up and go through Wiley’s farm. They won’t mind. The track comes out by the reed beds.’

‘Do you know what’s wrong?’

He climbed back in. ‘Apparently the cliff’s collapsed.’

++

They went out straight after breakfast. The huge machine they’d seen careering past last night sat quietly off to one side, but already the beach was busy. There were several children from school and their parents, as well as Julian Tierney and a few villagers Jess recognized but couldn’t name. She spotted Jon Patchett, a sheepskin coat draped around his shoulders. He held a mobile phone tight against his ear. As usual, he wore an air of importance.

She nudged Rob. ‘Do you think he’s talking to the BBC?’

‘Doubt it. It’s hardly an item of national news.’

It was colder today, the sky clearer. As they made their way along the shingle, the extent of the damage became obvious. A large section of the cliff had sheared off and

fallen to the base. Roots and stone hung precariously from the cliff-side and, further along, the grassy area that once held the sixpenny-telescope with its views over the ocean, now hung at an angle and looked ready to drop. Of the telescope itself, there was no sign.

‘Look at the chapel.’ Rob said. She squinted up. It appeared to have shifted forward and now stood a yard or so from the edge. ‘That’s what that plant’s for.’ He indicated the machine. ‘It’s to shore up the damage.’

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘Only if it’s not reinforced.’ He dipped his head to look up at the underside of the broken cliff. ‘It looks pretty firm.’

She followed his gaze. Could see a jumble of torn tree root, some huge stone slabs tipping into the area below the overhang. ‘Oh God!’

‘What?’

‘There!’ She pointed. What looked like bits of muddy ivory protruded from the dark of the shadow below the chapel. ‘You don’t think they’re *bones*, do you?’

Rob reached for his binoculars and put them to his eyes. ‘Christ, you’re right. It’s the cemetery.’ He bent forward. ‘It *is* a bone. A thigh bone - long and thin. And, Jesus... ribs. Look.’

He passed her the glasses, and she scanned the dark mass of earth, spotting them next to a fragment of gravestone: a row of ribs still attached to a sternum. The bones had broken free of the soil and now hung suspended, curving round the empty air. Beside them, a knobbly section of spine pushed out from the hillside like a shattered spear.

As she stared, the sense of childlike excitement she’d been experiencing began to change. It was more as if she were doing something wrong, like spying through someone’s window and watching them undress. With a growing sense of shame she

looked about her. There were more onlookers now, muffled up in scarves and woolly hats. They'd spotted the bones too and pushed forward, trying to get near enough to see. A man in a luminous jacket had arrived and was fixing a line of orange tape. Two police officers stood watching him.

There was a roar from the vehicle as its operator switched on the engine and she felt the ground tremble. For a moment she feared it would send what was left of the damaged cliff-side crashing down on them, the chapel with it. Others had the same idea and, almost as one, the villagers moved, catching at one's another's arms and pulling back. Safely out of reach of any tumbling rocks, she turned for Rob. He wasn't there. Jon Patchett stood at her elbow.

'Bit of excitement, eh?' He seemed to have forgotten their last meeting.

'Yes.'

'I gather our little friend was in the midst of it all.'

'I'm sorry?'

He indicated across the dunes. Luke, his hand held tight by his mother, was dragging back towards the beach, resisting her. She was clearly trying to take him home. Even from this distance Jess could see he was filthy, his body and clothes covered in soil and sand.

'He saw it happen, apparently. One of his little excursions. Then this morning, believe it or not, before it was properly light, the little bugger snuck out again and tried to clamber up the cliff. I was down here early with the dogs, and found his mother in a dreadful state. We spotted him on his way down, blithe as a goat. She can't control him, you know.' He waited for her agreement. When she was silent, he added. 'He'll do *serious* harm one day.'

The words, uttered so casually, made her shudder. ‘He does silly things sometimes,’ she said. Her anger at Luke’s mother was strengthening by the second. Emily seemed incapable of protecting her own child. If Jon Patchett was to be believed, Luke had been on the beach alone not once, but twice, within the last 24 hours.

‘It wouldn’t,’ Jon Patchett said, ‘surprise me at all if he hadn’t somehow set the whole thing off.’

‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘Oh come on, Jess. You know what I mean.’ The way he threaded in her name implied they were friends, even intimates.

‘I don’t actually.’ She smiled lightly as she said it. Chair of the school governors – no point in antagonizing him. She gazed at Luke’s departing back, would have dearly liked to run after them to ask Emily what she was thinking of. Instead she searched the crowd for Rob, who seemed to have disappeared altogether. After a moment, she caught sight of his green coat further up the beach.

‘I know you feel protective towards the boy,’ Jon Patchett was saying, ‘But admit it, he’s been nothing but trouble. He’s never going to belong here. Nor is his mother.’ As she tried to speak, he lifted a hand to silence her. ‘Look, we’re a funny lot here. Jealous of our little village. You’ve seen that yourself.’ He smiled. ‘We all love *you*, of course. But you’re married to Rob so that’s OK. We’re a family, all the contradictory, awkward parts of it. That’s just how it is. But when someone like Luke who, let’s face it, is pretty odd anyway... Well ...’

He dipped his head indicating the sentence was hardly worth finishing

‘I so hope you’re wrong, she said.’

But his tone had been matter of fact, without regret or even surprise. He spoke as if they lived in the middle-ages, were clannish and warlike.

‘It’s happened before.’

‘What has?’

‘A child not fitting in.’ He shrugged. ‘Anyway...’ He turned to go.

‘No, wait. What do you mean? Who?’

He pushed his lips together, as if considering whether to go on. Then he said, ‘I’m sure you’ve heard the story from Rob, but I was thinking of the boy who disappeared in the reeds when Leonie and he were at school here.’ He paused, forced out a cough.

‘What *was* the chap’s name...? It was a terrible business.’

‘Jimmy someone?’

‘That’s it - his father had the shack where they sell the crab nets. He was an odd child too.’

‘When you say ‘odd’?’

‘Different. Peculiar. Probably autistic, though no one said that at the time. He spoke to ghosts, you know. Or rather,’ Patchett gave a sharp little laugh, ‘he told people he did.’

‘What did happen that day?’

‘To be honest, I don’t really know, though I have my suspicions. He went into the reeds. He got lost and...’ He stopped, as if the words were beyond even his ability to form.

‘And drowned?’

‘It was, as I said, very terrible.’

She found herself staring at the broken cliff, as if it might provide some explanation. It was open and raw. She followed the scar down to its base, saw that the vicar had arrived. Bypassing the orange tape, she stood, surplice billowing in the wind, arguing with a policeman.

Jon Patchett had seen her too. He let out a groan. 'The Lord save us,' he said. 'We're going to get prayers for the dead.'

Jess's sense of revulsion - at Jon Patchett, at all of them standing there gaping - became suddenly overwhelming. It wasn't just the boy, Jimmy. Or Luke. It was the bodies, the people whose bones were before them. The easy innocence of the beach had disappeared, and something foreign had taken over. It made her feel complicit, tainted. She didn't want to be there at all.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I need to find Rob. We have to go home.'

Emily

She wakes to find her head flat on the mattress, her body curled around her pillow. She lies still, certain it's Amy she's holding, bathing in the warmth of it, the peace that her body feels.

She opens her eyes. Sees Luke gazing down at her.

'It's time you got dressed,' Luke says.

The scent of Amy's body and the spicy African air disappears like a bubble. As Emily pulls herself up to a sitting position, a pain as sharp as any she's ever felt pushes up under her lungs and robs her of breath. The cottage bedroom swings dizzily into view.

Luke has his coat on, and gloves. 'Hurry up,' he says.

'Not this morning. I told you. The beach is too dangerous.' She feels terrible. As though something has kicked her in the ribs, torn out her insides. But she eases herself from the bed anyway and goes to pull back the curtains. Outside it's black. Not even a moon to throw light on the sea.

She turns back into the room. 'What time is it?'

He picks up the bedside clock and shows it to her. The hands read ten past five.

'For God's sake, Luke,' she says.

++

Twice recently she's sought out Jess Baxter, waited until she's said goodbye to the last of the others, and twice Jess turned away. 'So sorry, I've got to see the Head. Can we talk tomorrow?' And then she's walked from the room.

Emily hasn't really known what she wants to talk about. Just needed to make a connection, evoke a friendly adult response. Taking Luke to school has become worse than an ordeal, the village women so brazen in their hostility they barely drop their voices. Even Sarah Harding eases away to the other side of the gate.

And this week, the new marks on Luke's arms.

She looks at her watch. 9.13am. Is that too early? She scrolls through her numbers, finds the one she wants. A man answers. She can guess it's the husband, Rob, who she's seen from afar.

'I think I know him,' Simon said when he was here.

She asks for Jess and hears the muffled sound of his voice in the room but not the words. 'I'm afraid she's out at the moment,' he says. 'Can she call you back later?'

'It doesn't matter' she says.

++

She spotted the marks yesterday, when he was taking off his coat. But he was sulking then, angry. Now she takes his wrist and turns it over. She stops as he tenses but he doesn't pull away. The area is raised, like a blister, but there's no membrane, no liquid. It's as if his arm has been pulled and the skin twisted. She touches it but he doesn't flinch.

She picks up his left hand from where it's dangling at his side and turns that over too. This time he jerks back but not before she sees another mark, more like a flattened ulcer than a bruise, that extends along his forearm and disappears under the edge of his pulled-up sleeve.

They remind her of something. Pictures she's seen. She wracks her brain but nothing further comes. Are they natural, or man-made? 'What happened, Luke?' Her tone is shrill.

He tugs at his jumper, trying to cover them.

‘Lukey,’ she says, calming her voice, making it as gentle and firm as she can, though inside the pain is there in her ribs again, making her weak. The marks are shocking, bizarre, and even though they must have been there for days, she, his mother, hasn’t noticed them before. ‘Did someone at school hurt you?’

He pulls his arms tight against his side, hiding them, and his face becomes stony. She opens her mouth to try again, but he turns away and, with his back sloped against her, heads towards the stairs. Perhaps she should take him to the doctor, just in case, but he doesn’t seem in pain. He won’t agree to go anyway; he’ll think she wants him to see a psychologist again, answer all those questions.

Anyway, it’s the kids at school, she’s sure of it.

He’s her son, yet he won’t talk to her, won’t let her *love* him. Perhaps if she could stop the shaking, it would help. He’s aware of it, just as he is of all her weaknesses and failures, picking them up from the air like a bird before a storm.

She walks to the window and looks out at the dunes. They’re grey, dispiriting. She’d imagined a house this close to the sea would be full of light, shimmering with it. And whilst in Luke’s bedroom it is – when the sun’s out, you could almost be on the water, the reflections so fluid and mobile - down in the sitting room it’s permanently clouded, the dunes casting a wall of shadow that deepens to night before the clock does.

There’s no sound, and she wonders what he’s doing - whether perhaps he has his shells arrayed on the carpet or if he’s sitting curled in anger against her, on the stairs. Hugging her arms around her chest she pulls her head in and down, like he does. The action is instinctive, coming from somewhere she doesn’t recognize. She knows it’s odd. That it’s as if she’s trying to inhabit Luke, to *be* him. It throws her back into herself, like a sea creature coiled in its casing.

It's too visceral, too intimate. She feels a flash of fear that she'll stay like that forever and moves to break the spell. How on earth can he stand it? She needs to be outside herself. She needs a drink.

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Monday she won't come home after she's dropped Luke off at school, she'll go straight to the Headmaster's office. 'Look at my son,' she'll say. 'Look at his arms. How do you account for that?

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He's been in his room since supper. She needs to go to him, check that his teeth are done, his clothes ready and in the right order for tomorrow. Then there'll be the business of saying goodnight, the switching off and on and off again of his bedside light, the door open no more than six inches, no less than five. She knows the drill. She waits for a moment, listening, before nudging at Luke's door. He has wedged something behind it, and it stops a quarter of the way in. She peers round the gap. 'Luke,' she says. 'Time to say night-night.' He's lying wrapped in his dressing gown on top of his duvet, looking upwards. He doesn't turn. Everywhere, there are shells. They've moved from the shelves and the window-sill up onto the walls and over the ceiling. The room looks like a Mediterranean grotto.

'Good God, Luke, what have you done?'

She pushes at the door, and a chair slides across the floor. He pulls his arms into his sides and looks at her calmly.

'I fell asleep, and when I woke up it was there,' he says.

She moves into the centre of the room. Almost, she can't believe what she sees, because the ceiling is high, eight foot perhaps, too high for Luke's small body to reach. The shells have been arranged in curves, the largest at the outside, the smallest in the

middle. She looks at the chair and imagines it on the bed, Luke, balancing on top, stretching up. He could have broken an ankle, a leg. She's been downstairs the whole time and heard nothing. What if he'd fallen and hit his head? She glances up again. Even with the chair, the ceiling is too far.

She swallows and sits on the side of the bed. She doesn't touch him, and he doesn't edge away. The marks loom like an accusation from under the cuffs of his dressing gown, but his face is smooth, untroubled. 'Luke, darling,' she says. 'Can we be friends now, and talk about this please?'

The room looks terrible. Not Mediterranean, she decided, but Las Vegas. Crude and stupid. There's no glue to be seen and, in a moment of optimism, she hopes it might be Blue-tack he's used, that she won't need to redecorate altogether.

His blue eyes shift to hers and away. 'It's a present,' he says.

For whom she wonders? Himself? Her? Then she knows. It's for Amy. She takes a deep breath, fights the urge to get up and go back downstairs and pour herself another drink. 'It's extraordinary,' she says.

They should have stayed in London, gone to see a family therapist. What was she thinking, bringing him here to Suffolk?

'Alwin did it.'

Each word he utters chills her further. Always Alwin. What *is* he? A boy? A man tall enough to reach the ceiling? Dear God.

Alwin, she's convinced, doesn't exist.

She traces a crease on the duvet, running her fingers along it and then back again. Is it the wine that's making things so difficult? Or is she being stupid? She tries again. 'Luke,' she says. 'I don't think I've met Alwin, have I?' It's a chance she's taking, waiting to see his reaction. If he feels cornered, he'll retreat.

‘Oh no,’ he says. ‘It’s only me that sees him.’ He shifts up onto his knees raising his arms to balance and the sleeves move. She bites her lip.

‘I see.’ She watches as he settles down onto his ankles, his feet splayed, toes poking out under the dressing-gown. It takes him forever. *I speak to dead people*, Jess Baxter told her he’d said. A fantasy, of course. ‘Is he sort of like Tinkerbell then?’

‘That’s daft.’ A frown creases his brow. ‘He’s not a *fairy*. He’s a *boy*.’

Dear God, the child is impossible. Even so, she feels relief, because his tone is matter-of-fact, guileless. She closes her eyes and breathes in deep. When she opens them again, he’s still there, gazing at her intently. The shells are still stuck to the walls, the ceiling a mess.

‘We can’t leave it like this.’

He looks round the room. ‘Why not?’ His voice is peevish.

‘This isn’t our house.’

He hums then, quietly at first, a melody she doesn’t recognize. ‘Luke,’ she says. He shuts his eyes, and the tune swells and fills the room. ‘Please don’t do that.’

He ignores her, forcing the sound out through the tautened muscles of his throat. It’s grating, unnatural. She stands and scrabbles at one of the shells on the wall, and the humming stops. As she tugs, the shell’s ridges cut into her skin, but it doesn’t give.

‘For God’s sake Luke, you can’t just stick things wherever you feel like it. This is Daddy’s auntie’s house, and we have to look after it.’

‘I - didn’t - do - it.’ He pushes the words out slowly, jutting his lips forward in an exaggerated way so she can see his gums.

‘Yes, you did. You know you did.’ She bends and takes his chin in her hand, moving it towards her. He pulls away, and she tightens her grip. ‘Look at me Luke.’ He stops resisting and slumps forward, letting his weight fall into her hand. ‘Don’t be silly.’ She

releases him but his head stays where she's left it, hanging awkwardly forward, his mouth slack. He looks like a marionette, dangling from inert strings.

'Luke stop it. Sit up properly.' He doesn't move. There's blood on his chin, and for a horrible moment she thinks she's hurt him. But it's her knuckle that's bleeding, and she puts it to her mouth, sucks its hot iron taste.

At school, he must be like this, stubborn and unreasonable. No wonder the other kids get frustrated.

No wonder they bully him.

'I don't know what to do with you,' she says. It sounds feeble, and she knows she's close to tears. She puts her head in her hands, feels the comfort of skin on skin. He needs her to be strong, to provide him with boundaries.

She tries. She's been trying for months.

What she needs is a fucking miracle.

She lifts her head to see that he's slid himself upright and is leaning against the wall at the back of the bed, his eyes turned away. The sleeves of his dressing-gown have rucked up above the elbow. The marks are red turning to paleness on the one side, mottled on the other.

A constriction closes her throat, and she reaches out to touch his hair, lets her fingers rest there gently, almost as if he were asleep. He doesn't move but tolerates it. She leans forward and doesn't quite brush his forehead with her lips.

'We'll leave the shells for now,' she says. 'But they can't stay there. You know that, don't you Luke?' She smiles, though he's not looking. 'Now go and do your teeth and get into bed. I'll come back in five minutes and say night-night properly. Ok?'

At the doorway, she turns again. His position hasn't changed, his gaze is still away from her, angled toward the window. Above his head, the ceiling is impossibly high.

Everything lay under a coating of frost. There'd been snow too, blanketing the piles of earth and stone on the beach. But, if you got close enough to the exposed cliff-side, and peered up through the wire netting erected to keep it secure, you could see the bones glistening in the morning sunlight, as if they'd been sprinkled with a layer of the tiniest diamonds.

Real skeletons. Real dead people.

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Harry was the first to report a one-to-one encounter. Arriving dark-eyed and edgy one morning, he announced that a skeleton had come into his bedroom and woken him in the night.

'It whispered things. In my ear.'

'What things?' Tom wanted to know. 'What did it say?' But Harry shook his head and blinked back tears. She kept her eye on him. Lunchtime, he was fine again, playing with the others.

A day or so later, Matthew - calm, sensible Matthew - said his clothes had been moved from the chair at the bottom of his bed and thrown out of the window. 'It was a skeleton,' he said. 'I know it was.' He pointed to his jeans. 'That's why I've got these on. My school ones're all wet.'

The children exchanged nervous glances. Mollie reached out for Whitney's arm and clung to it. Whitney clung back. Did they really believe these things? It seemed they did.

'Come on children,' Jess said. 'This is nonsense.'

A few days later it was Molly herself. Her mother brought her late, a good hour after school had begun. The child's cheeks were pale, and her eyes red from prolonged crying.

'We had a bit of to-do,' Mrs Dixon confided. 'She's very upset.'

Molly hung up her coat and made her way across to her place by the window. There was none of her usual impatient energy, no swinging of her arms or tossing of hair. She sent fragile smiles to Whitney and Kyra and the others at her table, but didn't speak. When the bell rang for break, she hung back, letting the class file out without her.

'Molly, are you alright?'

She looked up, eyes glittering. 'They don't believe me.'

'About what, Mollie?'

'About the scribbles. I didn't do it.'

'Scribbles?' Jess patted a chair, pulled out another and sat on it herself.

'In my *bedroom*. On the wall,' Molly sniffed miserably. Her pale fingers reached up and pushed into her eyes. Some hair caught and stayed there, stuck to the side of her cheek. 'They say it's my fault.' She began to sob.

Jess put out a hand and took the child's smaller one in her own. There were, surely, many possible explanations for scribbles on a little girl's bedroom wall, not least her own twin sisters who from Jess's experience of them, could get up to more or less anything. 'Then you tell them again that it wasn't you. That the marks got there by accident.' The weeping became more desperate. 'Molly, sweetheart. It'll be alright.'

‘It won’t.’ Molly words buried themselves through splutters and hiccups into Jess’s chest. ‘It was the skeletons. They’ll come *back*.’

Jess stroked the girl’s hair. Oliver and Jerome and Tom pretending to be ghosts, running at the meeker ones, scaring them – little buggers. ‘Nothing’s coming back, Molly. What the boys say is a joke.’

‘Luke said they talk.’

‘Luke? He was- ’ He was what? Imagining things? Being silly? ‘Molly, I promise, there aren’t any skeletons. Not one single one.’ She smiled, pushed the girl gently away so she could see her face. ‘There’s just some daft old bones stuck in the side of a cliff.’

Mollie regarded Jess through frightened, puffy eyes. The tears welled again and slipped soundlessly down her cheeks. ‘It was them. I know it was.’

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‘We’ll fight ‘em off.’ said Oliver.

‘A posse. We’ll get a posse.’ Jerome cried.

‘No you won’t,’ Jess said. ‘We’ve taken this joke far enough.’

She could see Luke’s agitation. Whitney looked troubled too. Jess moved over to stand behind them, to provide reassurance with her nearness. The sleeves of his school jumper were pushed up as he rubbed at the table with the palms of his hands.

His voice broke across the troubled mood in the classroom. ‘I told you. They want to talk to us. All of us.’

‘You’re a fucking psycho crackpot, that’s what you are,’ Tom said.

As he spoke, Luke tensed his arms, and she saw the marks on their underside. Several now - as if over a period of time someone had taken hold of him and dug their fingers into his flesh. There was fresh one there. Darker, more defined than the others.

She couldn’t deal with it now. The class was in uproar.

Rob had become Tigger-like, ideas and plans bubbling out of him like a child.

‘What?’ he said, seeing her laughing.

‘You. Floor-to-ceiling glass for a whole wall?’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, cost for a start.’

‘But think of it.’ He pointed to the artist impressions on the screen. ‘A view directly over the sea. No gardens or beach huts or dunes in the way. And the wildlife – avocets, sandpipers, oyster-catchers. Seals even. Did you know there’s a colony at Hunstanton?’

‘Oh Rob.’ His enthusiasm was infectious, she had to admit. But all those things, they could have them here in Little Charlburch, couldn’t they? In time.

‘Anyway, I had this thought. Why don’t we rent for a while? Six months perhaps. Even a year. It would give us a chance to really explore the area, find the very *best* place to live – and then if we needed serious work done...’

She shook her head at his craziness. It was too complicated. Too expensive. But renting? That didn’t feel *quite* so bad. It would certainly make things less permanent, allow them to change their minds.

‘What would we do with this house?’

‘Sell it, of course. The interest from the capital would pay the rent.’

The pain was physical, as if she’d been smacked in the stomach.

‘There’s just one thing.’

‘Yes?’ She didn’t want to hear it.

‘It’s just - ’ He lowered his eyes. ‘I mean, what if you became pregnant? We wouldn’t exactly be settled.’

Pregnant? It hadn't taken him long, had it? She laughed again, making the sound easy, light-hearted. 'There's loads of time, Rob. Loads. We can't do everything at once.' She needed him to calm down. She felt like a hoop bowled along at the end of a stick.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing. I don't know.'

She could tell him now. *I don't want to go.*

'Something at school, that's all.'

At least it offered a distraction. He moved to sit beside her, squeezing up on the sofa. 'Sweetheart, you're worried. I didn't realise. What is it?' He took her hands. Even his concern was fevered.

She searched for something to offer him. Saw it had been there all along, pressing for attention.

'It's not really about me. Only I'm not sure how to handle it.' She told him about the marks on Luke's arms. 'His mother came in the other day and spoke to Richard. He wanted to talk to her about the skeleton thing – you know, the kids all being terrified and Luke saying the dead speak. But then Emily showed him Luke's arm. She said the boys are bullying him, which in a way they are. But I don't think they'd do *that*. They're not violent kids, Rob, and the marks are *vicious*. Really livid and sore-looking, I've seen them. But, the thing is, I'm wondering - do you think she could have done them herself?'

'Crikey, Jess, that's a thing to say.'

'I know. It's a Child Protection issue. We'd have to get Social Services in.'

'But what makes you think it's *her*?'

‘Well, she’s very odd with him. Sort of distant one minute, anxious the next. And all those disappearances down to the beach. I mean, to let your child *do* that? That’s *negligence*. Besides, I’ve smelt alcohol on her breath –’ She stopped, counting on her fingers, ‘-at least four times this term already.’ She pulled away from him, saw her anxiety mirrored in his face. ‘Three fifteen in the afternoon, Rob. And it was *strong*.’

He frowned, pushed a fist against his chin. ‘You need to talk to Richard.’

‘But what if I’m wrong?’ Everyone would hear about it in an instant.

‘Are you sure it isn’t one of the kids?’

‘No, I’m not. But I’ve watched him. He’s not frightened of them, even though they’re horrible to him. But he doesn’t like his mother touching him at all.’

‘Give it the weekend, sweetheart. See what you think on Monday.’ His face cleared, and he rose and went to pick his briefcase up from the floor. ‘Now, no more work. I want us to drive over to Kings Lynn. I thought I’d show you the new office. There’s lots to do to it yet, but -’ He pulled something from the bag, waved it in the air. ‘They’ve given me a key.’

She could probe Whitney. Discreetly. If it *was* one of the other children, the little girl might tell her.

‘Jess?’ He was by the door.

‘What?’

‘Kings Lynn?’

No more work, he’d said.

Emily

‘A holiday,’ Simon’s says. ‘At half-term. Why not? We could meet in Greece – or France maybe?’

‘What’s wrong with Suffolk?’

There’s a crackle at the other end of the line, and she wonders if he’s gone. ‘It’s cold,’ he says at last.

‘You said you loved it here when you were little. When you came to see your aunt.’

‘Did I? Well I’m not little now. Anyway I’ve got a meeting in Athens. And one in Paris. Come on, Em, let’s go to Greece, it’s our place. It’ll do you good to get away, Luke too.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ she says.

++

Actually, she’s sick of the sea. And of the beach, and the shells and the cliff-tops. Of the interminable screeching of the gulls. Most of all she’s sick of herself and her inability to cope with her wayward, possibly seriously disturbed, eight-year-old son. All she wants is for him to be ordinary. To require ordinary things of her, like watching football, or reading him to sleep, or cuddles. Sometimes she has the urge to slap him, because it’s the only way. And she feels sick about that too, because what is it for a mother to feel so angry with her son, so needful of his love that it turns her against him?

A holiday? Time with his father? It might do the trick.

He’s in his room, but she can’t hear him. She’s told him no more shells. ‘Not one, Luke, please. This obsession has got to stop.’ He stared at her through narrowed eyes.

‘Obs.. what?’ he said

‘For God’s sake, Luke. It just means that you never think about anything else.’

Ashamed that she was rowing with him as if he was a teenager, she’s sent him upstairs.

++

The stench hits her, pungent and choking as if the house has been buried in kelp. Luke is standing by the open window, gazing out. It’s cold. Bitter. The air full of the stink and roar of the sea. There are bits of what look like half-built model on his bed. She thought it was finished.

She crosses the room, stretches an arm over her son’s shoulder and pulls the window shut. ‘For goodness sake, Luke, that smell...’

‘Don’t,’ he says, pushing his arm forward to open it again.

‘Luke.’ She holds the window shut against him. ‘Don’t be silly. It’s freezing in here. You’ll get pneumonia.’ To her surprise he lets his hand fall. The marks, she sees, are shrinking.

‘So what are you doing?’ She surveys the bits of cardboard and wood and paper on his bed. ‘Is that more of the model?’

‘Sort of.’ A look, half-secretive, half anxious, appears on his face. ‘It’s for school.’

‘OK.’ She sits on the duvet, careful not to disturb the pieces, The smell is still there, not quite as bad, but still strong. She holds back a cough. ‘I want to ask you something.’

He relaxes, allows himself to meet her gaze.

‘How would you like to go and meet Daddy? In Greece. We can have a week on the beach, but there are ruins there too.’ As she speaks, the idea grows on her. The thought of the sun, the heat, the bottomless blue of the skies. Like a door opening out of a darkness. ‘We could go and see the Acropolis, and the Temple of Zeus – he was the

chief God.’ This surprises her too, the memory of it, of her month there with Simon, when she’d thought he was god-like himself, though goodness knows why. Students, both of them. She pauses. Luke’s eyes are still on her face; they seem hardly to flicker. ‘We might even be able to go to the Temple of Poseidon - he was God of the Sea. The temple’s right on the coast.’ She sits forward, waiting for a response. Please, she begs him silently. Just a glimmer. Excitement. Interest. Even rejection would do.

He turns back to the window and looks out.

‘Are there drowned people there too?’ he says.

She knows she has a stupid expression on her face. It’s how she feels. He’s not looking at her anyway.

It’s not just the shells but death too, those that have died. Perhaps it’s not surprising. Amy, the ruins, the school project on the buried city. An unfortunate project, now she thinks of it, given the collapse of the cliff and the bones so rudely exposed. It’s fed something in Luke that’s risen to meet it. A kind of monster.

They must get away.

But not Athens. Crete maybe, Santorini – though not for the ruins. For the sun. For play.

Play? She’s forgotten what that is.

He’s looking at her, waiting for an answer to his question. She wants to reach out and pull him close, feel him warm against her body. But she can’t, and she knows he won’t let her. What can she say anyway? Rising, she moves to the door. There’s the sound of the window catch behind her, and she’s aware again of the rush of the waves, the stink of seaweed in her throat.

‘Alright, Luke,’ she says, turning. ‘If you must. But keep the door shut please.’

They were intimidating, the five of them together, accosting her. And although she'd half expected the challenge, she hadn't reckoned on such hostility.

'I can't get Jason to sleep for all his hanging out of the window, and Kimberley's in our bed every night,' Mrs Clarke stood in the doorway, her eyes fixed on Luke. 'That boy needs speaking to.'

'Boy?' She smiled, feigning innocence.

'You know who I mean.' Mrs Clarke flipped a hand in Luke's direction and lowered it again. 'That boy there.'

'*Luke*,' Jess made an attempt at laughter. 'It's hardly his fault. It's the landslip, seeing the bones.' The women's faces remained fixed. 'It's excited them, that's all.'

Izzy Jackson broke in, her voice trembling. 'The dead speak to him. That's what he says, isn't it? And it frightens our kids. You tell me...' She jabbed at the air with a finger. 'Since when's it natural for a boy to say them sort of things?'

Put like that, Jess could see their point.

'What he did to poor little Gabriel – think about *that*.'

Jess surveyed their faces, every one angry, every one closed.

'I'll talk to them,' she said.

'It's *your* fault, you know,' said Mrs Clarke. 'You're new still, so you wouldn't understand. But all that raking up of the past – it don't do.'

'Why on earth not?'

'Just how it is.'

Jess raised her hands in the air, gave them a look that said, *this is beyond me*.

‘If you was one of us, you’d know.’ The slight was intended.

She swallowed. Bit back: *Anyone would think you were ashamed*.

++

The sunlight was harsh. Fat puffs of cloud scudded across the blue. It was Saturday at last. With Alice wrapped in a blanket in her buggy, she and Rob had taken the dune path to look for avocets in the pools at the back. Ahead lay the damaged cliff, its steel mesh already beginning to stain. As usual, she felt her eyes drawn to it, to the orange-brown earth behind the webbing, the lumps of stone and root that stuck out where the graves had been. Above it, stood the leper chapel, no longer serene or comforting, but mysterious. A dark mass against the morning sun.

‘Just think...those people,’ she said. ‘And all that’s left is their bones.’ She gestured to the cavities in the cliff wall. ‘We might never have known they existed.’

‘Is that so awful?’ Rob said.

‘Well.. yes. You live, you die. That’s the sum of it.’ The brevity of life terrified her sometimes. In the end everything, *everything*, was lost.

‘Crikey, Jess,’

‘Well it’s true.’

‘This isn’t like you,’ he said.

A snuffle came from the pram. Alice was asleep, her white-mittened fist tucked awkwardly under her chin. Jess leaned to free it. Through the thick wool the baby’s hand was warm.

She straightened. ‘Perhaps you don’t know me very well,’

She saw the look in his eyes. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t mean that.’ It was the mood of the village, it had infected her.

Rob turned to gaze at the sea. Terns dipped low over the water. Several dinghies were out too, their sails fat.

It had been a mean thing to say. Hasty and unfair. She took his hand and threaded her fingers through his. 'That's what we should have done,' she said. 'Get the sun on our faces. Feel the bite of the wind.'

'What about Alice?'

She laughed. 'Nothing wrong with starting early.'

He bent to look at the sleeping child. 'Do you think she's alright?'

'She's fine.'

'This is nice, isn't it. The three of us?'

She squeezed his fingers. 'Of course it is.'

The dinghies had come about, slicing the wind at right angles, dipping perilously close to the water. She thought of what was beneath. A whole city, a whole community.

'Rob?'

'Yes.'

'What did happen to that boy, Jimmy Henson?'

'*What?*'

'The boy – the one who was lost in the reeds. You know, Mel mentioned him once.'

'Jesus, Jess.' He kicked at a stone, watched as it disappeared down onto the beach.

'Please don't be cross. It's just... well... seeing the cliff. That day it first fell, Jon Patchett was here and he mentioned him. He said his daughter knew him, and you did too. Were you all friends?'

'Not with Jimmy Henson. No one was.'

'And Leonie Patchett?'

'She was in the year above me at school. We hung out a bit.'

‘What was she like?’

‘A bit snooty, actually – full of herself. Probably because her dad was famous.’

‘I haven’t ever met her, have I?’

‘Don’t think so. I’m not sure you’d want to, she’s not a very nice person.’ He took a step forward. ‘Look, we need to get a move on. Mel said we should give Alice her lunch at twelve.’

‘You don’t think she was involved do you? Leonie, I mean. In the boy’s disappearance?’

‘Of course not.’ His turned to stare at her, his mouth hard. ‘Why on earth would you suggest that?’

What could she say when she didn’t know herself? *Connections? Instinct?* A feeling that gnawed at the pit of her stomach. The words had appeared almost as if someone else had thought them.

He’d taken the buggy from her grip and was pushing it onwards. Alice, she could see, was waking, her face screwing up, threatening to cry. ‘Wait a minute.’ Jess crouched down and took her hand. ‘It’s alright sweetie. We’re here.’ She pulled out the elephant, gone grey over the months, from where it had lodged under Alice’s right leg and waved it in front of her. Alice reached for it, her face breaking into a smile.

‘Fefful.’ she said.

Jess laughed. ‘Yes, fefful. What a clever girl you are.’ She glanced up at Rob. He was laughing too. She turned back to Alice. ‘We’re going to see some birdies, sweetheart. You’ll like that, won’t you?’

++

It was as they were walking home that they saw Emily Bayely. She had Luke by the wrist and was pulling him along, his feet kicking into the sand as he twisted to gaze back at the sea.

‘Look at how she holds him. I told you.’

‘But he’s *fighting* her. Watch.’

Luke was ungiving, struggling every inch of the way. At that moment Emily glanced up. She seemed shocked to see them there. Embarrassed probably. Her hair was pulled into a knot at the back, and she was thin, without colour.

She gave them a grim smile. ‘Off on his wanders again.’

As Luke caught sight of Jess his body relaxed. He let his mother guide him up onto the dunes.

‘This is Rob.’ Jess said.

‘I’ve seen you before,’ Emily said. ‘From afar. When my husband was here, he thought he recognized you.’

‘Really? Do I know him?’

‘Simon. Simon Bayely.’

‘Doesn’t ring a bell, I’m afraid.’

‘And this is?’ Emily bent to Alice. ‘What a sweet little thing? I didn’t know you had a daughter.’

‘Alice,’ Jess said. Why did people always assume things? ‘She’s not our daughter; she’s our niece.’

‘Ah, sorry. Hello, Alice. What a pretty girl you are. Is this your elephant?’ Emily picked it up and rubbed the front of Alice’s coat with its ears. Alice giggled, and Emily bent her head in a sudden jerky movement. Jess remembered the baby she’d lost and felt a pang of pity. When Emily looked back, her face was expressionless.

‘Well, better get on,’ she said brightly. ‘Come on, Luke.’ She turned, ready to head in the direction of Hinton Lane.

‘We went to Africa Live,’ Luke said to Jess.

‘Did you? How exciting.’ So his mother spent time with him then. Proper time.

‘The lions were good.’ His eyes were serious, fixed on Jess. ‘Though not as good as in Tanzania. You can see them from Lookout Lodge. And the lemurs. But they’re from Madagascar, and their forests are all being cut down. They might be extinct soon.’

That was a lot of words for Luke.

‘How terrible.’

‘It’s what happens sometimes,’ he said. He gave a long quivering sigh, and his gaze dropped. ‘This was on the beach.’ He dug into his pocket and brought something out, tucked into his fist.

‘I told you, Luke, No shells.’ Emily’s voice was sharp.

‘What have you found?’ Rob stepped forward. Jess waited for Luke to slide into shut-off mode as he so often did with strangers. He uncurled his hand.

‘Well?’ Emily said.

‘That’s not a shell.’ Rob bent to look more closely. ‘A bone maybe? It’s not from a bird, though is it, Luke? It’s too big for that.’ He shook his head slowly. After a moment, his voice dropped to a whisper. ‘My god, I think it might be a finger. A *human finger*.’ He reached out for it.

‘It’s a metacarpal,’ Luke said. ‘I found it.’

‘Luke, that’s horrible. Give it to me.’ As his mother spoke, Luke’s hand closed and shot back into his pocket.

‘No.’

‘Luke!’ Her voice held an edge of panic.

Luke had gone rigid, as if he'd been planted into the pebbles. Emily tugged at his arm. Jess winced. His hand stayed fixed in his pocket.

'No,' Despite his stillness, it was a shout.

As if the sound had summoned him, a large Labrador, its fur flattened and glistening from the sea, scrambled up the side of the dune. He stopped to shake himself, sending out a spray of salt-water in a rainbow-coloured arc. Emily stepped back with a cry.

'So sorry.' His owner clambered up. The dog put its head against Luke's thigh and looked up at him. The man smiled. 'He likes little boys,' he said.

Luke's withdrew his hand from his pocket. 'We had a dog like you,' Luke said, reaching to pull at the animal's ear. 'It was my friend.'

'We called it Cecil,' Emily said.

'They killed it.'

'Luke, that's not true.'

The man smiled awkwardly and moved away. The dog sprang after him.

'It wasn't like that, you know,' Emily whispered. 'We've never had a Labrador. Just a tan-coloured mongrelly thing. And it wasn't ours. It just roamed around outside our house in Tanzania. Luke was upset when we left it behind.'

'Perhaps he sees that as a death?' Jess said.

Emily narrowed her eyes. 'He said we *killed* it. I don't know why he would say that.'

'Perhaps to him, it feels like that.'

Emily gasped. She seemed to have taken the words as a kind of criticism, even an accusation. 'I don't think Luke reads things that deeply, Mrs Baxter.'

Distanced by the 'Mrs Baxter' Jess felt suddenly irritated. 'I think he does,' she said. It seemed nobody took the boy seriously. Not even his mother. She waited for the response, but there was none.

They should get home anyway; Alice would be hungry. She looked down. The baby's eyes were closed, but there was a troubled pull on her lips as if she were waking. She probably needed changing too. Rob was growing impatient. She bent to retrieve the toy elephant now discarded on the path, and became aware of the boy beside her, watching.

She rose, tucking the elephant under the blanket. 'If what you've found *is* a human bone, Luke, it'll be from the cliff fall, where the graves were. We need to give it to Gabriel's daddy, so it can go with the others. There are laws, you see; things we have to do with bones.'

She looked up for Emily's support, but she didn't seem to have heard, was gazing instead at the fallen cliff. Behind her, Rob raised an eyebrow. *More fool you*, the gesture said. With a look that was more than half-annoyance, he took hold of the pram and turned it for home.

'Will Gabriel's daddy bury it again?'

'Well, no. I think someone else will do that, a vicar probably. But he'll look after it.'

Luke was silent, thinking.

She heard the *whEEP whEEP* of an avocet and looked up. Flashing black and white, two flew overhead, their gangly legs trailing.

'Will it be under the sea?'

She wondered if his acquiescence would depend on her answer. But she wouldn't lie to him. 'That's a nice idea, Luke. But the bones will probably be buried in the graveyard at St Margaret's Church.'

The birds were moving away; she could see them from the corner of her eye, heading towards the village, white arrows in the sky.

'It's not right. Luke said.'

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Yes, you do,’ he said. ‘Everyone does. They should be together.’

‘Together?’

‘Yes, the *people*.’ He did a jump on the spot, unable to control his impatience with her. ‘The ones that didn’t get drowned and the ones that did.’

‘Ah.’

How extraordinary to think of that. As if all these centuries later, it still mattered.

He looked up, and she followed his gaze. ‘Have they always been here?’ he said. It was the avocets again, wheeling back round.

‘Perhaps. What do you think?’

He held out the bone for her to take. ‘I think they were,’ he said.

++

Dust motes rose and fell around where Joe stood at the front of the stage, breaking the winter sunshine streaming through the windows. It had been Rob’s idea to invite him.

‘Get him to give a talk,’ he’d said. ‘It’ll help put the thing about the bones into perspective.’

With his new beard, Joe looked older, more professor-like. On a board at his side was a poster of the dog’s skeleton they had in the museum. The animal was beautiful, its head stretched forward on its paws, its legs curled into itself at the back. It could have been in someone’s kitchen, lying by the range and enjoying the warmth. She imagined a woman there, sewing perhaps, a man whittling a stick.

‘This dog,’ Joe was saying. He pointed to it. ‘Once lived in someone’s house – or someone’s barn. He was part of their family. We don’t know his name or even what sort of dog he was, but I expect he was loved very much.’

Luke was at the edge of the circle, nearest the wall. He was listening intently, his eyes flicking between the gestures Joe made with his hands and the image behind.

‘The people who were buried in St James Churchyard,’ Joe continued, ‘up by the leper chapel – I know you saw the bones of one or two of them when Carston Cliffs fell a few of weeks ago – they were loved too. They were people just like us. Just as funny and silly and naughty and well-behaved as we are now. Just as intelligent and curious. They lived busy lives. As busy as yours and your parents. Busier probably, because life was hard in those days. Really hard.’ Joe gave a laugh. ‘We’re lucky it’s not quite that bad now. All year round, the people of medieval Charlburgh got up before dawn, before the sun even peeked its head above the horizon, and they worked until nightfall. Can you imagine that? It didn’t matter how cold it was; there wasn’t central heating....’

The children were silent, listening. Luke’s blue eyes were fixed on Joe’s face. Whitney’s bottom shuffled along the floor so that she was beside him. Luke let Whitney stay there, almost touching. After a moment or two, the little girl slid her hand over to Luke’s and covered it. He shook her off, but he didn’t edge away.

‘Several hundred years ago,’ Joe was saying, ‘people didn’t have our privileges; they didn’t have the nice comfortable things that we have now. The things that keep us safe and well and happy. Often there wasn’t enough food, or the food they had was poor and didn’t have many vitamins. You know about the storms of course, and you know, too, from your work on the project about Old Charlburgh, that there were terrible fights along this coastline, warring gangs that behaved cruelly and selfishly. In those days, when people got hurt there weren’t any proper doctors to treat them. There wasn’t anyone to take out an appendix, or treat their chickenpox, or set their broken arm and put it in a plaster like Gabriel’s was last year. One of the skeletons you saw on the beach

was of a man whose leg had been broken and hadn't healed properly. That poor fellow will have lived his whole life like that, managing as best he could...

There was a collective gasp, and Jess saw Whitney's fingers reach out again and cover Luke's. This time he let them stay for a second or two before pulling his hand away.

'But his family loved him. And his friends did. And when someone died, before the storms came of course, they were buried in churchyards like the one by St James Chapel – the leper chapel. But all these people are at peace now. Their souls have gone somewhere else. Perhaps heaven, perhaps elsewhere. That's not something I can tell you about. But I *can* tell you that they no longer feel any pain or any unhappiness. And they certainly don't come back and haunt the streets and houses of this village. I can promise you that.

'In return, I want *you* to promise *me* something.' They waited, mouths open, giving him their attention. 'I want you to promise not be frightened, and not to make up stories, and not to worry about skeletons or ghosts. Can you do that?' He looked along the rows, waiting for their nods. When at last they came, he beamed. 'Great,' he said. 'Well done.'

It had helped, Jess thought. Even Luke was silent.

Emily

If they fly Ryan Air from Stansted, it's just over £200 for the pair of them. But then she sees there's a column at the side asking for payments for bags. Really? What, any bag? She sits back, takes a long breath and then takes up the laptop again. There's a weight behind her eyes. Already she's beaten down by the bureaucracy. Try Heathrow, Simon said,

But they have to get there, don't they? Stansted's an easy drive. They can park.

She presses 'continue', and the request comes up for her credit card. Shit, she's forgotten. Her purse is in her bag, or a pocket. She wanders round, looking into things, feeling her coats in the cupboard. Then she remembers, she had it upstairs. When she returns, the page has timed-out. She looks at the screen, at its badly worded apology, and screams silently inside. Perhaps they're not meant to go, perhaps the Internet, with its customs and habits and rules, is telling her something.

As she considers this, there's a bang at the door. Soft and well-mannered though it is, it makes her jump. She feels a sudden tingling of fear and creeps to look. But her view through the hall window's obscured: if it's those odious boys, she'll have heard them run up the path. Besides it's school time. She looks at her watch, suddenly anxious that it's Luke, and she's forgotten him.

At first she doesn't recognize the man standing there, then she sees it's Joe Harding, his face hidden behind a beard. Looking down at the trousers flapping wetly round his ankles, and his boots thick with mud, she doesn't feel any better. What, she wonders, has her son done now?

It seems he's done nothing. When she raises her head, Joe Harding is grinning through the beard. He would, he says, like a chat. Is she meant to invite him in, she wonders. He seems to think so, because he's moving forwards. But she doesn't want him there, invading her privacy, the quiet place where she feels safe. Not his voice, not his big muddy shoes. *Smile*, she tells herself. *Smile*. But he's following her into the hall. And there are dirty dishes on the kitchen counter and bottles on the floor. Hadn't she been meaning to clear them up?

He waits by the kitchen door, dripping. 'Your coat?' she says. She stares at the shoes.

'Oh, I'm so sorry. Do you mind?' He slides them off, pads out into the hall to leave them on the mat. She hangs the coat over the newel post, lets it drip onto the floor. In the sitting room he takes the armchair, his long limbs overflowing, and leaves the sofa for her. 'I'm sorry,' he says again. 'I've disturbed your writing.' He gestures towards the open laptop on the table. 'That's right, isn't it? You're a writer?'

She laughs. It comes out shrilly. 'I was. Not any more.'

'That's a shame.' He doesn't probe further, and she's grateful. He looks round at the bare walls, at the empty shelves. Says nothing.

'Why are you here?' She places coffee in front of him. It's instant, and there's a brown stain on the rim of the mug, but he doesn't seem bothered.

'I hope you don't mind,' he says. 'I want to ask you something.' He leans forward over his long legs. 'It's to do with the bones.'

The bones? Is *everyone* obsessed?

He looks at her as if she's said it aloud. 'I've always thought,' he says, 'how little the villagers know about their past. We have the museum, but how many ever come to it? Locals I mean? When you and Jess brought Gabriel's class that day, it was the first time in my twelve years in charge of it. That's terrible, don't you think?' He looks up but

doesn't wait for an answer. 'We never talk about what actually happened here. It's not even been properly investigated. It's just *assumed* -'

Hurry up. Then go. Please.

'When I first came, I wanted to do some serious research, be rigorous and thorough. But it cost money of course, and no-one would take it seriously, not even the trustees. They said the museum was good enough – the tourists liked it, and that was what mattered.

'The thing is, Emily, history's important to me.' She feels an electric tingle at the mention of her name. It's so long since anyone's said it. Other than Simon that is, and to him she's always Em. Shortened, made manageable. 'It always has been. But I didn't really discover all of this.' He waves an awkward arm at the window, and she knows he's including the sea and the town lost beneath it. 'Until after university. And when I got a chance to take over the museum, I thought, why not?'

