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On Barley Hill; Method-Writing and Spectral Landscapes in the Supernatural Gothic Horror Novel

Volume II
A novel submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at

By
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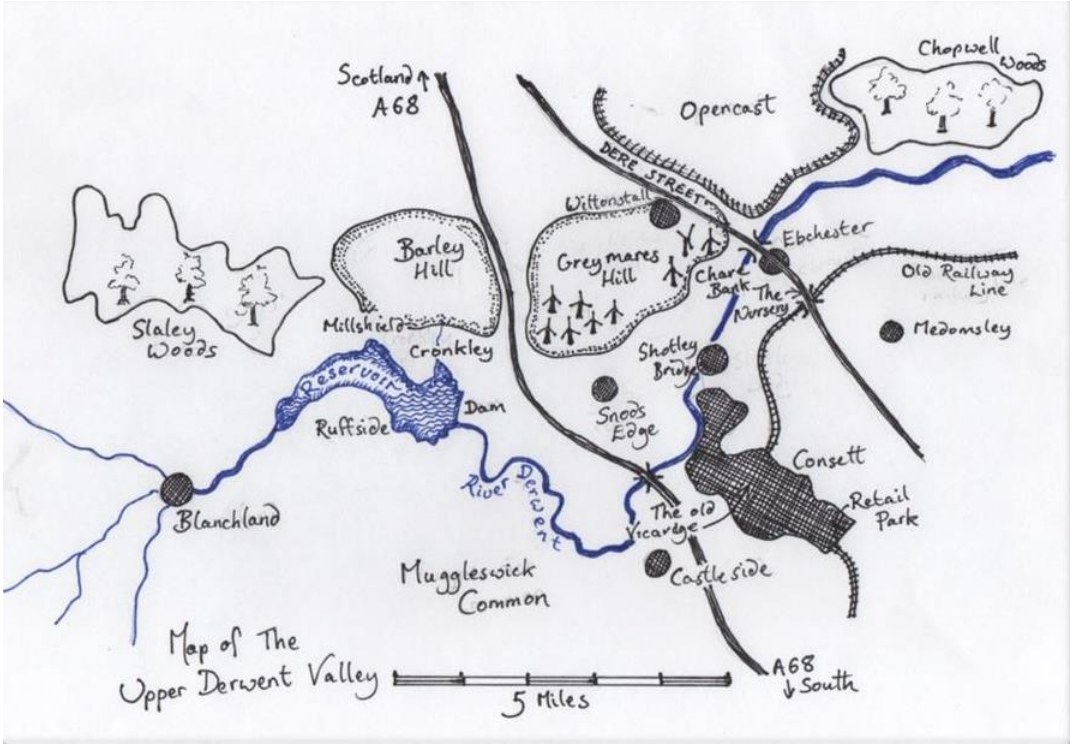
October 2016

On Barley Hill



1 Jack

It's a stripy grey tabby, this one. An overweight tom with a red collar, someone's pet.

Jack buries it in the wood by the reservoir. He digs its grave among the creaking pines, cutting through the obstructing roots with loppers. Something dug up the first one, left a clot of stinking gore and orange fur next to the shallow grave. He digs this hole deeper.

It is raining outside, but the planting is so dense under here that you'd scarcely notice. The soil is bone dry and powdery, but full of stones as well as roots. It doesn't have the clean wet smell of garden soil, all its goodness long since sapped by the growing trees. Even the worms are undernourished, red and wiry. Jack flings any whole ones out of the way if he sees them in time. The arch of his left foot started to ache before he was halfway done and it hurts now. The flexible treads of the wellingtons give no protection. He should have changed into his boots.

Sweat drips into the hole as he scrapes the bottom flat. The cat's body is stiff and heavy. Jack hoists it up and twists the spade as he balances over the hole, letting the body slide into the earth. There is never enough soil to back fill, no matter how carefully he piles it up as he excavates. There ought to be a cat-sized bulge of displaced earth, not a sad little depression here between the boles of the Scots pines. The wind is picking up. He turns to a wheel barrow full of flat coping stones. He builds a cairn, laying the stones with care. He stops to listen but the wood is empty, quiet except for the wind. Lonely. He looks around as he straightens up. Six more little cairns. He throws his spade into the barrow with a clang that reverberates briefly round the wood then is swallowed as if it had never been. He picks up his loppers and glances behind him at the shadows among the heaps of brash beneath the trees. The wheel squeaks as he trundles the barrow up to the little gate.

He leaves his gear in the shed ready for the next time and walks through the rain to his cottage. He takes his wellies off in the porch. A phone begins to ring inside. The kitchen is warm and dim. Jack washes his hands at the kitchen sink and dries them on a towel hung over the rail on the Rayburn. The phone is still ringing, vibrating itself towards the edge of the table. Jack picks up the phone and reads the number. He holds it until it finally stops ringing then he fills the kettle with fresh water and sets it on the hotplate. He sits on a chair by the table, staring out of the window at the rain. The oil-

burner in the stove putters in the uneven draw from the chimney as the pressure changes outside. He gets up when the kettle hisses and pours water onto the teabag. He counts to forty elephants under his breath. Everything takes on a weight, a significance, the drips from the used teabag as he carries it from bench to coal bucket and the little puff of coal dust as the soggy bag slaps down onto the black nuggets, the twisting thread of milk from the carton and the cloudy storm as the liquids mix before he stirs them.