His words batter her, intensify her exhaustion. But there's something about his seriousness, his appetite for truth that speaks to a hunger she's long-since buried. She likes the man, she's discovering. Likes his solidness, his lack of guile.

'And so?'

He beams. 'So, I've decided. I'm going to do it. Properly research what happened when the storms hit, and then put on an exhibition. I'll fund it myself if necessary.'

'That's good.' She wants to close her eyes, to shut him and his shameless enthusiasm out of her life. 'But why tell me?'

'I was coming to that. My reasons are twofold. Number one, you're a historian. That's right, isn't it? - Jess told me how much you'd contributed to that wonderful project of hers. I thought perhaps,' he stops, clears his throat, 'you might like to be help me too.'

She stares at him. He really has no idea. To be involved in the village, doing things under people's noses, it would be awful. It would mean being *seen*.

'I studied Classics,' she says. 'Not History.'

'Well, same difference. Would you be willing –'

'I'm not –'

'And reason number two...' He's leaning forward again, urgently this time, and she knows this is what it's really about.

'Yes?' she says.

'Luke.'

'Luke?'

'I like him. He's bright. And he's serious about the things he discovers. When he used to come to the house he was so reserved that I -' He stops, she thinks he's going to say more but he doesn't. 'Then a couple of weeks ago, goodness, when I gave that talk - he came up to me afterwards - did he tell you? Some of the things he said I didn't even know myself.'

She can feel her heart beating, a kind of butterfly arrhythmia she's never had before. She swallows to still it, and gets up and walks to the window. The dunes are grey as ever, the sedge grasses thumped flat by the rain.

'Really?' she says, turning back to him. 'What sort of things?'

'Galingale for one. It's a herb they used to cook with, but I think he mentioned that to Jess ages ago. No, this was about the gangs. From further up the coast. They used to fight, that's well documented, but he told me a story about a group of Old Charlburgh men who were killed when they tried to dig out the silt built up by the storms. It meant Ippingham wouldn't get the trade, you see. I thought he must be making it up, especially when I researched online to check. Then I found this manuscript – ' He stops, clears his

throat and looks down. ‘Actually, it turned up in that odd little room the boys found when Gabriel sort of got locked in.’ He looks back up and tries to smile. She can see he’s doing his best not to embarrass her. ‘We found some amazing things there actually: old pots, some weapons even, though there’s not much left of them. But there was this manuscript – it’s in good nick, Emily - and it pretty much chronicles everything about the times. What’s extraordinary is that it mentions the story Luke told me. Then I thought, of course, you must have somehow found a similar source somewhere and told Luke.’

She grips the windowsill behind her, hears the *thum-thum* of rain on glass. She wants Luke away from the past, from anything to do with death.

‘It wasn’t me. A lucky coincidence, that’s all.’

‘Oh.’ The smile that holds his face disappears. ‘That’s a pity. I thought maybe you and Luke might help me work on the – I mean, you’re a writer, it would be -’

‘No,’ she says. ‘Sorry.’

His face is so downcast she feels almost guilty. She checks herself. She’s hardly responsible for him. He’s barged in with all his wild ideas, made assumptions, tried to carry her away with them. She watches as he rises and walks to get his coat from the hall.

She wonders why, after what happened with his own son, he’s bothering about Luke at all. ‘You know,’ she says, ‘that Gabriel and Luke aren’t friends anymore, don’t you?’

He turns round, his face serious. ‘I do know that,’ he says. ‘And, if I’m honest, I should tell you that Sarah didn’t want me to come. I also know how unkind the village is to you both. But in Luke, even though he’s so young, there’s a kind of fire you don’t see very often, and it’s precious. And so, actually, is history.’ He pauses, pushes his feet

into the shoes. A row of bubbles oozes from where the soles meet the uppers. 'Who was it said, *to know nothing about history is ever to remain a child?*'

'Cicero,' she says.

'Ah.'

He's framed by the open front door, the rain and the dunes at his back.

She stretches out an arm. 'Goodbye,' she says.

His hand is warm, taking hers. 'You've got my number if you change your mind.'

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That story about the gangs? Yes, it frightened her for a moment. But Luke found it on the Internet, whatever Joe Harding says. She knows how resourceful her son can be.

Turning for the kitchen, she feels larger than she has of late, more substantial. As if, for the first time in months, she's had a decent meal and a good night's sleep.

Please, Jess thought, not tonight. Not this weekend. Let's have a break.

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'I thought we'd go and explore Heacham.'

She screamed. It was meant to be funny. Or partly so. But it didn't come out like that. It came out shrill and desperate. The house echoed with its sharpness, then sank to silence.

She sat back, oddly satisfied.

Rob stared. 'What on earth was that about?' His tone was pompous, as if she were guilty of some moral outrage. He didn't do fury.

She did though. Felt it well up at his coldness, a torrent that burned her insides.

'I can't go.'

'What?'

'To Heacham, Kings Lynn. Wherever. I'm not going.'

His mouth was open, his eyes narrow. 'What do you mean? Today? Ever?' If at that moment she'd been asked how she saw him, she'd have said, *Separate. Utterly separate.*

'Ever.'

'Do you mean that?'

'I think I might.'

'I see.' He got up from the table, walked behind her and stood by the door to the hall. He seemed unsure what to do.

‘I’m sorry.’ She was now. She should have said something. Warned him. But he’d swept her off her feet in the worst way possibly. Like a bulldozer. A snowplough. There’d been no way to stand up against it.

‘A bit late. You didn’t think to mention this before?’

‘This is my home,’ she said. But already the fight was going out of her, because why should she think that? No one in the village saw her as belonging, whatever Jon Patchett said.

The room was too hot. She rose and went to the window, gazed out at the garden. It was shrouded in darkness, but she wanted to be in it, smell the damp of the mouldy leaves.

‘I don’t understand you,’ Rob said from the doorway. ‘I really don’t. I work my balls off so I can get something better for us – a bigger house, more money. And you...’ She turned to look at him, saw the twist of his lip. ‘Well, it means nothing to you.’

‘That’s not fair.’ Tears were pricking now. How could he say such a thing when she’d tried, really *tried* to go with him on it? When she’d been positive and encouraging, overruling her own best instincts?

‘I thought we talked about it. Having a nice house, good area. Decent future.’ He released a long sigh. ‘Obviously I misunderstood.’

He was being deliberately obtuse. He must be. He couldn’t really think that none of those things mattered to her, that she’d somehow been pretending. She forced the tears back.

‘You know that’s not what I mean.’ Pulling herself upright from the windowsill, she took a step towards him. ‘Rob -’

He gave her a long slow look. He was shaking his head, playing the disappointed adult who’s done his best for his child. She’d never seen him like this before. If only she

could tell him how sorry she was. Say that all she needed was a bit more time. But the ache in her gut kept her silent.

‘What’s the point?’ he said at last.

She turned away. He was right. What was the point, if this was how they could be? What was the point of any of it?

‘Rob.’ She tried again, pushing away her hurt, looking for sanity, reason, any kind of negotiating position. ‘Please understand, I didn’t mean -’

But he wasn’t listening. He was moving forward instead, taking his laptop from the chair and sliding it under his arm. ‘I’m going to work,’ he said.

‘What, *now*? It’s Friday night.’

‘Yes, now.’

Leave it, she thought. Let him go.

She felt jagged, ugly. She walked back to the window and leaned her forehead against the glass. Moonlight cut across the edge of a cloud and turned the garden glossy and wet. White patches left from the morning’s snow flared silver under the hedge and at the side of the fence. She opened the door and took in a deep breath. The garden was rotting. A smell she liked. It brought back winter holidays with her dad, before he became ill: the smell of nature hunkering down, of the deep rhythms of the earth.

Under it all, came the rumble and pound of the sea.

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A false step and she might be in the swamp, dragged down into its darkness. Don’t go through the reed-beds after dark, everyone said.

The worst row ever. And it had been her fault. She’d no idea what had possessed her. And yet that coldness suddenly rising between them, creating a distance so vast she could never imagine crossing it. As if it had come from winter itself.

She'd hurt him. She was doing it a lot at the moment. But he hadn't even pleaded with her, said, 'Come on Jess, you're just nervous. It'll be fine.'

But then what?

She stopped. It was darker, the moon skimmed in and out of the clouds, lighting her path then burying it. She flashed her torch. Wisps of sea-grass broke the edge of the boardwalk, disappeared into the black. How silent it was. The breeze so low there was hardly a sound. Not even the rustle of a bird settling itself in the grasses.

She moved forward. One step, then another. What she was doing was foolish, but she couldn't go home, couldn't even wander the village streets. Maybe she *didn't* belong.

Because of Rob she'd put down roots. Together they'd scrubbed the sitting room floorboards, chosen bedding, repainted the walls, dug the garden, watched as the first shoots of grass rose and became a lawn. They'd planted bushes, shrubs. A lilac that filled the house with its scent.

It means nothing to you, he'd said.

What experience had she of marriage? What did she know of how hard you had to work, what retorts you needed to swallow or hurts you should forgive? She supposed her own parents had argued once, screamed at one another, maybe even come to blows. But what revisits her now is silence, the closing of doors, emptiness.

Her mother had left, and she couldn't even remember it. It had just been her and Dad. The two of them.

Her mother. Mum. *Mummy*. What if she'd never even used the word?

Mud slid beneath her feet, and she caught herself. *Concentrate*. She moved on, sensed, rather than felt, the lap of sludge over the sides of her shoes. Gently does it. Again, she stepped forward, careful this time not to transfer all her weight at once.

Liquid oozed and gurgled, sucked at her. The marsh had become bottomless, terrifying. She withdrew her foot, fighting the mud's pull.

To go further was madness.

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Her skin prickled. She was being watched. Had been since she'd emerged from the reedbeds, a looming shadow that seemed to flicker through the trees, slip out from the back of the Co-op. Now here it was again: a man, his jacket heavy and thick, sliding into the shadow beyond the street lamp in Felix Street. She quickened her pace, trying to make it seem casual, part of the business she was engaged in out there in the dark. She could hear her footsteps on the stones, the soft squelch of her mud-caked shoes. Soon she would need to cross into unlit Manor Lane and the pavement would run out. Her heart-beat quickened, rising through her chest, into her ears, pounding so hard she knew he could hear it. Up ahead there were garden gates, porches, doorways. Perhaps she should run into one of those?

Her throat was dry with fear, her legs heavy. *Walk confidently. Don't run.* The important thing was not to look a victim, not to *invite* him. She felt her pocket for her phone. Oh God. Where the fuck was it? She gasped for air and felt it rush past the dryness in her throat, burn her lungs.

Calm down.

He meant no harm. Of course he didn't. He was a man out for stroll. A man who wanted a smoke, a moment alone.

She was speeding up again, almost running. At the end of the lane, the lights of *The Charlborough Arms*. Come in, they said. *Now*. But he was following her, catching up. She dry-swallowed, felt the trembling in her legs and the sudden lucid fury that, when

she most needed it, her body was failing her, the wrong chemicals flooding to the wrong places.

There was no one else about. The only other sound the ponderous thump of wave against shingle. The sea suddenly loud, as if the wind had turned and quickened, pulling up the tide, making it angry, unstoppable. She had a sudden image of it coming over the tops of the dunes, brushing aside the roof of the community centre like so many matchsticks, burying the village, the man, herself.

He was behind her, now, calling.

Faster, she told herself, *faster*.

At the doorway to *The Charlbrough*, she stopped unable to move further, her breath tight in her chest, a stitch doubling her over. She gasped, took in the night air, gasped again and felt her breath returning, her heart-rate settle. She was safe; he could hardly accost her here.

But he did. And he was, his hand reaching out. She scrabbled at the door. It wouldn't open. There were people inside: she could hear them, the clink of glasses, the hum of friendship and normality. She pushed again. *Oh God*.

'Please,' the man said. 'Please.'

She was still, taut as a bone. The muscles rigid in her neck. She turned. Saw in the light from the porch, the man's face.

'*I know* you,' she said.

As she spoke the door opened outwards, forcing her to step back. A couple came out chattering, turning to smile at her before rushing off into the night.

'Miss,' His hand grasped the door, blocking her. 'I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk.'

++

The moment she'd seen who he was, her fear had slid away. She heard the words again in her head. *Fancy that Dad, she's looking for Alwin.*

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'My son treated you badly. He don't always remember his manners.'

She was glad it was *The Charlbrough* they were in, not *The Anchor*. She never came in normally. Locals didn't – it was for tourists, weekenders. But here she was, sitting opposite a man who'd been following her in the dark, who'd barred her way at the door. Rob would be appalled. Well, let him. There was something about the look in this man's eyes, a genuine desire to tell her something, or ask her, that broke down her fear. He'd offered to escort her home out of the forest, she remembered. She'd been frightened then, too. But, now, back in the village and in the warmth of the pub, she wondered if he'd been trying to protect her.

She'd chosen one of the tables by the fire in the snug, watched as the man had made his way unsteadily down the steps, leaning into the wall for balance. He was limping, she realised, one leg unable to bend properly at the knee. He was older than she'd thought, and, when he took off his heavy jacket, she saw how thin he was, the sharp jut of his bones. And yet there was a strength in him, a wiriness that made her glad of his nervousness. He fumbled for cigarettes from a pocket.

'You're not allowed to smoke in here.'

He looked up. 'Forgot.' He pushed away the pack and withdrew something else – the screwdriver with the orange tape he was holding when she'd seen him before.

A pint of lemonade in front of him, white wine for her. She'd begun to shiver, as if the weather outside had caught up with her now she was OK. She went to lift the glass. Too cold to drink.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘You can at least tell me your name.’

‘Edmund. Ed.’

‘Hello Ed.’ She held out her hand. Awkwardly, as if he’d not thought of it, he swapped the screwdriver to his left hand. His hold was firmer than she’d expected, his rough skin warm against hers. ‘I’m Jess Baxter.’

‘Didn’t mean to frighten you,’ he said. ‘Saw you come out of the reeds. Tha’s dangerous at night, you shouldn’t be there.’

She looked down at her feet, at the slime caked to her shoes and the base of her jeans. She was shivering still, the cold deep under her skin. ‘I know.’

‘Make a habit of it, do you?’

‘No.’ She shuffled in her seat, her muscles easing in the heat of the room. She took a mouthful of the wine, then a second. ‘You said you wanted to talk to me.’

‘About Alwin,’ he said. ‘That’s an unusual name, that is.’

‘So he *is* one of you?’ she leaned forward.

‘Can you tell me, Miss,’ he was weighing his words carefully, easing them out. ‘Why you want to know?’

‘I wanted to talk to him, that’s all. I still want to.’

‘Well, if he’s the Alwin I think he is, you can’t do that.’ He stopped, drew in a breath. ‘See, he’s not a live person. Least, not like you and me is.’

She could feel her jaw tightening. ‘What do you mean?’

‘He’s a spirit, Miss. One of the *Old Ones*. That’s what they’re called, those that got taken by the storms.’ He stretched out a hand, as if to stop her rising and leaving altogether, ‘No one talks about them. They walks the beach, see, looking for those as got drowned.’

She laughed, a strange yelp of disbelief.

‘Who says so? I’ve never heard of the Old Ones before. Someone in the village would have mentioned them.’

‘Pah,’ It was almost a spit. He waved towards the door, the houses and streets beyond. ‘You think they care? They got blinkers on, that lot. Blind as bats.’

‘So how do *you* know about them?’

He was calm, untroubled by her doubt. ‘I got Romany blood, Miss. We got our stories.’ His eyes were clear, looking at her. ‘They go back a long way.’

Alwin made me do it. Alwin’s waiting. Nearly two months ago now. But it brought back the dread, made her feel weak.

‘They say they brings the sea with them when they come. Right into the room.’

The *sea*. She remembered the smell - pungent, almost choking.

‘I’m sorry’. She needed to leave. ‘I have to go home. My husband’s expecting me.’

‘Thing is, Miss. My son had the sight too.’

She paused, gripped the table for support. ‘Your son? Really?’ The dreadful man who’d seemed to hate her so much, the one with the baby strapped to his chest? It was impossible.

‘No, not Jesse. My other son. We never found him.’

‘Never found him?’ There was a prickle down her spine, a dawning realisation. Of course she knew now, she knew who the man was.

‘No.’ He twisted the strap on the screwdriver. ‘He disappeared see. In the reeds. Jimmy his name was, Jimmy Henson.’

++

‘Where the hell have you been?’ Rob was standing in the centre of the sitting room, his phone in his hand. ‘I’ve been worried sick.’

She longed to tell him everything, pour it out. But he was distant again. Separate. He'd tell her she was a fool. She kicked off her shoes, hoped he didn't spot the mud and slime she was leaving on the doormat. *I met Jimmy Henson's dad*, she could say. *You can't imagine the things he said.*

'You went out, so I did too.'

'Where? Where did you go? It's dark, Jess. And bloody cold.'

'As a matter of fact, I went to *The Charlburgh*'

'Good God. We never go there.'

'Well, I went tonight.'

'What's happened to your jeans?'

Blast, she'd forgotten. A green-brown crust clung to the denim. 'It's muddy out. Where the snow's melted. The slush.'

'It looks as if you've been wading in a ditch.'

I walked through the reeds, she could say. *My foot got sucked in. I could have drowned.*

She shrugged. 'Guess I better change then.'

'Jess?' He stretched out an arm as she turned for the stairs, stepped towards her.

'Please, don't go out again without leaving a note. I was really worried.'

'I didn't expect you to be back.' She touched his arm, still moving away. *Could* she tell him? She wanted to more than ever, the look in his eyes tender again, closer to the Rob she knew. *Jimmy Henson's father says Alwin is a ghost.*

It sounded crazy.

Rob was watching her. She opened her mouth and closed it again. Nothing was resolved.

'You're the most important thing in my life,' he said.

He positioned himself between her and the stairs, blocking her way.

‘Am I?’

‘Yes, but you should have told me how you felt. How was I to *know*?’

A reasonable point. Yet here she was hiding things again.

‘You couldn’t.’ She felt a surge of shame, covered it with a lop-sided smile. It seemed even odder to be thinking of moving now – the power of Henson’s words still so strong in her head. *Should* she have told Rob her fears? Surely she had no more right to hold him back than he had to haul her kicking and screaming forward. ‘Would it have made any difference?’

He took her hand, stroked the back of it with a finger. ‘I don’t know.’ The honesty of his reply shocked her. But he said it kindly, with sadness. ‘I don’t want you to be unhappy, Jess.’

‘I know.’

He pulled her into the sitting room, sat her down. She pointed to the mud on her clothes, her filthy feet. ‘Leave it,’ he said. ‘It’s us that matters.’

She looked up at him, tears threatening, but she didn’t care any more. ‘So what are we to do?’ she said. She couldn’t bear it. Felt the tears spill, roll down her cheeks.

Emily

It's pushing in despite her, a past she hasn't entered in years: the steps up, and her racing ahead of him, scrambling over the broken stone and rocks at their top. Then the dizziness when she saw the view, the whole of Athens tipping and swaying before her. He came up behind and held her, and they watched the sun go down, the gold sky dipping to red, before dark crept up and far-off city lights glimmered and became bright.

Their teeth chattering in the sudden chill, they discovered everyone else had gone. They were alone in a place where animals had been sacrificed, murderers sentenced. Turning, they found each other's eyes in the moonlight.

'How are we going to get down?'

'Torch.' Simon brought it from his pocket.

She pretended crossness. 'You *planned* it.'

'Well....' He flashed the beam, it caught an olive tree and he tore off a twig. 'Peace offering?'

'In Ancient Greece olives were sacred. The penalty for damaging them was death'.

'Oh dear.' He made a face. 'So that's it then?'

'Guess so.'

He pulled her close, lowered her carefully to the hot stony ground. 'Then we've nothing to lose,' he said.

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A tornado they'd been. Whipping themselves up, one in the other, whirling ahead as if they had the right. Parenthood and marriage in the space of a year.

A pair of fools.

She rises and goes to the bureau. It's the bateleur box she wants. When she opens it, there's the photograph face-up, ready for her. This time the pain is softer, more an ache.

'Oh, Em,' Simon said when she told him she was pregnant a second time. 'We've organised this badly.'

She fingers the edges of the frame and then moves inwards to touch Amy's face, tracing her eyes, her lips, the snub button of her nose

'I'm sorry.'

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'I think,' she tells Luke, conversationally. 'That we won't go to Greece.'

He looks up from the computer. 'What about Daddy?'

'He'll have to come here.'

He nods, satisfied. 'Alright,' he says.

In truth, she suspects Simon won't come. She isn't sure whether it's England or Suffolk that puts him off. Perhaps it's her.

Luke's leaning over the laptop, peering at it, his eyes only a few inches away. Maybe he needs glasses. She might mention it sometime, ask him if he finds things difficult to read. For now, it's enough that he's downstairs, being a normal kind of son. His face, screwed up in concentration, turns him into Simon – the pink-cheeked little boy she imagines her husband once was. Luke's attention is caught by something beyond the window, He raises his head and stares out. His eyes are wider than Simon's, a deeper blue.

Perhaps, she thinks, they *should* go to Greece.

'Do you miss Daddy?' she asks. If he says yes, she'll change her mind. Book the tickets this very afternoon.

‘Not really,’ he says.

Then she remembers he has Amy. And Alwin too. A host of imaginary visitors.

He’s back squinting at the screen, his arms stretched out. She scans them for injury: the old ones have shrunk almost to nothing, and there are no new marks. Speaking to the Headmaster seems to have worked. Is Luke happier now? Perhaps. Is happiness even the point?

‘What are you looking at, Lukey?’

His face closes. He snaps the lid shut and gets up.

‘Please, sweetheart, it’s OK. Don’t stop.’

‘I’ve done it now.’

‘We can go to the beach later.’ She hears the desperation in her voice and attempts to temper it. ‘You’d like that.’

‘It’s alright, thank you,’ he says, and heads for the hall. She hears him clump up the stairs, the creak of the floorboards as he crosses his room. He’s opened the window again, let in the sea. She shivers, rises to close the kitchen door.

Even though she knows it’s her own fault, his self-sufficiency wounds her. She misses him, she realises. She taps a finger on the table, then stops and slides her arms down so she can rest her head on her hands. The sense of isolation it brings jerks her back upright. She scrabbles amongst the papers and cards in the fruit bowl, reaches for her mobile.

‘Hello,’ she says. ‘It’s Emily Bayely here. This new display you’re planning - do you think Luke and I might help after all?’

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‘No,’ he says. Already he’s half-way up the stairs.

‘Luke!’ She should have known better. A long discussion yesterday – well, not a discussion maybe. But Luke didn’t refuse, didn’t clam up.

‘You said you’d *like* to help Mr Harding.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why can’t you?’ She sees his limbs tensing. If she pushes things further there’ll be a scene. She turns to Joe. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says helplessly. She’s angry with herself now. How stupid to have relaxed, to suppose things would work smoothly. ‘I thought...’

‘It’s OK. Honestly.’ Joe smiles. ‘But maybe you could still...’

Luke hasn’t screamed in a long time, hasn’t lashed out, but she can see it building in him. She longs to grasp his arms and shake him out of it. ‘Perhaps,’ she lowers her voice to a murmur, ‘we should leave it today.’

‘Of course,’ If Joe’s annoyed, there’s no sign of it, though it’s hard to tell anyway, under that beard. If she reached out and touched it, would be soft?

‘Maybe another day?’ he says.

‘Perhaps.’ But it’s ruined now, she can see that, her attempt at normality. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says again. Already she’s opened the door, is ushering him out. She wants the peace of the house again, it’s safe, disinterested silence.

In the porch, Joe turns. ‘Please, don’t feel bad. I’ve enjoyed the walk here. The sea mist is wonderful this morning.’

She nods, leans to close the door.

‘It’s not mist.’ Luke’s voice grates through the hallway.

‘I’m sorry?’ Joe moves forward, leans to look up at the stairs.

‘On the sea, it’s not mist. It’s called *sea-roke*.’

Joe’s eyebrows shoot up and lower again. ‘Of course it is. How silly of me. That’s a good word, “roke”. Do you know what it means, Luke?’

Luke descends a couple of steps. She can hardly believe it, the release of tension from his body so palpable. 'No,' he says. 'Do you?'

'As a matter of fact, I do. Can you guess?' Luke shakes his head. 'Think of something that it looks like, but that also rhymes with "roke".'

The creases in Luke's forehead deepen, his eyes half-close. She looks back at Joe, at his calm, patient gaze. Behind him, through the open door, she can see the sun has broken across the dunes; it brings a clarity to the air she can almost taste.

'It's *smoke*, isn't it,' Luke says. 'It means *smoke*.'

Joe's face rounds into a grin. 'You've got it.'

Luke smiles too. 'That's clever,' he says.

++

She's not quite sure why she agreed to go down to the beach. But here they are, she and the bearded man, with Luke between them, like a family. It was hard to say no with Luke rising on his toes in mute anticipation, his eyes pleading when Joe offered to take him. And she's glad now, because the sea-roke's beautiful, a rolling mass of cotton-wool cloud that divides the blinding blue of the sky from the dark mystery beneath. She stretches her neck, lifts her face to the sun and closes her eyes. When she opens them again, she sees Joe is smiling at her, and she dips her head, frowning. It's not embarrassment she feels, but a sudden deep twist of longing. She's missed this more than she's realised, this sharing of things - having her perception informed by someone else's eyes.

Tears streaked Molly's cheeks. At her side stood Matthew, his hands in fists against his chest, his pale moon face flushed in indignation.

'He pinched me,' Molly said.

'I didn't.'

Jess suppressed a sigh. All morning the children had been edgy with one another, surly with her. *Sort it out yourselves*, she longed to say. *Don't be so childish*. Instead she crouched down beside them, her face level. 'OK, what's going on?'

But it was impossible to resolve, the two rigid in their justifications, their stubborn mutual outrage.

It was a Numeracy session, they were ordering and comparing things, using the symbols '>' and '<'. Jess arranged groups of numbers on the white-board, set simple tasks they should have done with ease. Instead they were struggling, asking silly questions. Kyra and Sam were wrestling over a ruler.

'Leave it alone,' she said. 'You don't *need* a ruler at the moment.'

They glared at her as if it were her fault.

There was a giggle as something flashed through the air. A sharp gasp. Luke clutched at his arm. She saw Oliver and Jerome duck their heads, pretending innocence. The screwed up balls of paper on their table gave them away.

'Stop that at once.'

Another pellet. From Tom this time. It missed Luke, went flying by and hit the base of the wall. She went over and picked it up, unfolding it as she returned to her desk.

Weirdo she saw written on the inside.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘That’s it. Ten minutes lost from Golden Time.’ The class stared at her. She clicked on the laptop, brought up the figures 65, 13, 27 and 2 onto the board. ‘And if you don’t want to lose any more time, you’ll each write down four new sets of numbers from these I’ve put up. Two must have the “greater than” symbol.’ She pointed again at the board. ‘And two must be “less than”.’ She stopped, gave them a look. ‘In *silence* please.’

Oliver’s eyes held hers, his lip curling in insolence. ‘You too, Oliver. Get on with it.’

A couple of months ago she’d have asked them. *What’s got into you all this morning? What’s wrong?* But she was theirs then, a constant figure they could trust. Now with this move hanging over her, not knowing if she was leaving or staying, married or separated, she had nothing to give them. No certainties.

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In the staffroom she collapsed into a chair. ‘Is it really only Tuesday?’

Claire lowered herself beside her. ‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing.’ Jess shook her head. ‘Everything.’

‘Is it Whitney. You know her dad’s back in hospital?’

‘It’s awful, isn’t it? Richard told me.’ Come to think of it, she’d hardly spoken to Whitney. *Was* the child alright? She stretched out a hand, scratched at a herringbone line on the upholstery. ‘It’s just me, I’m horrible today.’

‘Oh hon, you’re not. You’re never horrible. It’s because you’re worried about the move. I don’t want you to go either.’

‘It’s not just that.’ She regarded the row of chairs opposite. How nice it would be to lie along them, fall asleep, and not wake for a week. ‘It’s this skeleton thing too,’ she said, trying to draw her thoughts into some sort of order. ‘It’s nasty. And the things everyone’s saying about Luke. As if he’s some kind of ... I don’t know...’ She lifted a hand, dropped it again. ‘.. *devil child* ‘ She could hear Will Sutton’s voice in her head. ‘How can the kids possibly be nice to him when the rest of the village is so cruel?’ The thought stoked her anger, and she sat up straight. ‘What’s got in them all?’

‘But he *is* strange, Jess. You have to agree.’

‘He’s a little boy, Claire. Eight-years old – not a monster.’ In the end Claire was a villager too, with village prejudices woven into her.

‘This claim to see ghosts. I mean, does he actually *believe* it?’

‘I’m not sure. Yes, maybe.’ What had he said? *They want to talk to us. All of us.*

‘And that doesn’t worry you?’

‘It does actually, yes.’ It was relief finally to admit it. But what was she going to do? Possibly nothing. Whenever she decided that she must, an instinct almost visceral in its power, held her back. She looked round. The staffroom was empty, the door closed. ‘There’s something else too. Can I tell you?’

++

‘God, that’s so *weird*,’ said Claire when she’d finished.

‘It is, isn’t it? Did you know about Jimmy Henson - I mean, at the time? Were you aware of what happened?’

‘Only sort of. I was very little. I was in Reception I think, and we were all called into the hall and told that a boy from Year 5 had gone into the reeds and not come out. I’m not sure it meant very much, except to make us more frightened of going there. But the

ghost thing- ' Claire's eyes clouded, considering it. 'No, I never heard about that.' She turned and looked at Jess. 'And the name really was Alwin?'

'That's what Jimmy Henson's dad said. A strange coincidence don't you think?'

'It's spooky.'

'But it *could* just be that - a coincidence.'

'I've never understood why that boy went into the reeds in the first place,' Claire said. 'He must have known they were dangerous.'

Surely, Jess thought, the answer was obvious: Jimmy Henson had simply been too strange, or too slow maybe, to fully grasp the threat. 'You don't think he was chased into them do you? Or was hiding?'

'God, I hadn't thought of that.'

'Is it possible?'

'It's drummed into us, Jess, from the moment we're born. *Don't* go into the reeds without a grownup. It's like telling a child not to play in the middle of a motorway.'

'Rob implied Jimmy had some kind of learning difficulty.'

'Even so.' Claire rose and crossed the room. She pulled a plastic container from the staffroom fridge, and the lid made a popping sound as she opened it. 'Hugh might know I suppose, though he was younger.' She held out the box. 'Hummus and pitta bread?'

Jess shook her head. 'So how can I help Luke?'

'If you want my honest opinion, I think you should talk to Richard. And then call in Mrs Bayely. That poor boy's disturbed, however you look at it.'

'You really think so?'

She felt horrible, as if she'd failed him. Failed all of them.

'Yes.'

The fog was creeping back into her brain. Tomorrow perhaps, not today. Today was a day for getting through, surviving. She had Rob to encounter after school. They'd been putting it off long enough, the talk about their future.

++

Other than the fishermen sitting to one side of the bar, she recognized no one. 'I don't know why you chose this pub,' Rob said, nodding at the men as they passed. 'I must say, I don't like it much.' He frowned up at the pictures of Edwardian Little Charlburgh on the walls and the fishing nets hanging from the ceiling. The place smelled of chips and peanuts.

'At least it's neutral,' she said.

'I guess.'

They settled themselves in the same corner she'd sat with Jimmy Henson's dad, though there was no way she could say. Rob took a large swallow of his Guinness and leaned back against the wall. 'Ok, so what is it Jess? Please.'

'I'm not sure I understand myself.' She felt close to tears, her obstinacy appearing suddenly as strange to her as it was to her husband. Even the possibility of losing him – unimaginable though it was – didn't seem to shift it.

'Don't you want us to be together?'

'Of course I do.'

Perhaps she didn't love him enough. Even in bed she'd felt a distance between them, their bodies too anxious, too separate, to reunite them.

'The children need me,' she said. 'I can't leave them.'

'Of course you can. Next year they'll move on to someone else anyway. If you go a term early what difference does it make?'

'A huge difference. They're not ready.'

‘That’s daft.’ She felt the sting of the word. ‘What they need, Jess sweetheart, is a good teacher - like you’ve been. But not *you* personally.’

‘But I *know* them.’

He slid his hands round his beer glass, tapped the sides with his thumbs. ‘You’re putting the kids in your class before our marriage.’

‘That’s not true.’ A head turned towards them, and she lowered her voice. ‘Really it isn’t.’

‘You are. You’re *choosing* them.’

‘No, it’s.... it’s duty. I have to be with them all year. It’s what we sign up for as teachers.’ Why didn’t he understand? ‘God, Rob. Do we have to go at all? Here is good. I love it. It’s *home*.’

Reaching out a hand to take hers, he leaned forward, the energy in his body suddenly released. ‘Not for me, Jess. Not any more. I’m sorry. This is my chance to leave – to move on – and I really want to take it.’

Despite the fire roaring in the grate, she was cold, stiff with tension. A spark spat and settled on the stone floor. They watched as it burned itself out. ‘Then you must go,’ she said.

Home is where you are, Jess, he’d said once.

++

The strange figure Luke had made was on the floor by her desk, staring up at the ceiling. Poor thing, it seemed bedraggled and rather lost. She picked it up, straightened its clothing and retied the belt of its pantaloons. She wondered how it had got there, a good seven or eight metres from where the models still sat on the shelf. They were looking tired, their roofs dusty and beginning to peel. Carefully she lay the figure down

just outside the confines of Luke's papier-maché walls. *Drowned*, Luke had said.

Maybe she did need to talk to the Head.

She could do it tomorrow. Now that a decision had been reached with Rob, she felt cleaner, more defined. Last night she'd cried, begged him. They'd left the pub with her fighting back tears. In the mist and drizzle outside, she'd let them go.

'I can't bear it,' he'd said, his arms around her, holding her tight against the scratchy dampness of his coat.

But after the tears, she'd felt released. 'I'll stay here till the summer,' she said. 'Then we'll see.'

She walked round the room, looking at the stories and poems of Old Charlburgh still on the wall. When the cliff had fallen to reveal the bones, the reaction of the village had more or less closed the project down, as if digging for history would make it rear up and confront them in a way too terrible to be endured. She'd kept the work there as a kind of rebellion.

There was still no news from Joe about the carbon dating of the bones, or where they might eventually rest. The clock said 4.40pm. Just time to catch him before the museum closed. At the door she stopped to look round. The figure was on the floor again. How on earth? She picked it up and examined it for damage. What a strange thing it was, with its blackcurrant eyes and thin angry mouth. She brought it close up to her face and breathed in. The smell of the sea rose up and choked her.

++

She was still shaking when she reached the museum. She needed to be inside, with people and voices and things that made sense. She'd imagined it of course, the terrible sea-salt smell, the decomposition of centuries pulled up and polluting the air. What if it was a symptom of something? A brain tumour perhaps. Isn't this what happened:

strange, inexplicable sensations that appeared from nowhere? The smell had gone even before she'd left the school building. But the fact of it, the strength of it, was with her still, like a nightmare she couldn't shake off

She'd already rung the bell before she saw that the museum was in darkness, the sign on the outside turned to 'Closed'. *Shit*. She walked away down the path and then stopped. The house lights were on next door. Joe was probably inside, kicking off his shoes, finding his slippers like Rob did when he got home.

She could she call there. They were friends, weren't they?

++

'He's in the museum.'

'I don't think so. It's all locked up.'

'Oh.' Sarah looked at her blankly. 'I don't suppose he's gone far. You're shivering. It's cold isn't it? Come in, wait if you want.'

'If you don't mind.' She didn't want to go home. Not yet. What would she tell Rob? *I might be seriously ill*. He might think she'd invented it to stop him leaving. It was warm in the kitchen, comforting. The oven was on, something simmering on top.

'I've called at a bad time,' Jess said.

'No. Not at all. It's nothing like ready.' Sarah tightened the apron she'd draped round her middle and bent over to stir the pan. 'I can't think where he is. Unless,' she frowned. 'I suppose he might have gone to see Emily Bayely.'

'Emily Bayely?'

'Something to do with the bones.'

'It's why I called by. To ask him about them.' She was suddenly ashamed of her own silliness.

‘They seem to have rather taken him over. Emily Bailey’s helping him with some kind of special exhibition. Luke as well.’

It sounded promising – a chance for Luke and Emily to be included in the village. Taking Luke under his wing despite what had happened with Gabriel – that was the mark of a good man. ‘I’m glad.’

‘I’m not sure what I think about it,’ Sarah said.

‘Luke’s just a little boy, Sarah. He didn’t mean-.’

‘I know.’ Sarah had stopped stirring. The spoon in her hand dripped sauce onto the hob.

‘Careful.’

Sarah glanced down, an expression of surprise on her face, and let the spoon fall back into the mixture. ‘I’m being stupid,’ she said.

‘Are you? Why?’

‘Well - it takes up a lot of Joe’s time, that’s one thing. But Luke – well you know how people feel about him.’

‘You *liked* him once, you told me.’

‘I did. I *do* – I suppose. But the thing about the dead talking. It’s *weird*, and Joe’s encouraging it. This business with the bones, exploring where they come from, what sort of people they belonged to... I’d rebury the bloody things.’

‘He gave a fantastic talk at school.’

‘Gabriel told me. Joe says the exhibition will help people make sense of everything, put the bones into context. But nobody wants it, Jess. No one cares. And I’m beginning to agree. Let the past be the past.’ She stopped. ‘Why are you laughing?’

‘You’re married to the curator of a *museum*.’

‘Oh, I know. It’s just...’ She gave up, turned back to her stirring. After a moment she said, ‘If Luke and his mother weren’t involved it would be better. They seem to bring bad luck.’

It was understandable, Jess supposed. Given everything.

‘Do you fancy a glass of wine?’ Sarah opened the fridge. Gabriel’s pictures from school were taped on its outside, their colours, like Gabriel himself, understated and careful. There were others too that Jess supposed his older sister Samantha had done when she’d been at St Margaret’s, brightly painted drawings of birds and animals.

‘Thank you.’ It was comforting here. Normal. ‘How’s Samantha doing?’

‘She was home last weekend actually. She loves Nottingham. I’m so glad she chose it.’

‘What’s she studying exactly?’ The wine was light and dry. Jess swallowed and set it down.

Sarah laughed. ‘Well not history, that’s for sure. Natural Sciences.’

‘Good for her.’

There was a pause. Now she’d stopped attending to the food, Sarah seemed distracted, listening for something. Probably not Gabriel. Jess could hear the TV.

‘I should go,’ Jess said.

‘No, please, why don’t you stay for supper? I’d really like you to.’

There was a curious look in Sarah’s eyes, almost pleading.

Emily

She touches her cheek, still cool, still tingling from the kiss that Joe has left in the air beside it. The action surprised her, and , noses. She wonders what his beard would have felt like if they'd touched. She's trembling slightly, aware of an undercurrent of something else that's sprung up in her. It's a long time since she's felt anything like desire, anything like the *difference* that marks her out as a woman. When did she last feel like that about Simon? Ages ago. Long before she had reason not to. She wonders if he thinks about it too, or whether he never considers it, viewing her as a responsibility. A burden.

She can see him now: sweat darkening his shirt, hair stuck to his temples and neck, the eye-stinging sun above. Of course there'll be moments of *frisson* between him and the female aid workers. How could there not be, with such misery around them, such need. He may even, she reasons, have a lover already, someone to hold on to through the African night. 'That's my son Luke,' he'll say in the morning, showing them the photograph, 'And the baby girl next to him...'

But they'll know. Everyone does.

++

Joe's back at the door, a grin splitting his face like a moon-beam. 'My laptop?' he says. He waits in the porch as she gets it, and she wonders why the kiss hasn't shaken him as it did her. She pushes the computer into his arms and backs away.

'See you tomorrow,' he says cheerfully. She nods, and Joe turns on his heels, goes down the path and clicks the gate behind him. As she watches him disappear into the

dark, a pool of fury forms inside her and spreads liquid and burning, through her body.

If he were to turn back now, she'd hit him.

The nerve of it. The bald arrogance of his assumptions. What does he think he's doing, waiting – as he has several times now - at the entrance to Hinton Lane when she brings Luke back from school?

As if he had a right to. As if *she* had.

++

Luke has already arranged the papers Joe's left in neat piles, A4 below the A5, the A3 below them. Each sheet as flush to the next as if they've come straight from the stationers. Photocopies from the manuscript Joe discovered in the museum cellar, along with sketches of the weapons, are there too. She knows what a *flail* looks like now and *guisarme*.

Mostly Joe and Luke get on with the work together, and she sits in the armchair by the window, watching them. It's best that way.

'Why don't you join us?' Joe asks every time. Sometimes she does, sometimes she doesn't. Today was a 'not' day. Instead she watched his hands. They're too big even for his tall body, his fingers splayed out like spatulas and almost ugly. His thin legs sloping upwards to his knees on the too-small sofa and getting in the way. He's all angles and awkwardness but he doesn't complain, doesn't even seem to notice.

'How tall are you?' she asked him the other day. 'I'm not sure,' he said, 'Six three, six four maybe?' Who else in the world doesn't know their height?

She should be pleased – *is* pleased - at the way Luke's rigidity has eased. At the way his shoulders are uncurling and his face opening in something like pleasure. She wonders if it's dangerous, this attention Joe's giving to her son. This sharing of

passions. What happens when Joe loses interest - for of course he will? Or when Sarah puts a stop to it? *Have you forgotten*, she'll say, *what Luke did to our child?*

Yet Luke basks in the glow of Joe's attention, in the *shared* attention they both give to the history of the old town. Not bones anymore. Not skeletons. But people.

You'd think the pair of them had *lived* there.

'There was mostly only pitchforks and axes,' Luke said today. 'They weren't 'xactly *rich*, you know, they weren't *lords*.'

'On the button, Luke,' Joe said, beaming at him. 'To get hold of these,' he waved at the pictures of weapons he'd laid out on the table, his long arm creating a draught that lifted the top one and sent it fluttering to the side, 'the peasants would need access to a smithy, or maybe one of the men was a worker there. Otherwise they'd be stuck with farm implements at best.'

'There *was* a smithy - for the stables,' Luke said.

'Of course there was.' And in his delight at the idea, Joe reached out and put his hand over Luke's arm. Emily held her breath. Any second there'd be the cry, the pulling away. She counted. One...two...three...four. Nothing.

'We'll make one of the characters an apprentice blacksmith then, shall we?' Joe said. He withdrew his hand and bent forward to type into his laptop. She watched as Luke followed his movements, peered to see the screen.

Joe glanced upwards, and she forced a thin return to his smile. She couldn't help it, the taste of envy so bitter in her mouth.

'So Luke, how old is he?' Joe said.

'He's a boy. He's thirteen. Thirteen and a half.'

'Great.'

Joe's succeeding where she, Luke's mother, has failed. A stranger almost, a man they hardly know - and Luke responding to him like a son.

So be it. She doesn't care.

++

Her temple throbs, and she rubs at it, before leaning forward to take a mouthful of wine. The liquid's warm already, but she doesn't care about that either. She swallows, pulls the blanket up round her shoulders and lies back on the sofa. She's glad now to be alone, to have the cottage back to herself, Luke upstairs doing whatever Luke does when he doesn't want her around. He's used up his 'people time' anyhow – school, then Joe. There's only so much he can bear.

Perhaps it *is* a good thing, this project. For, now she thinks about it, when did Luke last talk about his baby sister? A fortnight ago at least. And the shells – though they're there still, stuck like greying limpets to his ceiling, he's not *fussing* about them anymore.

Alwin's around though – for all Joe's paternal matiness, there's no getting rid of him. She even had to leave the bathroom window open the other day, freezing the whole house and filling it with that awful sea-stink that comes up sometimes from the shoreline. But an imaginary friend's better, she's decided, than that heartbreaking fantasy about his baby sister.

The wine is a good one. She takes another mouthful, lets it slide down her throat.

++

The *rat tat*'s way in the distance. A gentle accompaniment to her breathing. She sits up. Hears it louder. Now what?

She can ignore it – Luke will too, because he always does – but a surge of unexplained energy makes her rise and go to the door.

‘Joe?’

‘My phone,’ He says. ‘I left that too.’ He’s all fuss and bluster, and she has no choice but to stand back to let him in. As she follows him into the sitting room, she breathes in the rain-soaked air he carries. It’s sharp, knife-clean. Abruptly he stops and looks down at the smear of mud on the carpet his shoes have made. ‘Sorry,’ he says and slips them off before she has time to speak.

The wine’s on the table, the blanket and cushions sliding half to the floor. ‘How rude of me,’ he says, when he sees. ‘You were resting.’

‘It’s fine.’ She’s surprised to find that it is. That despite what she thought earlier, it’s OK to have a man – Joe in particular - treat her world as if, vaguely, obliquely, he’s entitled to share it. ‘Go ahead.’ She waves an arm in permission.

She watches as he stalks the room, his long legs covering it in three sharp strides. He throws back curtains, bends to search the floor under the furniture, picks up the papers on the coffee table and replaces them. They’re untidy, she’ll need to straighten them or there’ll be a scene.

Joe looks back at her, frowning, ‘I was sure I left it here.’

She leans over to feel down the side of the sofa. Her fingers hit the hard edge of something, and she withdraws them.

‘Sorry,’ she says.

He shrugs. Frowns. ‘Maybe I dropped it on the way home. That’s a nuisance.’ He stands up straight, surveys the room one more time. ‘No Luke?’

‘He’s upstairs. Caught up with something, no doubt.’ She looks up at the ceiling as if she can see him through it. ‘I was just going to refill my glass.’ It isn’t true, there’s still a good inch or so inside it. If Joe realizes, he doesn’t say. ‘Would you like...?’

‘Why not?’ He slides off his coat and drapes it across the cushions that hide his phone. ‘It can’t get any darker out. Five minutes won’t hurt.’ His beard juts forward as he smiles.

She goes into the kitchen, and he follows her. She feels him close, the shape of him taking up the space behind her, his breaths a soft rhythm in the silence. She wants very much to face him, the impulse tugging at her like a rope. ‘There’s something I’ve wanted to do,’ she says as she turns. Despite knowing that she mustn’t, her hand reaches up and strokes his beard.

She withdraws the hand, feels the heat rise in her cheeks. ‘Oh God,’ she says. And then she’s giggling. Like a child, like a girl. Little hiccupping sounds that start at the back of her throat and bubble out through her lips. She doesn’t appear to be able to control them.

At first he’s laughing too. But when she doesn’t stop, his eyes darken. ‘Emily,’ he says, at last, the anxiety in his tone breaking through and reaching her.

‘I didn’t realise my beard was *that* funny,’ he says.

As he speaks, she catches his scent. The faint tang of soap, the rain in his hair, something dusty. It draws her in. She can’t help it.

This time, when she reaches to touch his beard, she can see he’s expecting it. As he leans forward to meet her lips, the fresh-air smell of him seeps into her body through her pores.

It’s only a moment, and then he draws away. His arms come round her and hold her and she leans into them, feeling the warmth of him, the scratchiness of his beard, the sweet male scent of his neck.

It was hot in the staffroom. Much too hot. Jess glanced at the window, misted over with condensation. It had been dark for ages. God knows what time they'd get away.

'The thing is,' Tracey was saying, 'It's not really for the good of the school, is it?'

'But we *owe* him,' said Claire. Jess wondered how she could bear it in that thick cowl-neck. She shook off her own cardigan, slid her blouse over the top of her waistband. 'He's worked here for ever,' Claire continued. 'Besides, the kids want to do something.'

'What's Barry's employment position, anyway?' Tracey leaned forward so that everyone could see her. 'I can't imagine he'll be able to work here again.'

It seemed, Jess thought, a miserly thing to argue about.

'Officially he's still on sick leave,' Richard said. 'If he wants to return - if he *can* return with an artificial leg - then his job's open until the end of the academic year.'

'In principle then,' said, Claire, 'it *would* be for the good of the school. If it'll help him recover and come back to work.'