He picks up the phone again and makes the call.

'It's Jack Roberts here, you just telephoned.'

'*Oh I'm so glad we caught you. It's time, I'm afraid, Mr Roberts*.'

Jack scalds his mouth on the hot tea.

2 Emily

I'd seen Jack at the hospice before, but not to talk to. Before, I'd mistaken him for a patient, gaunt and shaky.

The room smelled of the morphine sweated out onto sheets that had to be changed twice a day. The other four beds were empty. That morning they had put up a screen next to my grandmother's bed. His wife was already dead by the time he'd arrived. He had brought a sparse bunch of harebells with him but he must have known it was too late. Wild flowers mean more. Behind the screen I could hear him, not weeping, but snuffling. I looked across at my grandmother. What was it that lurked behind her eyelids refusing to be dislodged even as the tumours shut down each vital organ? How was it possible that the struggling, rattling life could disappear, become *nothing*. For a moment I remember feeling the senseless horror of existence, my life not half lived, yet witnessing the far end, already inescapable.

Jack stood up, silhouetted against the pastel nylon, warm autumn sunshine streaming in behind him. I kicked my bag so that he would remember there was someone else, another consciousness, in the room. I couldn't speak when he came round the screen, couldn't think of what to say. I wouldn't cry when my grandmother died.

'What lovely flowers,' he said.

I'd brought in roses from home. My home, not hers. My grandmother's roses always turned to rotting parchment parcels before they fully opened. A dose of magnesium sulphate would have fixed the soil but I had never told her that.

I looked down at the harebells in his hand so that I didn't see his lined face. His fingers twitched around the brittle stalks. He went behind the screen and came back without them.

'It's alright, lass, you don't have to say anything,' he said.

I saw Jack a week later. He had brought in a wooden farm set for the family room at the hospice. I hated this room more than all the others, with the stale carpet and the religious pamphlets piled on coffee tables where no-one ever drank coffee. It wasn't the religion that upset me so much as the rocking horse and plastic trucks in the corner.

I was putting my roses into a vase. Garden roses don't last. Last week's were well past it, faded and musky, ready to slide off their carpels in a squishy mush. I

dropped them into the bin and washed the vase in the handwash. It's important to keep the vessel sterile for cut flowers. I washed the scissors too. I tore open a sachet of sugar from the pot next to the coffee machine. Nobody but me ever used them, still I felt guilty as soon as I heard voices in the corridor, naughty, stealing sugar. I quickly poured the sachet into the vase and filled it up with water, dissolving the evidence.

Two nurses were praising Jack's gift. He walked behind them, flushed and grim with embarrassment. He was wearing a tweed jacket and corduroys, looking presentable, less like a patient. The farm set was green and red, fixed to a tray. It was made for show, not play, and I wondered if he saw the way children crept round the hospice, too laden with fear to whisper, let alone play with someone else's toys. He set it down on a coffee table next to the rocking horse.

'More roses,' he said when the nurses left.

I agreed and turned away. His troubles were a generation at least away from me. I wanted it to stay that way. I finished wiping down the counter top while he stood and smiled.

'How are you?' I asked when I realised he wasn't going to go away.

'Oh, I'm alright, you know.'

He was still watching me, waiting for a response. I felt cornered, unable to express the sympathy he clearly expected. I ended up admiring his toy farm for want of the right words.

'Did you make it yourself?' Something in the detail made me think it wasn't from a shop. I thought then that perhaps he lived on a farm.

He nodded, still smiling.

'It's very good.'

'I make models. It's what I do for a living.'

I'm not good at conversation at the best of times. It's fine when I meet people through work. Then it is as though I have a script, I know what to say to customers and I can talk about plants and gardening, but I've never been able to improvise. It would have stopped there if the nurse hadn't found my grandmother dead at that moment. Jack came along with me back to the ward, as though we'd been saying something that mattered.

In any other hospital there would be the undignified flurry to start the motor again, but there they just accepted it was the end.

‘It’s a blessing,’ the nurse said, squeezing my arm.

‘Do you want me to stay?’ Jack asked.

I shook my head, but he didn’t leave.

My mouth was so dry I couldn’t move my tongue and all of a sudden my legs wouldn’t take my weight anymore. I leant against the wall by the door and closed my eyes so that I could concentrate on drinking in the close, unpleasant air.

‘Fetch me that chair, would you?’ I heard the nurse say.

The fuss was worse than the faint-ness. The nurses plainly wanted me gone, but they insisted I wasn’t in a state to drive; a taxi, perhaps? No offer to stay until I felt better, or at least until that awful trembling had stopped. Then Jack assumed a familiar air with me, play-acting that surprised me, so that they ushered us out together. They seemed to regard me as a child without self-determination, and treated me accordingly. I compliantly climbed into a stranger’s car, anything rather than cause a scene. Jack drove me back to my house.

He talked about his wife, Claire, small things, the way she burned toast because she was watching the birds, how she made pin-money from selling homemade stuff at craft fairs, the daft things she believed in, charms and spells and faeries. That explained the harebells. He was older than my first impressions of him, certainly older than his wife, quite a bit older than my father would have been. The car was old, too, but clean and well cared for. Jack smelt of Imperial Leather up close. I found his proximity alone enough to make me uneasy and I worried that he was already too solicitous, too clingy, too selfless.

As soon as he turned into the car park I had my seatbelt undone. I was getting out before he had the handbrake on.

‘Thank you.’