'But a new TV?' Tracey's upper lip puckered in what was doubtless meant to be a smile. 'You can hardly call it educational.'

'Wait a minute,' said Jess. She felt oddly distant, as if she were coming down with an illness. Tracey kept interrupting and making her forget. What had she been meaning to say? Not, surely, the thought now in her mind that her dad got on with things and never complained. Her dad?

What had that to do with anything?

‘Yes?’ said Richard.

It was the window’s fault - someone needed to open it.

She stood up. It seemed the only thing to do. The room was swaying. Everyone was looking at her, their features overblown and huge. What were they waiting for? She tried to focus on their eyes, working out what it was they wanted, but the buzzing in her ears and in the bridge of her nose stopped her. The walls tipped inwards, the floor buckled.

‘Oh,’ she said, into the collapsing room.

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‘Lovey, you fainted.’ It was Claire, gazing down at her from above. She propped Jess up, handed her a glass of water. Behind her, Tracey’s face came in and out of view. Jess felt a wave of nausea that eased as she drank. ‘And eat this.’ From somewhere, Claire had found a biscuit. ‘It might be low blood suger.’

Jess shook her head but she found herself taking the biscuit anyway. She bit into it, glad of its sweet-salt taste on her tongue. *Fainting?* She’d never fainted in her life. When had she last eaten? Lunch seemed a long way away. Had she had any? She couldn’t remember. And then she could, because at lunchtime, hadn’t she stayed in the classroom when the kids had gone out? That was it - she’d looked up ‘symptoms – strange smells’ on her mobile.

Oh God.

‘Come on,’ Claire said, ‘lets get you into Richard’s office.’

Of course. She was in a staff meeting. And now everyone was staring at her with worried expressions on their faces. Even Tracey seemed to be making some sort of effort at concern. So they’d all seen it then, her stupid, terrifying collapse onto the floor?

She pulled herself to a standing position. Waited for the walls to dip forward, but they didn't move. 'I'm fine,' she said. She was. More or less. The nausea was fading, and the strange disconnected feeling too. Someone had opened the door, and a draught caught her as she rose. She was a bit shaky, that was all. And hungry. In the midst of her terror and her embarrassment, she wanted food.

'I wonder if we should get an ambulance,' Richard said.

'No. *No*. Don't do that.'

'I'll call Rob,' Claire said.

'No. Honestly. I'm fine. I'll sit in Richard's office for a minute or two, and then I'll come back to the meeting.'

'You won't,' said Richard. 'You'll go home. Amanda will call a taxi, won't you?' He looked towards his secretary. She nodded, went to the door.

What a fuss. Really, why couldn't they pretend it hadn't happened? Then she could too.

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So she *was* ill. She knew it because the next morning she was her knees, retching into the toilet. Horrible. She felt dirty, embarrassed that Rob was seeing her like that. He stroked her back, and she shook him off.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'Don't be daft.' He helped her up when she'd finished, wiped her forehead. 'Better now?'

She smiled past the sour taste of her mouth. 'Yes.'

'Back to bed then.'

At least, she reasoned, as she heard Rob's car pull away from outside, the putrid smell of the seaweed hadn't returned, nor had that strange feeling of being miles away from herself. It was food poisoning. Of course it was.

She settled back against the bedhead. They weren't expecting her in school anyway. 'Take tomorrow off,' Richard had said despite her objections. Actually, now that she'd vomited, she felt fine. Perhaps she needed a day to herself. It would give her time to think – about Rob, about the future. But the thought clouded her brain, and she burrowed down into the pillows.

She lay like that for a moment, the duvet pulled up over her ears, and then she sat up again. She was meant to be recovering, wasn't she, looking after herself? Well she would. There was a book on her bedside table, and she reached for it. On its front, a row of worn wooden piles protruded from a seal-grey sea. It was so like the view from Little Charlburgh beach, the picture could have been painted there. Perhaps it had. The novel had been a gift from the Deputy Head when Jess'd left her old school. 'It's an amazing book,' Maggie'd said. 'It's set in the part of East Anglia you're going to be living in.' When she'd first arrived in the village, Jess had opened it, read the first pages and then closed it again. It needed concentration, commitment: not things she'd had to spare in those early days at St Margaret's. But the other evening, catching sight of it on the shelf, she'd resolved to give it a try.

It wasn't the sort of novel she was used to, not a novel in the accepted sense at all. More a kind of philosophical rumination. *A meditation on the history of the Suffolk coast, in the company of ghosts*, it said on the back cover. Ghosts? Thinkers, it meant, writers and artists from the past. Perhaps she'd learn something more about Old Charlburgh's medieval history? There'd been sea battles off the coast, she learned, a Dutch raid in the late 18th century. How exciting. She could do a lesson on it for school.

But it was the tone of the account she found most gripping, its sombre, troubled immediateness. If she'd been a secondary school teacher, she'd have read it aloud, introduced her students to its poetry.

The shadow of night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, and since almost all creatures, from one meridian to the next, lie down after the sun has set, so one might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, as if leveled by the scythe of Saturn, an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness.

It was a chilling image: millions upon millions of bodies lying ignorant and lost. Felled like so many blades of grass, never to rise again. Maybe the narrator had stood on this very coastline, looking out across the bay, and been thinking of what lay beneath. Perhaps he'd even stood beside the graveyard next to the leper chapel, seen the tombstones that covered the bones.

It was then that she smelled the seaweed again, rising up from the shore and floating inland. Not powerful like before, but pervasive, seeping into the room through the cracks in the brickwork and under the eaves. She felt a moment's panic and calmed herself. It was nothing weird, nothing to do with *her*. It was simply a trick of nature, a strange way that the wind picked up certain scents and carried them inland.

She got up and went to the window, staring out across the trees to the dunes and ocean beyond. The beach was empty, the surface of the water dark and still.

A day of perfect calm.

Whatever her fears, whatever nonsense she'd read on the Internet, there was a natural explanation. There must be.

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Dr Gerrard rummaged in a drawer and passed her a plastic envelope. 'Here, do it in the loo. It won't take you a second.'

Jess opened it and pulled out its contents. 'It can't be that. I'm on the pill.'

'I know. But it's possible you've forgotten to take one.'

'I haven't.'

'Please. It's just to rule things out. While you're gone, I'll organise the blood tests.'

There seemed little point. Her periods hadn't stopped, and it was ages since she and Rob had made love. 'I miss you Jess,' he'd said only the other night.

When she'd done what she needed to, she leaned with her back against the toilet door. There was an orchid on the windowsill, with speckled yellow flowers. It wasn't beautiful at all, and she wondered if they'd put it there to hide it. It seemed to thrive on the chemical smells and the germs. She let her gaze wonder back to the pregnancy stick. Nothing. She had no idea how long she'd left it, her watch still on the chest of drawers at home. But surely now was long enough?

She handed the stick to the doctor.

'Well, well,' Dr Gerrard said. 'I rather expected as much.'

'So what's wrong with me then?'

'Didn't you look at it?' The doctor smiled, thrust the stick forward so that Jess could see the two blue lines in the applicator window. 'You're having a baby.'

Jess sat down. She felt hot again, odd. The words impossible to take in. 'I can't be,' she said, trying to draw breath. 'I still have periods '

Dr Gerrard leaned her head to one side, unexpectedly sympathetic. 'Very occasionally that can occur because of the pill.' She placed a hand on Jess's arm. 'You don't seem too pleased.'

There were freckles on the doctor's skin, a sapphire engagement ring on the third finger. There was no pressure, no sense of the hand being there at all, other than a kind of dispassionate knowledge brought about by the sight of it on her arm. She looked up, searching the woman's face for a denial of what she'd just heard. 'You can get false positives, can't you? I mean, that does happen?'

The doctor withdrew her hand, swivelled her chair so that she was face on. 'Only very rarely,' she said. 'And in your case I don't think so. We'll do blood tests of course, and arrange a scan. And I can do a pelvic examination now if you like. That might give us more of an idea about how far on you are.'

Oh God. *God*. Three months, at least.

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A swollen uterus, the doctor told her. 'That does rather indicate-'

'But it could be something else?'

'It could, I suppose.'

It wasn't. Jess knew it now. 'And the smell – of the sea?'

'Funny things happen when you're pregnant. I'm just going to listen for a heartbeat. If I can hear one, that means you're at least ten to twelve weeks.' She reached for a torch-like implement attached to a machine on the wall and pulled it towards her,

'No. Please.' Jess swung her legs round and sat up. 'Don't do that.' It was hard to breathe. She needed to get away - from the doctor, from everyone. Feeling suddenly, unendurably exposed, she took her jeans from the chair and began to put them back on.

The doctor stepped back, frowning. When she drew the curtain, her disembodied voice came through from the other side. 'But you're a teacher. You teach at St Margaret's in Little Charlburgh, don't you? ' As if that very fact made it all OK.

‘What? Yes. Yes I do.’ Jess fumbled with the rivet at the top of the zip. Sod it, it wouldn’t work.

‘I went there myself,’ the doctor said. ‘Before my parents moved away.’

Abandoning the rivet, Jess reached for her sweater and slid it over her head. ‘Thank you,’ she said, pushing the curtains aside and picking up her coat. ‘Thank you for seeing me. But I have to rush. I’ve just remembered I need to be somewhere.’

++

I can’t be a mother.

The thought bruised her brain but wouldn’t go away. The climb up the cliff had been hard, and now her breath rasped in her throat. But she didn’t care.

Beyond the crumbling remains of the wall at the eastern end of the leper chapel, the sea stretched out flat and indifferent, reflecting only the greyness of the sky. *Please*, she wanted to ask it, *what do I do?* She pushed her fingers against her stomach. It felt unchanged, a touch generous around the waist, but she’d always had that. Then she lifted her hands to her breasts and prodded the sides. A little tender, but that was all. *Pregnancy?* Surely, surely not.

She leaned forward onto the parapet and crumbs of stone fell away, skittering to the beach below. A satisfying sound. She pushed at some more and watched as they bounced on the metal grid covering where the side had collapsed. How long, she wondered, before the whole chapel was gone? A hundred years? More? Whatever, she’d hardly be here to see it.

And if she had a child, if she acknowledged the fact of it, what would happen with Rob? Could she still manage in the village alone as she’d thought she might? He would hate her for it. And then, whatever she wanted long term, it would be the end of them.

A wind was whipping up, picking at the surface of the water. A light rain falling. She hadn't been up here since the business with Luke and Gabriel. She stood listening for the ghosts of that evening's voices, but there were none. The chapel had slid back into its past, sloughed them off.

A child. A *baby*. The most dangerous of words. Was a propensity for desertion genetically inherited, she wondered? She had no idea of her own mother's background. Only what Dad had told her, that his wife had come from Lincolnshire, and that her father, Jess's maternal grandfather, had died in the war.

Mother. Mummy.

What did it mean?

She walked out beyond the chapel walls, better to see the rising waves and feel the rain on her face. How quickly the weather could change, the wind coming from nowhere, even in summer, and sending sunbathers scurrying from the beach.

It was this she would miss if she went with Rob to Norfolk – not the extremity of the elements, she knew Norfolk could be worse - but the view, and the chapel there on the headland. It's ancient presence, it's secret history.

No wonder Luke had come here.

She touched her stomach again. Inside. In *there*. A growing thing.

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The clouds were darkening, soon the rain could turn heavy. She must get back. Besides, before she knew it, school would be over. It would hardly do to bump into the kids coming home.

Look Mum, there's Mrs Baxter. Where's she been all day?

But home? Did she want that? And Rob! That was the thing. Once she'd told him, their future, *her* future, would be fixed. One way or another.

The path back down was worse than she feared, her feet taken by the stones as the mud slithered under her. She slowed, tried to turn sideways to get more purchase. How stupid to be wearing only trainers, and to ruin them so. She tried to shift her weight but the motion was too much, and there was a sudden blur of cliffside and marram grass as her feet went. She was on her back, sliding downwards, her arms flailing for balance, the stones biting into her spine as she bumped across their tops. Only when she came to a flat section midway, did she stop.

Shit.

Gingerly, she hauled herself upright and stood for a moment, testing first her legs and then her arms. They seemed more or less OK, the only hurt the stinging in her back from the contact with the ground. It hadn't been a terrible descent, merely awkward: more like a slide down a snowy hill on a makeshift sledge, than anything. She moved her hands over her stomach, pressing softly. Had anything shifted? Probably the earliest, most vulnerable, days had passed, but a fall...

Did it know, this thing inside her? Had it felt the jolt as she'd slipped, the sudden tilting of her body? Could it feel pain?

Could it feel *her*?

++

She turned so she could negotiate the rest of the path backwards, treating it as a ladder and holding onto the grasses at the edge. Much better. Much safer.

As she reached the beach, she saw a figure off to one side. He came up close, and she realised it was Joe Harding, his hair flattened against his head and droplets of water covering his beard. He looked flushed, as if he might have been running.

'I heard a cry,' he said. 'Did you fall?' He gestured to her clothes. 'You're not hurt, are you?'

She looked down, her parka and jeans were streaked with mud. She attempted a laugh. 'So silly. Yes, I did. I slipped.'

'That was a dangerous thing to do, coming down there in this weather.' He looked up at the sky as if to confirm to her that it was raining and she hadn't noticed.

'I know. I didn't think it would be so bad.'

'You sure you're ok.'

She nodded, Attempted to wipe away some of the mud but it smeared and spread and stuck to her hands.

He frowned. 'What's the time? It can't be that late, can it?'

'I'm ill,' she said. His frown deepened. 'I mean I'm better now, I thought a walk would do me good.'

He nodded. 'Me too.' She wondered if he was going to say something else for he seemed to form a word, or a sentence, but held it inside him. He stood for a moment in the rain, and she stood watching him. 'Well, better get going,' he said at last.

'Yes.'

It seemed neither of them was in a hurry to get home.

I'm pregnant, she could say. *I don't know what to do.*

He'd be embarrassed, of course.

'Any news about the bones?' she asked instead.

He shook his head. 'We should know by Easter. I thought we might have a service for them - lay them properly to rest.'

'That's a good idea.'

'It was Luke's actually.'

'Goodness. Really?'

‘Well not the service as such. But he said we should say a proper goodbye. It made me think.’ Again he seemed about to add something, and she waited. But he stayed silent.

‘I’m soaked,’ she said.

‘Yes, me too.’

They laughed.

‘Ah well,’ he said. ‘See you anon.’ And then he was off, striding with his long legs away from her, up in the direction of the boardwalk through the reeds. A strange route to take on such a day, she thought, as she watched him go.

++

There was a clinic in Ipswich, another in Norwich. She phoned them both to see how it felt. A kind of testing of the water. But each time that dreadful word *termination* came up in the list of options, her finger reached out and broke the connection.

What *did* she want? Other than an end to the sense that her body had been taken over and her life was spinning out of control? An end to the anger too. It wasn’t just with Rob, but with the children and staff at school: a blind molten fury that ate her up and spat her out, drained and miserable, at the end of the day.

Dear God! A separate thing, living and developing inside her. She hadn’t invited it, hadn’t wished it. Yet there it was. Needy and fragile, and making her its world.

Emily

He's there again, on the doorstep. She pulls him in and holds him even though the rain on his coat goes straight through her sweater and freezes her skin.

He stays like that for only a second before he edges away and looks down at her. She feels suddenly embarrassed, ashamed even, and steps back out of his reach, avoiding his gaze.

'Luke isn't here,' she says.

'I know. It's why I've come.'

Her heart gives a kind of flip. It's the sort of thing that happens to women in the dreadful novels her mother used to write. But it's happening to her, a genuine physical sensation, a movement in the cavity of her chest, where her heart's hidden.

She's been thinking about it since he was last here, wondering if really, actually, she'd go to bed with him, and she hasn't known. But now she does.

She looks at the clock in the hallway. They have forty-five minutes until she needs to leave. She's surprising herself at how coldly she's planning things but it's necessary. It's how it'll have to be.

'Well?' she says. Her voice is curter than she's meant it to be. So she puts out an arm and leads him through into the sitting room. He's still dripping with water but she doesn't care because she's pressing herself to him again, pulling his head down so their lips can meet.

And they do. His lips, his beard, his face.

‘Take your clothes off,’ she commands. Already she’s removing her own, utterly heedless, utterly abandoned. There in the sitting room with the curtains open and the rain drumming against the windows.

He pulls away. ‘Emily,’ he says. His face is sad. ‘I can’t.’

She stops, lets the sweater rest around her neck, her breasts showing through her bra. When he doesn’t move she pulls the sweater back down, threads her arms awkwardly through the sleeves. The wet absorbed from his coat is icy.

‘Then why have you come?’ she says.

He sits, taking the armchair by the empty bookshelves. The discarded coat makes dark stains on the floor. ‘I need to talk to you,’ he says.

‘I see.’ She doesn’t. ‘But you *kissed* me?’ She makes the word sound ugly, her voice shrill. Then she realises. He feels sorry for her. She turns away, finds she’s reflected in the window, a tired looking woman whose hair hangs in strands around her face.

‘I think you should go,’ she says quietly.

‘Emily,’ he says.

She turns back, advances towards him.

‘Go.’

She picks up the raincoat and thrusts it against him. And he stands. But he isn’t moving towards the hallway as she wants him to. ‘Emily,’ he says again. She’s trying to push him through the door but he blocks it, and they’re having a kind of scuffle, her breath coming in quick jerks of pain in her chest.

He takes her wrists and holds them. She can’t free herself. The coat’s on the floor again, and she kicks at it because she hates it, because she hates him.

‘Emily,’ he says. ‘Stop it.’

Her name on his lips. Over and over.

‘Let me go.’

‘Then stop pushing. I have to talk to you. It’s important.’

He releases her and she rubs her wrists. They don’t hurt, but she wants him to think they do. His eyes narrow in concern.

‘Stop using my name.’

‘What?’

‘Stop using my name. You keep saying it: Emily.’

‘Do I? Sorry.’ He heaves a sigh, and she feels a moment of pity for him because it’s clear that he’s struggling. And then the pity turns to something else. Scorn. Because he doesn’t have the courage of his convictions, and because he can’t follow through what he’s begun. ‘I’m married,’ he says helplessly.

‘I’m aware of that. So am I. So why are you still here?’ She laughs suddenly. ‘You don’t have to *console* me, you know.’

‘I know. I’m not.’ He waves one of his long arms. ‘Emily, we get on, don’t we? We share something. I don’t want to lose that.’ He clears his throat as if there’s an obstruction, and she waits. ‘But I need to talk to you about Luke.’

‘Luke?’

‘Please, just sit down, will you?’ She examines his face. There’s something grave and insistent about it, and she does as he bids, choosing the chair opposite so the coffee table’s between them. ‘I haven’t known whether to tell you this – or how to,’ he says.

‘But I was talking about it the other night with Sarah and she said -’

‘With Sarah? Good God, what else do you talk about with her?’

He frowned, shook his head. ‘No, not that. Of course not. But Luke – for God’s sake, Emily, will you listen?’

She sits forward, puts her hands together in front of her chest and dips her head in an exaggerated gesture of paying attention. ‘Well?’

‘You know this thing about the bones, and the dead – all the stuff he told the other kids in his class?’ She nods, waiting. ‘Did you know that Luke really believes it? He thinks there really are ghosts, and that they *really* talk to him.’

She feels oddly disappointed. ‘There’s nothing new about that,’ she says. ‘And, actually, he doesn’t believe it at all. Not deep down. He’s inherited my family’s propensity for fiction, I’m afraid.’ She wants to hurt him because now the disappointment’s turned to a fizzing sense of fury. The arrogance of the man: assuming that his visits, his kisses, his self-important judgements about her son have anything of worth in them at all. Her voice turns cold. ‘Did he mention that he sees his baby sister too – that he *plays* with her?’

His eyes widen, his jaw slackening in shock. She smiles. ‘You see?’ she says. ‘A lively imagination.’

‘But that’s awful,’ Joe says. ‘How can you bear it?’ His voice is so gentle it almost undoes her.

She swallows, forcing back the emotion rising inside. ‘It’s perfectly simple,’ she says. ‘It’s his way of punishing me.’

He’s quiet, looking at her.

‘Is that it?’ she says.

‘No, I wish it were.’ His voice is soft, careful. ‘There’s that boy he says he plays with – you know, the one that none of us have seen. Luke says he comes from the old town, did you know that? He says he was one of the lepers who lived in the chapel and that when the storms came he went looking for his family and couldn’t find them?’

‘I suppose you mean Alwin?’ She feels a moment of unease and quells it. ‘That’s quite a story. But, I’ve told you, he’s got a lively imagination – he doesn’t really believe it. And if he does, I’m sure he’ll grow out of it.’ She lets her head drop forward, supports it in her hands and then raises it again. ‘Frankly, I’m sick of it.’

‘But Alwin existed.’

‘No he didn’t.’

‘He *did*. Or at least a child with his name did. He must have been one of the very few who survived the storms. I found it in those records we discovered in the cellar.’ She stands up, and he reaches out an arm to stop her. ‘Please, just listen.’

She sits again, rubs at her temple.

‘And *was* he a leper?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘There you go. Coincidence.’

‘*Is* it? Think about it - Luke leading us to that hidden room, all those things he says. About the weapons, and how they lived, and the fights between the gangs. He knew about the Ippingham men, Emily, that they *won*. Where did he get that from? It changes our whole understanding of what happened here.’ He pauses, and she wonders what she’s supposed to say. What he’s implying is impossible, ludicrous. ‘And the way he talks about it when we’re working together - it’s as if it’s part of him, his *reality*. Yet it’s information that’s been buried for centuries. He *knows* these things.’

‘That’s crazy.’

‘He *does*. He says it’s there. Inside him.’ Joe lowers his eyes beneath her stare. ‘To be honest, it frightens me.’

She’s misjudged him completely. He’s mad. Even madder than her son might be.

‘Are you suggesting that what Luke “sees” might actually be real?’

He looks suddenly miserable, entwines his fingers and rubs them together. 'I'm not sure I know what *real* means anymore.'

Ice spreads through her veins. 'You're an anthropologist.' Her voice is unsteady. 'You rely on *evidence*.'

'Exactly.'

'Come upstairs.' She rises and goes to the door. Her legs feel oddly disconnected from her body. 'There's something I want to show you.'

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'Well?' she says. 'How did those get there, do you think?'

They're looking up to where the shells make their bizarre pattern across the ceiling.

'You didn't do it?'

'No.'

He pushes off his shoes and climbs onto the bed. When he reaches up, his hand just touches the shells. 'Could he have used a step-ladder?'

'We don't have one.' She feels flimsy, almost diaphanous, as if she might float away. Shivering, she wraps her arms about her chest to remind herself she's solid.

'There's that smell,' she says. And it's there even though the window's shut. A brackish pungency floods the room, so strong it could have risen from the sea floor itself. She coughs, and then Joe does too, his eyes meeting hers in bewilderment.

'Luke says that's Alwin coming.'

Just for a second, she wonders if it's true, but then she finds she's laughing. Bubbles of hilarity that rise inside her and explode in uneven gasps from her mouth. Joe's laughing too, though she can tell from his eyes he doesn't know why. He gives in to it anyway, the colour returning to his face so that, beyond the beard and despite the sharpness of his bones, he looks almost avuncular.

‘Oh God,’ she says, ‘God.’ It’s the second time he’s done this to her, reduced her to a silly, giggly wreck. And in a way she’s glad of it, because she needs to feel her body, sense her own materiality.

Otherwise she’s nothing. A million particles, drifting.

There were two biscuits left in the jar. She took them both, wrapped them inside a piece of kitchen roll and tucked them in her jacket pocket.

‘No breakfast this morning?’

She looked up. Tracey stood in the staffroom doorway, her eyebrows raised.

‘No time.’ The truth was breakfast had already been flushed down the loo. Now, in the mist of her nausea, she was ravenous.

‘There better be another packet in the cupboard.’ Tracey said. She headed across to the notice board, her heels clicking. ‘Your lot’s noisy this morning. Are they on their own?’

‘I’m on my way.’

Any other time she’d have met Tracey’s eye, showed her annoyance at the implied criticism; this early there’d be three or four kids in the classroom at most.

The nausea surged again, and she stopped, leaned against the wall. Is this what it was going to be like? Already Rob was anxious, banging on the door of the bathroom when she’d been in there longer than usual. ‘Are you alright? You’re not still ill are you?’

‘I’m fine. Mascara smudge, that’s all.’

But soon she was going to have to tell him. Or not. The possibility there all the time, hanging in the air before her. The question mark huge.

Mother. Mummy.

And that was it. Those words. They confused her. She could feel their truth and yet not recognize them at all.

The nausea had passed, and she stood upright. Soon Rob would guess and then what? She hurried to her classroom, aware suddenly of the noise emanating there. Why was she so stubborn about Little Charlburgh anyway? She wasn't sure she knew the answer anymore.

As she neared the classroom, she felt a growing sense of unease. Tracey had been right; the noise had become a din. She speeded into a jog. Through the glass she could see Luke, along with six or seven other boys. They were shouting, baying at him, moving forward, forcing him backwards against the wall.

‘Mr leper-man.’

‘Mr baggy-trousers-leper-man.’

Luke's face was red, one arm flailing, trying to hold them off. In his other hand was the strange little black-eyed figure he'd made for the model of the old town. Even from the doorway she could see its ripped pantaloons and the dangling splinter of wood that had once been a leg.

‘Leper-man!’

Jess reached the door, pulled the air into her lungs and bellowed.

‘Enough.’

They twisted to look at her, the cruelty still visible in their faces.

‘Do you understand what a leper is?’ she said, stepping into the room and eying each of them in turn. They were quiet now, their heads lowered, their faces moved to guilt and awkwardness. ‘Well, *do* you?’ They didn't dare respond. But she knew what their answer would be. She'd told them herself.

Outcast. Untouchable.

‘OK, which one of you is going to tell me what’s been going on?’

It was Robin who spoke. ‘We were looking at the peg thing, Miss. Just looking.’

‘I see.’ Her tone was curt. ‘And?’

‘Then Luke came and he shouted out it was a leper. So no one wanted to hold it.’

Robin gave a shudder as if the disease were real. ‘It sort of fell.’

She could imagine it: the boys not *looking*, but mocking. The shared excitement. The figure thrown from hand to hand. Then the word, *leper*, sparking them into disgust and violence, providing the excuse they needed.

‘What he want to do a leper for?’ said Oliver. ‘Sicko.’

‘Oliver!’ It was a roar.

The boy took a step back, and she felt a flicker of guilt. Now she was bullying too. But she was angry. So very angry.

She took in a breath, held it and then let it out. Beyond the door, some of the other children had arrived and were standing unsure whether to enter. She motioned to them to wait. When she turned back to the boys, she was calmer, more in control.

‘I never, ever expected to see such behaviour from the children in my class,’ she said. ‘Pushing someone like that, ganging up.’ She allowed the disgust to show in her face. ‘I’m ashamed of you all. You should never have been touching Luke’s figure in the first place. We agreed, didn’t we, right at the beginning, that we’d respect one another’s models? Imagine how you’d feel if it had been yours.’

‘*Luke’s* a leper,’ said Jerome. ‘I saw them marks.’

‘Be quiet.’ She glared at him, furious, and his lips came together in a pout. ‘All of you go to your desks and get out your things ready for lessons. I’ll speak to you after assembly.’ His words had disturbed her, more even than the nasty little scene she’d just

witnessed. She swallowed, fought a renewed wave of queasiness. ‘Robin, open the door and let in the others, will you? Luke, come here please.’

At least he hadn’t run away. Or hid in the corner and pulled his arms up over his head. He’d challenged them, fought back.

++

A nasty little guess on Jerome’s part, that was all. He surely hadn’t googled it as she was doing now. Similar but not, thank God, the same. How stupid of her to have thought they might be, for hadn’t Luke’s marks looked more like something done *to* him, than rising from inside? Why, she’d even thought Emily might have made them herself.

Anyway, the marks were gone now. Faded to nothing.

She walked to the window and looked up at the sky. This was her pregnant vulnerability acting, not reason. She was letting the unease in the village affect her.

Back at her desk, she pressed the computer shut-down key, picked up her bag and slid it over her shoulder. It was heavy with folders, but not unbearably so. She would walk back via the beach and reed-beds. After a day like today, she needed it.

++

‘I warned you,’ Tracey had murmured, coming up close so the children couldn’t hear and bestowing a thin smile on them as she spoke. ‘That something like this would happen. That boy disturbs everyone.’

Jess had refused to reply. The only safe thing to do.

She breathed deeply, as if to do so would rid her of the cold hiss of Tracey’s voice, but it was still there, and the shouts of the children too: *Leper-man, leper-man*. She shuddered and looked up into the sky for distraction, searching for birds. There were plenty there – wheeling up and back towards the sea, looking for supper. She saw terns

and gulls but mostly ones she didn't recognize, dark against the fading sky. It made her think of Rob. She wanted him here with her, if only his voice: a gentle guidance inside. *That's a cormorant. There's a harrier. Look.* She strained to hear it, but there was nothing – a sullen silence in her head.

Leprosy indeed. What had she been thinking of?

She'd reached the reeds. Despite the crispness of the day the boardwalks were slippery, the grasses at their sides battered and pulped by weeks of rain. In the distance, a mistiness round the branches at the forest edge suggested that spring might be arriving at last, though she had no real sense of it. She had no real sense of anything, except a low and burning feeling of failure: to control her class, to control her own life. Even the sun seemed to attack her with its brightness, hanging so low it stung her eyes and made them water.

She moved forward almost blindly along the path into the middle of the reeds. Even the birds had deserted, and nothing moved as she passed, the reeds limp with the weight of their own rot. With no wind to move them, they formed a precarious carpet underfoot, but she was careful, stepping slowly and testing the surface as she went.

There was a noise ahead - an animal perhaps, or a bird, caught in the reeds – and she stopped to listen. But the sound stopped too. There were snakes here, adders that sometimes strayed from the forest onto the boardwalk. In their terror, they might strike at her foot. She'd heard of dogs dying from such bites. It was hard to see, the sun so glaring and the reeds broken low over the walkway. The sound came again, a kind of rustling.

She edged forward and bent to look, blinking away the dark after-image of the sun. Not a snake of course - how silly, it was winter still - but plastic flowers that caught at the side of the boardwalk and made scratching noises as the structure moved under her

feet. She picked them up and held them so they caught the light. They looked new, garish against the mucky khaki of the broken reeds. There was a card attached, and she peered at it. The writing, though faded, was still legible. 'Never out of my heart,' it said. 'Your loving dad.'

Of course. Jimmy Henson.

She shook the stems free of dirty water, brushed the debris from the petals. Almost twenty years since the boy had died - a long time - and his father still grieved. Without a grave to visit, she guessed it was all he could do: wander along the shoreline and into the reeds, a kind of commemoration. She lay the flowers back at the side of the boardwalk. Perhaps, she thought, you mourned a lost child forever.

Had her mother mourned her?

A lump rose in her throat, tears welled. Goodness what was wrong with her? Suddenly it mattered so acutely it made her want to cry out. Not a letter. Not a birthday card. Nothing.

How was that possible?

She gazed down at the flowers by her feet. A mother hadn't put them there, but a father. A man, struggling to come to terms with what the world had thrown at him. You could rely on a father.

It was getting colder, the air damp with evening and the sky growing dark. In the distance, a plume of smoke rose from Hinton Lane. She wondered if it was from the Bayely's cottage, if Luke and his mother were inside, curled in front of the fire. She doubted it. Not those two. They'd be separate, in different rooms, curled, if anywhere, into themselves. Now there was a father you *couldn't* rely on. He was never at home. A strange choice: to ditch your grieving wife and son for the desperate children of Africa.

++

Emily peered at her through the chink in the door. She seemed unwilling to open it properly.

‘Sorry to call unannounced,’ Jess said. ‘I was passing and wanted to check that Luke was OK.’

‘Why shouldn’t he be?’

‘The thing today with the boys. Did he tell you? I wanted to catch you after school only you’d gone before I got the chance.’

‘You’d better come in.’ Emily led the way through. The room was functional, without character, held only a sofa and chairs upholstered in beige, and a small modern coffee table.

Jess perched herself awkwardly on the edge of one of the chairs.

‘Well?’ Emily said. ‘What happened?’

It was, Jess discovered, harder to explain than she’d expected. She didn’t want to suggest that Tom and Oliver and the other boys were little thugs in the making, and yet she could hardly excuse them, make what they’d done any less yobbish than it appeared. As she spoke, every word confirmed her growing ineffectuality as a teacher. How, she would have asked had she been Emily, had such an incident been allowed to happen?

She didn’t know herself. Or rather she did. Because if she’d been there earlier, not fussing over biscuits in the staffroom, or leaning, pathetically sorry for herself, against the corridor wall, the boys would never have picked up the figure in the first place.

‘They’re silly boys,’ Jess ended. ‘Extremely silly. I don’t think they realised what they were doing.’

‘I see.’

‘You’ll be told about it formally. The Head will probably ring you tomorrow. We always do that when bullying’s involved.’

‘Is that often?’

‘Bullying? Actually, I’m glad to say, it’s very rare.’

‘And yet with Luke - ?’ Emily left the sentence unfinished.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Jess said.

Rising, Emily said. ‘I’m going to have a glass of wine. Do you want one?’

‘Yes. Thank you.’ Then, with a thud that was almost physical, Jess remembered.

‘Actually,’ she said. ‘Perhaps not. I’ve got lots of work to do tonight. Better keep a clear head.’

‘As you like.’ Emily shrugged and disappeared into the kitchen.

The cottage’s interior was not what Jess had expected. She’d imagined African throws and artifacts, little sculptures, pictures on the mantelpiece. Maybe a nod to Emily’s interest in the Greek myths. There was none of that. There weren’t even any books on the shelves. If it hadn’t have been for the dents in the brown cushions that suggested they’d been sat on, the place would have looked uninhabited.

‘He tells me nothing of course,’ Emily said when she returned. ‘But what you’ve just said explains the nasty bruise I saw on his ribs when he got changed after school. Those boys are vicious.’

Jess swallowed. ‘A bruise? A proper bruise?’

Emily frowned. ‘Yes, a bruise. As if from a kick or a fist.’

‘I see,’ Jess said. A bruise of course was bad. It was terrible. But it was better than what she’d feared. Somehow, she doubted the boys were responsible, though she had no idea what they’d done before she arrived. Surely the aim had been to drive Luke away, to make him untouchable.

Like a leper.

‘Don’t you believe me?’ Emily said.

‘Of course I do.’ She knew the children in her class, didn’t she? Knew them well. Now it seemed she was wrong. She couldn’t admit that to Emily, or to anyone. And, foolish though it was, she needed to see the bruise, confirm what it looked like. Make sure it wasn’t anything else. ‘But would he let me see it, do you think? Is that OK? Then I can tell the Head’

‘We can but try,’ Emily said, putting down her glass. ‘Come with me.’

++

‘Right,’ Richard said. ‘What I want from you boys is the truth. No protecting one another. That’s not going to help.’

They were ranged in a semi-circle in front of his desk, she at their side. Tom looked embarrassed, as did Robin. The others, particularly Jason, looked up at the Head, a mixture of innocent expectation and challenge on their faces. From outside came the yells of the children enjoying their mid-morning break. She would like to have been outside with them. It was stuffy in here, too warm. But at least her nausea seemed to be over for the morning.

‘Well, Richard said. ‘Which of you hit Luke Bayely?’

There was a gasp. A sudden exchange of looks. They looked genuinely shocked at the accusation. Any other time she’d have been tempted to believe them. But she had seen it: a bruise, genuine and livid.

‘We didn’t hit him,’ Oliver’s voice was outraged.

‘I think you did, Oliver. One of you at any rate. There’s a very nasty bruise on Luke’s ribcage that hasn’t come from thin air. If the person who did it doesn’t own up, I shall treat it as if it’s all of you.’

‘That’s not fair.’

Richard looked at them, lowering his eyebrows. ‘It’s up to you,’ he said.

‘Please, Sir,’ Robin’s voice was little more than a squeak. ‘We were doing that walking forward thing, that’s all. Like police when they’re stopping riots happening. We didn’t touch him. We didn’t. We just had that doll thing he made.’ Normally such a solid, level-headed little boy, it was odd Robin had been involved at all. His words held a ring of truth. Jess caught Richard’s eyes, made a questioning gesture with her arms.

‘Go outside and think about it,’ he said to the boys. ‘When you come back, I want the culprit to own up. Go on, off you go.’ He waved his hands, and they tramped out, muttering.

‘I’m inclined to come down hard this time,’ he said when the door had closed. ‘These aren’t the first marks we’ve seen on Luke, but I want them to be the last. He’s a difficult child, but that’s no excuse for outright bullying.’

‘They can, a bit wild sometimes,’ she said. ‘But that bruise is horrible.’

‘It’s a pity you weren’t in the classroom.’

Was it a reprimand? She wasn’t sure.

‘I know.’

‘I realize it was early but I think, in future, we better keep your lot in the corridor until you arrive. That way Tracey can keep an eye on them.’

She swallowed. ‘Surely you’re not expecting a repeat?’

‘No. But I want to be certain. The kids don’t like him. Sadly, I understand why.’

‘You can’t blame *Luke*.’

‘I’m not *blaming* him, Jess. I’m stating a fact. That business with Gabriel frightened people. And all this strange talk about death. The parents don’t like it. They don’t like it at all. He’s a clever child, but I’m not convinced being in a school like this is good for him – or anyone else.’

‘It’s good for Whitney.’

‘Is it? I don’t think so. Her mother was one of the first to complain.’

‘Oh.’

This village, *her* village, was turning into something uglier and more stupid than she could have thought possible. A little boy grieving for his dead sister, and people were *afraid* of him.

Emily

They're there again. She wants to go to the window to look but they'll see her peer round the curtains. Perhaps if she's very quiet, if Luke's very quiet, they'll go away.

Please.

She's shaking, appalled at her own terror. It's not just kids this time but older boys, men. Their voices are hard, deep, though she can't make out many of the words. Luke's upstairs. She wants to go to him, to tell him not to look out at what's going on beyond the garden gate. Perhaps if she's very careful and sneaks up on all fours so no shadow can fall across the glass of the porch?

Are they beyond the gate?

The voices are louder. There's laughter, a cracking of something - a branch from a tree perhaps.

'Scheming bitch.'

She jumps as if she's been hit. It's her they mean. What has she done, what do they think she's done? But the thought is hardly formed before the bang comes on the door.

'Com'n bitch, open up'.

There's more laughter. 'She done that right enough. You ask Joe Harding.' The name is pronounced slowly so she knows she's meant to hear. But this time she recognizes the voice. In a flash she knows who it is. A name she's tried to forget.

Shit.

The important thing is to think clearly. There's silence from Luke's room. She imagines him a curled ball of terror on the floor. She must get up there. If she can

somehow bring him downstairs, they can get out through the back, slip across the garden into the trees.

Stop it! No one's exactly going to break in, are they?

There's another bang. Something scraping. A singsong voice:

Mis-us Bay-ely, Luk-ey le-per-ghost-boy. We're com-ing to get you.

It's amused. Playful. Vile.

'That'll put the breeze up their skirts,' someone says, and the laughter comes again, a loud hard ball of it.

Head low, she creeps up the stairs. Luke is on the landing, eyes wide, standing ramrod-still like a sentry at the door of his room. She puts a finger to her lips and reaches for his hand. Thank god, he's letting her take it. 'Bend down,' she mouths and points to the stairs. Again, he does as he's bid, sliding silently step by step behind her. Outside the men or youths, or whatever they are, have begun to sing.

Why was they born so beautiful...?

Why was they born at all?

They're no fucking use to anyone..

The words bite into her veins.

Her heart beating hammer-hard on the very surface of her body, she creeps into the kitchen still holding Luke by the hand. Even in the midst of her fear she's aware that his passivity could end at any point. She daren't turn on the light but at least that means she can see into the garden. No shapes beyond the windows, no torch beams breaking the dark.

As she reaches the kitchen door there's a crash. The jagged sound of shattering glass jerks her bones. She stops, puts a hand to her mouth to stifle a scream, and in the instant Luke pulls away. 'No!' She can't help saying it out loud. She grabs at him, and he tries

to shake her off. But she has him now, her fingers tight round his wrist. Her nails dig into his skin, but any reduction of pressure and he'll be away, flying back up the stairs, He pulls again, and she lowers her head to his. 'Luke.' She wills him to listen. 'You *must* stay with me.'

Christ! Another crash, more sounds of glass splintering and falling. Luke jumps. She drags him over to the door and reaches up, feeling for the key on the hook above the frame. Her fingers find bare wall. Damn Luke, that she has to make things so inaccessible. But she's got it now, her palm closing round the comfort of metal.

The key slides in easily but, as she pushes at the door, it makes a low creaking sound, and she holds her breath, prays her legs won't give way.

'*Now.*'

She pulls him through.

But it's too late. There's a figure in the garden, a man moving from the woods at the back. There's something in his hand. A torch flashes and catches her and Luke in mute and petrified indecision on the patio. They can't go back, can't move forward.

The figure lurches and grabs her arm. 'Get in the trees.' She sees the gleam of metal, and the torch goes out.

But the man's walking past them, and there's another figure behind him. Maybe two, it's hard to tell, and they're moving round the side of the house towards the front. She pushes Luke across the garden ahead of her, feeling the drag of mud beneath their feet. The darkness is denser up ahead. The trees. She thrusts Luke forward, follows tightly behind. Feels the scratch and sting of branch and nettles.

'Get down,' she hisses. She pulls at Luke's arm.

She can feel his heart, or maybe it's hers. A hard fast *thump thump* that resounds through their feet and into the soil. Her whole body is trembling, but she's alert, her

senses roused like an animal's. There's more laughter from the front of the house, and then a cry.

An eruption of shouting. Men yelling at men. Scuffles and exclamations. A sharp scream of pain. It seems to go on forever.

She waits. Holds Luke tight to her chest, her breath stilled. There's more scuffling, more yells. Feet sprinting away.

Silence. Filling the air like a blessing.

Then the words, clear through the cold night sky: 'It's alright, lady, you're OK.'

She sinks into the ground, puts her lips to the top of Luke's head. 'Thank God,' she says into the soft pelt of his hair.

++

She and Luke are in the kitchen. They're shivering, more from the cold than anything. She hadn't felt it. Now, back in the warm, it's seeped through her muscles and into her bones.

The man from the garden is at the kitchen door, his companion standing behind him. They're both well-into middle-age, with tired looking skin, as if they've been heavy smokers all their lives. Neither of them looks capable of scaring a gang of men as large as the one she guesses was outside the house.

'Just you stay in the warm,' the man says. 'While we check the front room. See if it's safe.'

'Safe?'

'Glass and that.'

Her legs have given way, so she can't argue. She's in a heap on a kitchen chair. Luke is standing beside her, his face pale.

It occurs to her that the two men could go anywhere in the house, do anything. That she and Luke might just have been rescued from the frying pan only to fall into the fire. She daren't believe it.

She pulls Luke to her, and he doesn't resist. 'They've gone, Luke,' she says. She feels his warmth, wanting to tug it even closer. 'The nasty gang have gone.'

'I know,' he says. 'That man scared them away. He's my friend.'

She draws back. 'Your *friend*? Do you *know* him, Luke?'

'He's got a knife. I see him in the reeds.'

Knife. In the reeds. Jesus.

'It's alright, Mummy, he won't hurt us.'

The first man's back, he has Simon's bottle of brandy in his hands. She feels an upsurge of terror.

'You got a glass?' he says.

She attempts to rise, but her legs won't hold her, and she watches as he opens the wall cupboard doors. 'This'll do.' He pulls down a mug and pours a generous slug.

'Drink it,' he says when she pulls back. 'It'll do you good.'

And it does. Immediately the liquor hits her throat she feels her body's response, a coming together of its parts so she can begin to think again.

The second man returns to the kitchen. He's larger than she thought, and younger, and he's wearing a kind of thick leather waistcoat with studs on it, over a bare chest. He leans and places her mobile on the table. 'Found this. Looks like it's alright.' He nods toward the sitting room. 'But you don't want to go in there just yet. They've made a bit of a mess. You just wait til you're up to it.'

She nods, grateful. Already, the brandy's warming her veins. 'Do you know who they were?' she says. 'Those men?'

‘Men?’ He shakes his head. ‘Is that what they call themselves? Bloody idiots more like. Drunks from the village.’

‘I recognised a voice. Will someone.’ It’s there in her head. *Scheming bitch.*

‘Sutton. Yea, nasty little bastard. Heard him shouting miles off.’

‘Is that why you came?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’ It’s the first man again. He leans over, puts out his hand. It’s a ridiculously formal gesture under the circumstances, but she takes it, feels the hard skin of his palm.

She looks at them both, her eyes first on one, then the other. ‘You’re not going are you?’ She knows there’s terror in her face.

‘You need to call the police. Don’t madly want to see them, if that’s OK with you.’ He gives her a grim smile.

They’re travellers, she guesses. Gypsies. There’ll be no love lost. But the thought of being alone in the house, so vulnerable now without its front windows, - no, she can’t bear it.

‘Look.’ He seems to know what she’s thinking. ‘You call them now, see. Before we go – they’ll be here soon after.’

Did you hurt anyone? she wants to ask. There’s no sign of the knife, but she can hear the scream still, mixed up with all the other sounds, a terrifying jumble in her brain. He might think she’s going to report him. She won’t; she doesn’t care what’s happened to any one of those thugs. In fact she hopes they’re bleeding to death somewhere in the reedbeds.

It reminds her. ‘My son,’ she says. ‘He says he sees you in the reeds.’

‘I see him there once or twice.’ He frowns down at Luke. ‘I told you, didn’t I? Keep away? Tha’s not a good place to be.’

‘But I like it there,’ Luke says.

‘So do I,’ the man says. ‘But I got a reason.’ The man’s face is still for a moment, pulled tight. Then he goes on, ‘Sides, I know what I’m doing. You don’t. And your mum don’t want to lose you. Right?’

‘Right,’ Luke says.

‘Glad to hear it.’ The grim smile returns. ‘Go on, lady,’ the man says to Emily. ‘Time you phoned the cops.’

++

She’s waited an hour and a half. It’s unbearably long, though Luke’s asleep, thank heavens, rolled under her duvet, his chestnutty hair, soft as a squirrel’s, poking out from the top.

Still fully dressed, she’s lying next to him. If lying is the right word because her body’s a tense pillar of misery, sometimes shaking, sometimes numb, as wave after wave of different horrors return.

‘We can’t touch nothing,’ the younger man said before he left. ‘The cops’ll want to take pictures. You got to think of insurance.’

She nodded. Promised not to look until the police came, but the moment the men left, she couldn’t help herself. Edged open the sitting room door and peered in.

Glass, litter. Everywhere.

And the *stink*.

‘That’s dog poo!’ Luke said behind her. It was mixed in with the chip papers and beer cans on the floor. Smeared and dripping from the sofa.

Something happened to her legs, to her stomach too. Feeling her gorge rise, she slammed the door shut.

She has boots on now. In case they need to run.

++

Three forty am, and finally the police have gone. But the windows are gaping, the sitting-room a dung heap. The photographer – the forensic van – may come tomorrow they've said. But it all depends. In the meantime, she mustn't touch a thing.

Luke is still asleep in her bed. How does he do it? How does any child do it – switch off from the world like that? But now she needs to wake him. Because she can't bear another moment in this dreadful house.

She looks down at him, curled so heedlessly into his dreams. She doubts she can lift him and, anyway, he's beyond the age where he can sleep through it. She touches a shoulder, bends forward and whispers into his ear. Her voice is shriller than she would like but he doesn't wake. Perhaps he's pretending. She shakes him, not hard, but enough, and his eyelids flutter open, clouded in sudden confusion, before he sits upright.

'I need you to get dressed,' she says. 'We're going for a drive.'