‘Wait.’ He leant across the passenger seat, ‘you’ll need my number. I can drive you back to pick up your car when you’re feeling better.’

He passed me a small printed business card, *Jack Roberts, Dolls’ House Maker, Cronkley Cottage, Barley Hill*.

I didn’t want to see him again, certainly didn’t want to be part of his mourning process, but I couldn’t find the words to say this politely. Stuart was watching us from the corner of the shed.

I was still shaking all over as I unlocked the door and let myself into the cool passageway.

The house had been there so long that the road outside was higher than the floor inside. The stone flags weren't damp but the broad passageway never felt warm. In summer the two sash windows let in very little light because I let the wisteria and clematis hang down low. The nursery gardens wrapped around the house on the other three sides.

The ginger cat was waiting for me in the kitchen.

'Off the table. Shoo,' I said.

Maybe the cat thought that was its name. It sat until I shoved it off, then ambled towards the back kitchen and its food bowl. It was the only cat that I allowed in the house. Several others hung around outside and probably had other homes when they weren't hunting or sunning themselves around the nurseries. One seemed to live next to the till in the shop and liked being petted. The road was quite busy and I tended not to name them; it wasn't so bad when they got squashed if I didn't have a name to attach to them.

The cat had been lying next to the keys for my grandmother's house. Heavy keys that thrummed every time a lorry trundled up or down the steep road. Without thinking I picked them up and dropped them into the bin.

The main problem with running the nurseries was the general public. They had to come in, but one couldn't always trust them. They wandered into the glasshouses, sometimes into my private flower garden, like it was all some sort of entertainment. The shop was a persistent problem. While I was in there I couldn't be working, and there was never a constant flow of customers, so it would have been uneconomic to have Dawn or Stuart in there all the time. There was a hand-bell for customers to ring for attention but inevitably some thefts occurred, even with the cats watching. On the whole the public were honest, but it was a constant nagging doubt, especially whenever I was down by the bottom polytunnel or in the roses. Stuart was reliable, but Dawn was hopeless. I had to watch her constantly or she started texting. She never got her hands dirty enough to not be able to use her phone. She came in to see me that day to avoid work rather than because she was worried about me. She was only a couple of years younger than me,

and clearly could not see why I should expect to hold authority over her, regarding the business more as a collective enterprise.

She had already heard about my grandmother somehow, and stood in the kitchen as though my bereavement entitled her.

‘Sorry about your gran.’

Gran was the name I thought of for my father’s mother, not my maternal grandmother who had just died, but Dawn didn’t know that.

‘Thank you.’

‘How long will you have to close up for?’ This was subtle for Dawn; the implied suggestion that I intended to close anyway.

‘I don’t need to close at all. I can organise everything for next Wednesday.’

Wednesday was the one day we didn’t open.

‘You’ll need to sort the funeral and stuff, though.’

‘That won’t take long.’ I watched her face fall. ‘Has it been busy while I was away this morning?’

‘Not a soul,’ she said.

I don’t know why she always sounded so triumphant when that happened. Fewer customers meant less need for Dawn, less money to pay for help. I didn’t like the way she had come into my house as though she had every right.

‘Actually, if it’s not very busy can you go and check the tomatoes and then sweep out the shop for me? I need to make some phone calls,’ I said, turning my back on her.

3 Jack

It's a restless place, Jack's little corner, but today it's calm. All the reasons the farm was built on the windiest point in the valley were drowned when they filled the reservoir and now it just seems lost.

The reservoir stretches out to hold the reflection of the Ruffside hills with barely a breath of wind to disturb the image. Even the geese have hushed. Jack walks down the new footpath which leads round the eastern edge of the reservoir towards the dam. They have built a boardwalk over the boggy bit where Jack's fast stream spreads out as the new waters check its descent. The boardwalk curves round in a large bend, flat and easy, a multi-user surface, the sign says. The grooves in the boards are filling in already with mud and sheep droppings, another year and it will be unusable, slick with slime. The scrubby goat willow and alder trees already encroach. He walks along the boardwalk, the whole structure bouncing to his stride, and the valley holds its breath for him beneath the broad sky. He steps off the other end onto the gravel path and is dazzled by the sun glancing off the water. The scent of the gorse nearly knocks him off his feet. It's so still he might be walking through a photograph. Not a bee, not a fly, not a bird, not even the lap of water, silence more deafening than a waterfall. Jack shakes his head, rubs his ears and swallows hard against the pressure. He staggers for a moment, almost overbalances, then stares about him as if unsure of what has just happened. Across the glass smooth reservoir a wrinkle spreads out from the mouth of Jack's stream, a convex ripple that travels with the speed of tsunami across the surface and throws light in all directions, shattering the inverted hills. Over by Ruffside Hall, a mile across the water, the wild geese scream.

4 Emily

I arrived late for my grandmother's service at the crematorium to avoid having to speak to anyone. I slipped into the back row of plastic chairs, eight rows behind the rest of my family. The room was rigidly utilitarian and non-sectarian, no ornament except an abstract patchwork of faded colour from the stained glass window and, of course, the short red velvet curtain. Her coffin was already on the conveyer belt. I couldn't join in with the prayers and I missed my opportunity to escape because it all ended so abruptly. I had forgotten that I had asked for no hymns. I was paying so at least I had my own way over that.

Tim and his wife hemmed me in as soon as I stood up.

'She would have been very disappointed, you know,' Tim's wife began. 'A lifetime of caring for other people and this is the best you could do?'

Then they all piled in, cousins and in-laws, distant aunts and uncles, all of them, plus three tearful little brats who began to wail, until they were standing in a semicircle around me as I tried to push backwards through the row of plastic chairs.

'Honestly, Emily, I have no idea why she'd make you the executor. After the way you behaved,' said Angie.

'Have you spoken to Robinsons' yet?' asked Angie's current husband, as if it was anything to do with him.

'You don't get the house, you know. She left it to all of us. Fair shares.' Tim always had been a little thug. Now he was a big thug. He used to take sweets from me while shrieking 'fair shares' at me. He broke my finger once when I wouldn't surrender a toy to him. All our encounters ended in tears.

The funeral director was trying to push us outside to look at the flowers by this point. The coffins must have been piling up in a queue. We were marshalled out of the chapel into a long glassed-in corridor. I slipped away as Tim's wife and Angie began to argue about the dining table, of all things. I could hear them still through the thick glass doors. I supposed that this was just what my grandmother would have chosen, a family row in public, a fitting panegyric.

I was halfway home when it hit me that it was finally over. Even sharing with my cousins, I should have enough money to finally escape and start afresh.

My grandmother had given her set of keys to me weeks ago, her instructions scrawled on a pad held by one of the nurses after she had lost her ability to speak. I fetched her clean clothes and her hairbrush. I had watched over her, waiting for something. I was only fifteen when we last talked, and she hadn't wanted to believe me then. I didn't know if she believed me now. If she did she never communicated it to me. Maybe she meant me to infer all these things by naming me as her executor. Given our history, though, she should have made it clearer.

There must have been other sets of keys, I assumed my cousins had them, but I wouldn't ask for them. I had thrown mine away the day she died and here I was, the day after the funeral, scrabbling through the rubbish bin to retrieve them. Dawn caught me in the kitchen before I had a chance to clean up the mess. In my house again, she waited in silent satisfaction while I washed and dried them. I straightened up and turned round to face her.

'I can't stay past five,' she said.

'I'm not expecting you to. I'll be back before then.'

'What should I do, then?'

'Just make up the veg boxes like you usually do on a Thursday. Ask Stuart to give you a hand if you can't find anything. I won't be long.'

The valuer was already waiting for me when I got to my grandparents' house. I parked next to his car. It was the only house set back from the road, overhung with tall beech trees. It dwarfed the Victorian stone terraces on either side. It used to be a vicarage before my grandparents' time, and the redundant church, St Aidan's, stood right across the road, opposite the house. It was for sale again. People bought it from time to time, but no one had ever finished converting it. The dereliction had been a source of annoyance to my grandparents for forty years.

The valuer gazed glumly across the road at the church. He looked about twenty, ill at ease with his business clothes. I wondered if he had enough experience to do his job well. The tax situation frightened me a bit and I wanted as accurate a valuation as possible for probate. I knew why my grandmother had chosen me to be her executor, really, even though I was younger than my cousins by six or seven years: neither Tim nor Angie would understand the inevitability of paying death duties. They'd think they

could get round the system, conceal stuff from the Inland Revenue, find some crooked accountant. Clever, clever cousins.

‘Toby Prentice,’ he said, ‘my condolences.’

‘Hi, I’m Emily.’

I shook his damp hand and he followed me up to the front door, a big double door with an awkward heavy lock which hadn’t been used for several weeks. I always used the kitchen door when she’d needed me to fetch things for her. He was already dictating his opinion of the front of the house to his phone by the time I tried the lock.

‘Fine four bay Jacobean frontage. Grade II listed former vicarage. Didn’t you say it was Victorian?’ he asked me as I struggled with the key.

‘It is, the main bit anyway. It’s supposed to be a copy of some place in Scotland. Ah.’ I’d hurt my finger trying to force the lock.

‘Look up the architects and check the listing, Sarah.’ He put his phone in his pocket. ‘Here, shall I have a go?’ he asked.

‘Sorry.’

He couldn’t open the door either.

‘Maybe it’s bolted on the other side,’ he said.

I led him round to the kitchen door.

‘Charming garden.’

It wasn’t. The heavy squareness of the shady lawn and dismal overgrown borders filled with dead or dying specimens was utterly charmless. But then it’s not my job to sell houses. His phone was in his hand again. His face didn’t match the enthusiastic tone he was using.

We went in through the scullery. I had been using the washing machine to launder her things and there was a sickly smell of detergent sludge from the drains. One of her nighties still hung over the clothes rail. The boiler hadn’t been used since the spring and the empty space needed airing. There was a definite dampness in the room. The windows were too high up for me to open them without steps. And it wasn’t my house.

‘Security conscious,’ he murmured, staring up at the iron bars. All the ground floor windows facing the garden had bars. It spoke volumes of the Church’s attitude towards the locals. I ushered him through to the kitchen as quickly as I could.

It was chastening to see the place through a stranger's eyes. The size of the house made me conceited as a child. I lived in a far larger house than any of the other children in the coal-miners' village and it set me apart from those who might otherwise have been friends. I came to regard it as what made me special, a personality trait rather than just my home. Now this man was casting his disparaging gaze around the room and diminishing me at the same time. The kitchen fittings were old, but they'd never seemed tatty before. I'd not noticed the stains around the drawer handles, or that the doors hung crooked. Things had gone downhill since the cleaner left. The kitchen felt clammy and airless. When the valuer opened the big cupboard next to the fireplace a family of woodlice scuttled for safety underneath a pile of dinner plates. He shut the door and wiped his hand on his jacket, waving away my apologies. I stood by the door and tried to be as invisible as I could while he took measurements and poked under the sink. He looked up from his phone from time to time, firing questions about central heating and warranties. I was too vague for him. I had been too young to be involved in household matters when I last lived there.