++

'There's Jupiter,' Luke says. He's pointing through the passenger window.

She looks ahead. There's nothing to see but the A12 and the cold lights of the car against the empty road. She has no idea where she's heading, only that she wants to put as many miles between the village and the two of them as possible.

'How do you know?' she says.

'February's a good month for seeing Jupiter.' He sits back into his seat. His voice is calm, as if he's already forgotten the ghastly events of the night. She snatches a glance at him. In the glow from the dashboard his face is spectral. She's still amazed that he's so biddable, that he's risen from her bed, put on his clothes and simply done as she said.

They drive in silence. She wants to go fast, to throw all her anger into the handling of the vehicle, sliding round corners, pressing down hard on the accelerator so the wheels spin. But she doesn't. She's circumspect, adult. She has her son in the car.

'When will we see Daddy?' he says.

Simon. She hasn't phoned him. It hasn't even occurred to her to want him beside her. The thought hits her with a thud.

'Daddy's in Arusha,' she says.

'Aren't we going to see him? Isn't that where we're going?'

'What made you think that? Arusha's thousands of miles away.'

'Well, we're in trouble, aren't we? Daddy helps people when they're in trouble.'

She slows the car further. Then she pulls it to a standstill. She can't manage anymore: the car, the road, the emptiness. She turns to look at her son.

'Oh Luke,' she says. And the expression on his face tells her she's crying.

Rob was over by the bedroom door, his dressing gown half over his shoulders, his feet sliding into his slippers.

‘What are you doing?’ Jess clicked on the light and reached for the clock. ‘It’s ten to five.’

‘There’s someone at the door.’

‘*What?*’ Then she heard it too, the bang of knocker against wood. She knew what Rob would be thinking. Mel. One of the children. A family emergency.

‘Wait, I’m coming with you.’ Already he’d gone.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, Rob looked up at her and back to the open doorway. ‘What is it?’ she asked.

Framed in the entrance was Luke Bayely, his mother standing behind. It was clear from the smudges on her cheeks and her red-rimmed eyes that she’d been crying.

‘I’m sorry,’ Emily said. ‘I didn’t know where else to go.’

++

At last Emily seemed calmer, the colour returning to her cheeks. Every so often a paroxysm of shaking took hold of her body and then subsided, but to Jess’s relief they were becoming further apart, less violent. On the table sat an empty mug of tea and a plateful of toast and jam that Emily’d refused to eat. Jess glanced towards the sitting room. Luke lay wide-eyed under the blanket on the sofa, watching through the open doorway. She smiled, but he didn’t respond.

‘I’m going to phone the police,’ Rob said. ‘Find out what the hell they’re doing, leaving you alone like that, and the windows uncovered. And then, when we’ve some idea what they’re planning with this forensics thing, I’ll come back with you and help clear up.’

‘No!’ Another tremor shook Emily’s body. ‘I don’t -,’ Her voice sank to a whisper. ‘I don’t want ever to set foot in that place again.’

‘OK,’ Rob said. ‘We’ll worry about that when you’ve had a chance to sleep.’

Jess watched as Emily’s face cleared. She shouldn’t be surprised that Luke’s mother had chosen her, Jess, to turn to. Who else did she have in the village? No one. Except Joe perhaps. But she could hardly go banging on the Harding’s door hours before dawn. Jess wondered what kind of insults the men had called out. Somehow she’d got the impression they were directed at Emily too, not just her son.

Poor Emily, how small she looked. Pale and fragile. Not a bad woman after all, but exhausted, overwhelmed. She would like to comfort her. But she didn’t dare – Emily radiated such an aura of tight-lipped fragility it might shatter her forever.

‘You and Luke must stay with us, until you’re ready,’ Jess said. She caught Rob’s eye. *What if it’s ages?* his look said. Jess ignored it. ‘You’ll have to share a room, but there are two beds. You’ll be OK with that, won’t you?’ She saw Emily glance towards Luke to see if he’d heard. He was frowning.

‘It’s alright,’ Emily said. ‘We can stay at *The Anchor*.’

‘No you can’t. It’ll cost a fortune and it’s noisy. You’ll be quieter here.’

Emily made an effort at a smile, pulled Jess’s cardigan closer round her shoulders. ‘Just for a day or two then.’

‘As long as you want,’ Jess said. ‘We’re friends, aren’t we?’

++

She watched as Rob got into the car. Unable to get any kind of satisfactory reply from the police, he was driving to Ippingham to ask for himself.

‘They won’t tell you anything,’ Jess had said. ‘They’ll only talk to Emily.’

He’d shaken his head, given her a twisted smile ‘There’ll be someone,’ he said.

‘Everyone knows everyone around here. You forget.’

She supposed she did. But just this moment she was glad he’d gone, the nausea back again, twisting her insides and making her weak.

++

Luke was outside the bathroom as she exited. ‘There’s someone there,’ he said.

‘Where, sweetheart?’

‘The front door.’

She pushed her hair back from her face. *Now?* Please not.

‘Thank you, Luke,’ she said. ‘You stay here.’

She was expecting it to be a police officer, the forensic person perhaps. But the man on the step was scruffily dressed, ill-shaven. At first she didn’t recognize him.

‘Don’t remember me do you?’

‘I’m sorry.’

Something familiar in his voice reached her. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘It’s Mr..... Henson, isn’t it?’

His sweater, under the heavy black jacket was frayed at the edges and his nails and knuckles ingrained with oil. Jess remembered the screwdriver. A mechanic of some sort, then. Once, though, he’d had the crab hut in the beach car park. Part of the village then. But now so separate.

‘Tha’s it. Ed Henson.’ He made a vague gesture with his arm. ‘I just came to see how the lady was. Heard she was here.’

‘The lady?’ How word got around. It seemed it reached even to the forest. ‘Do you know her then?’

‘I saw her last night. When she had the trouble.’

‘It was *you*? You helped her?’

‘What we could.’ He dropped his head in modest acknowledgement of his contribution. ‘She alright then?’

‘Thank you. She’s...’ Jess had been planning to say, ‘Fine’. But he deserved more than that. ‘She’s tired – the police took a long time to arrive. Just at the moment, she’s sleeping.’

He nodded. ‘Right. OK.’

‘Thank you anyway,’ Jess said.

‘I’ll be off then?’ He didn’t move.

What was she meant to do? Invite him in, ask if he’d like to wait? She could imagine Rob’s face. ‘I’ll tell her you called,’ she said.

‘Good,’ he said again. He turned to go, then turned back. ‘That boy, her son - Luke is it? He’s the lad sees the Old Ones, in’t he?’

But he wasn’t looking at her any more. His gaze had slid over her shoulder and into the house.

‘The Old Ones? Who are they?’ came Emily’s voice from the stairs.

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‘I don’t know,’ Emily said, ‘what I’d have done without you last night.’ She shuddered, joined her hands together and pushed them between her knees. In Jess’s too-large dressing gown, she looked like a child. ‘But what you’re saying now – it’s crazy.’ She glanced at the kitchen door to be sure it was closed.

‘It’s ok,’ Jess said. ‘Luke’s reading.’

Emily looked down at her hands. 'There are no such things as ghosts,' she said.

The steam from the mug rose and obscured Ed as he spoke. 'Call em ghosts if you want,' he said. 'But that's not our word.' The steam spread and disappeared in the warmth of his breath. He bent forward, moving his hands as if trying to draw what he was saying in the air. 'They come back sometimes. Tha's all.'

Emily eyes were fixed on the table, her face deathly white. Jess coughed. The sea-salt air seemed to have entered the house along with Ed Henson. A background tang but strong enough to hit the back of her throat.

'Come back?' Jess said, at last.

He picked up his mug, hugging it between both hands, and drank it down.

'Shouldn't surprise you. Look at them bones for a start,' he said. 'Where are they now? Not in the earth, I can tell you. And not where they should be, under the sea with their kin. Those poor buggers, the ones that got drowned – this village don't give a damn.'

'But,' Jess said. 'It *is* a long time ago.' She thought about the project at school, abandoned because the bones had appeared and frightened everyone. Why should the villagers care at all? She looked at Emily, but she was rigid and separate, her eyes down, as if she half-believed him and it terrified her.

Maybe for some people time *wasn't* linear. Couldn't be. When something's not been resolved, not been *settled*, the past, the present, they overlapped.

She watched as he stood up, held out his hand. A gentleman, for all his strangeness. 'I'm obliged for the tea,' he said. At the kitchen door, he stopped and turned to Emily. 'I'm glad you're alright, but your boy,' his voice dropped, 'he got the sight - whether you like it or not.'

Emily's eyes met his. She was pinched and grey.

'I'm grateful to you,' she said. 'but please, I need to be left alone now.'

He nodded and moved to the door.

‘It’s just his way of seeing things,’ Jess said when she’d seen him out. ‘The man’s a traveller, remember. It’s part of their culture.’

But it was hard to push his words about Luke to one side. *He got the sight.*

++

The Bayely’s cottage had been swept and scrubbed by a team of cleaners from Ipswich. When she’d gone to check, Jess had found the house sparkling, the only scent that of the chemicals used on the upholstery.

‘I’m not sure I can go back,’ Emily said.

‘How about us having a walk along the shore, then you could pop in? I’ll stay on the beach with Luke and wait. Or, not,’ she added, seeing the look on Emily’s face. ‘ - whichever you prefer. Just see how you feel. Either way, it’ll get us out into the open air.’ Jess waved a hand at the window. ‘It’s so beautiful.’

‘I’m thinking about moving away.’

‘Moving?’ Jess should hardly be surprised. No one had made the Bayelys the least bit welcome, except perhaps the Hardings, and that was only Joe, really – and, of course, little Whitney. The spare room would be become free again, the queues gone from the bathroom. And Rob would be glad to have his house back. But to leave the village too? With an odd little jerk of her heart Jess realised she was fond of Emily, would miss having her close by. ‘Where would you go?’

‘I don’t know. Simon’s parents, perhaps.’ There was little enthusiasm in Emily’s face. ‘We have some friends in London. I haven’t been in touch for ages, but maybe...’

Jess wondered about Africa. Emily hadn’t mentioned it. Surely they should be with Luke’s father? Maybe things were more difficult than she’d realised. ‘You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need,’ she said, surprising herself.

Emily shook her head. ‘You’ve been very kind. But the village doesn’t want us, and I can’t say I want the village.’ She stood and looked out of the window towards the green, and Jess became aware of footsteps as people passed, the low rumble of voices. ‘At least the cottage is away from the centre. Maybe I *should* go back there. Only...’

A week ago already, and still no one had been picked up by the police.

‘It belonged to Simon’s great aunt, did you know?’ Emily said.

‘The cottage? Goodness. She was local then?’

‘Of long standing. Her side of the family goes back generations, she was the last. Simon used to visit sometimes – during his school holidays.’

‘So he knows the village?’

‘Yes, I suppose he does.’

‘Perhaps -’ the thought seemed odd but also rather appealing, ‘- he and Rob knew one another as boys?’

‘He’s never told me that. Though he did say Rob looked familiar.’

‘There you are then. How nice.’

Had Rob, in turn, recognized Simon Bayely? If so, why hadn’t he said?

Perhaps the boy’s visits had been like those of other weekenders - not important enough to count, not on the village radar.

++

‘Look,’ Jess said. She pointed to two approaching figures. ‘There’s Whitney and her mum. You’ve met Whitney, haven’t you?’ She smiled, trying to win Emily over. ‘She has a soft spot for Luke.’ To her surprise, Luke was already moving ahead. He tolerated Whitney, she knew, but this was genuine enthusiasm. She smiled again, watching them.

It seemed Wenda Tydeman didn't share her delight. As Luke came towards them, she pulled at her daughter's arm and headed for the dunes. Whitney twisted away.

Unless she was going to be clearly and decisively rude, Wenda was stuck.

'Hello, Wenda,' Jess said. 'How nice to see you. You know Emily Bailey, don't you? Luke's mum.'

'I've seen you about,' said Wenda.

'Lovely that the sun's out.' Jess glanced up at the sky and, as if to confirm the truth of it, the other women followed her gaze.

'About bloody time,' said Wenda.

The children were on their knees, picking through the stones. Jess wondered if it was shells that Luke was after, but Emily seemed unconcerned. She was distancing herself, looking away.

'Five minutes, Whit,' Wenda said.

'How's Barry?' Jess said. 'We miss him at school.'

'Like you'd expect.'

'Perhaps -' Jess stopped. 'If there's anything we -' She left the sentence unfinished.

'Can't undo the past, can you?' Wenda's tone was bitter.

Jess felt it as a blow. Perhaps she deserved it, this casual asking after Barry. But how else to do it? She liked Barry, she liked Whitney. She cared about their future.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean -'

'To be honest, I come down here to get away. First time in months.' Wenda's tone hardened again. 'Not that I'm short of exercise at home, mind.' She turned to her daughter, raised her voice. 'Come on Whit.'

'I must go, too,' Emily said quietly. 'I won't be long.' She caught Jess's eye before moving away in the direction of the dune path.

Wenda said, 'I heard what they did to her house. Going too far, that was.'

'Yes.' It was the first time anyone in the village had said so.

Jess took a deep breath. The salty air felt sharp, clean. So different from the heavy pall that drifted in from the shore sometimes and terrified her. A brain tumour! She bit her lip. A different sort of growing thing altogether.

'It's nice, this.' Wenda was gazing out to sea, at the silver-flecked waves, squinting into the dazzle.

'Yes, lovely.'

There was the bubbling cry of a bird, the long upward spike of its whistle. Jess turned to look. Luke had heard it too and was pointing to a pool beyond the tideline where the pale rump of a wader was visible. The bird repeated its call. *Tu-hu-hu*.

'A curlew,' he said.

'So it is,' said Jess.

'How'd you know?' Whitney asked him.

There were gulls, terns, a flock of larger birds. Luke eyes followed them, flicking from one group to another. 'I just do,' he said.

Whitney seemed disappointed, as if she'd expected a different answer, a revelation of some kind. She dropped her eyes. After a moment she leaned forward and picked up an object from the sand.

'Look.'

A stone. There were dull flecks of grey in the brown.

'That's amber,' Jess said. 'When it's polished, it's beautiful.'

'It's worth money, is what,' said Wenda. 'Keep it, Whit.'

Her daughter held it out, pushed it towards Luke.

'You have it.'

But Luke was looking away, his attention caught by something further up the beach. His head was dipped to one side, his eyes tight in concentration.

‘I’ve got to go.’

As if they weren’t there at all, he jumped up and headed away, his arms open, pushing into the air. Within a second, Whitney had dropped the stone and was running after him, calling to his departing back.

‘Children,’ Jess shouted. ‘What are doing? Come here.’

They weren’t listening. They were skipping and leaping. Faster and faster, as if they knew exactly where they were going, driven forward by some inner need. There was a shimmer, a shadow, and for a moment Jess thought someone was beckoning them. She squinted, trying to see, but the haze was too vague, making focusing impossible. They’d moved too far along the beach. She called again, broke into a run.

Already they were well ahead of her, the broken cliff towering above. The great roll of wire sat rusty and brown at its base, its points sticking out dangerously. The tape strung up to mark the forbidden area lay discarded on the shingle. The children were getting nearer and nearer, and she was behind them, calling.

Suddenly Whitney stopped. She seemed perplexed, troubled, glancing this way and that. Luke stopped too, looked around. There was a low rumbling, like far-away thunder. A strange shivering of the earth beneath Jess’s feet.

Then a louder noise and the earth shaking harder.

What was left of Carston Cliff was collapsing in on itself, and into the sea.

Emily

The earth fissures and cracks. Slivers of cliff slide away in sheets. It's as if she's on another planet, admiring the grace, the sombre beauty of an inexplicable landscape.

It's then she sees the children, how close they are. A dawning realisation that creeps as slowly as the rocks that bounce, graceful as feathers, to the shallows below. The figures are tiny, and it's difficult to believe that they're who she knows they are, because that's not where she left them. But they're there, far too close to the foot of cliff, staring upwards. She hears herself scream. And then she's wading through the sand, pulled down as she tries to go faster because the dunes too, are shifting as if there's a sudden collapsing of the earth's crust. Ahead the rocks move more wildly, falling now, one over the other in a rolling, tumbling race to the ground. The sound grows, and she screams again.

Why don't they hear? Why don't they turn and run away?

From somewhere comes a different cry, and she's aware of Jess and the girl's mother sprinting up the beach. Under the roar of the falling earth comes their dry, desperate calls. *Whitney! Whitney! Lu-uuke!*

Still the children don't move.

Her legs are jelly, her body boneless, but she keeps running, running, crying out as she goes. There's another crack and she sees, through clods and strips of root torn from the soil, a gravestone plummeting into the shallows.

There's dust everywhere. It rises in a cloud, above the height of the cliff, up, up into the air. It hangs and spreads. The noise hangs too, a long diminishing echo that gives

way to silence. She can see the children. They're safe, clutching each other. Frozen like statues.

She's nearly there, reaching out her arms, as if somehow she can scoop the children up and out of the way, when she hears the new sound, lower and deeper. Again she stops, suddenly disoriented. A shadow is looming, and at first it seems the sky is falling. Then she sees it's the chapel. It's collapsing, splitting apart, black and terrible. Its great stones bounce and loom and flail, tumbling one after the other, over and over in a new wave of noise and dust and chaos.

It seems like forever, or maybe it's no time at all - there's no way of knowing. The earth is still again. There's a growing pall of dust, the iron fencing that droops like a huge winter leaf, and the breakers turned to mist.

She squints through the haze. The whole of St James chapel has fallen. And where the children were standing, there's a heap of stone and rubble. She can't move. Can't speak. And then she does, rushing forward, sounds breaking from her throat.

Dear God, dear dear God. There's Luke, her son. Lying off to one side. Somehow he's managed to roll free, or been knocked there. She feels a sudden terrible urge to laugh because he's moving, standing, and she's there with him, taking his grimy body in her arms, her face rubbing against his hair, against the cold terror of his face, against the grit that coats him. But he's scrabbling away, shouting and fighting her, pushing her towards the rubble.

She hears more screams, not her own. Long animal wails. And she knows what he's trying to tell her. Seconds before, Luke and Whitney have been together, holding each other. Now the little girl has gone.

She shoves him to the side. 'Get away, Luke.' She scrapes at the mountain of stone. It's immovable, solid. She pulls at the smaller rocks, pushes aside the stones and earth.

Dust fills her nostrils and mouth, scratches her eyes. There's blood on her arms, on her hands.

Jess is there, phone in her hand. She can hear her talking. 'A child. For God's sake be quick.' And then she's beside her, pulling too, their hands scraping together at anything they can.

They see her. Or a part of her. An arm peeking from below a rock. There's a gap beneath it. A chance. Emily lowers herself so she's face down in the dirt, wriggling forward under the overhang, Jess behind her, murmuring. *Careful. Slowly.* There's a pink boot, a leg attached, and Emily feels along it, fingering her way in the dark, wanting to pull but not daring to, because what if the child is wedged somewhere? What if moving her makes things worse? A gentle tug and she feels the body give, slide against the scree. She does it again, reaches up a second arm to grasp the child's leg properly. It's warm, soft under her hands. But she can't feel a pulse, can't find one. The ankle isn't it? But there's no time anyway. Dare she move her further? The rocks will be jagged, could catch at the girl's head. Already there's something sticky under her fingers. She stops. There's an extraordinary calm. A quiet, though she knows there are noises around, but they're somewhere else, beyond her. She crawls forward, reaching up again. Dear God, the head is free, the back too. Thoughts race now. Images of neck-braces and broken spines. Should she? Dare she? There's a grating sound, and then a shaft of light, dim and smoky but allowing her to see.

Now. Do it now. It's going to fall.

She takes a breath, swallows the dust and smoke and mess. What choice does she have? As she scrambles back, pulling the child with her, there's another rumble from above as a wave of loose earth falls and pushes the rock back down, embedding into it the sand.

Whitney is in her arms. Emily bends forward and touches the child's lips. Feels the quiver of a breath.

‘Amy, ‘ she says.

Rob was waiting in the hospital café. ‘A broken leg,’ Jess said. ‘Concussion. Cuts and bruises. But they say she’s going to be OK.’ Suddenly she sat down. ‘God, I thought she was dead.’

Her breath tight at the thought of it. A stone on her chest.

He leaned to take her hands. ‘You were incredibly brave.’

She looked down. Even enfolded in his, her hands were trembling. ‘Not me. Emily. She was amazing.’

‘Yes, her too. Meg told me.’ She looked at him. He seemed far away, a stranger. ‘Hugh’s mum? She was with Wenda.’

‘Oh .. right.’ It had hardly registered, Meg Tydeman hovering in A & E. ‘They’re keeping Luke in overnight – just to check. Emily’s staying with him. I’ve said we’ll pick them up in the morning.’

He nodded. ‘Are *you* OK?’

‘I’m fine.’ The shaking had eased but a headache was taking its place. Her body felt weirdly tense, as if she’d taken a drug of some kind. ‘How did it happen Rob, how did the cliff just disintegrate? It was supposed to be shored up.’ She saw the chapel again, the ruin splitting like a walnut. ‘*How* Rob?’

He stroked her hands with his fingers. ‘There’ll be an enquiry for sure. But it doesn’t make sense.’ He thought for a minute. ‘There’s been a lot of rain - it can get underneath, make everything unstable – but not *that* much.’

‘It’s possible though?’

‘Well....’ He shook his head. ‘It takes a hell of a big storm - even a tidal surge - to trigger a collapse like that.’

She pulled her hands from his and leaned forward, covering her face. It sent her back into the confusion of her own head, the flashes and images and sounds. She sat up, unable to bear it.

‘I should have known. I should have stopped them going.’

‘Sweetheart, how could you? They ran off.’

‘Oh God.’ She tried to think back. It had been so sudden. One minute there on the shoreline, looking at a piece of amber, and then off, away up the beach. ‘If I’d run faster... Got to them.’

He pulled her to him, his arm around her shoulders. But she pushed him away, the adrenaline or whatever it was inside her too strong. Her whole body shaking again.

‘You frightened me,’ said Rob.

‘Me?’

‘I might have lost you.’ To her amazement his eyes were moist. ‘Come on.’ He stood up and reached down to help her. ‘Let’s get home. We both need a drink.’

She met his gaze. ‘I can’t drink,’ she said, her trembling hand meeting his. ‘I’m pregnant.’

++

As they drove into the village they saw people coming back from the beach. The collapsed cliff had already become a site for spectators, for tourists to ogle.

Rob was still clutching her hand. Every so often she pulled away, but after he changed gear or negotiated a turn, his fingers came back again, grasping hers.

‘I can’t believe it,’ he said for perhaps the tenth time.

She made a face that he didn't see. She had no idea what it meant. If it would force her to follow him to Hunstanton or wherever it was he thought he was going. Or whether, somehow, she could remain here and bring up the child herself. Either way, she was going to be a mother, and, oddly, unexpectedly, the fact gave her comfort.

When they parked, he came and opened the car door. Despite the trembling that came back in sudden brief bursts, his act of courtesy made her laugh.

'I'm pregnant,' she said. 'Not ninety.'

Once inside, he made her sit on the sofa, pushed cushions at her back. 'Rob, I'm fine. Really. Quite *fine*.'

'Delayed shock. It can do strange things. I'll make tea.'

She sighed, sitting felt wrong. She needed to be up, moving around, working off the tension that still gripped her body. After a moment she followed him into kitchen.

'Will you please *sit* down,' he said.

'I can't.'

'Of course you can.'

'It's silly.'

'Not as silly as charging across the beach and diving into a fucking cliff collapse when you've only just found out you're expecting a baby. You can't be twelve weeks yet. That was reckless, Jess.'

She leaned her hips against the table, watching him. 'Actually I'm probably about sixteen weeks. And I didn't *dive* anywhere. That was Emily. She saved Whitney's life.'

'*Sixteen*.' She saw the shock register on his face. '*Sixteen*? Why didn't you tell me?'

'I didn't know.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'You must have. What about-' He waved in the direction of her womb. 'Periods and things?'

‘When you’re taking the pill, sometimes it makes that happen.’

‘And?’ He sat down, forgetting the kettle.

‘I must have missed a tablet.’

‘So – blimey!’ He counted out on his fingers. ‘What are we talking about – August? September?’

She moved over to pour the water into the mugs, gave them a stir. It felt hard to think about it like that – to picture the end of it, the actual arrival of a baby. Just now, all she could see was Emily, her arms and face streaked with blood, Whitney’s body covered in dust: the image suddenly large and filling the room. She fought to concentrate on his question.

‘Early August probably.’

‘I can’t believe it.’

She felt for a chair. If Luke’s mother hadn’t moved so quickly, Whitney would be dead.

‘Emily was amazing,’ she said.

++

He was talking as if everything was OK between them, as if the question mark hanging over their future had been erased. Already, he’d phoned his parents, and tomorrow he wanted to go and announce the good news in person to Mel.

‘We can’t,’ she was glad of the excuse. ‘We have to go and pick up Emily and Luke.’

His face fell, then brightened. ‘That won’t take long. We can go afterwards.’

‘We’ve no idea what time it’ll be. Besides, shouldn’t we be here to make them feel at home?’

‘Here? I thought you said their cottage had been cleaned – that it was ready to move back in.’

‘It is. But, surely a couple of days with friends – given the shock of everything?’

‘Oh,’ He was downcast again. ‘Do you think so? It’s a lot of work for you – looking after them.’

She stared at him. ‘Don’t you like them very much?’

‘Of course I do. It’s just.. ‘ He walked over and stood in front of her chair. ‘They’ve been here *weeks*. I want our home back, Jess. I want you back. And now that you’re... Well, you’ve had a shock too. What if something went wrong?’

She didn’t want to talk about it. Not any of it. ‘I’m fine,’ she said

But she wasn’t. She was back on the beach, and Luke was in front of her, jumping up and running. Whitney too. The earth shuddering beneath them, the cliff crumbling.

She stood up, headed for the door. ‘I need to go out.’

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere.’

‘Jess, it’s dark.’

‘I don’t care. I have to get the hospital out of my head.’ And the day too. The fierceness of it, the smell and taste like the climax of a disease.

++

Mercifully, the centre of the village was quiet, the excitement of the day wrapped up and carried inside to be examined again behind closed doors. The evening air was clear, the spring night a balm. She breathed it in greedily as they circled the green and then walked up Felix Street, the intensity of memory fading, replaced by the vast space of the sky - its ghostly moon, a smattering of stars.

Thank God, the children were going to be OK. Because Emily had saved them. Moving fast, purposefully, knowing what needed to be done. Would the villagers hear of it, understand her extraordinary courage?

Surely Wenda would tell them?

‘What’s the matter?’

She was rubbing at her ribs. They were sore, bruised as if the baby inside her, tiny and unformed as it was, were kicking against them in protest at the tension still gripping its mother’s body. It would grow soon, become visible. People would comment, congratulate her, ask about names and plans for the future. Was she ready for that? A weariness engulfed her at the thought.

‘I think,’ she said, turning to Rob. ‘I’d quite like to go to bed, if that’s ok with you. I’m shattered.’

++

She opened her eyes, still groggy. After the half-dreams, half-flashbacks of the night, she must finally have fallen into a proper sleep. Now she could hear voices, Rob and another man talking on the doorstep, their low sounds wafting upwards though the window. It was cold. Freezing. She shivered, huddled back under the duvet.

After several moments Rob returned. ‘That was Hugh.’

She raised herself on an elbow and peered at him. ‘A bit early, isn’t it.’

‘It’s a quarter to ten.’

‘It’s not?’ She pushed herself upright, blinked as he pulled back the curtains. The day was bright, the sky a steely blue. ‘What did he want?’

‘Emily actually. I told him she was still at the hospital. He hadn’t realised.’

‘Do you know why?’

He shrugged. ‘To see if she was OK, I think.’

‘That was nice of him.’ More than that. It was surprising. Hopeful. ‘Any news of how Whitney is?’

‘Not yet. His mum’s there now – she’s been at the Tydeman’s all night, looking after the baby and Barry – and Wenda too, I gather.’ He made a face. ‘Apparently she’s in a bit of a state.’

‘What *is* wrong with her?’

‘I don’t know. Not sure anyone does. She was fine as a kid – we were in the same class. She began to get headaches or something when we started secondary school. I know she always seemed to be off sick.’

‘God, that poor family - they’ve got their hands full, haven’t they?’ And yet - the thought was ghastly, unbearable. At least Whitney was alive, would get better.

‘Was Barry in your class too? He looks older than you.’

‘Ten years, I should think. He was always one of the strong ones.’

She looked down at her hands. ‘Yes.’ He was like her own father: practical, generous hearted. Surely Richard could find *some* role for him at school, even if he could no longer be caretaker.

++

There were bandages on each of Emily’s arms, a couple of butterfly-stitches on her forehead, another on Luke’s.

‘You look like wounded heroes.’

They shepherded them to the car. Luke’s hand was in Emily’s, an unusual thing.

‘Mummy was the hero,’ Luke said.

‘Yes, she was.’ Jess smiled at him, waited as he climbed into the back seat beside his mother.

When he'd strapped himself in, he said. 'We went to see Whitney. She's going to be better soon.'

'That's wonderful news.' She knew already, had been to see her before meeting the Bayelys. For a child suffering from concussion, Whitney had looked surprisingly alert, propped up on pillows and grinning over the white cast of her leg.

'I'm going to be in a wheelchair, like my dad is.'

'It's just when you go outside, lovey.' Hugh's mother looked up from the corner where she was sitting with a magazine folded in her lap.

'You'll be like two Roman chariots coming down the road. We'll all have to make way for you,' Jess said.

Whitney's smile returned.

'But then I'll have crutches and my dad will have a prof... a proffth...' She gave up.

'A prosthesis. That's good. You'll be able to get strong again together.' Jess smiled at Hugh's mum. 'Hello, Meg. How are you?'

'All the better for seeing this one's OK.'

'I'm sure.' A shadow passed over the window. She could smell the dust again, sour and choking, taste the grit on her tongue.

'My dad's coming later,' Whitney said. 'Uncle Hugh's bringing him.'

'That's great.' Jess bent to look at something written on the cast. 'Brave girl!' it said. It had been signed by one of the doctors. 'Whitney,' she hesitated, made her voice light. 'You know yesterday? You said something like "I can see him" when you started to run. Was it Luke you meant, or someone else?'

Whitney frowned. 'I can't remember. Did I do running?'

Jess nodded. 'You did. You ran off suddenly with Luke. But you called out first.'

Maybe she'd misheard. Even so, the impression lingered. Maybe Whitney would never

be able to recall the moments that led up to the cliff fall. It fact it was pretty likely.

Even now, a full day later, Jess could barely make sense of them herself.

Emily

Quiet was what she came for. A kind of limbo. This morning is the first time she's found it.

She looks out of the window.

Two women stare in at her, and behind them there's a TV outside-broadcast van. On The Green, beyond a line of badly parked cars, groups of people stand around talking.

What?

The women drop their gazes, consult one another. Emily glares at them, willing them away. Shit, they're coming to the door.

Even so the bang is sudden, slicing through the silence of the house. She freezes, eases back into the shadows. The bang comes again and then the clatter of the letter box.

'Mrs Bayely? Emily Bayely? Please open the door.' It's a London voice, chirpy.

'Please Emily. You're a heroine. Everyone's talking about you.'

The words make her feel sick. She pulls herself into the corner. How on earth have they found her?

If Luke were here, she'd run the gauntlet, rush to the car and drive them both away. Properly away this time, never to come back. But Luke isn't here. The half-term holiday's over, and he's back at school, taken in by Jess first thing.

Besides, there's a little girl in hospital – and Emily owes her.

'Emily? Mrs Bay-ley.' It's a different voice now. 'Please. People know you. Your readers are anxious to hear your story.'

Her readers? Hah!

She's on the floor, on her knees. As she pokes her head round the doorway, she sees the open letter-box, the pink of someone's fingers. 'Go away,' she hisses under her breath.

Now she wants to pee. *Dear God. Just fuck off.* She waits, trying to keep her breath still. But they know she's there, have seen her. She considers crawling on all fours up the stairs, then she stands up instead, strides loudly through the hallway, lets her feet ring out on the floor. She's done enough slinking around. No more.

She pushes the chain into its moorings and opens the door the three inches it allows. 'Go away,' she says. 'I don't want to talk to you.'

There are other journalists now, a straggle of them behind the women. One pushes his way through. 'Hey, Emily, it's me, Sam Jacobs.' The name disarms her. She knows it from somewhere. It makes her hesitate, look up.

'It is her. It's the *writer*,' says someone else.

From nowhere, there's a microphone under her chin. 'Emily, you've had a personal tragedy of your own. Saving that little girl's life - it must be a great comf-.' She locks eyes with him, wants suddenly to spit, feeling the saliva ready on her tongue. The door slamming into his wrist converts his words into a gasp of pain. She pushes at the arm and heaves the door closed with the weight of her body. When she leans against the wood, her breath is tight.

She's been glad of Jess's little house, glad of the sanctuary it's offered her and Luke. But today she hates it. There's no gap between it and the outside world, no protecting garden, or long pathway to a gate. Just the walls, and the windows, and then people. People who talk loudly as if she isn't there, three feet away.

Baby girl, wasn't it? Died.

It happens.

She blocks her ears with her fingers but snippets break through.

Not much of a Dunno ... why we ran it.

If there were a rifle in the cupboard, as there used to be in Arusha, she might get it out, put it to her shoulder and shoot them. One by one, through the deepest part of their stupid, addled brains. Instead she turns on the television. The radio too. Sets the volume to the highest she can stand.

The house rocks with the noise, but it does the trick.

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After an hour or so, a kind of calm sets in beyond the clamour, a whispering of silence, so she knows the journalists have begun to drift away. Maybe now she can go out, get some air. But when she goes to the window, she sees the man – Sam whatever his name was - and the women are still there on the green in a huddle. She bangs her fist down on the windowsill, puts it to her mouth to ease the sting.

Beyond the little party of hacks, a figure emerges from the shadow of Sugar Lane. She ducks behind the curtain and watches as it approaches. With a jolt she sees that it's Joe. But it isn't the Joe she knows. This one is beardless, an overgrown youth. The women intercept him and he stops. They're too far away for her to hear, but after a few seconds he points up towards the allotments and the reed-beds, and the reporters hurry away.

She opens the door.

'What the -?' he says.

She looks at him blankly and then realises. The TV and radio are still on full blast, the sound deafening.

‘Sorry.’ She goes to switch off the machines and he follows her inside. When she turns, he’s there behind her and she steps back.

‘Poor Emily,’ he says. ‘You’ve had such a rough time.’

His voice is Joe’s, but not his appearance. She can’t quite make sense of this clean-shaven, gangly figure in front of her. It seems younger, even more unworldly. Where his beard has been there are patches of red, as if his chin is sore.

‘You cut it off.’

He bites his lip. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Yes, actually. I do.’ She swings away and heads for the kitchen. She’s not sure if she wants him here, or how to be with him. This last week, stuck as she’s been in the centre of the village, she’s seen him from afar, has ducked behind hedges, the biscuit display in the Co-op.

‘You managed to get rid of those vultures outside then?’

‘I saw them crowding on the doorstep earlier, so I’m afraid I told them that bones had been found in the reeds.’

‘Have they?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’

There’s a glimmer of a smile. ‘They’ll be old bones, washed there, I imagine, after the graveyard collapsed on Boxing Day. I’m afraid I gave our friends the impression they were recent.’

‘Good.’ She leans back against the counter. ‘But shouldn’t you be there too?’

‘Possibly.’ He frowns, lifts an arm and drops it. ‘Your face,’ he says.

She puts a finger to her temple, feels the sting as she touches one of the butterfly strips, the crust of a scab. ‘It’s fine.’

‘I hear you were very brave.’

She shrugs. ‘I didn’t think about it.’ She does now, feels again the weight of her impossible movements, the slow, custard-like intensity of the air as she tried to race forward. ‘It was horrible.’

‘Yes.’ He gazes down at her. She can see his lips properly. They’re fuller, wider than they seemed under the beard. There are wrinkles at their edges. Not so young after all.

‘Why are you here?’

‘I needed to know you were OK. Both of you.’ He stops, his eyes close, and he takes an audible breath. ‘I heard what they did to your house. Somebody said they yelled terrible things at you.’

She bows her head, the shame of it still there.

‘It was my fault.’ he says.

She looks up, shocked. ‘Yours?’

‘Yes.’

A strange *phissing* sound comes from between her lips. ‘You can hardly be responsible for the actions of the whole village.’

‘I can guess what happened. One of them - Will Sutton, probably, because he’s always hanging around looking for trouble - will have seen me come to your house. Then their nasty minds will have put two and two together and assumed -’ He flaps his arms.

Another vision rises, the pull of her sweater across the top of her bra, her breasts all but exposed. Had the curtains been *open*?

‘They’re stupid people, Emily. Ugly-minded, stupid people.’

A thought strikes her. ‘How do you know about it, about what they said? Does *everybody*?’

‘In one version or another.’ He grimaces. ‘Sorry. You know what it’s like here. But,’ he says when he sees her face, ‘people are ashamed of what happened. Truly. They know it’s gone too far.’

‘It shouldn’t have gone anywhere.’

‘No.’

She looks at him. The lines around the edge of his eyes deepen. She can see affection in them, regret. She feels, suddenly, incalculably, weary.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she says. ‘Not any more. We’re leaving.’

He’s silent, staring at her. She can hear voices again, though they’re distant. The slow *sthunk-sthunk* of the waves. Despite what people say, the sea here is always the same: grey and lazy and tired. The sky bleakly flat.

She’s exhausted by it.

‘As soon as I know that Whitney’s alright, we’ll be gone.’

‘Whitney is alright. At least, on the way to it. She’s home now.’

‘Well then.’

Colours are what she wants. The dry copper of the earth, the purple jacaranda. Things that are pungent and hit the back of your nose and make you sneeze. The memory of them comes as a kind of light dazzling through the greyness, past the red patches on Joe’s chin, and the wrinkles round his eyes.

‘Emily?’

The village is nothing but a shadow really – the men who rubbished her house, the hacks outside. She can shrug them off. What’s real is the little yellow weaverbird, and the bee-eater, and the lilac-breasted roller saying hello from its post.

‘Why are you smiling?’ Joe moves towards her. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘I don’t know,’ she says. ‘I think I might be homesick. Isn’t that a thing?’

++

Flights to Arusha, to her dismay, are in excess of £1,000. Less, if she delays a month or so. She sits back, closes her laptop. That will take them almost to Easter. Luke can finish the school term, and she'll have time to repack the boxes. The irony of it lifts her mouth into a grin.

She has no idea how habitable their old house is. With Simon travelling so much, it's been empty most of the time. Full of spiders. Worse possibly. She shrugs. Aishi, their neighbour, will help. Luke too.

As for Simon himself, she's not sure that he'll want them there. Well, so be it.

This isn't about Simon. It's about her and Luke. And Amy.

Already she missed them. The presence of Emily and Luke had provided a different focus, a centre. Even Rob, for all his resentment, for all his impatience, had been protective and thoughtful. And now the house felt empty. Mugs and dishes remained stacked in cupboards - not that Emily hadn't cleaned up everything as soon as she'd used it - and the spare-room had become bland again, colourless. More like a Travel Lodge than a home.

Jess sat on the bed by the window, spread her hand over the coverlet, fingered the lines of its grey-blue checks. She'd brought it with her from her flat in London. Before that it had been in each of the various houses she'd inhabited with her father. She tried to remember how many that was. Ten perhaps? Eleven. The fabric had become thin, almost shiny from countless washings. It was the only thing she still had.

She'd apologized for the room's lack of welcome. 'It's the one we've never got round to doing.'

'You'll be able to redecorate now,' Emily'd said as they left.

Jess'd taken the words as confirmation of the room's drabness. Now, she realised, staring out at the darkening sky, it wasn't what Emily had meant at all. She'd meant it was time for them to turn it into a *nursery*.

But Emily hadn't known about Rob's new job. Or that in ten weeks time he would take up his post in Kings Lynn and would rent a house there, and, at the end of the summer term, she was expected to join him. Because if she didn't, she'd break his heart.

She rose and made her way towards the doorway. It was no good thinking like this. What she needed was a discussion. A proper talk. A thrashing out of things. Tuesday or Wednesday maybe, when Rob was back from overseeing the new office.

A piece of loose wallpaper caught her eye. She spat on a finger, wiped it on the flap and pushed it against the wall. When it refused to stick she pulled at it but instead of tearing, more came away, and then more. Soon a large strip had broken free to reveal the paint beneath. She clicked on the light to see it properly: a pale dusky-pink colour.

A child's room.

Right then. That's what she would make it.

++

'Jess?' Rob was standing in the doorway, filling it.

She jumped. 'I didn't hear you.'

'What on earth are you doing?'

Lowering her aching arm, she turned to face him, sandpaper clasped to her chest.

'The room needs doing – and we've got a baby coming. I haven't got the paint yet but I've prepared the walls.' She took hold of his hand and dragged him into the room. 'Feel it,' she told him. She slid her fingers over the surface herself. 'See how smooth I've made it. I've done a good job, don't you think?'

He touched where the paper had been and then drew his hand away. He looked stunned, as if he'd been driving for days and had just stopped and come into the light.

'Very nice. But we're not going to be *here*, Jess.'

'Well we might be,' she said. '*I* might.'

'Please,' he said, as he turned to go. 'Don't start this again.'

'I'm not *starting* anything.' She felt suddenly uncomfortable and lowered her voice.

'I'm in the middle of it.'

He put a hand to his head, pressed his temples.

‘I thought buttercup,’ she said. ‘It’ll reflect the sun.’

++

‘Aren’t you hungry?’ she asked. He was sitting at the table, picking at the sandwich she’d made.

He shook his head. ‘Just tired.’

‘How did it go - the King’s Lynn thing? Is the office nearly ready?’ Not that she wanted to know. But if she asked, his mood might lighten.

‘It’s fine.’

‘Good.’

‘You’re not really cross about the room, are you?’

‘No. Yes.’ He raised his head. ‘It’s stupid, Jess.’ He pushed the plate into the centre of the table. ‘You shouldn’t be doing it. No,’ he raised a hand as she tried to speak, let it fall back on the table. ‘*I’ll* do it. There’s some white left in the cupboard. I’ll use that.’

‘White? But that’s cold. It should be buttercup.’ Anger prickled. He was being ridiculous - she’d do it anyway before he got the chance.

‘Jess, we’re putting the house on the market. Remember?’ His mouth narrowed.

‘You really don’t want it, do you – what I’m trying to make for us? Somewhere solid and safe to raise our children.’

‘We’ve got that *here*.’ She turned away so he wouldn’t see her lips trembling. Why did he say those things? Each time it cut her deep inside. Taking a breath, she tried to find some words of calm. ‘I love you,’ she said. It didn’t sound real, even to her. ‘But I saw the paint under the wallpaper, and I knew...’ Tears welled, and she kept her face turned away. ‘I knew the room *wanted* - ’

‘Just leave it, Jess.’ His tone lacked energy. After three days away he seemed hardly to want to talk to her. ‘I’ll paint it at the weekend - whatever bloody colour you want.’

The sharpness entering his voice stopped her tears. She turned and stared at him. His face was wooden.

‘*Rob.*’

‘Now what?’

‘Why are you being like this?’

‘Don’t be silly. I’m not being like anything. I’m tired and want to go to bed. And you’re doing everything you can to make things worse.’

‘That’s not fair.’

She went over to the window and put her forehead against the cold of the glass. He thought she was mad. Well, let him. She longed to get away from him, as far away as possible. It was a still night. Windless. She let the silence seep into her ears. When she turned back, he was watching her.

He dropped his eyes.

‘Did something go wrong?’ she said.

‘What?’ His head came up again. His eyes were sunken, his pupils small, as if they didn’t want to see.

He didn’t mean these things. He loved her, and, deep in her marrow, she knew it. Something had happened at the office, and he couldn’t tell her. He’d been away from home – had probably not even eaten properly.

‘It’s the new job, isn’t it? Something’s gone wrong.’

‘For fuck’s sake, Jess, it’s fine. Really.’ He stood up, moved to the door. ‘I’m going to bed.’

She watched him go. She didn’t know him like this, didn’t want to.

It was pitch black, no light. The bed felt odd, the room quiet. She slid her hand over to Rob's side. It was cold. She felt a sharp tingle of alarm.

She slid out of the bed, and over to the door, switched on the hall light. The spare room door was open, and she went in. He was there at the window, looking out over the village to the reed-beds.

'I didn't mean to wake you,' he said. He didn't turn.

She stood beside him, looking out too. There was little to see: in the distance, a glimmer of moon, the dark expanse of the marshland below. 'It doesn't matter.' She leant her head against his shoulder. 'You need to sleep.'

'I can't.' He put his arm round her, pulling her to him. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I said horrible things.'

'I hardly helped.'

'You will do something for me?'

'What?'

'Come and look at houses. I mean properly, seriously. You don't have to say yes to the whole thing, not yet. But at least *consider* them. I can't even go in through a front door without you there. I tried.' He gave a dry laugh. 'I booked a couple of viewings and then cancelled them.'

Her throat swelled and blocked her words. She squeezed his arm.

'Of course I will.'

'Thank you.'

They were silent. She leaned into him, her back against his chest, gazing out into the night. Yes, she could forgive him his cruelty, could understand that he was afraid of losing her. Wasn't she afraid of losing him too?

‘There’s something else.’

‘Yes.’

An affair, she thought. Her heart a sudden presence in her chest, beating hard. She hadn’t thought of that. And now he would confess, and she would be angry. Livid beyond experience. But she would know, could make a decision with that.

‘The bones they found – the ones in the reed-bed?’

‘Yes?’ She looked up at him, surprised. ‘You mean the ones that washed there from the cliff fall?’

He disentangled himself and faced her. She couldn’t see his eyes. ‘They didn’t. I mean they weren’t. They’re from that boy in my class. Jimmy Henson.’

‘The bones are? They’re *his*?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh God. When? I mean, how do you know?’

His voice was low. ‘Hugh - he phoned me. They checked the DNA.’

They never found him, the boy’s father had told her.

But now they had. She felt a weight of sadness on the man’s behalf, a stone in the centre of her chest.

They were silent again, looking out. The moon glimmered brighter, the clouds shifting and making shapes against it.

Perhaps it wasn’t awful. Perhaps it was a relief. In the long term anyway. At least now there was something to grieve. A chance to say goodbye. It was what Ed Henson wanted, wasn’t it? In a way she envied him.

‘Has he been told?’

‘Who?’

‘Jimmy Henson’s father.’

‘I’ve no idea. They may not be able to trace him.’

‘I know where he is.’ She’d said it before she’d thought.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I know him.’ She turned to look towards him. ‘Ed Henson. He’s in the forest with the travellers. He was one of the men who helped Emily that night.’

‘Christ, Jess.’

“What? What does it matter? It’s a good thing, surely? He’s nearby. He can -,” she stopped. Would he *want to see* his son’s bones? What if it were her? And the remains were her mothers? No - that was different. But if it were her *child*...

‘He loved him,’ she said.

They were still in the dark; she needed to see his face. She rose and switched on the light. Rob blinked, slid his hands across his forehead. He was pale. Heavy shadows sat under his eyes like an accusation.

‘Does he know who I am?’

‘I imagine so, yes.’ She wouldn’t lie to him anymore. ‘I know you won’t like it, because he’s a traveller and you’ve got a thing about them. But Ed Henson’s been here, Rob. He came to see Emily.’

‘I see.’

He was silent again. She waited for his anger but none came.

At last he said, ‘I was there when Jimmy disappeared. I was part of it.’

++

He was sitting on the bed, staring at the wall she’d sanded, not seeing it.

‘Please, Rob.’

He shook his head. ‘It comes back, you know. At night. I think, was it like that? Was it really? But it’s always the same.’