He put his phone back in his pocket for a moment when he had finished with the kitchen. He ran his finger round the inside of his shirt collar. I could smell his deodorant melting.

'I'll just show myself round, shall I? I call if I need to ask you anything,' he said.

I nodded and sat down at the kitchen table. I could hear him as he described the rooms in terms of their proportions and potential for different uses.

It was a dull afternoon and the kitchen was dim. The electricity was still turned on, but I felt reluctant to use any. I heard his footsteps in the room above me. That was Mrs Stokoe's room in the days when my grandparents still had a housekeeper. His footsteps receded. He was working his way along to the old part of the house, the pele tower, Grandpa's study. I heard a door slam and his footsteps coming back again, echoing down the empty passageway. He hadn't had time to do the attic rooms as well, but he was coming back downstairs anyway.

I came out into the hall as he clattered to the bottom of the stairs. He was loosening his tie with one hand and stowing his phone in his jacket pocket with the other. He jumped when he noticed me.

He cleared his throat. ‘Well, I think I’ve seen enough. I’ll send out a copy of the probate valuation report to your home address. Early next week? Is that alright?’

He ducked away from me towards the front door, remembered we couldn’t open it, and veered towards the kitchen, skirting around the walls to keep a distance between us.

‘Excuse me — you haven’t been up to the top floor,’ I called as I followed him back down the kitchen corridor.

‘No need, it won’t make much difference to the… er … it’s this way isn’t it?’

I nodded and he was off.

His tyres scattered chippings as he reversed onto the road. It had started to rain.

So that was it. Once the probate valuation had been done my duties towards the house ended. Someone would be round from an auction house the next week to value the house contents and all the portable valuables had to be sent up to the solicitors for a jeweller to assay. I wasn’t aware of any, but my grandmother must have had some. All I needed to do today was look for any jewellery in her bedroom and lock up. After next week my cousins could strip the place in peace. I thought I would get a firm in to do a house clearance if they left anything.

I stood at the foot of the stairs and stroked the wooden rail, looking up towards the first floor. The rippled panes of glass in the landing window rattled faintly in their iron frames. The wind was picking up.

As a child I tended to avoid the main staircase in the hall at night. The shallow risers always seemed to make these stairs a longer journey than the back stairs. During the day, however, the staircase was part of my games. The quarter landings made strategic eyries between the wooded slopes. When there were guests I loitered near the foot of the main staircase within call of the drawing room, and traced the dark swirly patterns of irregular growth in the conker-coloured pitch pine bannisters. Waiting, always waiting. Waiting to grow up. Waiting for this to be my house.

The treads creaked as I climbed. I sang to myself, without realising what it was I sang.

I had become used to going into my grandmother’s room while she was ill, almost immune to rifling through her clothes but I had never opened the shallow middle drawer of her dressing table. The nets at the window muffled the daylight and the new blue carpet hushed sound so that the room seemed to belong to a different house. She’d

had it redecorated shortly before her hospitalisation. The only familiar odours were trapped inside the drawers and wardrobes, the traces nothing can eradicate except the cleansing flames of a good bonfire.

The middle drawer was unlocked. There were half a dozen long velvet lined boxes for necklaces, all empty, and several ring boxes, some of which were old. The rings were pretty, with Victorian settings and large semi-precious stones like amethyst and opal. I'd never seen them worn. I tried one on, a large moonstone with a cloudy intrusion, but my fingers were thick from gardening and I couldn't push it over my knuckle. I found the necklaces from the boxes all tangled at the back of the drawer. Gold chains and a string of dulled pearls and a necklace of purple plastic beads that snagged at my memory. I caught sight of myself in the looking glass and didn't recognise the face looking back at me. For a moment it was as if I was looking at two images, the little girl I had been used to seeing in this glass and the young woman, a stranger to both me and my old reflection, now disconcertingly superimposed, Pepper's Ghost. I shivered and there was only me in the mirror, tired and drawn. I got on with decanting the contents of the drawer into a plastic Tesco's bag.

I closed her bedroom door behind me with a lurch of vertigo so strong I had to grab the door knob to steady myself. I neither belonged there, nor owned it, a limbo enforced by the Inland Revenue, yet I suddenly wanted to cling to the house as if it was a rock amongst the waves of homesickness. I needed something concrete to say I was here once, I really lived here, that this had been my home before the sale board went up and it was all too late. I loosened my grip on the doorknob finger by finger. The time for scuttling round this house, this shell, was past. It shouldn't matter anymore.

I walked along the galleried landing and tried the door to Grampa's study, but it was stuck fast, jammed when the estate agent slammed it. I thought I heard a voice for a moment, but it was only the wind in the chimneys. Above me, the top landing led to a box room, his bedroom and the nursery. No direct access to my own little bedroom but too many connections to other places, other times. A cool draught wafted down the broad stairwell. Maybe I could go the back way? We always referred to the stairs from the kitchen as Mrs Stokoe's stairs. They seemed less shadowy because they were further away from the old end of the house. They were handy for my bedroom as well, a short dash past the bathroom on the first floor and up another flight of stairs straight into my

room. That would mean I didn't have to go through the nursery. Alternatively I could behave like the house didn't have places that frightened me still, so that it lost its authority over me.

The floorboards creaked beneath my feet on the landing. I wasn't aware I was singing again until the words slipped into my ears.

Let me inside you, into your room.

I've heard it's lined with things you don't show.

The words died in the echoing space. I felt it might have been a tactless choice.

He who would valiant be….

There was a certain theatrical quality to the rooms on the second floor, so long abandoned that they had achieved Miss Havisham layers of decrepitude. I opened the closest door on the landing into the tiny bathroom crammed under the eaves. The taps had dripped for so long in that the bath had accretions of verdigris staining the enamel. It was as cold as ice. I shut the door.

The nursery smelt of mice. Mrs Stokoe always called it the playroom, but the toys had been kept elsewhere. The grime of a decade lay in fluffy grey folds on the parchment-coloured dustsheets. Beyond this room was my old bedroom. It had been a maid's room originally; I think there was a nursemaid when my mother and uncle were little. It became my bedroom because I wouldn't sleep in the nursery. The furniture here, too, was covered. The brass bedstead turned the protective dustsheet into a mountain range, the dust and grit on the bare floorboards was undisturbed, the large rug's colours were muted with disuse. The space under the bed was a dark cavern. One of the lower window panes had been broken and birds had been in and made a mess. A stained square of cardboard was taped over the missing glass. I tiptoed to the door that opened onto the back stairs and listened, I wasn't sure what for. I sifted through the sounds, loose windows, twigs scraping, traffic, and found I was holding my breath. I made a conscious effort to control the mounting unease, steadied my breathing and relaxed my shoulders, and turned back to look round the little room. There was nothing left of mine here. There were sooty scrabble marks on the wallpaper next to the light switch, maybe a panicking pigeon. I pulled back, something … something better left alone. The bare floorboards creaked under my feet as I edged back out, disturbing as little as possible. I retraced my steps through the nursery back onto the top landing.

The box room was on the other side of the galleried stairwell to the nursery, past the bathroom. The door was right next to the door into the top of the tower, with dark uneven stone steps leading up onto the little flat roof where Grandpa set up his telescope. This side of the landing was out of bounds to me as a child. I saw no point in disobeying and I understood the old part of the house was somehow dangerous. My boundary was the top of the stairs, until one afternoon when Tim and Angela were visiting.

We had been sent out of the way to the nursery and my cousins became bored very quickly, both in their early teens and still obliged to entertain a child. I must have been about seven at the time, and resented them fiddling with toys I had come to regard as my own.

We soon squabbled. They dared me to do forbidden things, but I wasn't used to siblings and didn't understand. Eventually they dragged me to the box room. I'm sure I made a noise, but the attics are remote and squealing children are easy to ignore. I begged with Tim through the door as he locked me in. The gloating stopped after a while and I put my ear against the door to listen. I heard their sandals pattering along the corridor and I realised I was alone.

The room was crammed with unwanted broken things but the window was too dirty and small to do more than show me shadows and shapes. There were spiders hunting on the walls closest to the door, huge spiders guarding draughty cracks in the plaster with bundles of flies dangling down below them. I stood still hugging my arms to my sides so nothing touched me and waited to die of hunger. The noises were the worst of it, the wind thrumming in the chimney breast, moths battering against the window, mice in the walls and pigeons on the tiles. My grandparents found me after an hour or two but by then I had spent so long with the house whispering to me that I don't think I was ever the same since.

That was nearly twenty years ago. I walked past the top of the stairs, past the door into the tower and pushed open the door to the box room.

It was empty. No junk, no stacks of newspapers, no broken furniture, just four bare walls. The chalky distemper flaked off the cracked plaster still, but the patches where lumps of plaster had fallen off the walls were recent, I thought. The lathes behind showed like ribs through broken skin. The floor had been swept and the window had been wiped enough for me to see the rooftops of the terrace of houses below through the

smears. I wondered if my grandmother had meant me to find this earlier, if she had been sure I would be curious. If it was a message did she intend it to be this frustratingly ambiguous? All's forgiven? Forgive me? Look: I have forgotten you, wiped your memories away? The wind played the chimneys behind the brick stack like a set of broken bagpipes. I always hated the wind there. The house never seemed safe in a gale, as though it might blow away, leaving the stump of the tower behind it. A draught caught the door as I closed it behind me, slamming it shut with enough force to dislodge more loose plaster, pattering down in the room beyond.

5 Jack

This morning the verge sides are littered with homemade wooden signs. Someone has gone to the trouble of banging them in every couple of hundred yards all along this stretch of the A68 in both directions. Some of the signs have wind turbines painted on them in red paint which has dripped. The graceful dip and sweep of the real turbines on the skyline detracts from the images, but there is a message. The landscape is dominated by massive steel structures to reduce carbon output and now they are set to dig up more fossil carbon from the same place. Not in my back yard, the signs mean but they also imply if they do it to us they'll do it to you, too. Jack shakes his head.