She could see he wasn't able to find a way to say it. Guessed that even now he might not. Whatever the truth, it filled her with terror. As if to protect the growing thing inside her, as if to block its ears, she slid a hand to her stomach and held it there.

Yet she had to know.

Tell me.

His skin was yellow, drawn tight across his bones. It was how he would look when he was old. Frail and frightened.

A different man.

'Tell me,' she said.

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He looked sadder than she'd ever seen him, and she took his hand. 'It's Ok.'

'You mustn't interrupt. Let me say it how I can.'

'I promise.'

But he said nothing. The room was full of silence. Louder than the waves that hit the shore on windy days, louder than the gulls.

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, staring into some middle distance. She had no idea what he saw. He took in a breath. When he spoke it was with unexpected energy, the words pouring out as if they'd been queuing up, longing for freedom.

'It's the first day of the summer holidays.' He looked at her as if for confirmation that she'd heard, and she nodded. 'It's hot. Dazzling. I'm messing about with something in my room – lego perhaps - and then Mum comes in. Get outside in the sunshine, she says, so I do. I go round to Hugh's, but he isn't there. It's just his brother, and he tells me to bugger off.

'I wander around, kick a few stones, feel a bit bored. Think of going down to the beach but I know there'll be weekenders there and they'll piss me off. Then I see Rick

Cooper - he's gone now, left the village years ago - he's on the green with his cousin, Si something-or-other, who comes from London and stays in the village sometimes. We don't really know him, though. None of us do, except Rick. They're messing about on the swings looking even more bored than me.

'They call me over, and we have a conflag and decide to go down to the allotments. It's where we always go - hidden away, so we can smoke and things. We wander past Leonie Patchett's house, and her dad's sitting on his lawnmower, cutting their great long lawn. He sees us and waves, and we wave back.

'Toff! Rick says.

'When we get to the allotments we see Leonie's there before us. She's down at the far end by the sheds, with Wenda and Tracey, and they're in a huddle, whispering. I've never seen them together before - Leonie's usually much too grand for the younger kids. They must hear us approach, because Leonie glances up. She's frowning, looking angry, then she sees Rick and her face changes. She puts a finger to her lips and points towards the shadows behind one of the sheds. It's bright, and the sun burns my eyes, so I can't see at first. I hear muttering, and then I know who it is - there's only one person who gabbles away like that. I look over at Rick, and he's grinning at Si and at Leonie and I see their eyes light up as if they've thought of something. Rick steps forward and says, all innocent, as if he really wants to know, Seen any ghosts lately Jimmy?

'Jimmy gives a frightened little squeal, like a seal pup or something, which makes us all laugh, then he emerges from the shadow. He's thin and scrawny, wearing his trousers that are too long, and he's rubbing his hands against the front of his shirt as if he doesn't know what to do with them.

'Spasmo, Rick says.

‘We bundle over, the six of us, shouting and hollering. Rick gets there first, and Jimmy takes a step back, his eyes all open and frightened, and walks into a wheelbarrow. I think he’s going to fall over, but he rights himself and stands behind it. It’s OK Jimmy, Leonie says. Her posh voice is like honey. You can play with us if you want.

‘Yea, Rick says. Come on.

‘Jimmy looks at us, his head tipped, not believing. I know we’re being cruel, tricking him like that, but I laugh anyway, because the others are, and because he doesn’t know whether to be frightened or hopeful. You’ll only be horrid, Jimmy says, and Rick says, We won’t, will we Robbie? and of course, I say, No, no way. But we’re all laughing by then - him too, giggling and simpering. We think he’s such a div, and he has no idea the poor bugger. We’ll play tag, Rick says. And because you’re the littlest, you’ve got to be it.

‘Start counting then, Leonie says, and he does. Thin and scrawny and all anxious to please, he squeezes his eyes shut and stands there by the wheelbarrow, and *counts*.’

Rob fell silent. She could hear his breathing beside her. She couldn’t look at his face. Almost she wanted him to stop, to rise from the bed and walk away. Almost she wished the bones had never been found. She could hear the shame in his voice, and the grief.

‘Once he starts counting, we go all quiet. His skinny fists are pushed tight against his eyes, but, instead of going off to hide, we don’t move. We stand there, our fingers to our lips, trying not to giggle. He hasn’t got any idea. We think we’re so clever. I count too, just to keep pace, and, even when I’ve gone way past a hundred in my head, he keeps on counting. Maybe he can’t count properly. It’s possible – he’s really slow in class. Or maybe he’s too frightened to stop. I don’t know. And all the time we’re standing there, getting hotter and hotter and finding it harder and harder not to giggle. Finally Leonie

points towards the reed-beds, and Rick nods, and they begin to creep up behind him. They go one step at a time, like cats, or lions stalking their prey, becoming still as statues when he makes even the slightest move of his body. Then, when they're right on top of him, Leonie shouts really loudly, *Booo*, and he jumps up and stares at them. Then he looks at those of us watching. And then he begins to run.

'He's heading for the reeds, and we chase behind. First Rick and Leonie and Si, and then me and Wenda and Tracey. As we get close he puts on a spurt and goes faster. He's a quick runner, thin and mean on his feet like a weasel, and it's hard to keep up with him. But we're approaching the end of the pathway. We've left behind the trees and the blackberry bushes and the sloes and, even though the day is hot and dry, the ground's getting soggy. Rick yells. Get him!

'I can see the look on Wenda's face, and on Tracey's. *We're not meant to do this*, the look says. *It's wrong*. And I feel the same. But we can't not keep going. I suppose we think we'll look stupid or - I don't know - that the others won't like us anymore. So we do what we were told and *really* chase him then, not caring where we're going, or where he is.

'Then suddenly we can't see him any more. The reeds are high because it's summer, and we've reached the start of the boardwalk. There's no sign of him. Not on the boardwalk itself, and not anywhere else. All we can see is this thick curtain of green on either side of the wooden planks - we can't see over the top at all, it's much too high - and the yellow sucking slush below. So we stop, our laughter fading away, and try to listen. But, beyond the swish of the grasses and the gulls that are always deafening anyhow, we don't hear a thing. So we call. And then we call again. And again. And still he doesn't come.

‘We wait, I dunno, maybe five minutes. Ten. Fuck it, Rick says at last. Stupid spasm. And he and Si wonder away. Leonie goes too, off in the other direction towards the big house where I saw her dad on his lawnmower. And, after another minute or two, Wenda says she’d not meant to be out anyway, so she goes as well.

‘It’s just Tracey and me left then. We look at one another, a bit lost, because everyone’s gone and deserted us. Bloody Jimmy Henson, I say.

‘But before I can go, she grabs my arm. Had we better find him? she says.

‘I suppose.

‘We’re not allowed in the reeds.

‘He won’t be there anyway, I say.

‘So we leave too. We go and buy ice-cream at Jimmy’s dad’s crab shack and take it to the bench in the centre of the green. Mine is chocolate and hers is vanilla, and we let it melt on our fingers, and then lick it off our skin. We go on the swings, and the seesaw, and we get sunburnt.

‘It’s only later, when the search party goes out, that we realise.’

There was silence again and then a strange dry, drawn-back breath, and she looked up. Rob’s face was distorted in misery. He held up a hand so she wouldn’t touch him and pulled away to the end of the bed.

‘For years, you know, I told myself we’d all thought he’d swerved off into the trees - I mean he could have done, it was *possible*. But if I’m honest -’ His eyes came up and held hers before dropping back down, ‘I’m not sure any of us *actually* believed it.’

Jess felt numb, shocked beyond belief. And yet not so. Children, stupid, mindless children. She could see Jerome and Oliver and Tom. All thinking themselves so clever, yet not thinking at all.

But this was Rob. Her husband. Her lover.

She stood up, moved again to the window. But it reflected her face back into herself, the light too bright behind her.

‘You were young,’ she said, turning to him. ‘You could hardly have imagined Jimmy actually *would* keep running on and on, right *into* the reeds. You wouldn’t have thought it through in that way. You couldn’t know that he’d dr -’

It was unbearable to say it.

‘The thing is -’ He raised his hand in a fist, banged it against his temple. ‘I don’t know what I thought. I really, really don’t know.’

‘You were *children*.’

‘We were nine, Jess.’

There was silence. Long and full, drumming in her ears.

‘And so, what happened then? Did you tell anyone?’

‘No.’ It came out as a moan. He passed a hand across his forehead, squeezed at the front of his skull as if trying to refine his memories, to change them. ‘We just joined the search when it started late that afternoon, pretending we were as shocked as anyone - in a way we were - we were terrified. But we never said that we’d chased him, that we’d made him do it.’

‘Not ever?’

‘Not ever.’

She went to him. Held out her arms. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘It’ll be light soon. We need to get dressed. We have to find Ed Henson.’

Now he was going, she felt oddly, inappropriately, bereft. She watched as he climbed out of the car, such a funny, awkward child, all elbows and head. Yet, somehow he'd made her look at the world differently, and she would miss that, along with the intensity of his concentration and his rigid, infuriating stubbornness. The class would be calmer without him, that was for sure, but it would be the poorer.

Emily bent for the case, levered it out over the sill of the boot. Jess picked up Luke's red tote bag, carried it on to the station steps, and returned to close the passenger door.

'They're picking up the boxes on Friday,' Emily said. 'They've promised not to come before 3.30.'

'Don't worry, I'll be there.'

'Thank you.' Emily touched her arm in gratitude, and Jess smiled.

'I'm sorry you'll miss the service.'

'Perhaps it's for the best.' Emily glanced towards Luke where he stood gazing at a map of the train line. 'You never know.'

Jess lowered her voice. 'He told me he thought the bones should be reburied in the sea.'

Emily shook her head. 'Oh Lord.'

'He's right though.'

Emily looked round. The platform stretched long and empty behind her, the rails curving into the distance. At its end the dark dust of the train, waiting for its signal. She breathed in deep, squared her shoulders.

‘Well, here goes,’ she said.

‘I’ll wait with you.’

‘No, please don’t. You’ve done enough. We’re fine.’

‘I’d like to.’

‘No. Really.’

The woman was as stubborn as her son. ‘OK,’ Jess said. ‘If you’re sure.’ She turned to Luke. He was watching her now. ‘Well, Luke,’ she said. ‘I guess it’s time to say goodbye.’ She put out a hand for him to shake. ‘Have a safe trip.’

He was silent. For a moment she saw the old Luke in him, in the rigid blankness of his face. Then, ignoring her hand, he stretched out his arms and clasped her about the waist. It brought a lump to her throat.

‘I might miss you,’ he said.

‘Oh Luke, I shall certainly miss you.’

He pulled away and looked at her; she felt the chill of the air between them. His eyes were dark pools in the shadows. ‘You don’t have to worry about Alwin,’ he said. ‘He’s gone now.’

‘What Luke, what did you say?’

But he’d turned to pick up the tote bag, the train was moving again.

Had she heard properly? *Worry* about Alwin - why should she do that? Always, always, these vague references, little drops in an ocean of possibilities but never followed up. Perhaps she was as guilty as Luke was. Avoiding it because... Because of what...? Here was her chance.

‘Who do you think Alwin really is?’ she could say.

And what would Luke reply? Nothing, probably. Or something as shadowy and elusive as Alwin himself.

No, Alwin was gone. Hadn't Luke just said so?

'You've got your tickets?' she said instead

Emily showed her them in her hand. She straightened her scarf and took in a deep breath, her pale face drawn in sudden anxiety. Then she smiled. 'Here we go,' she said. She leaned forward to kiss Jess's cheek. 'Thank you for everything.' She dropped her eyes to the bulge beginning to show under Jess's coat. 'You'll let me know how it goes?'

Jess nodded. The warmth in Emily's voice made it difficult to speak.

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He had, of course, completely emptied his locker. Not a scrap of paper or a pencil shaving left. If it weren't for the model still on the shelf, he could almost have never been. The pictures had gone too, the shells, the drawing of the dog skeleton she'd put on the wall, the sketches of Old Charlburgh.

An empty classroom always felt weird. Not in term time, because the children inhabited it even when they'd gone home. But during the holidays it was as if the room were haunted, their chatter and sighs there, but unheard. Today it was worse than ever.

It was time, she supposed, for the models to go. Luke had refused to take his - and how could he anyway on a flight to Africa? - saying it must stay here, in school. But the children wouldn't even pretend to respect it now. Not because they hated him - that had eased, since Emily's courage became the talk of the village - but because he'd gone, left them. He didn't count anymore.

But throw it away? All that work, all those hours of cutting and gluing and holding together. All that *talent*. No.

It was heavier than she expected, more cumbersome, but she picked it up anyway, and took it across to the store cupboard, where she pushed it awkwardly into the dark of

the top shelf, easing it below the cobwebs and to the back. As she closed the door, a clatter made her pull it open again. At first she could see nothing. Then she spotted the small figure Luke had made tucked in beside the gym hoops. So he hadn't taken it with him? She leaned to retrieve it, turning it over in her hand and experiencing the prickle of unease she always felt when she saw it.

The thing was dirty now, the clothes torn at the edges, the leg that had been broken before now gone altogether. It was hardly a figure at all. Just a face on a pole.

She took it and dropped it in the bin. It stared up at her, its dark eyes crossly alive as if she'd insulted it. She bent to turn it face down, but even as she straightened and began to move away, she felt its accusation.

'For God's sake,' she said out loud. The words rang in the empty room.

There was an unused exercise book on her desk and she opened it, tearing out its pages, ripping them to pieces and dropping those in too.

'Good.'

Now everything was ready for the first day of term. The rest of the holiday was hers. She had things to do, decisions to make, long hard conversations to have with Rob. At the thought, something dark and shadowy rose and travelled up her body to behind her eyes. She took in a breath, pushing it away. Not yet.

At the door, she turned. The bin lay silent and dull at the foot of her desk. Inside it, a piece of battered wood, an old peg.

Of no use to anyone.

Locals mingled with the tourists and weekenders scattered across the shingle. She could see Barry in his wheelchair, Wenda beside him with the baby in his pram. Whitney was there too, a crutch under one arm. She was getting better by the day, coping well at school despite her injuries. Whitney lifted a hand and waved, and Jess waved back. Seeing the gesture, several other locals waved too.

The bones and the cliff fall had lent the place a kind of notoriety - even glamour - that its inhabitants were enjoying. The Anglian TV outside-broadcast van had re-appeared, along with another from Channel 4, and a clutch of journalists were interviewing enthusiastic bystanders about their history. If, at a more practical level, it was their present the villagers were more concerned with, at least they were acknowledging their past.

Today, despite the mini-media-circus, there was a serious job to be done. It was why everyone was there. She would have liked Luke and Emily to see it.

The sense of desertion she'd felt when they'd left was still with her. A stupid feeling, she knew, because what they'd done was the right thing. For Emily, coming here after her little girl had died, it must have been like a mini death in itself. A kind of punishment. Hidden away in the cottage, ignored or reviled by the locals - where was the healing in that? No, you had to turn round and meet the past head on. You had to say to it: OK, then, do what you must. I'll endure it.

It was what Rob had done. Telling her about Jimmy Henson's death, owning up to his part in it, had changed him. Her too possibly. But she admired his courage, and in facing Ed Henson.

'Don't need your explaining,' Jimmy's dad had said. 'Worked it out years ago, didn't I? You was kids. Don't want to know more.'

These last weeks had not been easy, Rob's mood alternately cold and withdrawn or emotional and full of self-disgust. She looked at him standing beside her. He seemed more at ease this morning, had slept well, he said. Now he was gazing up at the sky, lost in it for once, rather than in himself. She followed his eyes. A harrier was flying across the top of the reeds, another behind it. They were performing a kind of dance, swooping up close, talons out, and then sliding away.

'Are they courting?' she said. 'Or fighting. They look so aggressive.'

'Courting. Look, one's coming down.'

She followed the curve of its flight. 'That's a female, isn't it? It's whiter.'

'Well done.' He caught her eye and smiled. For the first time in weeks he was relaxed. She prayed it would last.

The bird rose again. Something long and thin trailed from its beak.

'They're nest-building.'

She bit her lip. His tone held a hint of suggestion, as if it were their own future he were thinking of. Would it be shared? She still didn't know. He seemed hardly to have expected it these last weeks.

There was a sudden shifting in the waiting crowd, a communal sense of alertness that broke through her thinking. She strained to see. A small procession was making its way to the front. The vicar and various dignitaries first, then the coffins. They were carried

by a group of local men, Hugh and Julian Tierney amongst them. Rob had been asked and refused.

‘It wouldn’t feel right,’ he’d said. And she’d known what he meant.

‘Who’s that woman next to the vicar?’ she whispered.

‘That’s Lady whatsit - Lord Lieutenant for Suffolk. Look, Joe’s there too.’

‘He’s wearing a suit. I’ve never seen him in a suit before.’

He looked different, formal and full of authority. Were the rumours about him and Emily true? Surely not? There’d never been a hint of it from Emily.

‘They’re making quite a fuss, aren’t they?’ said Jess. ‘I’m glad.’

The service wasn’t starting yet after all. Joe was fiddling with a loudspeaker that didn’t seem to be working. She looked out across the water. A light wind picked at it and sent ribbons of white scurrying across the surface. But the sun was out, easing the bite of the breeze, turning the air warm.

This would be a time for the bells to ring, she thought. For the strange strangled sound of their booming to reach up out of the ocean and fill the shore. How apposite it would be. The past greeting the past, in the present. She sighed. Luke was right. The bones *should* be in the sea.

‘It’s where they want to be,’ he’d said. ‘With their mummies and daddies and sisters.’

The words had made her shiver, but now she understood. For the bones, the sea and the ruins of Old Charlburgh that lay beneath were a kind of home.

There was a hush, and she focused her attention on the events on the beach. The vicar had opened her prayer book to indicate the service was beginning. Presumably the issue with the electronics was resolved, for now there was music. Mozart, she guessed,

or maybe Fauré. One of the requiems anyway. Against the murmur of the onlookers and the suck of the waves, she could only just hear.

‘We have come together,’ the vicar said, spreading her arms so that the bone-filled coffins were included, ‘to pay our respects to our departed brothers and sisters, to give these men and women, these children and their mortal remains the dignity and honour denied to them in death.’

As if all of those present owed something to the past, there was a communal drawing in of breath as they bowed their heads. It had the same air as the Remembrance services Jess had sometimes attended with her father, the same heavy silence, the same quiet shuffling of awkward feet. Slowly, carefully, she stretched to see the coffins. A flag had been draped over each, bearing, she guessed, the coats of arms of Suffolk and Old Charlburgh. Luke, had he been here, would have been pleased, felt that something at least partly honorable was being done.

She would write and tell him. Maybe this evening or tomorrow. When the service was over, and the bones at rest.

Ashes to ashes, she thought. Bones to bones. There was a rightness to it.

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Although there was no one in the Bayely’s cottage, she had an urge to linger, to stay and gaze at it, as if it held something of herself. Or as if it once had, and that was what counted. When the summer came holidaymakers would take it over, and it would become anonymous again, just one of the many rental properties that lay within the confines of the village. Fighting the image, she tried to picture where Luke and Emily might live in Arusha. A bungalow, Emily had said, in a kind of compound with several others. But above it, the sky would be blue, Kilimanjaro cloaked and mysterious in the distance.

She took one last look at the cottage, clicked the catch on the gate and turned away. Soon she would be going to look at a new house herself. To try it out, of course, nothing more.

‘Consider it,’ Rob had said. ‘Will you at least do that?’

‘Yes,’ she’d said. She had no idea how it would feel.

From Hinton Lane, the dunes appeared so low that the lazy swell of waves was visible on the horizon. It made her dizzy, as if the sea were higher than the land, holding itself back by an effort of will; as if it would rush forward and engulf the beach and the village, and everything within it.

Once she’d mentioned it to Rob, and he’d replied - practically, sensibly - ‘It’s something to do with the curvature of the earth. Or refraction probably. Don’t worry, it can’t happen.’

‘It did once,’ she’d said.

As she crested the top of the dune, the wind took her hair and whipped it across her face. She dragged at the strands, pulling them into a ponytail at the back and tucking it into the hood to secure it. The air was cold, salty.

It was impossible now to walk freely along the length of the beach. Wooden fencing had been erected where the cliff had collapsed and, beyond this, bulldozers sat waiting to clear the rubble and to shore up the next section of land. But she knew the mass of stone was already smaller, bits of chapel hauled away last week to sit like ancient sculptures in the garden of the museum.

She had no wish to wander in that direction. The stones were not benign. All these weeks on and still she could see them tumbling terrifyingly through the air. Being close brought it back, reversed time.

She gazed at the scene, willing its stillness. The rocks stayed quiet, merged into insensibility, but she knew what they were capable of. It was why she was there. She nodded to them in a kind of acknowledgement, then turned away and headed towards the groyne.

Just as in a drawing Luke had once done, the struts stood out dark and serrated against the horizon. They looked like rotten teeth, the sea breaking at the base of the uprights and turning to spray. Coming up beside them, Jess dug into her pocket and pulled out the broken figure Luke had made. She held it in her palm, waiting for the familiar sense of unease. It didn't come. The expression on the doll's face was mild, its button eyes shining.

‘Will you rest now?’ she said.

She crouched down and placed the figure in the dip at the base of one of the struts.

At first it lay motionless but then, as the sides of the dip crumbled and rivulets of water seeped in, the doll began to rock, its tunic ballooning, sucking in air and letting go of it again in long slow breaths. The trickle turned to a stream, surging and spilling. The doll rocked more violently. Then, as the liquid spread out and over into the unbroken plain of the ocean, the figure rose with it, taken upwards and away with the tide.

Listening to Ghosts:

**Haunting in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,
Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*,
And in my own writing practice.**

Critical Discussion

Introduction

In recent years attitudes to the supernatural have changed. The line between what is real and what is not is less defined, our sense of the past (and even the future) as mobile and shifting, has grown, a change in position observed by Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren who point out that in a technologically minded age that is itself 'a ghostly space'¹ defying clear categorization, our world is 'fundamentally intertwined with the ghostly.'² No longer:

confined to cultural margins and fringe genres, ghosts now appear as part of the mainstream, invading the everyday realm and, in doing so, providing a cultural commentary on its increasingly spectral construction.³

Indeed, for del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, it is the need to live with the ghost that has become paramount, where even the ghosts themselves want to appear normal – as, for instance, in certain recent movies, such as *The Sixth Sense*, where the central character doesn't know he's a ghost, and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* where there is not just one ghost but a whole family of them, plus their servants – shifting our understanding of what 'normal' actually is.

From the perspective of a post-industrial, 21st century western society in which scientific and technological discovery has made possible the transmission of information and response across the world in an instant, in which robots appear and act increasingly like humans, in which spacecraft can take photographs of Jupiter, this seems an unlikely development. After all, Christian religious

¹ Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (New York and London: Continuum International, 2010), p. xiii.

² del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, p. xiii.

³ del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, p. xiii.

attendance has decreased - statistics for the UK Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster show a congregation drop of almost 33% in the last fifty years; the national attendance in the Anglican Church has reduced from seven per cent to below 1.5.⁴ Such figures might lead one to suspect that interest in a non-physical entity surviving (or defying) death would be regarded as anachronistic, an irrational form of wish-fulfilment that only the genuinely god-fearing would seek to preserve. Yet, as del Pilar Blanco and Peeren note, 'ghosts are everywhere these days',⁵ and the demand for fantasies about those who have died and come back grows and flourishes. Anyone only faintly aware of the contents of Britain's bookshelves, television and cinema screens can attest to this. Marina Warner accounts for it thus:

Even when we profess agnosticism if not unbelief in the supernatural order, we are the inheritors of much classical cosmology and medieval philosophy about spirit and soul – in an unconscious way and in common parlance.⁶

For Jonathan Miller there is a more psychologically dynamic explanation. Ghosts serve an ethical function in that they warn of 'the dangers of intellectual pride and show [...] how a man's reason can be overthrown when he fails to acknowledge those forces inside which he simply cannot understand,'⁷ an attitude illustrated when Parkin, the central character of Miller's film of the M. R. James story *Whistle and I'll Come to You*, responds to the question, 'Do you believe in ghosts professor?' by batting it away as if engaged in a game of philosophic cricket:

'Ghost, huh. That's a rather sticky one, isn't it? I'm not quite certain what you mean. I'm not quite certain what I'm being invited to *believe* when anybody asks

⁴ The Church of England, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/3331683/2015statisticsformission.pdf> [accessed 15 June 2017]

⁵ del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, p. ix.

⁶ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphor and Media into the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 9.

⁷ Jonathan Miller and Christopher Frayling, 'Whistle and I'll Come to You', dir. by Jonathan Miller, (1968) in *Ghost Stories: Classic Adaptations from the BBC*, (London: BFI, 2012).

me a question like that. I'm not quite certain what I'm being invited to disbelieve.'⁸

It is a kind of intellectual avoidance that Ramsey Campbell, in his introduction to the movie, claims 'leaves [an individual] open to a supernatural invasion'⁹ by the aspects of his psyche that he is so at pains to deny.

However, whatever our attitude to ghosts - and this will be addressed in more detail later - it seems, we can't get enough of them. We read ghost stories. We write them. We make films about them and watch these on our screens. It's a 21st century blossoming of a literary lineage that goes back beyond Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and continues through Shakespeare, the gothic stories of Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White*, to the writing of Henry James, Edith Wharton and M. R. James. Later examples include Shirley Jackson's chilling 1959 novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and, more recently, Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger*. Clearly the thought of something 'returning after death' answers an important modern need.

It is not possible here to unweave the common thread - if one exists at all - that coheres the disparate narratives above. Instead my intention is to show that, whether we like it or not, the ghost in literature is essential to our ethical and social development: by bringing the past into the present, and demanding that the present respond.

Sea-Roke, the ghost story I have written, was initially called *The Shell*, a title chosen because of its capacity to represent several different facets of the narrative, in terms of development of plot and character, as well as for its capacity to indicate possession. Defined by the OED as 'the calcereous or chitinous outer covering of crustaceans, molluscs and other invertebrates',¹⁰ a shell is an exoskeleton, part of the body of the sea creature that originally created it. It has cultural and symbolic importance as part of the earth's geographical and evolutionary history, as well as

⁸ 'Whistle and I'll Come to You'.

⁹ 'Whistle and I'll Come to You' (introduction).

¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com>

religious significance for Hindus, Buddhists and the Moche peoples of ancient Peru. In Tennyson's *Maud*, the troubled narrator calls the shell at his feet 'work divine',¹¹ and in *Lord of the Flies* the conch represents authority and order.

Particularly important for my purposes are the deep – often almost impenetrable – recesses a shell contains, as well as its capacity to serve as a temporary shelter for other, unrelated, organisms. In addition, and according to popular wisdom, a shell is a kind of magical conduit through which an individual can 'hear the sea'.

The central figure of *Sea-Roke* is Luke, a strange, withdrawn little boy, who comes to live in a village on the Suffolk coast where centuries before a huge port was destroyed by storms and swallowed by the sea. Luke shares many of the qualities of the shells he loves to collect. He has created his own external covering – it is brittle and difficult to penetrate – and his internal world is not only intensely private, it is also in a sense 'occupied' by another, Alwin,¹² who Luke's mother suspects is imaginary. Luke does not question where his new friend has come from, or who he might be. He is simply the one who waits for Luke on the beach. When Luke announces that the dead are not really dead but 'talk to us', the already mistrustful and hostile villagers turn against him.

As a result of his experience of Alwin, Luke becomes the conduit through which his family, and the village where he lives, are forced to confront their own troubled past. However, as the novel progressed, I discovered that history began to speak, not just through Alwin and Luke, but through the environment too: in the weather, the changes in the air, the actions of the land and the sea. It thus became clear that the image of a shell did not allow for the active, amorphous nature of the phantoms emerging and that, whilst I wanted to keep the image for various symbolic roles it could perform, a change of title was necessary. I decided on *Sea-Roke*. As a noun, *roke* is defined by the OED as 'Steam; vapour, mist, fog, or an instance of this; [also] very light rain';¹³ and as a verb as 'To sway to and fro, esp. as the result

¹¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Maud', Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45367> [accessed 7 June 2015]

¹² According to several online sources, one meaning of Alwin is 'elf- friend'.

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

of an impact or force' as well as 'To go, proceed, travel'.¹⁴ By demanding a change of title, the ghosts of my novel had imposed themselves on me too, for the image of mist - rolling in from the ocean, shifting and swelling, disappearing and returning - was plainly far better equipped than a shell to represent the spectral activity of the unquiet past and its forceful intrusion on the present.

Before I consider in detail the spectral happenings in *Beloved* (1987), *The Little Stranger* (2009) and *Sea-Roke*, I want first to layout the theoretical underpinnings of my position on the ghost. Initially, I expected my research to reroute me through my earlier postgraduate studies in Psychoanalytic Psychology and that discussion, much like Freud's own of the Uncanny, would centre on unconscious repressions within the troubled self. However, the more I read the more I became convinced that it is no longer enough to confine discussion to the domain of psychoanalysis or even - as in later twentieth century thinking - to the combined territories of psychology, philosophy and literary criticism. Instead it became clear that modern debate requires a more holistic approach, traversing boundaries of thought across a range of disciplines - a development that allows, in a way that Derrida might have approved, for a more open kind of 'listening' to the ghost. In a consideration of the numerous ways we might account for the ghost, I was concerned not to banish one account, or deny another, but to borrow what was useful from a range of different thinkers. What emerged at the end of this process was the necessity to acknowledge that ghosts are as much part of the world as the mundane, quantifiable, quotidian things that we encounter in our daily lives. It is our ability and capacity to attend to them that is central.

In the opening chapter, my examination of early thinking, in particular of what constitutes the Uncanny, establishes the importance of the psychological dimensions of haunting and its effects. A discussion of Freud's theory of phylogenetic inheritance is followed in Chapter 2, by consideration of Abraham and Torok's work on transgenerational haunting. Both of these theories show ways in which a phantom can travel through generations as well as the emotional and social consequences of this. In subsequent chapters I explore the responses

¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

to Abraham and Torok's position by Derrida and others, including trauma theorists working with holocaust survivors. These highlight, in a way that is crucial to my argument, the ethical dimension of the ghost's activity, as does Avery Gordon's definition of the ghost as a 'social figure'¹⁵ able to help bring about change.

To fully understand the significance of these later developments, it has been necessary to consider not only the concepts of time and death as viewed by certain non-Western cultures, as well as the dangers inherent in a Cartesian mind-body split, but also the insights offered by recent thinking in psycho-geography that a place, even the environment itself, can be a container of time – and thus of ghosts. This has enabled me to demonstrate how, in the novels I've chosen, the ghost's haunting of place as well as person allows it to act not only as the voice of an unsettled past appealing to a troubled present, but as an active agent, demanding - and sometimes forcing - a dynamic response.

I want also to explain briefly my choice of text. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for all the acres of literary and personal response it has engendered in the thirty years since its publication, is still undoubtedly one of the most significant ghost stories of our time. What it exposes about Afro-American history is vital at a personal, social and political level. It is a novel in which the past and the present coexist, in which place and time interweave, in which the dead and the living can be interchangeable. In which what is corporeal and what is not corporeal cannot always be known. A novel in which language itself breaks down.

Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* does not deal with such powerfully defining issues, but examines a time of substantial social transformation when the wrongs of the past, even if not acknowledged or talked about, have at least the potential to be redressed: the post WW2 era where one way of living, based on class and family, gives way to something more raw and yet more egalitarian, in which social and political foundations shift, and values change. In this novel the ghost is, appropriately, more subtle and more hidden. It speaks in riddles, through what

¹⁵ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 8.

might appear as the troubled hallucinations of a dying family, in actions that are ambiguous and allusive.

However, in both novels the spaces the characters inhabit are also actively involved in the narrative, allowing time, place and person to interact in a dynamic way. This demonstration of a vigorous past that in disturbing the present demands that the future respond has also influenced the writing of my own novel, *Sea-Roke*. I will address all three texts in detail later in my discussion.

Before moving on, I would like to add a postscript to my introductory remarks. I said earlier that my discussion examines numerous ways we might account for the ghost in literature, its function and its effect. Thus it might be thought that the experiences of the afterlife sought by W. B. Yeats or Arthur Conan Doyle could be of at least partial interest to my argument. Their attendance at séances, along with others such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Mina Loy, was, according to Helen Sword, 'like modernist literature (...an attempt to...) embrace both authority and iconoclasm, both tradition and innovation, both continuity and fragmentation'¹⁶. Indeed Sword's claims that Yeats 'sought in the netherworld of the séance room not easy enlightenment but the confirmation of his belief in the slipperiness of human consciousness, the precariousness of language, and the overwhelming complexity of modern life,'¹⁷ might add strength to the view that such mediumistic occurrences are relevant. It would certainly support Luke Thurston's observation that, 'for the essential modernist protagonist (...) there is a definitive restless satisfaction with the everyday self.'¹⁸ But what Yeats and Conan Doyle and others were concerned with was a 'seeking out' of the dead, a kind of chasing of those who have gone before in an attempt to gain some kind of personal, artistic, and mystical engagement with an alternative world. And whilst this is indubitably rich in possibilities for creative expression, it is a form of haunting – if 'haunting' it can be called at all – that is the reverse of what interests me here. My focus – and surely that of the popular appeal of ghosts – is on what the OED, in its definition of 'to be

¹⁶ Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. x.

¹⁷ Sword, p. 104.

¹⁸ Luke Thurston, *Literary Ghosts for the Victorians to Modernism: The Haunting Interval* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 167.

haunted', gives as 'to be subject to the visits and molestation of disembodied spirits.'¹⁹ It is the 'being subject to' that is crucial for my purposes, for it implies a total lack of control of the experiencer over his or her experience.

¹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*

Chapter 1

‘One has to know one’s buried truth in order to live one’s life’¹

Early Thinkers

One focal point within early 19th century discussion of ghostly experiences - as well as of the use of the supernatural in fiction - concentrated on attempts to understand the nature of, specifically, the Uncanny, a question that asks why a ghost is experienced as *ghostly* at all - that is, as something that disturbs and confounds perception and produces a troubled or fearful emotional response. Its definition by Ernst Jentsch as a feeling of being uneasy or ‘not quite “at home”’² brought about by ‘a *lack of orientation*,’³ as might occur when unsure whether an object is animate or inanimate (perhaps as in waxworks or dolls), is a useful first step in understanding the capacity of the Uncanny to disturb. The labeling of this as ‘intellectual uncertainty’ by subsequent thinkers (including Freud himself) weakened its explanatory - and by extension its emotional - power and thus its capacity to disturb through art. If only intellectual certainty is involved, there is no *emotional* disturbance going on – except in the most technical of senses. One might as well talk of a computer being anxious when ‘perceiving’ a language for which it has not been programmed, when what we mean is that the computer simply cannot work properly. I am not recommending some Platonic-like tripartite split of the soul into Appetite, Spirit and Reason, but it is reasonable to propose that, whilst mere *intellectual* uncertainty brought about by an event or a novel or a painting might create puzzlement, even an emotional response, it is hardly likely to

¹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 78.

² Ernst Jentsch, ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’ (1906), trans. by Roy Sellars, p. 2
http://www.arteidea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch_uncanny.pdf [accessed 14 October 2013]

³ Jentsch, p. 2.

⁴ Jentsch, p. 6.

⁵ Jentsch, p.11. He adds: ‘The dark feeling of uncertainty, excited by such representation, as to the psychical

connect to the hidden and unconscious processes with which psychoanalysts and writers are most concerned. Roy Sellars, who translated Jentsch's work into English, provides a helpful solution suggesting that what Jentsch meant was 'psychical uncertainty'.⁴ *Psychical* uncertainty is surely different, or at least encompasses a far wider network of affective response than does *intellectual* uncertainty, which indicates that whilst logic and reason may be active, terror and dread – which tend to stem from unconscious and pre-verbal sources – are not, or at least only to a much lesser degree. Unfortunately, Jentsch's inclusion of the word 'conscious' and his claim that the better the understanding and orientation of the perceiver, the less uncanny the likely effect will be, undermines his usefulness. It is the *unconscious* dimension to the response that is important for my argument here.

Nonetheless, whichever way one wants to read him, Jentsch is clearly correct in his observation that the tendency for perceivers to experience uncertainty on encountering the uncanny is a state of affairs much exploited by writers of fiction to create anxiety and horror in their readers. Moreover, his inclusion of the words 'emotional effect' indicates his wish not to confine the explanation to disturbances of the intellect alone:

In storytelling, one of the most reliable artistic devices for producing uncanny effects easily is to leave the reader in uncertainty as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character. This is done in such a way that the uncertainty does not appear directly at the focal point of his attention, so that he is not given the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away; for the particular emotional effect, as we said, would hereby be quickly dissipated.⁵

Jentsch had already foregrounded the link between the German words for i) uncanny: 'unheimlich' and ii) homely: 'heimlich' in his comment that those who experienced the uncanny felt 'not quite at home', but it was left to Freud, in his

⁴ Jentsch, p. 6.

⁵ Jentsch, p.11. He adds: 'The dark feeling of uncertainty, excited by such representation, as to the psychical nature of the corresponding literary figure is equivalent as a whole to the doubtful tension created by any uncanny situation, but it is made serviceable by the virtuosic manipulation of the author for the purposes of artistic investigation.'

1919 essay, 'The Uncanny', to fully explore the significance and power of this apposite connection. It is difficult to fully capture Freud's argument, not least because, as many commentators have noted (Žižek, Royle, Felman amongst them),⁶ the text seems to shift meaning with different readers and readings. Nicholas Royle describes it thus: 'To write about the uncanny, as Freud's essay makes admirably clear, is to lose one's bearings, to find oneself immersed in the maddening logic of the supplement, to engage with a hydra.'⁷

Even so, after an extensive exploration of the semantic relationships between the two words 'heimlich' and 'unheimlich' - the word 'heimlich' relating at one and the same time to 'what is familiar and comfortable' and to 'what is concealed and kept hidden'⁸ - Freud's appears to conclude that the uncanny is 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.'⁹

Thus for Freud, a necessary condition - though not a sufficient one - for an experience of the uncanny is the return of the repressed. It is something that reminds us of earlier or more primitive stages of our unconscious life. '[T]his uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed.'¹⁰ 'The uncanny element we know from experience arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed.'¹¹

Freud acknowledges that fiction can operate differently: fairy tales, for instance, do not bring about an experience of the uncanny because they are 'exempt from the reality test',¹² as are such texts as Dante's *Inferno* or certain of Shakespeare's plays. However, for a writer of realistic fiction, who 'adopts all the conditions that apply to the emergence of the uncanny in normal experience; whatever has an uncanny

⁶ For a discussion of this see Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2003) pp. 6-9.

⁷ Royle, p. 8.

⁸ Royle, p. 132.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, Penguin Books, 2003) p. 124.

¹⁰ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 148.

¹¹ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 155.

¹² Freud, *The Uncanny* p. 155.

effect in real life has the same in literature,¹³ the effects created can be even more powerful than in normal life. This is because we have been invited to trust the writer who ‘tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it. We react to his fictions as if they had been our own experiences.’¹⁴

Whilst this goes some way towards answering the question he attempts to address, Freud, as Marc Falkenberg argues in *Rethinking the Uncanny in Hoffman and Tieck*, does not sufficiently explore how the uncanny ‘leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,’¹⁵ confining its discussion merely to ‘the periphery of [his] investigations’¹⁶. Falkenberg is surely also right when he suggests that Freud has misunderstood Jentsch, failing to appreciate the latter’s emphasis on uncertainty and thereby missing its importance for the overall picture: ‘The characters in fiction blur the boundary between the animate and the inanimate because they are animated by our imagination.’¹⁷ It is precisely the role of the imagination – an often unconscious process that can lead us to believe things not supported by the rules of physics, such as Macbeth’s conviction that a dagger is floating in the air before him – in experiences of the uncanny that helps explain the *depth* of disturbance. This factor - what Falkenberg calls ‘the observer’s active participation in the process of perception’¹⁸ – is important, as is his assertion, like Todorov’s¹⁹ later, that Freud’s approach ‘dismisses ambiguity and thus dissolves the uncanny’.²⁰ The latter also fails to consider ‘the uncanniness of silence, darkness, solitude and death [... which...] contain the crucial element of uncertainty in particular threatening fashion.’²¹

One suspects that Freud never intended this. But the final words of his essay on the uncanny: ‘As for solitude, silence and darkness, all we can say is that these are factors connected with infantile anxiety, something that most of us never wholly

¹³ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 156.

¹⁴ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 157.

¹⁵ Falkenberg, *Rethinking the Uncanny in Hoffman and Tieck* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005) p. 82.

¹⁶ Falkenberg, p. 82.

¹⁷ Falkenberg, p. 191.

¹⁸ Falkenberg, p. 191.

¹⁹ See Tzvetan Todorov’s discussion of the Fantastic Uncanny and Marvellous Uncanny in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans Richard Howard (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1975).

²⁰ Falkenberg, p. 34.

²¹ Falkenberg, p. 188.

overcome,'²² seem casual at the very least. It is surely not enough to claim, as he does, that this is something with which research in psychoanalysis has 'dealt elsewhere.'²³

Because it provides an explanation of why certain experiences can cause the kind of morbid terror we associate with the uncanny, Freud's somewhat discredited theory of phylogenetic inheritance - which claims that symptoms exhibited by those suffering from neurotic illnesses reflect early stages in man's evolutionary development ²⁴ - offers a surprising and possible way forward. Describing the symptoms as the 'residues of the acquisition of our ancestors ...(which)...bear witness to the history of the mental development of mankind', he holds that neurosis comes about as a result of an inherited disposition that originated in oppression by the primal father. After the Ice Age, this oppression continues through the generations. '[I]n this sense neurosis is [...] a cultural acquisition'.²⁵

In *Totem and Taboo* he develops the idea,²⁶ claiming that it is precisely because the 'processes of one generation [...] continue into the next'²⁷ that progress and development in psychoanalytic enquiry is possible at all. Moreover, it is through inheriting our psychic responses that we learn to 'read' others:

[N]o generation is capable of concealing its more important psychic processes from the next. For psycho-analysis has taught us that in his unconscious psychic activity every person possesses an apparatus which enables him to interpret the reactions of others, that is to say, to straighten out the distortions which the other person has effected in the expression, f of his feelings. ²⁸

In his exploration of the 'primal crime', the killing and eating of the patriarch by the banished sons of the primal tribe (an 'event' on which Freud rests much of his

²² Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 159.

²³ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 159.

²⁴ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neurosis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 10-11.

²⁵ Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, p. 19.

²⁶ For an even fuller discussion of this, see Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy* and *Totem and Taboo*, (Missouri: Greentop Academic Press, 2011).

²⁷ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, pp. 114-5.

²⁸ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 115.

explanation of the uncanny – in particular the fear of castration caused by the wrath of the primal father), anthropologist Robert Paul recalls Freud's assertion that the crime was a genuine – and in some sense remembered - historical occurrence. He cites the latter's declaration that, even twenty-five years later, his conviction of its accuracy had 'become stronger'.²⁹

Freud's debt to evolutionary theory is acknowledged by Frank Sulloway who remarks that 'Freud himself probably never knew just how much he owed to this one intellectual source',³⁰ a view pointedly reinforced by Frank Kermode in his comment that Freud never 'gave [...] up' his 'adherence to an outmoded evolutionary theory',³¹ for it served to "fill in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth."³²

Ilse Grubrich-Simitis records Freud's own doubt on the matter, expressed in a letter to Einstein:

It may perhaps seem to you as though our theories are a kind of mythology. But does not every such come in the end to a kind of mythology like this? Cannot the same be said to-day of your own physics?³³

But in fact he never needed to make the claim at all. For whether the 'primal crime' actually occurred is immaterial to the theory of phylogenetic inheritance. All that's required for the theory to be true is that there is a recollection – unconscious or otherwise – of an emotion that an ancestor experienced. Whether there was any *veridical basis* for that emotion is beside the point. Indeed it would probably be impossible to discover. The power of the emotional response is what is transferred through the generations. It is this aspect of Freud's thinking that is relevant both to my argument – that disturbances of the past can remain active and dynamic and

²⁹ Robert Paul, 'Did the Primal Crime Take Place?' in *Ethos*, 4.3, (1976), 311-52, (p. 313), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/640056> [accessed 25 March 2015]

³⁰ Frank Sulloway, Freud, *Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 275.

³¹ Frank Kermode, 'Freud and Interpretation', *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 12.1 (1985), 3-12, (p. 5).

³² Kermode, p. 5

³³ Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, 'Trauma or Drive – Drive and Trauma: A reading of Sigmund Freud's Phylogenetic Fantasy of 1915' in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 43 (1988), 3-12.

reappear as hauntings - and to the actions of the fictional ghosts in *Beloved*, *The Little Stranger* and in my own writing.

The theory of phylogenetic inheritance is not only bound up in Freud's thinking but also possibly essential to it. Both Ilse Grubrich-Simitis and Ruth Parkin-Gounelas stress the extent to which the theory has been under-valued. The latter, in her discussion of Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*, quotes from Freud's account of introjection:

A child's super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents' super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and all the time-resisting judgments of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation.³⁴

Emanuel Garcia, in his review essay on Freud's *Overview of the Transference Neurosis*, also points out Freud's reliance on phylogeny, holding that it extends across his:

consideration of drives and defense mechanisms; sexuality, the latency period, and the Oedipus complex; id ego and superego development; memory and fantasy formation; religion and culture; symbolism, dreaming and the etiology of the neurosis and psychosis.³⁵

However, in the end, the contribution of Freud's model to the debate around inherited psychological processes, values and distortions, is not enough to fully support the argument I am making. Whilst his thinking can helpfully illuminate the psychic disturbance brought about by experiences of the so-called uncanny, it does not *explain* them. My aim is to show that the experiences of haunting - particularly in the novels I am considering - is

³⁴ Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, *Literature and Psychoanalysis, Intertextual Readings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) p. 39.

³⁵ Emanuel E. Garcia, 'In the Beginning...Phylogeny in Freud's *Overview of the Transference Neurosis*: A Review Essay' in *A Phylogenetic Fantasy* ed. by Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, trans. by A. Hoffer and P. T. Hoffer, (1987), <http://jdc.jefferson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=jeffjpspsychiatry> [accessed 27 January 2014]

brought about not through any form of dynamic repression, but as a result of a past that either the subject has been unable to recall because it is *too traumatic*, or because they *know nothing of it at all*; a past which they may contain unconsciously within themselves or which, thanks to a particular kind of 'prepersonal longing' (a concept I will explore in detail later) they can access from the very air that surrounds them.

Chapter 2

'The very thing that provokes the worst suffering must be kept alive'¹

A. *The Phantom and the Crypt*

A later development in psychoanalytic thinking about ghosts, and one that has particular resonance for my own writing practice, is Abraham and Torok's theory of trans-generational haunting, a response to Freud's famous analysis of the Wolf Man. Central to the theory, set out in *The Shell and the Kernel: the Scope and Originality of Freudian Psychoanalysis*, is the notion of psychic concealment, where a secret is so shameful or terrible that it can be revealed only *cryptically*, through behaviour or language. The use of the word 'shell' in the title of their work points to this, indicating the centre of a fruit or nut, a thing that contains within it something hidden and secret but which nonetheless has the potential for activity or 'life'. My own central character, Luke, is like this sort of shell in that he too is a container of secrets, both individual and collective. They are secrets of which he knows nothing, but which are to do, not only with his own and his family's history, but also that of the community in Suffolk that he and his mother join when they move back from Africa to England.

The secret hidden deep within Abraham and Torok's shell is not the traditional ghost of gothic literature that returns merely in order to torment the living, 'to lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences',² but a *phantom* with no independent existence. It is a manifestation of some deeply-rooted displacement within the psyche that, despite not being connected to the

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok' in Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986) p. xxxv.

² Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, 'Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology' in *The Shell and The Kernel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 171.

subject's own direct experience, represents a buried guilt or shame within the history of a family.