He turns off the trunk road and drives through a village, a dozen houses and a hundred signs. Bunting and sheets festoon the school fence advertising the next protest meeting. Only the pub has no signs or posters. It has six bed and breakfast rooms standing empty waiting for the opencast workers to come. Its bar was also empty last time Jack went in. The residents have picked their sides. He keeps driving. He crosses the Derwent river by a bridge built at the place where the Britons used to ford the river before the Romans came. His car roars in first gear up the Chare Bank, the ancient British name for steep. There are no protest signs on the south bank of the river. It's a different county and the proposed opencast doesn't affect them, even though they can hear and feel the distant thunder of the test blasts every day now.

Jack has driven ten miles out of his way. He pulls into the nurseries and parks next to a stack of compost bags. There are three other cars already there, but not Emily's. He loiters near the shed where a girl is serving customers. He picks up plastic punnets of cyclamen and winter flowering pansies, making a show of inspecting the merchandise. He dawdles so long that Stuart comes to the glasshouse door to watch him. Jack hesitates, aware of Stuart's presence, but does not attempt to approach him. He chooses to wait for the girl instead.

There's a couple purchasing several large ceramic flower pots. As they complete their transaction Jack moves forwards, but before he can claim the assistant's attention an elderly woman totters in front of him clutching a twig in a black plastic pot with a bright label showing a heap of purple flowers. The fluffy black and white cat that was snoozing on the countertop shifts in alarm and shoots off past the old woman's elbow.

‘Oh, puss,’ she says, then turns back to girl. ‘Can you help me? I’ve got clay soil, you see, and I’m worried it may be too wet.’

‘What does it say on the label?’ the assistant asks.

The old woman has to put the plant down to read the label.

‘Oh dear. I can’t see properly with these glasses.’

‘D’you want it, then?’

The old lady hesitates, not wanting to abandon her purchase.

Jack steps forward, ‘Shall I have a look for you?’ he asks.

‘Oh, if you wouldn’t mind.’ She takes a step back so that Jack buffers her from the assistant.

‘It says that it can tolerate partial shade and drought. Sounds like it’s tough and it’s got woody stems so it won’t rot.’ Jack smiles reassuringly and glances up at the assistant. Her hair is dyed white with pink tips that match her nail polish.

The old woman thanks Jack profusely and begins to count out nine ninety-nine in small change.

The assistant glares at Jack until he raises his eyes to hers. They stare at each other across the bent shoulders of the old lady who is oblivious to the atmosphere. When the transaction is over the assistant slams the till drawer shut so hard that a pack of peat pots on the counter fall over.

‘Next,’ the assistant calls.

Jack is the only person in the queue.

‘I’d come in to see Emily,’ he says.

‘She’s not here.’

‘I can see that. Do you know when she’ll be back?’

‘No idea. Was there anything else?’

‘No. Thank you for your help.’

The assistant stares blankly past his right ear as he stares at her. As he turns away he sees her shoulders droop slightly and smiles. He is aware that she sidles out of the shed behind him and sneaks a glance, seeing her hurrying across the yard, texting as she goes.

Jack walks back to his car. He sits in it to write a note; *Dear Emily. Called in to see how you are. I read the notice for your grandmother’s funeral in The Journal. Best wishes, Jack.*

After a moment he adds *'Roberts'* and *(we met at St. Oswald's).* He tears the sheet from the pad.

The assistant is watching him walking towards the house. She is standing in the shelter of the packing shed and doesn't do it casually, straightening up from the box she is busy with and swivelling round to have a good look. He has that effect sometimes.

6 Emily

Dawn was gone by the time I returned home. She hadn't finished the veg boxes, and the ones she had done needed to be checked to redistribute the contents more fairly. She would fill one box at a time which meant some people were short-changed and others got lucky. It led to bad feeling.

Stuart stayed to help. He didn't seem in a hurry to go. It was peaceful in the packing shed, just the smell of vegetables and earth, with the rain pattering on the iron roof and conversation as easy as thinking aloud. We talked about the whitefly in the top polytunnel and washing off the white sun-screen in the glasshouses.

'We can't send the swedes out next week,' Stuart said. 'I tried one at the weekend and it was a bit pale, like. We need a good frost.'

'How much kale, do you think?'

'This much? Don't bother weighing it, there's plenty.'

It was so normal, so routine, that the hangover of tension from dealing with the house almost wore off. I offered to do the Friday deliveries to make up for him staying late.

Afterwards I walked around shutting up. The rain was easing and the wind seemed to evaporate it almost as it fell in the mild autumn gloaming. I gathered up the plums from the lawn. Most were pecked or nibbled, but the wind was picking up and several were freshly fallen. I ate what I could salvage and threw the rest into the hedge. I rinsed my face and fingers under the tap by the roses.

Jack's note got stuck to the sole of my wellingtons when I went inside. I thought I'd trodden on a leaf so I scraped if off on the boot scraper. It was written on a page from one of those diaries you get free from agricultural suppliers. His note worried me, even then. More because he was pushing his luck, presuming too much after so little encouragement, than because I felt any premonition. Still, I wanted to nip this unwanted acquaintance in the bud. I fetched a bottle of sherry from the pantry and sat at the kitchen table to compose a letter asking him not to contact me again.

The letter was more difficult than I'd imagined. I realised that I risked suggesting that there was some sort of relationship in existence, almost insinuating an apology at the withdrawal of previously acknowledged rights. In my first few drafts I came across as some sort of neurotic fool. When I tried honestly expressing how I felt

about my bereavement and explaining it was not like Jack's own loss, the tone swung towards the psychotic. I didn't want to share anyone else's troubles; I had enough of my own. A sorrow shared means two people are made miserable. About ten o' clock I gave up. I'd wasted the whole evening fretting about a note to a stranger. My mouth was furred and sour from the sherry and my head ached.