Crucially, the *phantom*, of which the subject has no knowledge, has arisen not through dynamic repression, but as a result of a '*direct empathy with the unconscious or the rejected psychic matter of a parental object*'.³ Passing in a way that Abraham and Torok are unable to define, the phantom moves from the parent's unconscious into the child's, working 'like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography.'⁴ It inhabits a non-topographical space (*crypt*) within the ego and is patrolled by a 'cemetery guard'⁵ whose aim is to see that nothing escapes into the outside world, and that anyone who enters is provided only with 'false leads and fake graves'.⁶

When Colin Davis defines this as 'the presence of a dead ancestor in the living Ego, still intent on preventing its traumatic and usually shameful secrets from coming to light,'⁷ he should not be misunderstood. For Abraham and Torok, to be haunted by a phantom is not to be pursued by the spirit of some departed and tormented person. Instead:

It is a fact that the "phantom" whatever its form, is nothing but an invention of the living. Yes, an invention in the sense that the phantom is meant to objectify, even if under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap produced in us all by the concealment of some part of a love object's life. The phantom is therefore a metapsychological fact; what haunts are not the dead but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.⁸

In a useful explanation that bears some resemblance to Freud's account of introjection that we saw in the last chapter, Esther Rashkin points out the

³ Abraham and Torok, p. 181.

⁴ Abraham and Torok, p. 173.

⁵ Abraham and Torok, p. 159.

⁶ Abraham and Torok, p. 159.

⁷ Colin Davis, 'Hauntology, spectres and phantoms', *French Studies*, 59.3 (2005), 373-379. doi: 10.1093/fs/kni143> [accessed 14 June 2015]

⁸ Abraham and Torok, p. 171.

inevitability of this family inheritance. Initially the child has neither a conscious nor unconscious of its own, then, as it begins to emerge as an individual, it does so as a kind of ‘mother-amputee’⁹ – a cut-off limb that gradually finds individuation (in particular through language) but which will always carry residues of the mother’s unconscious:

As the verbal pieces-of-the-mother are disengaged from the mother’s person, the unconscious charge or effect bound to the word is transmitted into the child’s speech. The maternal unconscious becomes part of the child’s language. Communicated without ever having been spoken, it resides as a silent presence within the newly-formed unconscious of the child.¹⁰

Moreover, since all have mothers, and all our mothers have mothers of their own, we must ‘always already [be] carrying the content’s of another’s unconscious’.¹¹

The transference of an unconscious charge relating to language is not, of course, confined only to mothers and children. Or even parents and children. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that it can be passed down within communities too. It is a factor central to the haunting in both of the novels I have chosen, as well as in my own writing ,and I shall return to it in detail later.

The work of Abraham and Torok does not claim to be, in any Aristotelian sense, a ‘final’ product fixed in the canon of psychoanalytic teaching. According to Nicholas Rand in his introduction to the 1994 edition of *The Shell and the Kernel*, its authors were adamant that all such theories be ‘abandoned or revamped if inconsistent with the actual life experience of a patient or the facts of a text.’¹² The alternative ‘runs the risk of condemning the person’s genuine suffering to silence.’¹³ With this in mind, I have found it illuminating to read Abraham and Torok alongside Derrida’s work on hauntology.

⁹ Esther Rashkin, *Family Secrets and The Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 17.

¹⁰ Rashkin, p. 17.

¹¹ Rashkin, p. 18.

¹² *Shell and the Kernal*, p. 1.

¹³ *Shell and the Kernal*, p. 1.

Whilst there are important implications for the reading of literary texts in Abraham and Torok's thinking, I am not convinced by their contention that the ghost provides only 'false leads and fake graves'. Nor is Abraham and Torok's claim that a ghost/phantom cannot exist independently a particularly persuasive one. However, despite these reservations, their work has been influential in my own creative project, allowing me to shift the perspective on how to present the haunting in my own story. More specifically, I have attempted to make clearer the ghost's *functioning as a bearer of secrets* in a way that is often similar – though not identical – to the phantom found in the thinking of Abraham and Torok.

B. Derrida

Derrida's position is ultimately more satisfying. This is partly because, by holding that 'knowledge' of a ghost's separate existence is irrelevant, or even does not count as knowledge at all, Derrida is not concerned to banish the ghost to the status of an invention – inherited or otherwise. This attributes to the ghost an autonomy that is powerfully effective: as Colin Davis puts it, by 'turning the ghost into a figure of the absolute Other [...w]e are called upon to heed the ghost irrespective of epistemological concerns.'¹⁴ It is a much more open and dynamic position than that of Abraham and Torok. This spectre – that both is and not is, and yet is neither – is capable of profoundly disturbing our perspective on the world. As Tom Lewis reminds us, it 'represents the inherent instability of reality. Granting only a fleeting modality to material being, it serves as the sign of an "always already"'.¹⁵

Thus, whilst Abraham and Torok hold that the phantom needs to be somehow tracked down and (by being put into words) ultimately silenced, the reverse is so for Derrida. Laurie Johnson's reading of him implies that he viewed this aspect of Abraham's and Torok's thinking as unhelpful: for it was 'opposed to testimony, to

¹⁴ Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 84.

¹⁵ Tom Lewis, 'The politics of Hauntology in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*,' in Jacques Derrida et al, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, ed. by Michael Sprinker, (London and New York: Verso, 2008), p. 140.

bearing witness to ...[and] ...to the hospitality to trauma that invites the humanity to come.'¹⁶

Derrida wants us to *listen*, to be open to the ghost's 'voice'. What it can say is concerned not merely with a hidden and clandestine past but with a future too – a what-is-to-come. Yet paying attention is no easy matter. For Derrida, the more educated we are, the more rigorous our intellectual discipline, and the more we believe in the 'sharp distinction between the real and the unreal,'¹⁷ the harder it is for us to properly acknowledge a ghost. He uses Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an example:

What seems almost impossible is to speak always of the specter, to speak to the specter, to speak with it, therefore especially to make or let a spirit *speak*. And the thing seems even more difficult for a reader, an expert, a professor [...] for what Marcellus calls a "scholar".¹⁸

Derrida's claim that Horatio's command to Old Hamlet's ghost, 'By heaven I charge thee, speak!'¹⁹ is an action that restricts it, an attempt 'to inspect, stabilize, arrest the specter in its speech,'²⁰ appears supported by the original text. It is after this that the ghost retreats. 'It is offended,'²¹ Marcellus says.²²

Derrida's spectre is a 'revenant' (from the French *revenir* – to return, come back). Each visit is both a first time and a return. 'At bottom, the specter is the future – it is always to come.'²³ For Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, it is responsible for the 'disturbance of the distinction between beginnings and returns as well as between

¹⁶ Laurie Johnson, 'Cryptonymic Secretion: On the Kind-ness of Strangers', in *Re-reading Derrida: Perspectives on Mourning and Its Hospitalities*, ed. by Thwaites and Seaboyer (Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 117-130 (p. 126).

¹⁷ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) p. 11.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Specters*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Shakespeare W, *Hamlet*, 1,i, 48, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 13.

²¹ Shakespeare *Hamlet*, 1,i, 49.

²² According to Esther Rashkin, the silence of Old Hamlet's ghost is brought about by its own guilt. It is inherited by Hamlet as a 'gap in his unconscious that will perturb his behaviour.' E. Rashkin, *Family Secrets and The Psychoanalysis of Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 29.

²³ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 39.

death and life'.²⁴ For Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, it is 'an apparition which returns and disrupts temporal linearity',²⁵ a 'liminal presence, out of time, dislocated and characterized by "temporal disjoining",²⁶ and it is what Colin Davis terms a 'deconstructive' figure hovering between life and death', one that makes 'established certainties vacillate.'²⁷ All of these definitions – if such they can be called – emphasise Derrida's point. To label is to restrict, to pin-down is to close one's ears.

Despite their lack of ontological status, despite their shifting natures in and out of time – or perhaps *because* of them - Derrida's ghosts can be (unlike Abraham and Torok's hidden and deceiving phantoms who need to be exorcised) the symptoms of not only a disturbed past and an unstable present, but also of a troubled and needy future. As Jameson - who is equally careful not to confirm one way or the other the actual existence of ghosts, or indeed the dynamic involvement of the past with the present - is forced to admit: 'the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; [...] we would do well not to count on its density and solidity'.²⁸ If they can be said to be anything, the moments that we encounter the spectre are:

those moments in which the present – and above all our current present, the wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history, of the new world system of late capitalism – unexpectedly betrays us.²⁹

Derrida also differs from Abraham and Torok in his interpretation of the 'crypt'. For him, this thing that has to 'disguise the act of hiding, and to hide the disguise',³⁰ is ultimately indefinable. Acknowledging somewhat reluctantly that it can be referred to as a 'certain organization of places [lieux] designed to *lead astray* and [...] a topographical arrangement made to keep (conserve-hidden) the *living*

²⁴ Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, 'Anachrony and Anatopia: Spectres of Marx, Derrida and Gothic Fiction' in *Ghosts: deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, ed. by Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 127-143, (p. 130).

²⁵ Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, Introduction to *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*, ed. by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) pp. xi-xxv, (p. xvi).

²⁶ Arias and Pulham, *Haunting and Spectrality*, p. xvii.

²⁷ Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, p. 11.

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter' in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. by Sprinker (London: Verso, 1991) pp. 26-67, (p. 39).

²⁹ Jameson: 'Marx's Purloined Letter', ed. by Sprinker, p. 39.

³⁰ Derrida, 'Fors' in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, p. xiv.

dead’,³¹ Derrida nonetheless maintains that the question of what it actually *is* ‘can no longer [...] be posed’.³² Moreover, as Derrida notes, to suppose the presence of the crypt is a requirement for a redefinition of the self. ‘The crypt can constitute its secret only by means of its division, its fracture. “I” can *save* an inner safe only by putting it inside “myself”, *beside[s]* myself, outside.’³³

Perhaps this is what literature – in the truest sense of the word – attempts to do, a point reflected in Zoltán Dragon’s recollection of Hillis Miller’s suggestion that the question ‘What is literature?’ should replace Derrida’s ‘What is a crypt?’³⁴

Although sceptical of the link between the two, Dragon nonetheless acknowledges the logical implication that what make a work *literature* ‘is the secret it holds safe’: ‘[i]t has an essence, something that is “defamiliarized”, as it were, something uncanny encrypted within.’³⁵ It is an activity with psychic power: ‘If the walls of the crypt are torn down the traumatic secret is let loose...[...] the effect of this traumatic secret, the so-called crypt effect, [...] reaches and touches the reader.’³⁶ If this insight indicates a possibility that literary criticism has much to offer psychoanalytic understanding, then so much the better. I shall return to this later.

Literary critic, Parkin-Gounelas’s thinking is on similar lines. Just as the crypt works to deflect us from the truth of the secret it holds so, she claims, we are repeatedly turned away from the ‘real secrets, the secrets of [the] incorporated objects’³⁷ of Gothic texts. The fictional ghost ‘embodies the disruption and alienation of that other which resists assimilation.’³⁸ But she is critical of Abraham and Torok’s analysis of what needs to be done. Gothic writing, she holds, is ‘rarely about exorcism.’³⁹

³¹ Derrida, in *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, p. xxxvi.

³² Derrida, in *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, p. xiii.

³³ Derrida, in *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, p. xiv.

³⁴ Zoltán Dragon, ‘Derrida’s Specter, Abraham’s Phantom: Psychoanalysis as the Uncanny Kernel of Deconstruction’, <http://members.chello.hu/dragon.zoltan/projects/docs/DragonAnachronist2005.pdf>, p. 262, [accessed 15 December 2015]

³⁵ Dragon, p. 262.

³⁶ Dragon, p. 262.

³⁷ Parkin-Gounelas, ‘Anachrony’, p. 137.

³⁸ Parkin-Gounelas, ‘Anachrony’ p. 137.

³⁹ Parkin-Gounelas, ‘Anachrony’, p. 138.

Nonetheless, one needs to ask in what way a literary text might be said to hold a secret? It is after all a *text*, one in which all actions of a character, of his/her past and present, appear (a qualification I will explore later) to be sealed hermeneutically within the object itself. Of course, there is an author who brings the writing into being; there are intentions and hopes, inclusions and exclusions (both conscious and unconscious), and there are wishes and fears and prejudices. But a secret?

As Derrida points out,

Behind a novel or a poem, behind what is in effect the wealth of meaning to be interpreted, there is no secret meaning to be sought. A character's secret, for example, does not exist, there is no substance outside the literary phenomenon. Everything is secret in literature, there is no secret hidden *behind* it, that is the secret of the strange institution *about* which and *in* which I am constantly debating [struggling]. [...] The institution of literature recognizes in principle or in essence the right to say everything or not to say whilst saying, that is, the right to flaunt its secret.⁴⁰

Esther Rashkin concurs. There is no such thing as a 'false, fantasized past'.⁴¹ There is simply a necessity to understand that the text is more than that which is laid out before one and 'include[s] scenarios that are rhetorically, semantically, phonemically, cryptonymically, and symbolically inscribed within it.'⁴² For, as in a psychoanalytic context, the ghost or phantom is the "'unsaid" and "unsayable" of *an other*'⁴³ who has somehow turned it into a secret, transmitted it down the generations, and bound 'its recipient in an unspoken, unrecognized pact of collective concealment.'⁴⁴ It is Abraham and Torok's 'ventriloquist' - a 'silence, gap, or secret' - that 'speaks' through the words and acts [readable as words] of the subject.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Rashkin, p. 7.

⁴² Rashkin, pp. 7-8.

⁴³ Rashkin, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Rashkin, p. 44.

⁴⁵ Rashkin, p. 28.

Whether or not one wants to accept the restrictions that this view implies – and I do not – it makes the act of reading a ‘kind of “archeology”’⁴⁶ where residues of a family’s ancestral past are, despite the ‘nescience’ of the text’s characters, required to be exhumed and put together to form an explanation of why a text resists interpretation and what that resistance means. The printed text the, is not complete – not ‘realized as a text’.⁴⁷ It is up to the reader to “complete” it, to reconstruct from the visible text the symbol fragment estranged from it,⁴⁸ a task that, thanks to the near limitless possibilities of interpretation, Rashkin acknowledges can never be fully accomplished (an insight which I shall return to later).

Thus both Julian Wolfreys (who holds that ‘to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns’⁴⁹ and Hillis Miller are right in their belief that ‘the dead continue to live on, to survive beyond life, in the afterlife that we call reading’.⁵⁰ Wolfreys recalls Derrida’s assertion that: ‘traces of writing, language, experience [...] carry anamnesis beyond the mere construction of a given heritage, beyond an available past.’⁵¹ This makes literature, in Derridean terms, a place where we can not only listen and attend to the ghost, but also exercise an obligation. To quote Davis: there is an ‘ethical injunction’ to take notice of, one: ‘whose otherness we are responsible for preserving.’⁵²

⁴⁶ Rashkin, p. 47.

⁴⁷ Rashkin, p. 161.

⁴⁸ Rashkin, p. 161.

⁴⁹ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 3.

⁵⁰ Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, p. 141.

⁵¹ Wolfreys, *Writing London*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 21.

⁵² Colin Davis, ‘Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms’, 373-79.

Chapter 3

The Non-language of Trauma

Implied within the theory of trans-generational haunting is the victim's inability to speak about what has happened. For Abraham and Torok, this is because of the shame or horror attached to it. But even formulating it in this way ('happened'), as the past tense of an event that has occurred and is over, is a mistake, for it implies a *processing* of the occurrence, an - at least limited - understanding of it, and even a potential choice about how it is subsequently dealt with. However, it is a characteristic of any traumatic event that it *cannot* be articulated in words. Lacan talks of an encounter with the Real (almost certainly not something that in his view would be experienced consciously) that breaks the 'link[s]' within thought, the 'something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence.'¹ Geoffrey Hartman, who describes trauma as apprehended 'somewhere else, in another place than consciousness',² points out that it is at most 'registered rather than experienced', causing a kind of distorted memory trope in the 'bypassed or severely split psyche.'³ Gabrielle Schwab, noting that '[l]anguage is the first tool of and mode of introjection',⁴ questions how an event can be articulated at all when what has happened is not conscious or even, as in the case of a inherited phantom, directly experienced.

All of this accords with Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub's observations, formed after working with holocaust survivors, that the 'the imperative to tell the story [...] is inhibited by the impossibility of telling'.⁵ According to Schwab, the story is

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, trans. by Sylvia Tomaselli, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 164.

² Geoffrey H Hartman, 'On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies' in *New Literary History*, 26.3 (1995), 537-563, (p. 539).

³ Hartman, p. 537.

⁴ Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 81.

⁵ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. 79.

therefore forced to tell, 'itself over and over, in fantasies, in the language of the body, in pain or distortion, or in the endless, compulsive repetition of a particular traumatic rupture.'⁶

Dr Lawrence Johnson, citing Daniel Lagache's preface to *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, agrees that our everyday use of language 'has no words to evoke mental structures and tendencies that do not exist for common sense'.⁷ Johnson elucidates Abraham and Torok's notion of 'anasemia', the breakdown of meaning or the taking on of false meaning, that:

enables any word mobilised as a psychoanalytical concept to be *designified*; that is, to be stripped of its normal capacity for meaning and to allow it to point instead to that which escapes or lies outside conscious expression, as its very source, in the Unconscious.⁸

This is 'haunted' language - Schwab appropriates Abraham and Torok's notion of speech 'stripped' of its 'libidinal grounding' – where 'phantom words [...] can become carriers of another's story'.⁹ Schwab cites Abraham's own example of a young man whose grandmother secretly betrays her daughter's boyfriend with the result that the latter is sent to a concentration camp where he is forced to break rocks before being gassed. Later, the grandson develops a fascination for rocks and a penchant for killing butterflies with cyanide. Here, according to Schwab, 'haunted language has vacated the emotions, the pain and the terror, pertaining to the silenced history'.¹⁰ However, the 'phantom' is exposed through the boy's behaviour, in his wish to be a geologist and in killing butterflies, actions which reproduce in a distorted way what has happened to his mother's boyfriend, emerging 'as the unwitting reception of someone else's secret'.¹¹

⁶ Schwab, p. 81.

⁷ Lawrence Johnson, "I Wish to Dream" and Other Impossible Effects of the Crypt,' http://eprints.usq.edu.au/835/1/Johnson_I_Wish_To_Dream_Awaiting_Publisher's_Advice_23_June_06.pdf [accessed 2 February 2016]

⁸ Johnson, "I wish to dream"

⁹ Schwab, pp. 54-55.

¹⁰ Schwab, p. 54.

¹¹ Schwab, p. 56.

Marianne Hirsch records the experience of a daughter of a holocaust survivor, whose eczema made her scratch herself particularly badly on the same place of the same arm where her mother's concentration camp number had been tattooed on the latter's body. It is 'memory transmitted to be repeated and reenacted, not to be worked through'¹² as 'symptoms that plague even as they fail to lead to understanding'.¹³

It is a troubling fact that the legatees of profound suffering should not be legatees at all. Hirsch talks of such children as inheritors of a 'horrific, unknown and unknowable past that their parents were not meant to survive.'¹⁴ Because of this:

Postmemorial work [...] strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinventing them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression.¹⁵

It is when such a narrative occurs in fiction - when the 'post generation [...] does work to counteract or to repair loss'¹⁶ (as for instance, when Denver in *Beloved*, having 'decided to do the necessary', (296)¹⁷ goes to see Lady Jones) - that psychoanalysis and literary criticism come together. Shoshana Felman argues that in the past there has been a 'master-slave' relationship between the two disciplines, with psychology as 'knowledge' and literature as 'interpretation'. Yet, since psychoanalysis has been happy to appropriate the names and concepts that literature has introduced (Oedipus, Narcissism, masochism, sadism, and so on), just as 'psychoanalysis points to the unconscious in literature, so literature *'is the unconscious of psychoanalysis'*:¹⁸

¹² Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 84.

¹³ Hirsch, p. 85.

¹⁴ Hirsch, p. 34.

¹⁵ Hirsch, p. 33.

¹⁶ Hirsch, p. 33.

¹⁷ Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 296. All subsequent references to *Beloved* are to this edition and are given as page numbers in parenthesis in the main body of the text.

¹⁸ Shoshana Felman, 'To Open the Question' in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise*, ed by Felman (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 5-10 (p. 10).

Literature [...] is the language which psychoanalysis uses in order *to speak of itself*, in order to name itself. Literature is therefore not simply *outside* psychoanalysis, since it motivates and *inhabits* the very names of its concepts, since it is the *inherent reference* by which psychoanalysis names its findings.¹⁹

Anne Whitehead's account of how literature attempts to narrativise the un-narratable has echoes of the way the haunted legatee of Abraham and Torok exhibits symptoms of their inherited phantom. Features of the trauma reappear in crypted form: 'temporality and chronology collapse and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection.'²⁰ In this way, fiction, as I shall show with *Beloved* and *The Little Stranger*, serves to 'add something, or speak something that the theory cannot say', becoming in the process an extension 'of the theory's own silences.'²¹

For Hartman, any account of trauma, of the experience that is *not* one, of that which he holds to be as much 'nescience' as it is knowledge, can *only* be provided through figurative language. For 'precisely [the] disjunction between experiencing (phenomenal or empirical) and understanding (thoughtful naming, in which words replace things, or their images) is what figurative language explores.'²² Any reconstruction, as we have discovered, cannot be literal, for it is 'related to the negative moment of experience, to what in experience has not been, or cannot be, adequately experienced.'²³ Figurative language – as we shall see is powerfully the case in, for instance, the 'Middle Passage' chapters of *Beloved* – has the potential to recognize and capture the force of a trauma and even retrieve it too. It is a point emphasized by Caruth: 'Literature in its very excess can get at a trauma in a manner somehow unavailable to theory – that it writes (speaks or even cries) trauma in excess of theory.'²⁴

¹⁹ Felman, 'To Open the Question', p. 9.

²⁰ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 3.

²¹ Whitehead, p. 4.

²² Hartman, p. 540.

²³ Hartman, p. 540.

²⁴ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing Trauma, Writing History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press 2001), p. 183.

It is thus only a small step to move from this position to the one I touched on earlier which suggests that the active, ethical reader, perhaps like a psychoanalyst towards their patient, has a responsibility to look for and make the connections that a haunted text attempts to withhold. The reader must, as Rashkin suggests, bridge the 'generation gap' embedded within it, bringing together with their 'informing complements [those] textual elements whose separation is the result of an ancestor's refusal to speak, and whose reunion makes it possible to hear what has been silenced.'²⁵ Particularly compelling is her suggestion that, since it is ultimately more revealing of the text than any discussion about whether the ghosts actually exist, the debate between literary theory and psychoanalysis is what matters most - a kind of '*ghost effect*'²⁶ in itself. I will return to this point later when I show that in writing *Beloved*, Morrison invited a hermeneutical debate that not only informed and extended the understanding of a whole generation of white people about the horrors of slavery, but also helped advance a significant social response.

By incorporating the presence of a ghost, writers are able to find ways to articulate the otherwise inarticulable. Kathleen Brogan comments on the way ghosts 'emerge from the cultural history of a group'²⁷ and the number of writers who invoke them where a lost or broken past needs to be retrieved and redefined. In this 'cultural haunting',²⁸ history is imaginatively rewritten to help reconstruct an ethnic identity that can positively inform and serve the present. It is a form of 'reciprocal acculturation'²⁹ (a term Brogan borrows from social scientists) in which '[t]he ghost that makes the present the past while suggesting its indefiniteness (and thereby possibly malleability) thus provides the vehicle for both a dangerous possession by and an imaginative liberation from the past'³⁰

²⁵ Rashkin, *Family Secrets*, p. 162.

²⁶ Shoshana Felman, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation' in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise*, ed by Felman, 94-207 (p. 98).

²⁷ Kathleen Brogan, 'American Stories of Cultural Haunting: Tales of Heirs and Ethnographers', *College English*, 57.2, (1995), 149-165, (p151), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/378807> [accessed 16 Mar 2015]

²⁸ Brogan, p. 151.

²⁹ Brogan, p. 156.

³⁰ Brogan, p. 156.

Susan Engel concurs. In *Context is Everything: The Nature of Memory*, she holds that the revelation of an individual's knowledge of a past trauma holds power not only for the one remembering but also for the community, who may or may not be able to tolerate it: once spoken, the 'intimate details of our lives' become 'part of everyone's – become a kind of borrowed memory.'³¹

Thus, Brogan³² is right in her claim that ghost stories present a challenge to 'official' accounts of the past, a position defended by De Certeau when he asserts that writing 'allows a society to situate itself by giving itself a past through language, and it thus opens to the present a space of its own.'³³

³¹ Susan Engel, *Context is Everything: The Nature of Memory* (New York: W H Freeman, 1999), p. 151.

³² Brogan's reading of *Beloved* is particularly enlightening on this issue.

³³ Michael De Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 100.

Chapter 4

Time and Narrative

As we have seen, part of the reason a trauma sufferer cannot speak of his or her suffering is the contradiction that sits at its heart, a negation that Caruth describes as the 'oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival'.¹

To attest to the first is, arguably, impossible; to attest to the second is to deny the first. Felman and Laub recall Lacan's insight that the distortion of time that accompanies a trauma implies that survivors of a trauma have not survived at all but are still victims, living in 'an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before and no after.' Its lack of completion and closure, they hold, means the event is still 'current in every respect. [...] The survivor [...] thereby remains entrapped'.²

Thus the trauma lives on, an ever-present distortion in an individual's life. Avery Gordon recalls Derrida's definition of the spectral as the "'experience of the non-present, of the non-living present in the living present, of that which lives on".³ This means into the future too, a position supported by his claim that the spectre is 'always to come.' Buse and Stott define it as 'neither dead nor alive, neither corporeal objects nor stern absences',⁴ a liminal figure in which past and present can no longer be seen as distinct. The fact that the ghost *both* returns and appears

¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 7.

² Felman and Laub (ed), *Testimony*. p. 69.

³ Avery Gordon: 'Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity', *borderlands*, 10:2, 2011, University of California, Santa Barbara; http://www.borderlands.net/au/vol10no2_2011/gordon_thoughts.pdf [accessed April 29 2014]

⁴ Buse and Stott, (eds), *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and History*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 10.

for the first time is clearly a state of affairs that ‘fractures all traditional concepts of temporality.’⁵

This is no less so in literature. In a discussion of Gaskell’s *The Old Nurse’s Story*, Parkin Gounelas observes how the protagonist’s narrative ‘loops and turns back to beginnings repeatedly in its drive to the end, rotating upon an anachronistic axis of repetition *and* first time’⁶ with the result that ‘ghosts, in the end, lead the narrative as much to the origin of the mystery as to its deferral.’⁷

In the narratives of both *The Little Stranger* and *Beloved* the trajectory is similar, as it is in my own writing practice. In the latter case, whilst the ending of *Sea-Roke*, suggests that one manifestation of the haunting (the figure of the boy) has finally been restored to its own past, the very manner of its going – ‘taken upwards and away with the tide’⁸ - implies the likelihood of its return. In *The Little Stranger*, the narrative moves forwards and backwards in time, and the ghost - despite destroying (more or less) the physical manifestations of an outdated and exploitative patriarchal system - lingers at the novel’s end as ‘a presence ... or a movement in the corner of [Faraday’s] eye’.⁹

As I shall show in greater detail later, the ghost in *Beloved* is ‘of ‘ or ‘from’ *more* than one time - she is of the ‘now’ in which the novel is set, she is of her own brief baby past, and she is also of the dark period of slavery that has gone before. Deborah Horvitz points to the ‘fusion’ of voices that occurs when the ghost ‘mov[es] beyond human barriers [to] communicate the death-like Middle Passage’.¹⁰ An example of this fusion of time and voice in *Beloved* comes in the following: ‘All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too’(248). Moreover, in the

⁵ Buse and Stott , p. 11.

⁶ Parkin-Gounelas, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, p. 122.

⁷ Parkin-Gounelas, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, p. 122.

⁸ *Sea-Roke*, p. 364. All subsequent references to *Sea-Roke* are given as page numbers in parenthesis in the main body of the text

⁹ Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger* (London: Virago Press, 2010), p. 498. All subsequent references to *The Little Stranger* are to this edition and are given as page numbers in parenthesis in the main body of the text.

¹⁰ Deborah Horvitz, ‘Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*’, in *Studies in American Fiction* 17.2, (1989), 157-167, ecmd.nju.edu.cn/UploadFile/20/9656/belovedghost.doc [accessed 14 February 2015]

final pages of the novel, this figurative construction of the horrors of a history that has - at least partly - been retrieved, remains quietly active in the present: in a 'rustle of a skirt...the knuckles brushing a cheek.' (324)

At times, particularly in the 'rememories' that Sethe experiences, the temporal distinction between past and present, between 'then' and 'now', disappears not just for the reader but for Sethe too, an example perhaps of those individuals who, according to Caruth, 'carry an impossible history within them, or [...] become themselves the symptoms of a history that they cannot entirely possess.'¹¹ As Whitehead, echoing Caruth, in her discussion of Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*, points out: trauma is not, in the end, a symptom of the unconscious at all, 'but of history'.¹²

It brings to mind the words of Walter Benjamin:

Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? Is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today? [...] If so, then there is a secret protocol [...] between the generations of the past and that of our own. For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a *weak* messianic power, on which the past has a claim. This claim is not settled lightly. The historical materialist knows why.¹³

To articulate the past, of course, is hardly a moment of final recognition or of understanding "how it really was." It is 'to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.'¹⁴

In what way then can a writer take this control? De Certeau's claim that 'writing speaks to the past only in order to enter it'¹⁵ sounds reminiscent of the form of

¹¹ Caruth Cathy - *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 5.

¹² Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 12.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, Concept of History, Part II, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm> [accessed 29 October 2014]

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Concept of History*, part VI.

¹⁵ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 100.

exorcism described by Abraham and Torok, one that gets rid of the ghost/phantom forever. However, writing 'honours' the past too. By 'inserting the past into discourse'¹⁶ the identity of a community is being developed with a present it can claim for its own. 'Here the function of language is to introduce through *saying* what can no longer be *done*',¹⁷ – another way of affirming, as we saw earlier, that 'writing makes the dead so that the living can exist elsewhere'.¹⁸

Before I examine more fully the detail of the specific texts I'm concerned with here, I want to discuss three more areas of particular interest: 1) alternative views of time and death outlined by philosopher and theologian John S. Mbiti and sociologist Robert Hertz, 2) theories of ghostly spaces, and 3) Avery Gordon's claim that the ghost is a 'social figure'.

¹⁶ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 101.

¹⁷ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 101.

¹⁸ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 101,

Chapter 5

The Dead and the Not-dead

I want to turn now to perceptions that differ from our Western notions of time as linear and death as final. For, despite appearing alien to our analytically-minded perceptions of the world, such alternative views are attractive at an instinctive level and also help towards, if not an understanding of haunting (which since it's 'beyond knowledge' isn't finally attainable), at least the possibility of our being more open to the ghost's ubiquitousness and power.

In his book on African religions and philosophy, John Mbiti explains that, according to the traditional African world-view, time consists only of occurrences in the past and present, and those expected in the very near future. Events that either haven't yet happened, or are unlikely to do so soon, are in 'no-time,' whilst words to convey distant time do not exist at all. It is a way of thinking that renders time 'two-dimensional'.¹ 'Actual time is therefore what is present and what is past. It moves 'backward' rather than 'forward' and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place.'²

In order to become fully a person, in order to 'become real,' it is necessary, Mbiti explains, for an individual to experience time not just in their own life but also through their community and its past. This interconnectedness of history, group and individual identity suggests an understanding of time that is far more fluid than our own, one that is more akin, as Mbiti points out, to the rhythms that occur within nature, such as planting crops and harvesting them, a fact that will come as little surprise to those who know that the African words for time and space are closely linked. Because being born is a progression not an act, and may stretch

¹ John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Oxford, Heinemann, 1990) p. 16.

² Mbiti, p. 17.

beyond marriage and even child-bearing, personhood is not achieved until much later than actual physical birth. Death, too, is a process and ends only when entry has finally been gained into 'the community of spirits,'³ for after the cessation of all physical functioning, a person still continues 'in a certain sense to exist.'⁴ This existence is reliant on the recollection of him by name by relatives and friends who remember 'his personality, his character, his words and incidents of his life. If he "appears" (as people believe) he is recognised *by name*.'⁵ These and more specific actions of remembering (such as offering food or pouring libations) can continue through as many as four or five generations, conferring a form of 'personal immortality'⁶ on the '*living-dead*.'⁷

Roberts Hertz in his study of the natives of the Malay Archipelago records a similar story, The soul of the dead is seen as living in two worlds at once. In the afterworld, it is an 'intruder',⁸ and on Earth as 'an importunate guest whose proximity is dreaded.'⁹ In this society, the undead entraps and restricts the living and robs them of life. Until the cleansing 'second burial':

those most directly affected[...] are forsaken. Not only by men, but also by the protective spirits: as long as their impurity lasts they cannot hope for any help from the powers above. [...] They are set apart from the rest of humanity.'¹⁰

This bleakness of existence is clearly the lot of both the haunted and the trauma-sufferer. Peskin and Auerhahn in their essay on Post-Traumatic Stress Theory speak of the 'half-life of uninvested, forbidden, or forsaken identities far from either shore of past trauma or present adaptation'¹¹ where passion and excitement are avoided and '[l]ife is copied rather than lived.'¹²

³ Mbiti, p. 24.

⁴ Mbiti, p. 24.

⁵ Mbiti, p. 24.

⁶ Mbiti, p. 25.

⁷ Mbiti, p. 25.

⁸ Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. by R and C Needham (Aberdeen: Cohen and West, 1960), p. 36.

⁹ Hertz, p. 36.

¹⁰ Hertz, p. 38.

¹¹ Harvey Peskin and Nanette Auerhahn, 'Holocaust Transmission: Perverse or Life Affirming' in *Post-Traumatic Stress Theory: Research and Application*, ed. by John H Harvey and Brian G Pauwels (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 2000), pp. 183-208, (p. 188).

¹² Peskin and Auerhahn, 'Holocaust Transmission: Perverse or Life Affirming', p. 188.

So, in fiction too, the haunted (through whatever form the phantom/spectre takes) become (as do the grieving relatives of the Malay Archipelago) ghost-like. It has long been thus. Edgar Allan Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* - where Roderick and Madeline, cut off in a house that is itself little more than a ruin, suffering from a 'cadaverousness of complexion'¹³ (Roderick) and a disease of 'partially cataleptical character'¹⁴ (Madeline) - was published almost two hundred years ago in 1839. Even the Georgian and Victorian practice of wearing black and keeping apart from society after a close relative dies is a kind of death-in-life. Seen traditionally as a mark of respect, perhaps this is also a legacy of an earlier fear of the recently dead; for in medieval times there existed a genuine terror, as a wide selection of source material reveals,¹⁵ of the dead coming back to haunt from across a border which was ambiguous at best.

As Marsha Darling records in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Morrison herself talks of a 'restlessness'¹⁶ amongst the spirits of the millions who have suffered and died in the diaspora. 'Nobody knows their names and nobody thinks about them.'¹⁷ As a result, '[t]he gap between the African and Afro-American and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist'.¹⁸

In *Beloved*, a view of the dead similar to that described by Mbiti is part of what gives the novel its power. Layers – voices – images – of past dead and current living overlap and mingle, not just in the fusion chapters that express the misery of the slave-ships but in the events of 124 Bluestone Road, where it is Beloved herself who has most vibrancy while Sethe and Denver become ghost-like and insubstantial.

¹³ Edgar Allan Poe, *Fall of the House of Usher*, (Toronto: Joe Books), p. 9, Kindle book.

¹⁴ Poe, p. 16.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Andrew Joynt, *Medieval Ghost Stories: An Anthology of Miracles* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Marsha Darling, 'In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison in *Conversations with Toni Morrison* ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 246-254, (p. 246).

¹⁷ Darling, p. 247.

¹⁸ Darling, p. 247.

The house that Sethe and her daughter live in is 'grey and white'.⁽³⁾ Sethe's mother, Baby Suggs, lies, '[s]uspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, [and] she couldn't get interested in leaving or living it.'⁽⁴⁾ Sethe's two boys have fled. Words flee too. Sethe's daughter Denver becomes deaf. Descriptions of life, energy, colour, the one thing that Baby Suggs allows herself to 'ponder on'⁽⁴⁾ are absent from the narrative. When colour does unexpectedly appear, conjured up by Baby Suggs on her deathbed, it is, Morrison explains in *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, intentionally 'raw', seen 'for the first time, without its history.'¹⁹ There is:

[n]o compound of houses, no sculpture, no paint, especially no time because memory, prehistoric memory has no time. There is just a little music, each other, and the urgency of what is at stake. Which is all they had. *For that work, the work of language is to get out of the way.*²⁰

In order to convey the stripping of energy and '*nommo*'²¹ that trauma entails, the language of the novel has itself become a kind of Derridean spectre, of the sort discussed in Chapter 2, signifying and negating at the same time, asserting its 'right to say everything or not to say whilst saying, that is, the right to flaunt its secret.'²²

¹⁹ Morrison: '*Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature*', presented as The Tanner Lecture on Human Values at the University of Michigan, October 7, 1988 in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28.1, (1989), p. 162.

²⁰ Morrison, *Unspeakable Things*, p. 162.

²¹ Defined by Morrison in a footnote in *Unspeakable Things* as 'the life force, which produced all life (...) in the shape of the world' (quoting Janheinz Jahn), p. 162.

²² Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, p. 11.

Chapter 6

A. *Haunted Spaces*

The haunting that occurs in the novels I have chosen does not only bring about a collision between person and time, it brings about a collision between person, time and *place*. Anna Whitehead's insight, that within Abraham and Torok's metaphor of the crypt, there is an implied relationship between trauma and space in which 'something of the trauma remains or inheres at the site of the occurrence,'¹ underlines Jameson's point that 'the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be.'² The haunting by its repressed and hidden past of the physical/psychical/social entity that was Victorian London, noted by Rosario Arias, is a physical manifestation of this instability, turning the city into a 'text in which occluded meanings, symptoms of secrets, are cryptically enscribed'.³ The section of the Suffolk coast on which my novel, *Sea-Roke*, is modeled, is similarly haunted, the spectral influences infecting and, as I briefly indicated in the Introduction, appearing to control my writing. I shall return to discuss this in more detail later.

Katharina Boehm sees similar forces at work in the novels of Sarah Waters, recording her agreement both with de Certeau that 'there is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits that one can evoke or not. Haunted places are the only places that people can live in',⁴ and Tim Edensor, who claims that ruins are like memories and hold 'an excess of meaning, a plenitude of fragmented stories, elisions, fantasies, inexplicable objects and possible events which present a history that can begin and end anywhere'.⁵

¹ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, pp. 28-9.

² Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', p. 39.

³ Rosario Arias, *Haunting and Spectrality*, p. 148.

⁴ Katharina Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination in the Novels of Sarah Waters.' in *Studies in the Novel*, 43.2, (2011), 237-257 (p. 253), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41228679> [accessed 29 September 2014]

⁵ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 253.

In Waters's, *The Little Stranger*, the ruin is Hundreds Hall, a dilapidated and decaying old house which seems to turn itself almost bodily against its inhabitants as they attempt to fight off the physical and social encroachment of an increasingly modern and capitalist world. In *Sea-Roke*, the landscape itself is a ruin: an accumulation of the inevitable and unrelenting power of waves and wind, forces that have reduced it over the centuries from a thriving medieval city to a shrinking cliff face and a narrow beach. By eroding the space that was once the town, the sea becomes simultaneously a space and a non-space, a negation of what was once a multitude of spaces serving a multitude of functions.

Edensor's expansion of his view elsewhere, claiming that a ruin is a 'shadow realm of slowness in which things are revealed',⁶ is particularly helpful both to my writing and to my argument here. For a ruin can do more than 'merely evoke' the past, it can 'also suggest forebodings, pointing to future erasure and subsequently, the reproduction of space, thus conveying a sense of the transience of all spaces.'⁷ The implication of this is that the very fact of something *being* a ruin gives it the power to disturb psychologically, if only by reminding the onlooker that nothing is permanent, not even the ground on which they stand.

For social theorist, Michael Bell, *all* places (ruins or otherwise) are haunted. Places are 'personed – even when there is no one there'.⁸ Ghosts can come from any time, past or present or future, and can be of the dead or of the living, even of our own past selves. Borrowing from Heidegger the notion of 'mood' - not merely some sort of psychological state, but 'a certain way of being-in-the-world' that precedes 'the abstract conceptualization of thought'⁹ - Bell adds:

We attach our spirits to a place, and thus that place is attached to us. We animate it in our imaginations, we construct it in our minds, with the spirit we

⁶ Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 125.

⁷ Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 125.

⁸ Michael Mayerfeld Bell, 'The Ghosts of Place' in: *Theory and Society*, 26.6, (1997), 813-836, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657936> [accessed 15 April 2015]

⁹ Bell, *The Ghosts of Place*, p. 302.

sense in our own person, just as we sense spirits in others. The place possesses us, and we possess it; we belong to the place, and the place belongs to us.¹⁰

This mutuality of possession between place and individual (or group) is a frequent feature of ghost stories. In both *Beloved* and *The Little Stranger*, the relationship between the houses and their inhabitants - each possessed by the other in a perverted form of mutual dependency – are like indissoluble but dysfunctional marriages where any attempt at escape seems either inconceivable or likely to cause irreparable physical and/or psychological harm.

In Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger*, the Ayres family, the inhabitants of the now dilapidated great Hall of Hundreds, are as much bound to the house as it is to them. The building is not merely the physical structure that *contains* the family, it is the *manifestation* of the family, its 'seat'. The ghostly goings-on inside echo not only the demise of the family and the building itself, but also reflect the wider struggle of a society adjusting to the changes brought about in the after-shock of war. Heilmann, in her 2012 discussion of the novel, stresses this interplay of elements, calling Hundreds Hall, the disintegrating family home, 'a focal point for fractured identities and frustrated desires,'¹¹ where 'members of the new professional class born from domestic service covet not subjection to but, rather, the possession of the old-time privilege bestowed by a hereditary house.'¹²

But in what way is it possible for this mutual haunting to come about? To answer this question, I want to detour briefly into the work of philosopher Dylan Trigg. In his 2012 book, *The Memory of Place*, Trigg recalls Merleau-Ponty's observation that there is *always* a relationship between place and body: 'The body activates place. But the same is true in reverse: Place activates body'.¹³ Trigg gives the example of a train held up by some obstacle and one of its passengers remembering that the dogs left at home are desperately in need of feeding. Home, in such a situation, becomes suddenly much further away. Trigg cites Bachelard's claim that

¹⁰ Bell, *The Ghosts of Place*, p. 824.

¹¹ Ann Heilmann, 'Spectres of the Victorian in the Neo-Forties Novel: Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009) and Its Intertexts' in *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 6.1, (2012), 38-55, (p 40).

¹² Heilmann, p. 40.

¹³ Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), p. 11.

‘everything from “the house’s entire being” to the “feel of the tiniest latch”¹⁴ remains in and with us.’¹⁵ He goes on: ‘Our bodies not only orient us, but also serve as the basis for an entire history, at all times producing a self that strives towards continuity through retaining and returning to places.’¹⁶

This suggestion, borrowed in part from the thinking of Merleau-Ponty, that body and place become a ‘hybrid, each glancing toward the other for their identity and animation,’¹⁷ suggests an interdependence as powerful and substantive as Aristotle’s hylomorphic theory of matter and form, in which a body (matter) is given life by the soul or psyche(form). In Trigg’s version it is the body that serves as form, that is, as the animation and life-force behind the place (matter). The point is that when an individual remembers a place, or revisits it, the ‘body’ is the ‘necessary ground’ where the ‘felt density of place [...], in its sensuality and texture [is] relived.’¹⁸ This foregrounding of body, that fixes it as prior to cognition in the achievement of selfhood, ducks the traditional problem – as important in discussion of experiences of ghosts and phantoms as in any other – of the division between mind and body that has troubled Western Philosophy since Descartes, and allows the link between the two to be restored.

Thomas Fuchs, in his examination of the tensions between the Freudian unconscious and phenomenology, suggests that Freud’s insistence that drives are rooted in the psyche is simply Cartesian Dualism under another guise. Fuchs defines the unconscious as ‘something external within oneself, whose meaning and effect are alien to the subject’.¹⁹ The splitting off of the drives from the very regions of the body with which they are most associated leaves the body ‘only as a seat of symbolic or imagined meanings [...] as a primary projection field for the psyche.’¹ He explains that for Merleau-Ponty, any ‘repression’ comes about not through a separate, walled-off area called the unconscious, but as a result of the way an

¹⁴ Trigg, p. 93.

¹⁵ Trigg, p. 12.

¹⁶ Trigg, p. 12.

¹⁷ Trigg, p. 12.

¹⁸ Trigg, p. 13.

¹⁹ Thomas Fuchs, ‘Body Memory and the Unconscious’, in *Founding Psychoanalysis Phenomenologically*, ed. by D. Lohmar and J. Brudzińska, Volume 199, 69-82, (p. 91) , https://www.klinikum.uni-heidelberg.de/fileadmin/zpm/psychatrie/fuchs/Body_memory_Unconscious.pdf [accessed 19 February 16]

individual looks at the world through a body viewed as the ‘*capacity* to see, touch, sense’ in which ‘bodily memory designates the totality of [...] bodily predispositions as they have developed in the course of our development’.²⁰

For Phenomenology, my ‘not being able to see’ something is because of the way I look at the world as a result of conditions that have meant that I ‘do not see’ it. It is not something within me that I, in some way, ignore or hide. A traumatic injury can thus, Fuchs claims, be understood in terms of a ‘specific deformation of [...an individual’s...] lived space’²¹ which creates the very contradiction so familiar in the haunted: simultaneously the unconscious avoidance of that which created the injury and, *at the same time*, the disposition to attract it.

Such an explanation of how a body can know something that is *no longer there* helps illuminate the familiar post-traumatic feature that Schwab describes (see my Chapter 3) as the need for the story to tell, ‘itself over and over, in the language of the body, in pain or distortion, or in the endless, compulsive repetition of a particular traumatic rupture.’²²

This phenomenological view - in which the ‘ever-present past [...] declines to take part in the continuing progress of life’ but reappears as “‘blind spots”, “empty spaces””²³ (an ‘absence in presence’)²⁴ – reminds one of the phantoms of transgenerational haunting. And, despite (or perhaps *because*) it places the body as the centre of experience, it also appears to support Abraham and Torok’s assertion that the ghost is ‘nothing but an invention of the living’. In fact it does the opposite. Whilst holding that our ‘not seeing’ ghosts comes about as a result of the habits and predispositions our bodies develop to experience the world (as *without* ghosts), it also allows that, when ghosts *are* ‘seen’, they are genuine objects of experience. Either way, the question of whether ghosts exist independently of our perception is left unanswered.

²⁰ Fuchs, p. 91.

²¹ Fuchs, p. 99.

²² Schwab, p. 81.

²³ Fuchs, p. 101.

²⁴ Fuchs, p. 100.

Trigg's utilization of Merleau-Ponty's explanation for the phenomena of phantom limbs,²⁵ in which '[i]mpersonal time continues its course, but personal time is arrested',²⁶ takes us further towards understanding his position on the ghost. In such a case, there is a 'modification of being-in-the-world' that 'implicates the body's retrieval of the past as being deeply emblematic of the specificity of the self, giving the self a temporal density that would be ultimately fragmented were memory a solely cognitive affair.'²⁷

The separation of body from 'its own materiality'²⁸ that is a feature of the phantom limb shows, Trigg claims, how it is possible to access something that is non-corporeal through the body. Lived memory, too, 'can detach itself from the experiencer, establishing a phantom appearance'²⁹ that can be recognized and responded to by the subject. A 'particular kind of prepersonal longing'³⁰ for unity causes a response to what is absent in an individual's sense of self, causing him/her to 'see' a ghost. This is possible even with those things that exist outside of a person's own past. Because of the 'chiasmatic relationship'³¹ that our bodies have with place, 'our bodies carry the remains and reminders of a lived past.'³² These remains, when they have not been successfully incorporated into our sense of self, can express themselves externally.

Trigg's description of the haunting in Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House* as a 'simultaneity of consciousness'³³ between Eleanor Vance and the house demonstrates his support for the ghost as a genuine object of experience. The *mood*, that Eleanor and the house share, is something they are both *in*, an 'interpersonal phenomenon, forever vibrating against each individual being,'³⁴ not something the girl imposes upon her surroundings, rebutting any accusation that the ghost is a mere figment of Eleanor's troubled state of mind. Even Avery Gordon

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this, see Trigg, *The Memory of Place*, pp. 12-17.

²⁶ Trigg, p. 16.

²⁷ Trigg, p. 16.

²⁸ Trigg, p. 298.

²⁹ Trigg, p. 299.

³⁰ Trigg, p. 299.

³¹ Trigg, p. 307.

³² Trigg, p. 302.

³³ Trigg, p. 313.

³⁴ Trigg, p. 314.

(whose influential approach I shall look at in more detail shortly), as well as Edensor and Bell, are criticized for their treatment of the ghost as no more than a kind of figurative device. Perhaps his harshest words are for Derrida's Hauntology, which, he claims, reduces the ghost to 'a metaphor, a metonym, or a trope. As an ambassador for another cause, the ghost's voice is lost in the blur of academic discourse, nullified in the realm of commentary and textual analysis'.³⁵

Whilst Trigg's reading of Derrida seems unjustly reductionist, his view of haunting in which 'the haunt and haunted become one, thanks to a shared mood,'³⁶ invites us to see the phantom as worthy of our concern. To remain open to the experience of haunting not only refuses to dismiss ghosts as 'deviant modes of perception'³⁷ but allows them 'a chance of coming into the light, so far repressed by the language of deconstructionism.'³⁸ This comment brings to mind the parallel drawn by Marianne Hirsch between the openness to haunting and spiritualism. Describing Sethe's 'rememories' as 'a descent through what Judith Kestenberg calls a "time tunnel of history"',³⁹ she agrees that to experience the world of the past in this way "is similar – but not identical - to the spiritualist's journey into the world of the dead."⁴⁰

B. *The Haunted House*

There's nothing more haunted than a house. Doesn't matter where,
how grand, how small, made of brick, straw, stone, gingerbread,
whether perfectly cared for or blown to bits. Beings gather there.
Every house is a planet, exerting gravitational pull. Every house is in a
dark wood, every house has a wicked witch in it, doesn't matter if she
looks like a fairy godmother....⁴¹

³⁵ Trigg, p. 285.

³⁶ Trigg, pp. 307-08.

³⁷ Trigg, p. 287.

³⁸ Trigg, p. 287.

³⁹ Hirsch, p. 83.

⁴⁰ Hirsch, p. 83.

⁴¹ Jane Smiley, *Some Luck* (London: Picador, 2015), p. 583.

So says Jim Upjohn to Frank Langdon in the first of Jane Smiley's family saga trilogy, *Some Luck*. Although at first glance this is not quite the symbiosis of haunt and haunted that Trigg depicts, it is soon revealed as such when Jim adds that the house can 'make you wonder what you did wrong, [...] make you ponder your sins,'⁴² attributing to it the role of its inhabitant's conscience.

Julian Wolfreys in his description of the haunted house as a 'stock structural and narrative figure'⁴³ observes how the liminality of ghost and place, and place and person, is echoed in the actual 'blurring of boundaries'⁴⁴ that occurs when, for instance, ghosts walk through walls. '[T]he spectre, though incorporeal, is incorporated into the very economy of dwelling.'⁴⁵ And Fredric Jameson, in his discussion of the film adaptation of Stephen King's book, *The Shining*, observes that the character Jack Nicholson's plays is:

possessed neither by evil as such nor by the "devil" or some analogous occult force, but rather simply by History, by the American past as it has left its sedimented traces in the [hotel's] corridors and dismembered suites.⁴⁶

And so it is in *Beloved*. 124 Bluestone Road is not only 'spiteful, full of baby's venom'(3) and 'full of strong feeling',(47) but seen by Denver 'as a person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits'.(35) As if furious that its inhabitants cannot face their own past, the house 'worr[ies] Sethe and Denver with a pack of haunts so loud [Paul D] could hear from the road.'(200) In the 'loud hasty voices'(202) that Paul D cannot face, there are layers of black women's history, shifting to a 'whisper', a 'mutter' and a 'moan', the 'eternal private conversation'(203) that cannot be deciphered. Yet, at the novel's end, when Sethe has finally been able to acknowledge her own history and been accepted back into

⁴² Smiley, pp. 583-04.

⁴³ Wolfreys, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Wolfreys, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Wolfreys, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Fredric Jameson, 'The Shining' in *Social Text*, No 4, Autumn 1981, 114-125, (p. 120), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466280> [accessed 20 May 2015]

the community, the house, 'unloaded' of its ghosts and griefs, is free at last to become 'just another weathered house needing repair. Quiet.'(303)

This *sharing of mood* of which Trigg writes is also apparent in Edith Wharton's short story, 'Afterward,' in which an American couple actively search for a house that is haunted: 'I don't want to drive ten miles to see somebody else's ghost. I want one of my own on the premises,'⁴⁷ claims Ned Boyne. It is as if, unconsciously ashamed of the wrong he has done, he seeks out the house's collusion in his punishment. For the omniscient narrator's observation that 'it turned out that [...] the life they had yearned for to the point of planning it out in all its daily details had actually begun for them,' (41) surely points to Ned's ultimate fate as its terrifying but logical conclusion.

His wife, Mary, an unwitting carrier of her husband's *phantom*, acknowledges 'the ghost-seeing faculty'(44) of a house that 'communed visually but secretly with its own past.'⁴⁸ And whilst she innocently perceives a 'warm human presence [...and...] deep sense of intimacy,'⁴⁹ in its walls, feeling 'so complete a trust in its power to gather up her life and Ned's into the harmonious pattern of the long, long story it sat there weaving in the sun,'⁵⁰ once tragedy has struck, she is forced to look back and admit 'the *house knew*.'⁵¹

Lyng was not one of the garrulous old houses that betray the secrets entrusted to them. Its very legend proved that it had always been the mute accomplice, the incorruptible custodian of the mysteries it had surprised.⁵²

Perhaps because the family's connection to its surroundings is considerably more intertwined, the *sharing of mood* in *The Little Stranger* is even more evident. Beyond even the physical manifestations of haunting – the marks on the walls, the sudden fires that ironically destroy papers charting the family history, the

⁴⁷ Edith Wharton, 'Afterward' in *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, Wordsworth Editions, Ware (2009), p. 41.

⁴⁸ Wharton, p. 52.

⁴⁹ Wharton, p. 52.

⁵⁰ Wharton, p. 52.

⁵¹ Wharton, p. 61.

⁵² Wharton, pp. 60-61.

unexplained whistling of the speaking tube, the mirror that launches itself at Roderick's head – Hundred's Hall is alive with intentionality and emotion. Despite its author fastidiously including qualifiers such as 'like' or 'appears' or 'as if', the house is complex, troubled, contradictory. It is sad and spiteful and lost. It is 'depressed', (293) 'plays parlour games' (304) with the inhabitants and 'knows all [their] weaknesses and is testing them' (353). It 'makes one think things' (320), and 'would not be [...] easily subdued' (331). Able to develop 'scars of its own in response [...perhaps, to...] griefs and disappointments of the whole family' (148), its 'personality' is so powerful Roderick accuses it of planning to take 'me and Caroline and mother down with it' (153), for it 'wants to destroy us, all of us'. (195)

Parkin-Gounelas, in *Literature and Psychoanalysis, Intertextual Readings*, recalls Holland and Sherman's suggestion that, because of the 'variety of projections'⁵³ it can invite, the castle in gothic literature, can act 'like the maternal body, as a point of ultimate return, the source of birth and sexuality,'⁵⁴ indicating that the very identity constructed by gothic characters stems from their inherited wealth and status. In a sense, a castle has absolute power. Like the omnipotent mother of Kleinian theory it can hold:

all the possibilities of parent or a body. It can threaten, resist, love, or confine, but in all these actions, it stands as a total environment in one-to-one relationship with the victim, like the all powerful mother of earliest childhood [... in ...] a recapitulation of that earliest stage in human development when the boundaries between inner and outer, me and not-me, are still not sharply drawn, and self cannot distinguish from the mother who is the outside world.⁵⁵

In *The Little Stranger*, the fate of each member of the Ayres family reflects the hopeless struggle with modernity visible in the decaying walls that surround them. The house – both as structure and family - crumbles. One by one, as inexorably as rain seeps through ceilings and wallpaper slides from walls, Roderick, Mrs Ayres

⁵³ Norman Holland and Leona F Sherman, 'Gothic Possibilities' in *New Literary History*, 8.2 (1977), 279-94, (p. 282), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468522> [accessed 21 April 2015]

⁵⁴ Parkin-Gounelas, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, p. 121.

⁵⁵ Holland and Sherman, 'Gothic Possibilities', p. 283.

and, finally, Caroline forfeit either their sanity or their lives, or both, textual support for Parkin-Gounelas's definition of inheritance as both an 'economic and psychic determinant.'⁵⁶

Surely applicable to any structure that acts as home, as the container for the physical and psychical protection and shelter of human individuals, this comment has echoes of both Freud's *heimlich-unheimlich* explanation of the uncanny and his theory of phylogenetic inheritance. As Parkin-Gounelas reminds us, Freud held that a child's superego comes not from its parents, as such, but from their super-ego. 'It becomes the vehicle of tradition and all the time-resisting judgments of value which have propagate themselves in this manner from generation to generation.'⁵⁷

But it is also supported by Abraham's and Torok's theory of transgenerational haunting for, like the values, restrictions and 'gaps' that we inherit from our parents, the ghost that possesses Hundreds Hall is hidden. There are messages, mysterious noises, occurrences that defy the laws of physics. There are hints of a range of past miseries. There is no logic to the ghost, no one thing it might represent. The phantom of Hundreds Hall seems all things to all men. The strange sounds coming through the speaking tube point both to the narrator Faraday's servant mother and to Susan, the Ayres's first born who died suddenly at six years old. The mirror that hurls itself towards Roderick indicates his own self-disgust. The incident when the dog, Gyp, unaccountably attacks a visiting child suggests a rejection by the family's ancestral past of the nouveau-riche and their values, whilst the 'ssss' scrawls on the wall point back to Susan again, whose eyes Mrs Ayres 'feels' on her: 'her gaze is so strong, her eyes are like fingers; they can touch. They press and pinch.' (392) Faraday himself seems to experience the ghost in terms both of Freud's *heimlich/unheimlich* understanding of the uncanny, as well as the revenant of Derrida's hauntology. It is 'in some way *familiar*, as if its bashful advance towards us was more properly a *return*'. (393)

⁵⁶ Parkin-Gounelas, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, p. 121.

⁵⁷ Parkin-Gounelas, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, p. 39.

Whilst the construction of identities by those who live in Hundreds Hall is intimately entwined with the house itself, this is not so in *Beloved*, where the building they inhabit shares only part of its occupants' history. Moreover, the place that Sethe has escaped, the ironically named 'Sweet Home', is (as Morrison commentators acknowledge) the very opposite of everything a home should be. Despite the ostensibly "enlightened" nature of its owner, Mr Garner - who boasts that his slaves are 'men, every one'(12) - it confines, diminishes and punishes. When Garner dies and the farm is taken over by his brother, schoolteacher, the progressive-seeming 'reading' lessons concentrate merely on getting the slaves to list their 'human characteristics on the left [...] animal ones on the right.'(228) As Nancy Jesser observes, Sethe 'is the udder [the white men] drink from, and the sexual body they work their pleasures on - adjusting her characteristics to whatever shape their fantasies demand.'⁵⁸ Sweet Home is a place in which identity is denied and - where flutterings of self do exist - torn apart and destroyed. '[W]hat he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight'(11). 'Fire and brimstone alright, but hidden in lacey groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world.'(7)

In fleeing Sweet Home, Sethe has been unable to leave it behind. When Denver asks how it is that her mother and Paul D need to talk about it so constantly, Sethe replies that it '[c]omes back whether we want it to or not'(16), a ghostly intrusion, that as Jesser also notes, shows that 'communities constructed in the past haunt communities of the present.'⁵⁹ And whilst Sethe's cutting of her daughter's throat to save the child from a lifetime of slavery is the only major trauma to have occurred within the boundaries of 124 Bluestone Rd itself, the 'pool of red and undulating light that locked [Paul D] where he stood'(10) indicates the house's 'sharing of mood' with its occupants, allowing the haunting to speak for the history of their group as a whole. According to Carole Schmutde this is also possible

⁵⁸ Nancy Jesser, 'Violence, Home, and Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*' in *African American Review*, 33,2 (1999), 325-345, (p. 329).

⁵⁹ Jesser, p. 330.

because of the 'unbroken link with the past'⁶⁰ that 124 affords as a result of its proximity to Ohio River, the boundary between those who kept slaves and those who didn't, between the chained and the free. As Homi Bhabha observes, the novel's opening words ('124 was spiteful') offer 'no respite, no immediate meaning, because the house of slave-memory is not a resting place, not a Wordsworthian "spot of time"'. Instead it is 'the unhomely, haunted site of the circulation of an event not as fact or fiction, but as an "enunciation", a discourse of "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken"'.⁶¹

⁶⁰ A feature required by the *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* for haunting to take place - see Schumde, C, 'The Haunting of 124' in *African American Review*, 26, 3, Fiction Issue, (1992), p. 410.

⁶¹ Homi Bhabha, 'The World and The Home', *Social Text*, No31/32, Third World and Post Colonial Issues (1992), 141-153, (p.146), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466222> [accessed 31 March 2016]

Chapter 7

'One has to know one's buried truth in order to live one's life'¹

Cultural Haunting

Much discussion of the ghost in literature - in particular in *Beloved* (see Brogan, Moreland, Page, Krumholz, Christian, and others) – has focused on how a writer presents the ghost, in a post-Derridean sense, as a *functioning participant* in the narrative, using it to make those in the present not only aware of, but also *attentive to*, the horrors of the past. Schwab maintains it is the ability to 'take in' loss that allows the individual to be 'transformed and translated into something new, furthering continual self-fashioning'.²

This latter is what Abraham and Torok mean by 'introjection' – a process that Nicholas Rand, in his introduction to *The Shell and The Kernel*, tells us they hold to be as natural and instinctive as any physical form of maturation (such as puberty or having children or aging) and which takes place parallel to these. It occurs as a result of the individual's clashes with the world – a kind of learning-to-overcome that allows emotional and psychological development to take place. According to this view, there is no Freudian privilege of the experience gathered in childhood over that encountered by the adult. The conflicts and repressions of the former, powerful and influential though they can be, need be no more formative than those faced by older people. For Abraham and Torok, 'Psychopathology arises most often from disturbances in introjection or self-fashioning and these may occur at any stage in life.'³

¹ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. 78.

² Schwab, p. 56.

³ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel*, p. 11.

According to Rand's exegesis, Abraham and Torok perceive introjection as a form of 'psychic nourishment'⁴ that occurs as a result of an individual's encounters with change of all types, physical or psychological, external or internal. Ideally, it,

represents our ability to survive trauma, shock or loss; it is the psychic process that allows human beings to continue to live harmoniously, despite instability, devastation, war and upheaval [...and...] can also rescue life when faced with the threat of destruction.⁵

Not surprisingly then, trauma is a serious impediment to successful introjection - it is a loss that cannot be 'taken in' - and this can be so even when the trauma is experienced only indirectly, as with the *phantom* of transgenerational haunting. In such cases, in which past events are somehow submerged and treated as though they never happened, psychic disturbance comes about as a result of a family secret handed down to 'an unwitting descendent'.⁶ It is the new place, in which the *phantom* somehow hides, that Abraham and Torok have labeled the *crypt*. The breaking rocks and killing butterflies of the example I gave earlier, would be an instance of this process at work, as are the leprosy-like marks on Luke's arms in *Sea-Roke*.

An interesting illustration of how such a secret is presented in fiction is given by Kimberley Wedeven Segall in her discussion of JM Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*. Here ghosts 'represent the friction between traumatic image and identity [...thus....] shift[ing] the gaze to an-other',⁷ an instance of the crypt creating a barrier between language and meaning, or 'psychic aphasia',⁸ - a kind of sending off-course of the pursuers of truth.

⁴Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel*, p. 14.

⁵ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel*, p. 14.

⁶ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel*, p.16.

⁷ Kimberly Wedeven Segall, 'Pursuing Ghosts: The Traumatic Sublime in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*', in *Research in African Literature*, 36.4, (2005), 40-54, (p. 42), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821381> > [accessed 2 November 2013]

⁸ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p. 17.

According to this view, the phantom is a villain, a taker of a space that is not its own and who withholds the truth in order to protect it. But, as has already been indicated, examination of the chosen novels shows that, whilst at first glance this might appear to be true, it is not actually so. The very behavior exhibited as a result of haunting can be a clue to the secrets it attempts to hide.

Clearly, the *phantom* is not always represented or expressed as a ghost in the most conventional sense of that word. What is at issue is psychic distress or trauma expressed in a variety of different ways, including through alternative behavior or dis-function of language.

For sociologist, Avery Gordon, the ghost is not unknowable in the sense that Derrida believes but instead is a 'social figure'⁹ that produces 'a something-to-be-done'.¹⁰ And whilst trauma binds an individual – or a community - to their past in a way that can never end, denying any opportunity for reconciliation, haunting is 'an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known.'¹¹ The ghost can thus, as Gordon says elsewhere, lead one to 'that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life'.¹² It is 'one form by which something lost or 'barely visible or seemingly not there ... makes itself known or apparent to us '¹³

The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting in a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge. But as a transformative recognition.¹⁴

Haunting has the power to transform our understanding of the political and social worlds we inhabit. 'The ghost arises, carrying the signs and portents of a repression

⁹ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, (Minneapolis: New University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 8.

¹⁰ Gordon, 'Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity', p. 3.

¹¹ Gordon, 'Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity', p. 2.

¹² Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 8.

¹³ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 8.

[...] that's no longer working. The ghost demands your attention. The present wavers. Something will happen.'¹⁵ This is 'when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind field comes into view.'¹⁶ Under this view, haunting is a dynamic force, where the ghost (in whatever form it or might take) becomes as powerful a driver of events as character and situation. It also turns the reader/onlooker into a kind of witness, where awareness of what is now 'in view' not only colours and directs interpretation and understanding, but influences subsequent thinking as well.

In her exegesis of Morrison's *Beloved*, Gordon focuses on the 'out-there-ness' of the experiences ('rememories') of Sweet Home (the ironically-named plantation where Sethe and Baby Suggs were kept as slaves) that come back in all their painful details to haunt Sethe's present. 'The picture of the place *is* its very sociability, all the doings, happenings and knowings that make the social world alive in and around us as we make it ours.'¹⁷ It is a 'moment of enchantment', in which an individual is 'remembering something in the world or something in the world is remembering you.'¹⁸ They are not, Gordon stresses, imagining things, or going mad. Instead, they 'have bumped into somebody else's memory [... and ...] encountered haunting and the picture of it the ghost imprints'.¹⁹ According to this view, what has been denied or kept silent can vigorously force itself into the awareness and concern of others. In *Beloved*, Sethe says,

I was talking about time. It's hard for me to believe in it. Some things go.

Pass on. Some things stay [...] If a house burns down, its gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. [...] even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there, right in the place where it happened.(43)

¹⁵ Gordon, 'Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity', p. 3.

¹⁶ Gordon, 'Ghostly Matters', p. 197.

¹⁷ Gordon, 'Ghostly Matters', p. 166.

¹⁸ Gordon, 'Ghostly Matters', p. 166.

¹⁹ Gordon, 'Ghostly Matters', p. 166.

This is Derrida's '*revenant*' – 'the future ...[the]... always to come'²⁰ that I spoke of in Chapter 2. According to Gordon, we cannot escape it: it '*will happen again ... it will be there for you. It is waiting for you.*'²¹ The ethical landscape in which we need to take action, it is 'the terrain of responsibility' in which '[t]he ghost appears, something must be done'.²²

To my mind, the whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, demands your attention. Haunting and the appearance of spectres or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we're notified that what's been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, messing or interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us.²³

This characterization of the ghost as 'messing or interfering', as well as an entity with rights, demands, and a place in the world, not only reminds us of the words of Walter Benjamin (quoted in Chapter 4) that those in the present are 'expected'²⁴ on earth because a kind of appointment has been made between the generations who have gone before us and those living now, it strongly reinforces the ethical dimension of a reader's task.

²⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 39.

²¹ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 166.

²² Avery Gordon, Talk presented at United Nations Plaza (Berlin) for Seminar 6: "who's there?—an interrogation in the dark," organ. by Natascha Sadr Haghigian et al, (22–26 October 2007), <http://www.averygordon.net/writing-haunting/whos-there/> [accessed 15 April 2014]

²³ Gordon, 'who's there? – an interrogation in the dark'

²⁴ Benjamin, *The Concept of History*.

Chapter 8

Beloved

When Ella, in *Beloved*, welcoming the escaping slaves over the river to freedom, 'listen[s] for the holes – the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listen[s] too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind'(108), she, like the reader, is 'reading the wound'¹ that Hartman, (borrowing from Derrida) speaks of. She is the reader within the reading, the ethical agent who, like her counterpart outside the text, is responding to what is 'vulnerable, addresses us, reveals itself as a participant in a collective life, or life-in-death.'² It is a kind of reading that allows for the text to be '*addressed* [...]' as a responsive, vulnerable, even unpredictable being'.³

In Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth*, Morrison talks of her attempts draw aside the veil from 'those proceedings too terrible to relate'⁴ by giving the reader 'the impression that he isn't reading this, that he is participating in it as he goes along,'⁵ a process Linda Krumholtz describes as compelling him 'to actively construct an interpretative framework.'⁶ Elsewhere Morrison explains that the abruptness of *Beloved's* first line, '124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom'(3) ensures that:

[t]he reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place or another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense.⁷

¹ Hartman, p. 549.

² Hartman, p. 549.

³ Hartman, p. 549.

⁴ Toni Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2nd edition, ed. by William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp. 83-102, (p. 91).

⁵ Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', p. 100.

⁶ Linda Krumholtz, 'The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison *Beloved*' in *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, ed. by William L Andrews and Ellie Y McKay (Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 107-126, (p. 109).

⁷ Morrison: *Unspeakable things Unspoken*, p. 161.

The shifting narrative perspective that follows, combined with the novel's ever-changing temporal, spacial and material specificity, whilst destabilising and unnerving the reader, thus demands not just their attention and concern but their participation: a sleight of hand whose effect is to keep 'the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while being supplied a controlled diet of the incredible political world.'⁸ In this way, the ghost/woman Beloved, as Krumholtz suggests, becomes a symbol for the 'irrationality of the world by defying tradition and categorization' and yet it is simultaneously "real", a participant *in* the world, 'as sister, daughter, lover and, finally, perhaps, as mother.'⁹

Like the phantoms in *The Little Stranger* and *Sea-Roke*, Beloved functions multi-dimensionally. To Krumholtz she is 'everyone's ghost'¹⁰ – Sethe's, Denver's, Paul D's, the murdered baby girl, the slave women who have gone before, even the community's. Beloved is the only articulation possible of a process that Sethe begins with her first terrible act of true freedom – the killing of her baby girl to protect her from slavery - and which moves back, painfully and often incoherently, but always poetically, into the suffering past, emerging finally in Sethe's capacity to know herself as her own 'best thing'. As Amy says, '[a]nything dead coming back to life hurts' (42).

In *Beloved* the haunt and the haunted are interwoven, the distinction between dead and living, flesh and non-flesh, as uncertain as that between past and present. We have already heard (Chapter 5) how, before her death, the ghost-like Baby Suggs lay prone in her bed, 'pondering colour' (4). 'Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it' (4). But, even as a younger woman, she seems unable to experience herself as three-dimensional, solid. Only 'sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home' (165). It is only when she knows she

⁸ Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, p. 161.

⁹ Krumholtz, 'The Ghosts of Slavery', p. 117.

¹⁰ Krumholtz, 'The Ghosts of Slavery', p. 115.

is free, that she can acknowledge her body - 'These *my* hands'(166) - and feel her own heartbeat - 'Had it been there all along? This pounding thing?'(166)

Denver too, for whom to leave the house would be to 'step off the edge of the world'(286) and whose hearing has been 'cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear'(122), recovers only at the sound of 'her dead sister trying to climb the stairs'(122). So haunted does she become by Beloved, so *possessed*, that when the latter suddenly but briefly disappears, Denver is overwhelmed by existential terror: '[s]he feels like an ice cake torn away from the solid surface of the stream, floating on darkness, thick and crashing against the edges of things around it. Breakable, meltable and cold'(144-45): 'she has no self... She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing'(145). Even Paul D - 'the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could'(20), becomes 'a rag doll - picked up and put back down anywhere anytime by a girl young enough to be his daughter'(148). Full of shame, he is 'not man enough to break out'(148).

Beloved, too, is haunted. Both the demanding-child-returning and the dead baby murdered by her mother, she is neither dead nor alive. Haunted by her own past and by the nameless ancestors, whose anguished inarticulate voices she carries, her hold on corporeality is tenuous and fragile:

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart [...] she knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. (157)

Her desperation extends even to the seduction of Paul D: "'You have to touch me'", she says "'On the inside part. And you have to call me my name'"(137).

To haunt and to be haunted – either way - is to lose identity, to lose shape. If an individual has been haunted since birth, as Sethe has, they have never become fully

alive. Paul D remembers Sethe's face as 'a mask and with mercifully punched-out eyes'(10) that held only 'emptiness'(10). The skin on her back has 'been dead for years'(21), and later both her body and her spirit are all but absorbed by Beloved, whose monstrous hunger means she 'never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk'(282). As Beloved grows, Sethe shrinks. Denver observes that her mother's skin is 'thin as china silk'(281), that her clothes sag, that her eyes are 'bright but dead, alert but vacant'(285). 'Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur.'(295)

And yet it is this loss of shape, this merging of identity and history that haunting brings about, that also restores the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Rd, both to one another and to themselves. As Homi Bhabha points out, building on Levinas and his claim that human relations are primary,¹¹ it is a transition that Morrison makes particularly visible in the chapters in which the three women 'perform a ceremony of claiming and naming: "Beloved, she my daughter" Beloved is my sister", "I am beloved and she is mine"'.¹² It is impossible, Bhabha claims, not to detect in the exploration 'of interpersonal reality' that occurs between the haunt and the haunted, 'the healing of history, a community reclaimed in the making of a name.'¹³

Whatever has generated the ghost's presence in Bluestone Rd - whether it is Trigg's 'particular kind of prepersonal longing' ('If only she'd come, I could make it clear to her,'" (5) Sethe says) or as a result of phylogenetic inheritance from the generations that have gone before - what matters most is, as Rashkin notes, the dialogue that haunting *subsequently* provokes. Through the presence of Beloved, through her demands and needs - as insatiable and insistent as an angry baby's - a

¹¹ Anthony F. Beavers, 'Introducing Levinas to undergraduate philosophers.' *Colloquy paper, Undergraduate Philosophy Association, University of Texas. Austin* (1990). Beavers explains Levinas's position thus: "The meaning of my being a self is found in opposition to the other, as an essential ability to respond to the other. I am, above all things, a social self indentured a priori, made to stand in the place of the other. This standing in the place of the other provides Levinas with one of his most powerful concepts, "substitution." Substitution arises directly from the self as held hostage by the other. It is the means by which my being responds to the other before I know that it does. Indeed, substitution is a sign of how other-directed the human being actually is. In comporting myself towards the other person in substitution, my identity becomes concrete. "In substitution my being that belongs to me and not to another is undone, and it is through substitution that I am not 'another,' but me."

¹² Bhabha, 'The World and the Home', [accessed 14 April 2016]

¹³ Bhabha, p. 152.

history emerges. Just as Denver gives 'blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her – and a heartbeat'(92), so Sethe nurses the unfeeling and broken past back to life and provides herself, the women in her family and community, with new possibilities. Because the very nature of trauma determines that it has to be, it is achieved, as Krumholtz observes, without language, without words: 'In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sounded like'(305). The sound was 'the key, the code that broke the back of words'(308): 'It broke over Sethe and she trembled like baptized in its wash.'(308)

With all the power of one of Baby Suggs's rituals, this benediction gives Sethe not only the strength to face the worst haunting of all – the moment when she was forced to kill her baby girl - but also to transform its outcome. When she sees Edwin Bodwin coming towards her on his horse and mistakes him for Schoolteacher, the support of the community as well as a Medusa-like Beloved ('thunder-black and glistening [...] Vines of hair twisted all over her head"[308]) at her side allows Sethe to respond as an individual with emotions and rights of her own:

'He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing... and if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The icepick is not in her hand; it is her hand.(308-9)'

Although the language and the disjointed structure of the narrative bring powerfully to mind the original killing of the baby girl, Sethe's terror has become anger, her violence directed outwards.

This determination of Sethe's to fight back, to *be* the very anger she feels, shows how much has been achieved. It is clear from the haunting misery of the fusion chapters, where point of view is amorphous, identity blurred and the tone one of barely conscious passivity, that such a development has been unimaginable:

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not
crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching
the man on my face is dead his face is not mine (248)

And:

there is no one to want me to say my name I wait on the bridge because she is
under it there is night and there is day(.) (251)

This inchoate telling itself, reliving itself of the story, clamours - as *Beloved* herself does - for attention. They are the '[u]nspeakable thoughts unspoken' (235) that are the unending and unbidden repetitions that come as a result of trauma. And yet, impossibly, figuratively, poetically, they have been uttered and come to some sort of end. The novel has a last page, a last sentence.

However, there is a judgment in the final paragraphs that we cannot ignore. *Beloved*, we are warned, is 'not a story to pass on' (324). If we take Felman and Laub's point that the need an individual has to recount the story of a traumatic event is inhibited by the 'impossibility' of its telling, then a novel cannot fully do the job either. The tale has hardly been told - in any normal sense - *at all*. It is not a story to pass on because it *cannot* be. In fact, the narrative has hardly begun.

And yet there is a second reading of these words that imply a state of on-goingness into the future, that stretches way beyond the confines of the novel's last pages. 'This is not a story to pass on' can also be read as a request, an imperative even, to the ethical reader, who must not 'pass' - that is, 'ignore' or 'move on from' - what she has read. *Beloved* has been written, and readers are required not only to read it, but to talk and write and act on it too. This 'ghost effect',¹⁴ as Felman terms it, means that the final page is not - and cannot be - the end of the story. There is still 'a something-to-be-done.'

¹⁴ Felman, *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise*, p. 98.

The demand for attention by the ghost again brings to mind Derrida's *revenant*. As we saw earlier, unlike Abraham and Torok who believe that essentially the phantom is deceitful and out to trick us, Derrida's spectre is a force for change and restoration. Derrida, Davis tells us, 'aspires to learn to attend to its mystery, to hear within it the rumblings of what has yet to be understood.'¹⁵ There is an ethical urgency in this. We need to:

"give or return a voice with him, with her, whether this be in oneself or in the other, to the other in the self: specters are always there, even if they don't exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet."¹⁶

The spectre, then, is Gordon's 'social figure'. Or it is not. It doesn't matter. What matters is not only that the characters within *Beloved*, through their 'unconditional encounter with otherness',¹⁷ are given a chance of escape from the tyranny of 'proceedings too terrible to relate',¹⁸ but that the reader, who has been a participant as she/he 'went along', is left with more than an echo of the ghost's voice. Forced 'to face the historical past as a living and vindictive presence',¹⁹ the reader is in a not dissimilar position to the psychoanalyst listening to a patient, which for Torok (Rand explains) 'means to summon and welcome the voices patients cannot hear in themselves.'²⁰ There is, as Whitehead observes, a 'highly collaborative relationship between speaker and listener'.²¹ One that both allows for the 'the possibility of nevertheless transmitting truth in the new space opened up by testimony',²² and also mirrors *Beloved*'s last plea: This is not a story to *pass* on – but one to *pass on*.

It brings to mind Avery Gordon's view that:

[H]aunting is not about invisibility or unknowability per se, it refers us to what's living and breathing in the place hidden from view: people, places, histories,

¹⁵ Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, p. 88.

¹⁶ Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, p. 76.

¹⁷ Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, p. 76.

¹⁸ Morrison, 'The Site of Memory'. p. 91.

¹⁹ Krumholtz, 'The Ghosts of Slavery', p. 117.

²⁰ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel*, p. 250.

²¹ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 7.

²² Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* p. 7.

knowledge, memories, ways of life, ideas...one can say that futurity is imbricated or interwoven into the very scene of haunting itself....haunting is an emergent state.²³

Such a view helps illuminate the final lines of *Beloved*'s. Morrison writes:

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly...Certainly not a clamour for a kiss.

Beloved.(324)

Not only does the sense of loss that lingers here suggest a grief that even the natural world cannot overcome, Morrison's ending of the novel on the one word 'Beloved' - turning it into a sigh, or a moment of longing - reinserts the ghost as absent but present, as there and not there. And, if the 'uncanny' thing encrypted within the novel has, at least partly, been revealed, the ghost itself has neither been fully mourned, nor reintegrated into the community. There is work still to do. As Brogan points out, despite creating 'a wave of sound "able to knock the pods off chestnut trees"(308) the women do not fully assume the role of mourners because they refuse to claim the ghost as their own.'²⁴ Instead of being able to assimilate what has gone before, the integrity of the community 'has been defined against the history that threatens it'²⁵ Perhaps there is a rightness to this. Brogan reinforces James Young's point that to give violent events a narrative can both rob the trauma of its traumatic rupture and 'too easily and quickly resolv[e] what is unpalatable.'²⁶ She recalls Werner Hamacher's comment that "'we do not just write 'after Auschwitz.'"²⁷ Hamacher goes on:

²³ Gordon: 'Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity', p. 3.

²⁴ Brogan, p. 88

²⁵ Brogan, p. 88.

²⁶ Brogan, p. 90.

²⁷ Brogan, 'American Stories of Cultural Haunting', p. 90

There is no historical or experiential “after” to an absolute trauma. The historical continuity being disrupted, any attempt to restore it would be a vain act of denegation. The “history” of Auschwitz, of what made it possible (...) – this “history” cannot enter into any history of development, or progress of enlightenment, knowledge, reflection or meaning. It deranges all dates and destroys the ways to understand them.²⁸

A profound example of this inability to make sense of an experience that cannot be formulated comes in Tim O’Brien’s essay ‘How to Tell A War Story,’²⁹ in which he recounts a series of terrible and violent anecdotes about the Vietnam War, questioning the validity of each at the end of the accounts even during their telling:

It wasn’t a war story. It was a love story. It was a ghost story.

But you can’t say that. All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth. No Mitchell Sanders, you tell her. No Lemon, no Rat Kiley. And it didn’t happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy, and one night a guy named Stink Harris woke up screaming with a leech on his tongue. You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it.³⁰

Thus it’s the ‘keeping on’ that matters. It’s the only thing you can do. You may never exhaust the telling, but you have to keep on doing it.

In this way, although the ending of *Beloved*’s might appear to be an exorcism – and in a sense it is – it is also not one. As Brogan points out, it allows the reader to join the author as part of a community of mourners ‘gathered round the grave of American history,’³¹ but the challenge implied - ‘to take responsibility for both the

²⁸ Werner Hamacher, ‘Journals, Politics: Notes on Paul de Man’s Wartime Journalism’ in *Responses; On Paul de Man’s Wartime Jerusalem*, ed. by Hamacher and T. Keenan (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 438-467, (p. 438-48)

²⁹ Tim O’Brien, ‘How to Tell a True War Story’ in *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, ed. by Paula Geyh et al (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 174-183
www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/~cinichol/CreativeWriting/323/OBrienWarStory.pdf [accessed 14 May 2017]

³⁰ O’Brien, ‘How to Tell a True War Story’.

³¹ Brogan, p. 91.

past and the present'³² - has not been fully answered. It means the ghost remains with us, demanding our attention.

Which brings me back to the kind of collaboration I alluded to earlier: that between what goes on *inside* a novel and what is goes on *outside* it (that is, the place and circumstances and agent of its writing). Writers often comment on how imagined characters in imagined places can seem to take on a life and direction of their own. Some characters even appear to interact with the reality of their author's surrounding. It's a situation in which the writer becomes not a listener, as such, but a kind of medium, where the demands of the past and the social needs of the present become intertwined. Morrison, despite talking of the control she has over her characters, is one such medium. Alice Walker is another. Recounting the writing of *The Color Purple*, Walker tells of characters who:

didn't like earthquakes, neither did I I was carrying sometimes up to 12 people in my mind and they're all talking and they're all thinking and they're all planning their next adventure.³³

More than directing her novel, they direct her life:

the story, which started coming to me in the actual voices of the people... I also knew I could not remain with my husband because the world that we had [...] was not large enough for these people... The characters, the people - they were really very real to me - they loved the beauty of San Francisco a lot and I knew I had to take them out of the city to the countryside.³⁴

It seems 'collaboration' is the wrong word. For, as I shall discuss in relation to *Sea-Roke*, what occurs is more like a haunting, a spectral interplay of place and person and time in which the boundary between what is material - what can be measured and assessed and tested - and what is there invisibly in the air and in the walls

³² Brogan, p. 91.

³³ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, American Masters, www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/wal14.ela.lit.colorpurple/the-color-purple/#.WOT5hVPytsN> [accessed 5 April 2017]

³⁴ Alice Walker - *The Color Purple*, Interview, World Book Club, BBC World Service, 12 June 2013, BBC iPlayer, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01b9nfp>> [accessed 5 April 2017]

around us and in the secret compartments of our psyche, threatens to disappear. I shall return to this later.

Chapter 9

The Little Stranger

The ghost in *The Little Stranger* seems, at first consideration, to be significantly different from that which haunts the pages of *Beloved*. As critics have frequently pointed out, there is no single terrible trauma or other shameful interlude, in the history of the Ayres family that might account for the ghost that haunts Hundreds Hall. Instead the reader is provided with a myriad of personal and familial possibilities that leads them first in one direction and then in another. In Chapter 6, I commented briefly on the shifting, amorphous nature of the sounds and activities of the ghost in Waters's novel that connect it first with Roderick, then with Caroline and Mrs Ayres and, finally, with Faraday himself. Thus, perhaps, one should say that there is not one ghost in Hundreds Hall, but several. However, as with the characters in *Beloved*, the occupants of the house are also ghost-like themselves, leading half-lives, each haunted by their own particular past and uncertain future in a rapidly changing social world, a point captured by Heilmann in her observation that in each separate case, the individual's haunting 'represents a symbolic acting out of their sense of survivor guilt'.¹

Also, as in *Beloved*, the haunting is the house's too. Boehm points out how, as the impecuniousness of the Ayres family grows, 'life at Hundreds Hall becomes increasingly reminiscent of pre-industrial times'²: 'Folded into the cracks of antique objects and ruins, a plethora of untold, heterodox histories wait to be uncovered.'³ Using as an example a passage in which Mrs Ayres and Caroline sit 'in the little parlour, reading or sewing...by the light of candles and oil-lamps' where the 'flames would be weak enough to make them squint' (234), Boehm observes that the pair are enacting 'the movements and bodily practices of earlier inhabitants of Hundreds Hall, showing the continued life of the past in the

¹ Heilmann, 'Specters of the Victorian in the Neo-Forties Novel'.

² Boehm, p. 251.

³ Boehm, p. 255.

present.’⁴ This sliding back of both house and occupants into a time that should be long-gone is yet another instance of Dylan Trigg’s *sharing of mood* I discussed earlier, where a body can be separated from ‘its own materiality’⁵ to allow something non-corporeal to be accessed through it. In *The Little Stranger*, the inhabitants of Hundreds Hall become ghosts of their own past. It is not only the ‘inclement night’(185) that has ‘found a way in through seams in the brickwork, and gathered to hang like smoke or must in the very core of the house’(185) but history itself, seeping through the walls and into the very bones of those who live there.

Roderick, like the relatives of the dead recorded by Mbiti and Hertz, has retreated into a half-life. In physical pain as a result of war wounds, he is racked with guilt about the death of his RAF navigator colleague, full of anxiety about the future, and with ‘the skin on his cheeks and jaw standing out like diabolical fingerprints’,(112) he is ‘lifeless’(151) and alarmingly out of reach’(152).

At first glance one might conclude that the ghost that haunts Roderick is far from the unconscious phantom of Abraham and Torok’s crypt. I want to suggest this is mistaken. Whilst he is only too aware of the ‘infection’(225). prompting him to feel more in need of a ‘vicar’(169) than a doctor - ‘It’s the strain of – of keeping on top of it. It wants me to buckle... I shan’t give in to it. It knows that, you see, and keeps trying harder’(155) - Roderick’s powerful guilt and self-loathing is inappropriately excessive: ‘It was all my fault!’ he cries after the Baker-Hyde child is attacked by Gyp, ‘I’d willed that thing away from me, through sheer bloody gutlessness’(165). He calls himself ‘practically a murderer’.(224) And, as the taunts from ‘the little stranger’ - moving furniture, tripping him up, making marks on the wall, setting fire to things - become increasingly disturbing, his mental instability grows along with his guilt: ‘[t]he noise was *inside* me, [...] the thing that was scratching was inside me trying to get *out*. It’s waiting, you see’(225), and, ‘You’ll watch me, [...] won’t you? Nothing will get out of me, if you’re watching’(227).

⁴ Boehm, p. 251

⁵ Trigg, p. 298.

These might be seen as the ‘false leads and fake graves’⁶ of Abraham and Torok’s theory of Transgenerational Haunting in which the phantom does it best to hide the unconsciously inherited family secret, yet in which the story is forced to tell, ‘itself over and over, in fantasies, in the language of the body, in pain or distortion, or in the endless, compulsive repetition of a particular traumatic rupture’⁷ that Schwab speaks of in relation to survivors of trauma discussed in Chapter 3. Whilst it is possible to guess at what is hidden in the ‘crypt’ that is Roderick’s false unconscious, the reader cannot finally know, for they never have access to his actual words, actual thoughts. Information about him comes only through a narrator they are already growing cautious of trusting, positioning the reader, at best, in the role of the psychoanalyst whose access to the patient is not only second hand but unreliable. Nonetheless, the information that Roderick’s dead father was a ‘brute of a man’(34), who ‘thrashed [him] right by the open window, where any outdoors servants could have seen’(195), makes us wonder if Col Ayres might in some way be implicated and that Roderick’s haunting is a legacy from his father or Mrs Ayres, or both. Moreover, the fact that Roderick is not the most natural of heirs to the family seat - ‘He isn’t his father’s son, somehow’(33), says Anne Graham; he is a ‘great *disappointment*’(195) to his parents; he wishes vainly that he ‘*had* gone shares in that garage. I’d be a happier man than I am now’(195) – indicates his disease (‘infection’) with the role he finds himself in and supports the possibility that he has unconsciously inherited a family secret. It might even lead one to suspect that his paternal origin might be in doubt.

It is clear that Mrs Ayres feels responsible for her son’s state of mind – she ‘has failed him in some way’(219), and she wonders if something ‘got in the way of my feelings for him, when he was a boy. Some shadow, of upset, or grief.’(219):

I *do* love my children, Doctor; truly I do. But what a dull and half-alive thing that love has seemed to me, sometimes! Because *I* have been half-alive, you see.(220)

⁶ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel*, p. 159.

⁷ Schwab, p. 81.

This Hertz-style 'half-life', presumably brought about, at least in part, by the death of Mrs Ayres's first-born, Susan – who has always been 'real to me...[m]ore real, sometimes, than anything else'(317) - is a plausible explanation for her at times strangely distant attitude to her son. Whilst Mrs Ayres is presented by Faraday as the gentle and charming epitome of a country lady, her attitude to Roderick can nonetheless be coldly critical: her choice of the word 'schoolboy' and the exclamation mark that follows it in 'He caught hold of my hand like a schoolboy!'(116) is an odd thing for a mother to say, even one used to having nannies care for her children, classing him as a member of a group with which she is not normally concerned. Equally, her ill-concealed horror, when he returned seriously disturbed with a 'depression' after the war - 'I had to stop asking people to the house. I was ashamed of him!'(117) - hardly appears maternal. And whilst, understandably, she is angry when he is drunk, she also suspects he is starting the fires himself and, when Roderick accuses her of precisely the shame she has earlier confessed to Faraday, she not only snubs her son completely but also extinguishes what light his words might impart on the truth:

she didn't look at [... him...] she seemed to cut him from the table – to plunge him into darkness, just as if she were reaching and snuffing out the candles in front of him, one by one.(191)

It is clearly no accident that the descriptions of Roderick as 'bloodless. Even the taut smooth skin of his scars had lost its colour'(155) as well as Walker 's choice of name for him bring to mind the effete Roderick Usher of Poe's story. Roderick Usher not only has a 'ghastly pallor of the skin' and 'miraculous lustre of the eye,'⁸ but is the last of a corrupt and dissolute line, the physical symbol of which (the house he inhabits) is cracked through the centre and crumbling to the ground, suggesting a weakness at the very heart of both individual and family. Just as the narrator of Poe's story – in which 'The House of Usher' of the title refers both to the lineage and to the hall that is their family seat - speculates 'upon the possible

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, p. 11.

influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other',⁹ so Hundreds Hall and the Ayres family mirror one another's decay.

If the existence of a ghost is a demand for a 'something to be done' in the way that Gordon suggests, it is clear that, for the Ayres, there is more than one 'something'. Yet it is only when Roderick is removed from the house that the ghost turns its attention to Mrs Ayres, and her vulnerability to it increases. Visibly 'aged', she too becomes ghostlike: 'pale and delicate,' with a 'voice [...] like cobwebs'(240). Within a short time she experiences strange disturbances in the night, is brought to tears by the scribbled 'SSU SS Y ... SUCKeY'(308) (her dead daughter's name) on the wall, feels the touch 'of a child's hand'(344) and hears 'a child's voice [...] high and pitiful'(345). In the face of this sudden reminder of loss, and desperate to regain access to her child and to somehow make amends, she, like Sethe in *Beloved*, 'yields up her life without a murmur'(Beloved 295). Her initial response to the haunting, a 'panic tipped over into hysteria'(346), turns to a yearning ('I've wanted her to come, you see, so desperately. I've *felt* her, here in this house'[347]) that is deep enough to destroy her. And then, on the occasion that Faraday discover the drops of blood that 'seemed to spring from nowhere to the surface' of Mrs Ayres' blouse, she says, "'Susan is with me all the time. She follows me wherever I go'"(391). It is only when she experiences haunting herself that she can begin to acknowledge the trauma of the child's death, a loss so devastating that, despite being described with painful upper-class restraint by Col Ayres as "'awfully bad luck'"(318), it has never before been spoken of: "'Mother never mentioned her [...] I knew nothing about her for years",' (318) Caroline says.

Sethe, in *Beloved*, is able to become her own 'best thing'(322), but Mrs Ayres finds no redemption. The 'whispers' of her dead child, '*Where are you? [...] Why won't you come?*'(392), feed into her longing and rob her of the will to live. When Faraday finds the 'scores of little cuts and bruises' on Mrs Ayres's hanged body, he recalls her comment, '*My little girl, she isn't always kind*'(414), and wonders in atypically unscientific fashion if Mrs Ayres had 'only given strength and purpose to some other, darker thing?'(414). Indeed, her fate appears to confirm the family's view

⁹ Poe, p. 4.

that the 'little stranger' is malevolent. Mrs Ayres, the one individual who genuinely attempts, in the sense suggested by Derrida, to be open to the ghosts's voice, nonetheless meets an end that is both tragic and violent. Is Mrs Ayres' pursuit of the ghost, her wish to be with her dead child, like Horatio's call to Old Hamlet, a call that Derrida sees as both arresting and restricting the ghosts' freedom to speak? And is that why she is punished? Perhaps. Derrida has pointed out the difficulties of listening to the ghost. In the attempt, Mrs Ayres has tried too hard.

Whether this is the case or not, the shifting of the ghost's attention from Roderick to Mrs Ayres – and later, as we will see, to Caroline - suggest that Edensor is right in his claim (discussed in Chapter 6) that ruins are multi-faceted and that decaying buildings reveal:

successive histories as layers peel away and things fall out from their hiding places. Like palimpsests, ruins bear traces of the different people, processes, and products which circulated through their environs at different times... some spaces and objects are erased whilst others remain, recomposing a particularly dense and disorganized 'temporal collage'.¹⁰

Ruins not only 'bear traces of different people, processes and products', they also interact differently according to the individuals who inhabit them. Just as, in Morrison's novel, the ghost of 124 Bluestone Rd haunts its occupants in ways that are specific to each, so the ghost of Hundreds Hall does likewise. As we've seen, for Holland and Sherman a castle - and presumably a hall or a house too - is a space which will accept many different projections of unconscious material. In a similar way to 124, Bluestone Rd, the Hall is less a screen on which 'shame, agony, annihilation – and desire'¹¹ is projected, and more a character in itself: complex and alive, with a countenance that changes with its moods. Faraday, who notes its 'marred and wasted faces'(311), comments, in empathetic connection, it 'didn't deserve their bad feeling, and neither did I'(188), and wonders if it is 'developing scars of its own in response to ...the griefs and disappointments of the whole

¹⁰ Tim Edensor, 'The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins', in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2005, 23, 829-49, DOI:10.1068/d58j p. 834.

¹¹ Holland and Sherman, 'Gothic Possibilities', p. 283.

family'(148). Even early on, before we hear much of the ghost at all, '[t]he essential loveliness of the room stood out, like the handsome bones behind a ravaged face'(19). Later, when there is knocking in the wall, Caroline's belief that the house "is playing parlour games with us" leads her to challenge it verbally: "Do you hear me house? It's no good your teasing us! We simply shan't play!"(304). Later still, it "makes one think things"(320) and 'would not be so easily subdued'(331). And whilst, after her mother's death, Caroline says "The house is still at last. Whatever it was that was here, it has taken everything it wanted"(416), an observation supported by Faraday who judges it as 'gazing, sightless with grief, across the hushed white landscape'(417), it has clearly done no such thing. For when the shutters are subsequently drawn to let in the sun, the sounds of the house are 'those of a creature gratefully surfacing from a long slumber'(437).

Caroline Ayres, whilst clearly aware of the ghost's actions, is – until very late in the narrative – less affected than other members of her family. It might be argued that her no-nonsense manner, her practical approach to life, allows her not only to adapt more readily to the changes around her, but renders her more resistant to the power of past family secrets. She hears the ghost, she's sees its effects, she is irritated and infuriated by it. But she is not *afraid*. Despite earlier admitting that the house 'does seem changed'(239), she says to Faraday that a poltergeist:

"...is just a word, isn't it? A word for something we don't understand, some sort of energy, or collection of energies. Or something inside us. I don't know. These writers here. Gurbey and Myers." She opened the other book. "They talk about 'phantasms'. They're not ghosts. They're parts of a person."(364)

However, it is Caroline's unconsciously ironic comment to Faraday that "You might as well say we've only had trouble since *you've* been in [the house]!"(365) that genuinely gets to the heart of the matter. She is spared terror of the ghost for much of the novel not because she is down-to-earth and lacking imagination, but because, although apparently not haunted by her family's past, she is haunted by Faraday *himself*. Whilst she is courted by him, there is no need for the ghost to focus specifically on her. It is only *after* she has rejected Faraday as her future

husband and, therefore, as legitimate master of Hundreds Hall - and has told him of her plans to sell it - that the ghost pursues her and she falls to her death.

It is thus Caroline's decision to sell the house, as well as her refusal to fully *attend* to the ghost that haunts it, that finally kills her. Roderick's claim that the house 'wants to destroy us, all of us' (195), becomes prophetic in the light of this, and Faraday's cry, "Destroying this house. Abandoning Hundreds! How *can* you? How - how *dare* you?" (465), becomes a chilling warning. Caroline dares, and she dies.

This passionate intervention by Faraday, suggesting an identification with Hundreds that goes beyond that of a mere visitor, is perhaps the biggest hint of his complicity. His connection with the Hall - he is the son of a woman whose short life was ended whilst he was still a child and she a servant at the hall - is hardly close. Despite the 'faintest stirrings of a dark dislike' (27) he feels at the Ayres's casual attitude to those who for 'two hundred years' had labored to keep the house from 'collapsing, like a pyramid of cards' (37), and his occasional bitterness about the sacrifices made by his long-dead parents for his social and educational advancement, Faraday never suggests his parents' deaths are in any way linked to their work. Yet this palely insubstantial man, whose social awkwardness positions him on the edge of the lives he both observes and infiltrates, nonetheless becomes an insinuating and slippery presence, responsible finally for the killing of Gyp, the sectioning of Roderick, and, had she not killed herself first, the sending of Mrs Ayres to the county asylum.

As a representative of changing social values and structure, Dr Faraday has risen to professional class, and yet he does not belong. He admits that people 'don't like me. They never have. They've never been able to place me' (36). The reader cannot place him either. Hovering ghostlike between various sections of local society, he fits in with none of them. At the Ayres's party, when he assumes the role of host and hands out drinks, he notes the 'surprise' on the face of 'old-fashioned "'quality"' (85) as well as the patronizing question from the local magistrate's wife, who, unable to fathom why he's there, says, 'No one's unwell, I hope?' (85). He is no more at ease with the newly wealthy: he spots Mr Morley,

'looking me over and dismissing me'(88), and the party 'lose[s] its lustre'(89) altogether when he judges that the nouveau-riche Baker-Hyde, whose advertising agency lifestyle gives him 'an extraordinary sort of finish'(87), has a 'polish, against which nothing could compete.' And no less uncomfortable with those whose parents and grandparents were servants and labourers, Faraday comments:

'I don't hunt or play bridge; but I don't play darts or football either. I'm not grand enough for the gentry – not grand enough for working people come to that. They want to look up to their doctor. They don't want to think he's one of them.'(36)

Even Faraday's memories of his childhood are misty and ill-defined. Despite the existence of an old biscuit tin he 'hadn't opened [...] in years'(37) and the sadly-posed picture of his parents in a facsimile of a balloon basket (that symbolically never lifted off the ground), he has 'shockingly little record'(38) of their lives. Even in the photograph given to him by Mrs Ayres, his mother is all but unrecognizable: "Is that your mother, Dr Faraday?" "I think it might be. Then again: 'Just behind the awkward looking girl, I noticed now, was another servant, also fair-haired, and in an identical gown and cap. I laughed, embarrassed. "It might be this one. I'm not sure."'”(29).

Whilst clearly denoting the facelessness of servants in the eyes of their employers, as well as their lack of individual identity, this exchange also undermines any sense the reader has of Faraday's own personality. We know things *about* him – that he is a doctor, that his parents died whilst he was still young, that the latter made sacrifices for his education and advancement, but – beyond the intensity with which he regards Hundreds Hall and those who live there - he is presented as a pale figure whose embraces are 'passionless'(39), and affairs 'half-hearted'(39).

Like Beloved in Morrison's novel, Faraday gains energy and vigour from the house he attempts to possess. It gives him the courage to act as Roderick's

physician and to have him sectioned to an asylum, to become the 'friend' and advisor of Mrs Ayres and, finally – though unsuccessfully – to become, through his engagement to Caroline, the potential master of Hundreds Hall. He manoeuvres himself into the consciousness of each member of the family who, as he grows close, is destroyed. The connection of Faraday with the ghost is made even more explicit through Mrs Ayres' remark that 'it is as if [the house] knows all our weaknesses and is testing them one by one' (309) taking the alert reader back to Caroline's earlier comment that '[y]ou know all our secrets. You and Betty'" (237).

Despite the unexpected power of his feeling "I wanted Caroline; I wanted Caroline and I couldn't have her' (472), Faraday is ghost-like even to himself. On what should have been his wedding night and feeling both 'out of time and out of place' (472), he:

seemed to leave the car and press on to Hundreds: I saw myself doing it [...] I saw myself cross the silvered landscape and pass *like smoke*¹² through the Hundreds Gate. I saw myself start along the Hundreds drive. (473)

Later, when he hears of Caroline's unaccountable fatal fall - 'no stroke, no seizure, no heart attack, and no struggle' (479), the 'doors and windows all quite fast [...] sturdy bannister rail' (480) - he feels 'her death had a sort of inevitability to it, that could overpower logic' (478). The author's inclusion of Caroline's final shout 'You' (482), called, as Betty tells the Coronor, "'as if she had seen someone she knew'" (483), and the strange flailing of limbs as she falls, "'like when you pick up a cat and it wants to be set down'" (483), tempts the reader to consider in a more sinister light the significance of Faraday's out-of-body experience. It is as if, in a desperate attempt to wrench herself free from Faraday's ghostly grip, Caroline has either finally succeeded in the most terrible way possible, or the spirit of Faraday has entered the house and he has thrown her over the railings himself.

¹² my emphasis

At the novel's end, visiting the abandoned house, which he now in a sense, possesses, Faraday haunts its rooms and corridors. Yet, '[w]andering softly through the twilit spaces'(498), he is still not it's owner. Like a ghostly butler, he fussily keeps the downstairs rooms 'shuttered', worries about the holes in the roof, putting down 'pails to catch the rainwater', and sweeps up 'the dust and mouse-dirt'(497) as if trying to keep its final annihilation at bay. In a distortion of time one would associate with a phantom, he becomes not only the boy he once was before he stole the plaster acorn¹³ - perhaps initiating the process that begins the same year ('That must have been the last grand year for Hundreds Hall, anyway'{14]) and which is followed by the death of Susan, and ends finally in the extinction of the whole family – but also returns to the time when the building was first erected:

I can even now seem to see the house as its architect must have done when it was new, with its plaster detail fresh and unchipped, its surface unblemished. In those moments there is no trace of the Ayres at all. It as if the house has thrown the family off, like springing turf throws off a footprint.(498)

This final comment suggests that – despite all he has said and done in relation to them – for Faraday, the Ayres themselves were no more than competing spirits, exorcised from the house by his clumsy social climbing and unconscious malevolence. And when he fancies that '[e]very so often, 'I'll catch a movement at the corner of my eye, ' half expecting to see 'what Caroline saw and recognise it, as she did,' his eyes meet only the 'cracked window-pane'. The face 'gazing distortedly from it, baffled and longing is my own.'(499)

Notwithstanding the naive lack of self-awareness here, this unconsciously revealed 'pre- prepersonal longing'¹⁴ for unity is part of the 'chiasmatic relationship'¹⁵ between individual and place proposed by both Trigg and Bell that I discussed in

¹³ See also Barbara Braid on this: 'One might wonder if that seemingly insignificant act of destruction is not what sets the house onto the road to total dereliction and ruin' (Mantel 2009). The event is the first symbolic transgression in a series of escalating incidents,' in 'What Haunts Hundreds Hall? Transgressions in Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*', in *Crossroads in Literature and Culture* ed. by Jacek Fabiszak et al, pp. 136-144, (p. 138), http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-21994-8_13#> [accessed 15 June 2015]

¹⁴ Trigg, p. 299.

¹⁵ Trigg, p. 307.

Chapter 6. Bell's claim that, 'Just as a place may feel possessed of our own ghost or ghosts, so we may feel that that place is a special possession of ours, through our own ghost'¹⁶ helps explain Faraday's deep connection to Hundred Hall.

At the end of *The Little Stranger*, with the former occupants of Hundreds Hall either dead or insane, Faraday has taken possession of the house he longed for. Three years on, aware that he and Betty (the two who 'know all [the Ayres's] secrets'[237]) are the 'only survivors'(496), he has developed a 'down-to-earth'(494) manner, acquired a growing number of patients, and is 'popular'(494). There is even talk of a partnership in a new practice. But, if he has acquired an apparently stronger sense of self, Faraday has gained little in self-awareness. His tone is quietly reflective, even affectionate, but the clarity of his memories is eerily disturbing:

I remember poor, good-tempered Gyp; I recall those mysterious black smudges on the walls and ceilings of Roderick's room; I picture the three little drops of blood that I once saw springing to the surface of Mrs Ayres's silk blouse. And I think of Caroline [...] in the moments before she died, advancing across the moonlit landing. I think of her crying out: *You!*(498)

These recollections all share the same element of reality, as if every one of them has been experienced *directly*. As if he were *there*. The word, 'think' (of Caroline's death) bears, in this context, the same semantic weight as 'remember', 'recall', 'picture', a truth that Faraday seems unintentionally to admit. Unhappy with Sealy's judgment that the hall has been 'defeated by history',(498) he suspects instead that 'Hundreds was consumed by some dark germ, some ravenous shadow creature, some "little stranger", spawned from the troubled unconscious of someone connected to the house itself'(498). It takes the reader back to the childhood hunger for possession of at least 'a piece of' the house that Faraday confessed to in the early pages: 'The thrill of the house [...] came at him from every surface [...] as if the admiration itself, which I suspected a more ordinary child

¹⁶ Michael Mayerfield Bell, 'The Ghosts of Place' in *Theory and Society*, 26, 6 (Dec 1977), 813-836, (p. 824), <http://jstor.org/stable/657936> [accessed 15 April 2015]

would not have felt, entitled me to it'(2-3). In the light of this, Betty's comment at the inquest on Caroline's death, that it is a 'spiteful ghost, and wanted the house all for its own'(485) rings chillingly in the reader's ears.

Faraday's suspicion that the 'little stranger' was (as Seeley earlier suggested) 'spawned by the troubled unconscious of someone connected with the house'(498) is a rare moment of half-insight. It hints that the phantom may be inherited, in the way suggested by Abraham and Torok's theory, through his own mother - a phantom herself in the misty photograph - and those who preceded her. That is, the faceless generations of servants of Hundreds Hall (and places like it), whose names are forgotten and who worked appalling hours for little reward. Also suggestive of this is the way the maid ("It's just, this house' [...] 'I think I shall die of fright sometimes.'"[12-13]) is the first to draw attention to the 'little stranger', as well as the way the latter frequently manifests itself (as Boehm and others also point out) through items within the hall that are associated with those who were 'in service': the speaking-tube (through which Faraday half-expects to 'hear my mother's voice [...] hear her calling my name'[334]), the items in Roderick's study, his looking-glass, the fires, and so on. The fact that the lives of the servants - as much part of the hall's history as the Ayres themselves - are not addressed except briefly or by most elliptical of means, indicates that something is not being said. The gap is too big to be ignored, the unspoken too loud.

This leads to another possibility, one that might lie behind the story as the most powerful phantom of all. Faraday's deep-seated fascination for the Hall and his need to possess it could conceivably be as a result of his *own origin*. It was not unknown - nor even particularly unusual - for the male owners of grand houses to seduce their servants. Faraday's mother worked for Col and Mrs Ayres. Roderick, it is clear, is not a natural heir to the place and wishes he'd left. Faraday cannot keep away. The hostility that Roderick feels towards the latter - the phantom words that become 'carriers of another's story'¹⁷ - could then be seen as a manifestation of his own unconsciously inherited knowledge of who Faraday actually is:

¹⁷Schwab, pp. 54-55.

“Who the f—g hell are you anyway? Why the hell are you here? How did you manage to get such a footing in this house? You’re not part of this family! You’re no one!”(197)

This is an incidence of the ‘anasemia’ of Abraham and Torok’s theory that we considered in Chapter 3, the taking on of false meaning, in which Roderick’s denial of Faraday’s right to be in Hundreds Hall is a rejection of its truth. If my suspicions are correct, for Faraday then to seek to marry Caroline – his own *sister* – would be an outrage too far. One at which both the past and the present might also rise up to protest. Equally, if as is possible, Faraday’s birth was as a result of a genuinely abusive attack by the Colonel, even a rape, then the former’s collusion in the destruction of the house – both structure and lineage - becomes almost logical in its inevitability.

Faraday’s claim that ‘If Hundreds Hall is haunted [...] it doesn’t show itself to me,’ (499) might indicate that the ghost has gone. But the ‘movement’ that catches at the corner of the narrator’s eye, that gives his heart ‘a jolt of fear’(499), reminds the reader the story is not fully over, that history still has something to say. In the light of this, Faraday’s comment becomes yet another of the ‘false leads and fake graves’¹⁸ of Abraham and Torok’s theory of transgenerational haunting.

As the killing of Beloved cannot (as Schwab points out) be understood without the whole history of slavery, so the events of Hundreds Hall cannot be understood without considering the stories of the servants who laboured to keep the house from ‘collapsing, like a pyramid of cards’(76). It is no coincidence that those whose origins are of the servant class not only survive the ‘little stranger’ but benefit from its actions. Faraday himself is clearly doing well, and the once terrified Betty, who “‘wouldn’t go back in the house [...] not for a thousand pounds””(496), acquires a boyfriend and a sense of herself as a confident young woman, as well as a new job that gives her time to go ‘dancing up in Coventry’(496).

¹⁸ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel*, p.159.

A politically and socially desirable 'something-being-done' seems a possibility. However the final lines of the novel tell us that the ghost has not finally been laid to rest. Nor has history been forgotten. For, whilst the community has clearly benefited – from its estate of 'cosy' new houses, with 'neat flower and vegetable gardens' (495) - the dark and eerie shadow of Hundreds Hall still looms, a presence so powerful its new neighbours insist on a fence to hide it.

Chapter 10

A. *Distant and Not-so-distant Voices*

There is a kind of haunting that besets authors. I recently experienced it myself when I came across a collection of poetry, *Shingle Street*, by Blake Morrison in which he records his response to the storm-wracked east coast of Suffolk, the area in which the fictional Little Charlburgh and Old Charlburgh of my novel, *Sea-Roke*, are set. Readers with knowledge of the county will recognise the similarities that these places share with the present-day village of Walberswick and the ruins of the great port of Dunwich that have lain for centuries under the sea a mile or so up the coast. Perhaps, then, it should be no surprise that two of Morrison's poems, 'Dunwich' and 'Covehithe' anticipate in a particularly prophetic way my own writing. However, making this discovery after my novel was finished felt oddly disturbing, particularly because in each of them the landscape acts as a palimpsest much in the way it does in *Sea-Roke*, reflecting Edensor's claim that "ruins bear traces of the different people, processes, and products which circulated through their environs at different times".¹

Both poems are about ghosts. In 'Dunwich' the tombstone 'slab' that once lay in the abandoned cliff-top graveyard and overlooks a sea that is itself a 'flat grey slab/like a flattened gravestone'² reminds the reader of the dead buried beneath both sea and land. The 'passersby' who 'read [the] name and dates/ and wonder why he'd drowned'³ are dead too, for the stone is no longer there, 'had a slab to himself once.'⁴ Clearly, the passersby do not 'pass' any more, but remain as ghostly presences – much like the name 'John Brinkley Easey'⁵ (that somehow the poem is still able to record) - serving only to remind us of ourselves: the words 'like us'

¹ Tim Edensor, 'The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins', p. 846.

² Blake Morrison, 'Dunwich' in *Shingle Street*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015) p. 12.

³ Blake Morrison, *Shingle Street*, p. 12.

⁴ Blake Morrison, *Shingle Street*, p. 12, (*italics mine*).

⁵ Blake Morrison, *Shingle Street*, p. 12.

thus become a warning that we are all, past, present and future, destined to have our names inscribed on a gravestone that itself will eventually disappear. Like those who have gone before, we live in a temporal space that is multi-layered, shifting. We are there and not there, both alive and dead.

In 'Covehithe', named after a tiny hamlet a few short miles up the coast from Dunwich, it is the elements themselves that are ghostly, either searching one another out or attempting to flee. As the tides move towards the land, the cliffs are stuck in reverse: 'back across the fields they creep',⁶ as if phantom-like themselves. Blake Morrison blames the encroaching waves on the ghostly 'sailor and the fishermen' who are:

longing to be back at sea
who since they can't get up
and stride down to the beach
entice the sea to come to them.⁷

But this yearning for the elemental by the dead is not the sole driving force. The movement of the land itself is also intentional. Its 'creep' towards 'the graves of Covehithe Church'⁸ suggests both its secret desire for death and oblivion, and its sense of the future to come.

This landscape – the very one that I have borrowed for the setting of my novel – is, as Daniel Weston⁹ also points out, widely experienced as haunted. Henry James tells of the 'mystery [that] sounds for ever in the hard, straight tide, and hangs [...] in the soft thick light.'¹⁰ For him, Dunwich is a place in which 'there is a presence in what is missing – there is history in there being so little.'¹¹ W. G. Sebald's narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* recounts the 'paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far

⁶ Blake Morrison, *Shingle Street*, p. 13.

⁷ Blake Morrison, *Shingle Street*, p. 13.

⁸ Blake Morrison, *Shingle Street*, p. 13.

⁹ Daniel Weston, 'W G Sebald's Afterlife' in *Haunted Landscapes*, ed. by R. Heholt and N. Dowling (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 167-180.

¹⁰ Henry James, *English Hours* (London and New York: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2011), p. 182.

¹¹ James, p. 181.

back into the past'.¹² His later confession that he felt as 'if he was losing the ground under [his] feet',¹³ because his 'rational mind ... is unable to lay [to rest] the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency',¹⁴ intensifies this sense of a past that is active and demanding of attention.¹⁵

Before I discuss *Sea-Roke* in more detail, I want to develop a further point. Generations of writers have been inspired by this same stretch of coast - Swinburne, James, Fitzgerald, Sebald, and MacFarlane amongst them. Others (such as Ruth Rendell, P. D. James, Julie Myerson, Esther Freud)¹⁶ have set their novels there. Jonathan Miller's 1968 film of the M. R. James's story *Whistle and I'll Come to You* uses the long deserted stretch of Dunwich beach for the scenes of haunting, the struts of the ghostly and decaying groyne sticking up like bones from the grey deadness of the water.¹⁷ This amount of attention to a particular place suggests there is something (if in any post-Derridian sense one is justified in calling a spectre a *thing*) that disturbs and demands attention. As writers, we seem unable to resist its call. For, despite the fact that we cannot hear it, despite the fact that we cannot see it, cannot know what or even *if it is*, we nonetheless attempt to articulate in a creative way our sense of a past that feels both active and *present*.

The writing - both figurative and historical - that has gone before (and which may come after) hovers as a spectral cloud over a text, disturbing in much the way a phantom disturbs a house or an individual. Such disturbances are by no means always negative. They give colour and energy to meaning. According to T. S. Eliot, 'The most individual parts of [a writer's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.'¹⁸ It is this very

¹² W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, (London: Harvill Press, 1995), p. 3.

¹³ Sebald, p. 188.

¹⁴ Sebald, p. 187.

¹⁵ For an interesting discussion on Sebald, see Daniel Weston's 'W. G. Sebald's Afterlife' in *Haunted Landscapes*, pp. 167-179.

¹⁶ For more on writers who have been inspired by the Suffolk coast, see Blake Morrison, "'Drowned in a sea of salt'" Blake Morrison on the literature of the east coast, in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/31/blake-morrison-literature-imperilled-east-coast-climate-change>

¹⁷ 'The eeriness of Miller's film comes from the way it treats the landscape as at least as much an agent as its central figure', says Mark Fisher, writer of the foreword to the booklet accompanying the DVD. *Ghost Stories: Classic Adaptations*.

¹⁸ T S Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), (first pub Methuen, 1920). p. 40.

connection, what Eliot calls the compulsion to write 'with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order',¹⁹ that makes a writer 'traditional'.

Barthes claim that the text is 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash'²⁰ - given that these may well also include the writings of history - might seem a useful one to lean on here. It provides substance to the view that spirits hovering around a text are not only other writers and writings but also the recorded events of the past. In *Sea-Roke*, although the individuals, the village of Little Charlburgh and the development of the narrative strands are entirely fictional, the history is not. I have used the once thriving port of Dunwich, what Swinburne once called the 'dead cathedral city'²¹ where:

Time, haggard and changeful and hoary,
Is master and God of the land,²²

as a model for Old Charlburgh. The latter shares many of the real city's features and much of its past, including its destruction in the 13th and 14th centuries by the combined actions of the weather, the sea, and warring Suffolk gangs. Such a state of affairs complicates the already multi-dimensional hauntings going on.

With her own writing, an author knows only too well what she has written before and what she has discarded, what she has attempted to do or sought to convey. And whilst there is still Derrida's 'unsaid' and 'inaudible' that gives power and ethical force to a work, the many more voices haunting the reader of their own text makes it far more difficult to 'listen for something' that cannot be heard or understood. This is not to abnegate responsibility for the final outcome, it is

¹⁹ Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, p. 41.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, 'Death of The Author' in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author*, ed. by William Irwin, (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 6.

²¹ Yisrael Levin, 'Solar Erotica: Swinburne's Myth of Creation' in *A. C. Swinburne and the Singing Word: New Perspectives on the Mature Work*, ed. by Yisrael Levin (London and New York: Routledge, 2010) 55-72 (p. 67).

²² Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) p. 201.

instead to be aware that there are ghosts of self - as well as ghosts of other writers - who haunt the text as it finally appears on the page, and the writing of it too.

Like the infinite library in which, however carefully one catalogues, there is always another book beginning with A, another with B and so on, there will, according to Derrida, always be an 'overabundance of meaning,'²³ that cannot be exhausted when a reader reads a text. For it to be otherwise, to prove 'it is that and only that'²⁴ is to destroy the text. What is left is to:

try therefore to make myself listen for something that I cannot hear or understand, attentive to marking the limits of my reading in my reading. This comes down to saying: Here is what I believe one can reconstitute, what that could mean, why it is captivating and beautiful and strong, while leaving the unsaid intact, inaudible.²⁵

This is Derrida's 'wound' – the openness of a text to its inexhaustible possibilities of interpretation: 'What opens, what does not heal, the hiatus, is indeed a mouth that speaks there where it is wounded. In the place of the lesion.'²⁶

Thus, even under the best of circumstances, the unbiased yet participatory reading/observation of one's own work is a demanding task. Haunted by earlier drafts, intentions, and disappointments, the reading of a finished work as complete and of itself - separate from all those disparate forces that helped to form it – is an impossible task.²⁷

It is with this caveat in mind that I now attempt to consider the haunting, the attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*²⁸ within the pages of *Sea-Roke*.

²³ Derrida: 'The Truth That Wounds' in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan, Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Dutoit and Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 164-172, (p. 165).

²⁴ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, p. 166.

²⁵ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, p. 166.

²⁶ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, p. 166.

²⁷ For a discussion on the influences of expectation on response and judgment, please see Judee K Burgoon, 'Interpersonal Expectations and Expectancy Violation and Emotional Communication', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 12.1-2, (2016), 30-48, journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0261927X93121003

²⁸ *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: Translated as 'coming to terms with the past' (*Collins German/English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/german-english/vergangenheitsbewaltigung>)

B. *Sea-Roke*

The spectres in *Sea-Roke* - whose presence I make no absolute claims for, believing as Derrida does, that attempts to ascertain their real- or not-realness is to deny them – are experienced in different ways according to the psyche of the experiencer. There is no *one* figure, *one* experience that all individuals share. Instead there is the challenge to binary oppositions of Derrida's hauntology in the specter's there- but not-there-ness, in its being neither alive nor dead.

In *Sea-Roke*, characters experience disturbances and cracks in the surface of reality: the shifting sea-mist, the pungent sea-weed smell, in the things that Luke somehow *knows* but cannot explain. Unlike Sebald's characters, who in Jessica Dubow's view 'are not travellers who see sites but those who can no longer make sense of the seen and try to make visible this loss,'²⁹ Luke and, before him, Jimmy Henson, are not concerned with attempts at understanding. Perhaps because they are children, they do not question the displacement of time and place they encounter. It is, on the one hand, that time when, as Weston puts it, '[h]istory overburdens the moment of engagement'³⁰ and on the other a kind of freedom. They are like the 'simple child'³¹ in Wordsworth's 'We Are Seven', whose vibrant innocence refuses to consider that her buried siblings are no longer with her, a clear-minded acceptance of the apparently impossible that overcomes the down-to-earth questioning of the narrator who realises he is merely:

...throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, 'Nay, we are seven!'³²

[accessed 13 March 2017]

²⁹ Dubow, p. 189.

³⁰ Weston, *Haunted Landscapes*, p. 170.

³¹ William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge 'We Are Seven' in *Lyrical Ballads: With a Few Other Poems*, (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 61.

³² William Wordsworth, 'We Are Seven'.

And whilst the tone is amused, concerned, affectionate, the lack of any further challenge by the narrator implies an at least partial acceptance of the validity of the girl's claim. As if her very innocence has swayed him, moved him away from the comfort of the rational, to the possibility of a different realm.

In a similar way to the maid, Luke and Jimmy are unfettered by the intellectual restrictions of adults - the need to 'make sense'. They simply act or speak according to the essential reality of their own experience.

'No, not like that, silly.' His voice is confident. Happy. The old Luke she hasn't seen for so long. 'I mean *really*. She crawls on my bed and we play with the shells.'(34)

The fact that Luke's and Jimmy's experience 'fractures all traditional concepts of temporality'³³ (to recall Buse and Stott) is of no concern to either of the boys. They are Derrida's listeners, the payers of attention who 'let the spirit speak.'³⁴ Luke's announcement to the other children in his class that the dead 'want to talk to us'(217) is a fictional manifestation of the tradition in both written and oral literature that Margaret Atwood is referring to when she says: 'The premise is that the dead can talk if you know how to listen to them [...] they don't want to be pushed aside, obliterated. They want us to know.'³⁵

One might account for Luke's claims about the unseen Alwin and Amy as manifestations of the hidden phantom of Abraham and Torok's theory, secrets inherited both from his own father (whose involvement in Jimmy's death is later hinted at) and from the psychic aphasia of the community in which he has come to live. But that would restrict explanation *specifically* to Luke's own psychological state. And whilst this latter is clearly implicated (and the theory of transgenerational haunting useful to discussion), more important is Luke's capacity to *listen* to the demands for attention that the wavering present reveals: "'I just knew,'" he says. "'It was there in my mind'"(96); and: "'Alwin...'

³³ Buse and Stott, p. 11.

³⁴ Derrida J, *Specters of Marx*, p. 11.

³⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead*, (London: Virago Press, 2003), p. 146.

His voice shrunk to a whisper. 'Alwin told me some things'"(87). In his isolation and grief over Amy, he is able to engage (in the sense proposed by Trigg) in the 'chiasmatic relationship'³⁶ with place that the past seeks.

For teacher Jess, haunting is subtle. Confined as she is to a rational view of the world, she denies her own capacity to *listen*. Instead she feels niggles at the edge of her consciousness that appear as 'a shimmer, a shadow'(321) on the beach or the reek, 'thick as a fog'(69) that 'rose up and choked her'(263). Whilst she is aware that the leper chapel, '[p]erched on the cliff top like a giant bird, [...] had absorbed the past, layer upon layer'(40), and of 'the microscopic remnants of the departed [...] the skin of the dead, on hers'(40), she takes things no further. Only her final actions with the strange peg-figure Luke has made ("Will you rest now?" she said'[363]) suggest a genuine response to the haunting she has unknowingly experienced.

In a similar way, Luke's mother, Emily, is troubled by the deep-sea smell that 'hits her [...] as if the house has been buried in kelp'(222), in the 'showers of spray'(59) at the shore line, by the shells stuck 'impossibly high'(214) on the ceiling of Luke's bedroom, in the strange 'blister'(40) marks on his arm that 'loom like an accusation from under the cuffs of his dressing gown'(212). Able to imagine 'a kraken or cetus, dead for centuries, its putrid remains floating to the surface, the contents of its stomach disgorged onto the sand'(71), she cannot, despite the discomfort she feels, imagine a ghost. Only towards the end, when Joe insists, does she consider it. But, then, as a protection against feeling 'flimsy, almost diaphanous, as if she might float away'(290), she dissolves into giggles: '[S]he needs to feel her body, sense her own materiality'(291).

The two women's background of intellectual discipline and pedagogic training (what Derrida condemns as powerful obstacles to awareness of the spectre) makes their experiences puzzling at best, terrifying at worst. It forces them to seek explanations that accord with temporal linearity and recorded scientific fact. Jess: 'A brain tumour perhaps. Isn't this what happened - strange, inexplicable

³⁶ Trigg, p. 307.

sensations that appeared from nowhere?’(264) And Emily: ‘She looks at the chair and imagines it on the bed, Luke, balancing on top, stretching up.’(212)

Such attempts at rationalisation are rejected by the Travellers, whose lifestyle implies they’ve spurned the very logic that drives Jess to visit them and whose acceptance of those who ‘got the sight’(317) is not only ingrained but whose forest dwelling is itself primeval, a space that Bachelard calls a ‘before-me, a before us [...] forests reign in the past.’³⁷ Like Horatio’s challenge to the ghost that it ‘speak’, Jess’s determination to search for Alwin in the traveller camp is a restriction to her discovery of truth. In her need to find out, to categorise, the ghost eludes her. Her wish to *understand* Alwin, to narrate him, is also an attempt at exorcism. The travellers’ disgust at this is clear: “‘Oh you wanted to *establish* it, did you?’[...] ‘Just *establish* this, Miss Teacher – if we did have an Alwin here, we wouldn’t tell you.’”(189)

The village’s behaviour - the angry hostility of its adults and the threatening and vicious actions of its teenagers - is the most resistant to voices from the past. Less intellectually-motivated than Emily and Jess, and stemming from an unacknowledged but inherited shame, their response to the demands of the past is one of self-protecting isolationism. They have become Caruth’s ‘symptoms of a history that they cannot entirely possess,’³⁸ where the “‘unsaid’ and ‘unsayable’ of *an other*’”,³⁹ that Rashkin speaks of that I considered in Chapter 2, has been turned into a secret, carried down through the generations and hidden by the village’s ‘unspoken, unrecognized pact of collective concealment.’⁴⁰ It is the work of the cemetery guard’,⁴¹ ensuring that nothing escapes the non-topographical *crypt* they have all inherited. Like the haunted legatees in Abraham’s and Torok’s theory, the inhabitants of Little Charlburgh re-enact in a crypted form their own shameful history not because, ‘all that raking up of the past – it don’t do’(224), but because it’s a past they cannot acknowledge they have.

³⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p.188.

³⁸ Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 5.

³⁹ Rashkin, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Rashkin, p. 28.

⁴¹ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and The Kernel*, p. 159

Not scions of Old Charlburgh at all, the villagers are descended from the medieval gangs whose greed and violent actions ensured its final destruction:

‘They’re not ancestors,’ Luke’s voice was low from the back of the room.

‘What do you mean Luke?’

‘Drowned people *die*. They can’t have babies.’(85)

Joe Harding, initially an outsider, is free from the restraints imposed by communal inheritance. As curator of the museum, he is engaged in the identifying and ordering of the past that Edensor criticises as a restriction of its power, a restriction condoned – if largely ignored – by the collective psyche of the village. Yet, whilst the planned extended exhibition of the old town implies an inherent categorization that is hardly the ‘inarticulate, sensual and conjectural’⁴² illumination that Edensor demands, Joe’s attempts to uncover the truth about the demise of the old city can be seen as an honouring by ‘inserting [the past] in discourse’,⁴³ spoken of by De Certeau. In fact, Joe’s words to Emily suggests a willingness to attend – if only via the medium of Luke – to the spectres in their midst that is more in line with that advocated by Derrida:

‘Are you suggesting that what Luke ‘sees’ might actually be real?’

He looks suddenly miserable, entwines his fingers and rubs them together. ‘I’m not sure I know what *real* means anymore.’

Ice spreads through her veins. ‘You’re an anthropologist.’ Her voice is unsteady.

‘You rely on *evidence*.’

‘Exactly.’ (290)

In *Sea-Roke*, as well as manifesting themselves in ways I’ve already mentioned, ghosts also act through the weather and the environment, which are - to borrow Weston’s comment on Blake Morrison’s poetry – ‘actively malevolent’⁴⁴ and feature as ‘metaphorical markers of [a] spectral history’.⁴⁵ In my novel these forces

⁴² Edensor, ‘Ghosts of Industrial Ruins’, abstract.

⁴³ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 100

⁴⁴ Weston, *Haunted Landscapes*, p. 173.

⁴⁵ Weston, *Haunted Landscapes*, p. 173.

take on an unexplained power, exposing the ancient bones that having 'broken free of the soil [...] now hung suspended, curving round the empty air'(203), as well as causing the final near-fatal collapse of the cliff and leper chapel. These events – in which temporal upheaval becomes physically embodied - turn what is three-dimensional and constant into something akin to Jameson's unreliable present: one that 'unexpectedly betrays' those who rely on its 'density and solidity'.⁴⁶ By refusing to continue to hide the dead, it is as if the land is in collusion with the past:

'How Rob?'

He stroked her hands with his fingers. 'There'll be an enquiry for sure. But it doesn't make sense.' He thought for a minute. 'There's been a lot of rain - it can get underneath, make everything unstable – but not *that* much.'

'It's possible though?'

'Well – maybe.' He shook his head. 'But it takes a bloody big storm - even a tidal surge - to trigger a collapse like that.' (327)

Here, haunted space has become a kind of non-space, the land being taken over by the sea, in symbolic re-creation of the social changes required. And whilst the collapse of the leper chapel - a gaping reminder of the past - might be seen as a comment on the negative possibilities of the future, this destruction of a place that has always offered 'sanctuary and care'(40) is both an amputation and a healing. One in which the wound/pain can still be felt.

The actions of the ghosts, as well as of those who pay attention to them, forces the villagers in *Sea-Roke* to begin to acknowledge their own history. The *something-to-be done* begins with the reburial of the bones. Resolution – at least partial – has become possible for Ed Henson and, to an extent, for Rob Baxter too. The events allow Jess to become more open to her own buried grief, and Emily Bayely's decision to take Luke back to Africa means she must face up to the death of her baby daughter. It allows for a 'reshaping [of] the past'⁴⁷ for the village too, compelling it to reassess itself and its blinkered efforts to hide a shameful and

⁴⁶ Jameson, p. 39.

⁴⁷ Brogan, p.156.

troubled history. Thus, Joe's planned exhibition becomes a way for what de Certeau calls 'the function of language [...] *saying* what can no longer be *done*':

It receives the dead that a social change has produced, so that the space opened by this past can be marked, and so that it will be possible to connect what appears with what disappears.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 101.

Chapter 11

Conclusion

We have seen how the ending of *Beloved* is not so much an ending as a request for a continuation – a plea for the story not to be *passed* on – for there is still more of it to tell. Equally, in *The Little Stranger*, Faraday's claim that 'If Hundreds Hall is haunted [...] it doesn't show itself to me'(499) cannot count as proof that the ghost has gone and the past been dealt with. For the 'movement' that catches at the corner of the narrator's eye, that gives his heart 'a jolt of fear'(499), reminds the reader that the story is not fully over, that history still has something to say.

I have ended *Sea-Roke* on the same note of ambiguity. The partial acknowledgement of the village's violent history in the reburial of the bones and the setting up of an exhibition in the local museum is an important step in the telling of an ancient and forgotten story. But the fact that the figure Luke made – and that Jess releases into the sea - is 'taken upwards and away with the tide'(364) implies a potential not only for its own return, but also for that of the still unresolved past.

Because the history of the coast has been ignored, even denied, Alwin cannot fully die, nor can those whose bones have been exposed by the fallen cliff. Equally, Jimmy Henson cannot die – or Ed Henson begin to grieve – until Rob has told his story. It is not enough for Ed to have '[w]orked it out years ago(359), the narrative must be complete both in the sense of being *done* and also being all there is to have.

In his book on Jean-François Lyotard, Geoffrey Bennington quotes the post-structuralist's view on the finality (or lack of it) of death. Reminiscent of the attitudes to death recorded by both Mbiti and Hertz, he holds:

The dead are not dead so long as the living have not recorded their death in narratives. Death is a matter for archives. One is dead when one is narrated and no longer anything but narrated.⁴⁹

But this is an impossible aim – an undesirable one too. For the narrative to be ‘done and to be all there is to have’ is a further destruction, a kind of internal explosion that does away with itself. As Derrida says, for it to be ‘that and only that’⁵⁰ is to destroy the text.

Death, then, is rarely as final as it seems. As Ryan Trimm points out, the past leaves fragmentary offerings that provide ‘messy points of dialogue’.⁵¹ Our relationship with it is ongoing, vibrant, part of a process that we share both with others and with our own earlier and future selves. ‘The past stands not as a distinctive and separated realm but as a numinous spirit, one signaling not only events whose legacy lingers on but also spectres that might be conjured anew and recast for a more hospitable future.’⁵²

Traditionally it has been the human mind that gives life to the - possibly benign, possibly terrifying – ghost that it perceives and cleaves to. But this is to limit it in a most unsatisfactory way. Trigg holds the ghosts that ‘we hear and experience within place are as much part of the world as are our memories and dreams.’⁵³ Stephen Frosh takes it further. For him history infiltrates the present through ‘a traumatic haunting that is profoundly social, yet is lived out in the deepest recesses of individuals’ lives’.⁵⁴ We must, he holds, think of ghosts, ‘as *real*: they actually exist.’⁵⁵ To think otherwise is:

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 112.

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, p.166.

⁵¹ Ryan Trimm, ‘Witching Welcome’ in *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, ed. by Heholt and Downing, pp. 59-74, (p. 72).

⁵² Trimm, ‘Witching Welcome’, p. 72.

⁵³ Trigg, p. 318.

⁵⁴ Frosh, Stephen: *Hauntings, Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 44.

⁵⁵ Frosh, p. 44, (my italics).

to run the risk of not appreciating how their reality stretches further than the psychological alone. That is to say, we are not dealing with psychology here, but with the way psychology falls apart when confronted with the real.⁵⁶

This is a persuasive point, but as we have seen Joe confess in *Sea-Roke*, the word 'real' is highly ambiguous. I am not equipped to provide a full philosophical discussion of its meaning but the OED gives one (of many) definition which is particularly worth repeating here:

Actually existing or present as a state or quality of things; having a foundation in fact; actually occurring or happening. Also: expressing a subjective relation to a person; actual, significant; able to be grasped by the imagination.⁵⁷

It is the penultimate clause that is crucial. If, as I argued earlier (Chapter 6), de Certeau and others are correct in their claim that 'haunted places are the only ones people can live in,'⁵⁸ then Frosh may well be justified in holding that ghosts 'should be thought of as real'.⁵⁹ And if this is so, then he is also likely to be right that ghosts are 'necessary for ordinary psychic life.'⁶⁰ According to this view – shared of course by Trigg and others – instead of being consigned to being a mere by-product of an individual's disturbed psyche, the hauntings of Little Charlbrugh – as well as those of Hundreds Hall and 124 Bluestone Rd – can be understood to stem from the: 'fabric of history and culture, embedded in the symbolic structures of society [...] What haunts us psychically is, in this rendering, some injustice, something that has not been dealt with rightly'.⁶¹

The present in all its manifestations, both material and otherwise, is not a distinct and separate moment in time, unconnected to the past or the future as if they are

⁵⁶ Frosh, p. 42.

⁵⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵⁸ de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 108.

⁵⁹ Frosh, p. 44.

⁶⁰ Frosh, p. 41.

⁶¹ Frosh, pp. 44-45, (*italics mine*).

of no account. Instead, it is 'transient, in process, [...] saturated with the sound and sights of memory and expectation.'⁶²

De Certeau's further claim, also noted by Boehm, that 'there is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence'⁶³ is supported by Baby Suggs in *Beloved*. When Sethe suggests they move house to escape the ghost, the former says 'What'd be the point? [...] Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief' (6)

Such houses, as well as Hundreds Hall, 124 Bluestone Rd and the coastline of Little Charlburgh are spaces where, as Edensor puts it, the 'supposedly over-and-done-with remains',⁶⁴ where 'the ghosts have not been consigned to dark corners, attics and drawers, or been swept away, reinterpreted, or recontextualised.'⁶⁵ These spaces, where present and past meet, where 'layers peel away and things fall out from their hiding places'⁶⁶ to reveal the secrets hidden behind them, indicates the distortion of time that I discussed earlier in Chapters 2 and 4. They also suggest that however far we go into the future, there is no escaping the past.

This collision of time (and indeed *times*) and place serves, as Edensor points out, to allow writers to exploit an aspect of trauma experience - the inability to formulate it formally in thought and narrative. I have tried to show this overlay of past and present in Sea-Roke:

It was as if he occupied a space separate from the rest of the class. Like someone in a photograph where two images were imposed, one on the other. In this case, there were the same long thin windows and high grey walls in the background, the same tables and lockers and posters at the sides. But as if they were recorded at different times, for different reasons. (90)

⁶² Frosh, p. 41.

⁶³ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination in the Novels of Sarah Waters', p. 253.

⁶⁴ Edensor, 'The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins', p. 830.

⁶⁵ Edensor, 'The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins', p. 837.

⁶⁶ Edensor, 'The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins', p. 834.

The figurative language of haunted fiction does not demand of us the impossible - the piecing together of a history we can never fully know. Instead, like the 'obscure, ghostly, enigmatic traces [...of ruins...that] invite us to fill in the blanks',⁶⁷ writers can (to borrow, as Edensor does, a point from Steve Pile) 'trace out the threads and follow their convolutions',⁶⁸ thus enabling the construction of narratives unrestricted by formal demands. In haunted fiction, the imaginative employment of language, both in its *getting out of the way* (in the sense implied by both Derrida and Morrison) and in *what it says*, can point to the obscure, the ghostly and the enigmatic. It is these gaps, these crypts, these attempts to conceal, which demand our attention and prompt us to exercise our obligation:

'In translating history into ghost stories, authors of haunted narratives transform both source and target cultures, reshaping the past to answer the needs of the present and, implicitly, the future. This double-edged revisionism - which reinvents old traditions and creates new cultural fusions - suggests a literary form of what social scientists have called "reciprocal acculturation". The ghost that makes the present the past while suggesting its indefiniteness (and thereby possible malleability), thus provides the vehicle for both a dangerous possession by and an imaginative liberation from the past'⁶⁹

We must seek our ghosts in whatever way we can. We need them for social health and for personal integrity. As Brogan says,⁷⁰ in novels such as *Beloved*, 'haunting turns out to be necessary to the maintenance of historical meaning. The exorcism of all forms of ghostliness would result in a devastating loss of significance.'

The layers unpeel. We discover that the past furthest behind us is also the future that is farthest away. Despite the limitations of sequence implied, it is a state of affairs that serves to remind us of Derrida's claims that not only is the specter the future ('it is always to come')⁷¹ but, more importantly, it allows us 'to live otherwise, and better. No, not better. But more justly [...] Being with the specters

⁶⁷ Edensor, 'The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins', p. 847.

⁶⁸ Edensor, 'The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins', p. 846.

⁶⁹ Brogan, p. 156.

⁷⁰ Brogan, p. 154-155.

⁷¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 39.

would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, of generations.’⁷²

Derrida is right. You can’t pin ghosts down, you can’t know what they are. Or even if. The very business of knowing is irrelevant. A sentiment partly echoed by Ed Henson in *Sea-Roke*:

‘Call em ghosts if you want,’ he said. ‘But that’s not our word.’ The steam spread and disappeared in the warmth of his breath. He bent forward, moving his hands as if trying to draw what he was saying in the air. ‘They come back sometimes. Tha’s all.’(316)

You just have to listen.

⁷² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. xviii.