In my dreams I walked around my grandparents' house again. Details so vivid, so intense, that even in the dream I wondered if perhaps I should not bother waking up. I went along the first floor landing to find Grandpa and ask him why the attic room had been cleared.

Grandpa's study was hot and cluttered just as it always had been. He sat in his armchair in a halo of light and heat with deep brown shadows all around. The frightening caryatids that supported the mantle shelf creaked with the strain and sweated in the heat from the roaring coal fire. The lewd caricatures of negro features bothered me long before I knew to be offended. The cruel mouths with leering sensual lips and the boldness of the big wide eyes disturbed something inside me. Grandpa's tartan dressing gown smelt of his ageing flesh and aftershave. I climbed into his lap, nestling my head under his bristly chin as he listened to a story on the radio. Then suddenly in place of the human darkness there was only me falling away from everything with the shrieking harpy voice of my grandmother, banging on a locked door.

I could smell the fustiness of the dream in my room when I woke up. The streetlights were still on. I lay watching the occasional car headlights shine through the slit in the curtains, a camera obscura, travelling in the opposite direction to the car across my bedroom ceiling. When I was a teenager my dreams were so real, and I was so tired, that I had begun to feel that reality was inside my head and that my life was lived only in an aboriginal dreamtime. My school work declined and I stopped talking to people. I took the sleeping pills back to my doctor and tried to explain that I wanted oblivion at night, not sleep. To sleep is to wander at the mercy of your mind.

The dream had left me with such a feeling of grief that I was at a loss as to how I was to start the day. I kicked off my sheets when my radio alarm turned on. I sat on the edge of my single bed under the slope of the roof willing myself to be aware of the sheepskin under my toes, the light through the curtains, the chaffinch singing on the top branch of the lilac outside. There would be things I would miss about my life at the

nurseries, but with the inheritance all this could be left behind in Stuart's competent hands, and I could start again.

It was early afternoon before I had time to load the van. It was colder than the day before, but the sun had come out and the wind had dropped. The nurseries had been busy all morning, mostly with people stocking up on winter bedding plants, anxious that this would be the last mild weekend before the cold arrived. I was in the shop when Dawn mentioned that she had signed for a load of tulips 'a bit ago'. She had left the crates in the car park, handy for anyone who felt like taking a sample home with them, so I used my lunch break to pot up a couple of hundred ready to sell in the spring. Grandad George, my father's father, hadn't believed anyone would ever pay for something so easy to do, but potted bulbs were a real cash boost at the time of year when it was still too cold for selling other plants.

I remembered my grandmother's jewellery with an unpleasant jolt. My car smelt of the bag, tangy, metallic and slightly perfumed. I transferred the bag to the Transit and left the door open while I loaded the veg boxes into the van, hoping the smell would dissipate. Stuart helped me carry the stack of plastic packing crates.

'You take care, now,' he said as he slammed the back door of the van.

'You too.'

'I'll lock up if you're late.'

'Shouldn't be. Bye.' I shut my door. I saw him in my mirror as I drove away, standing where he always did, at the door of the potting shed.

Inside the cab the vapours of cut kale masked the odour from the plastic bag of jewellery, but it still made me feel greasy as it slumped in the passenger seat beside me, shifting like a live thing whenever the van jolted. The solicitors were miles out of the way of my delivery route but I went there first just to be rid of it.

The last drop of the afternoon was a mile outside Slaley village. Jack's house was only a short detour on the way back. I hadn't managed to formulate a letter to him. Possibly what I had to say would be better blurted out, anyway, so that if I said anything clumsy or stupid there would be no record, nothing that I couldn't claim he'd imagined if he ever turned up again. Keep it simple, I told myself: *I'm very grateful, but I'd prefer not to be reminded of that day*. I hoped he would he get the message.

At Barley Hill I turned down the road to Millshield. I'd been to the picnic area before when I was little. Grandpa used to bring me sometimes. He would sit on one of the picnic benches and drink tea from a thermos and watch the dinghies and yachts on the water. I would run around, lost in some game, unless there were other children there. Then I would sit next to Grandpa and watch them playing and add this research to my own games later.

The tarmac of the old road ran right down to the water, all chewed at the watermark, chomped off in lumps that had shifted apart over the years like a map of tectonic plates.

I had nightmares about the reservoir years afterwards, when Grandpa was dead. Grandad George would sit on the end of my bed like I was a child and talk about the houses under the water, and the bridge that crossed the lost river. He told me the bridge joined the two sides of the valley, Millshield to Ruffside. All blown up, he said, so nothing could get tangled, but then I dreamt of being tangled in the rubble and drowning in the trapped waters of the Derwent.

Cronkley lane only went as far as the farm. The lane was made for horse drawn vehicles and pack ponies, so narrow that the gorse bushes scraped both sides of the van in places. I drove at walking pace in case I met someone coming the other way.

Between the trees on the steep slopes below me to my right the reservoir glinted with a blue more intense than seemed possible. A yacht with an orange sail moved up and down but seemed to make no headway, as though it was fixed to an eccentric axle on some giant engine beneath the water. On my left the fields rose gently to a hazy distance, the only sense of scale coming from the tips of wind turbine blades rising and dipping behind the hill top. After five hundred yards the gorse gave way to grassy banks with badly made dry-stone walls. At least there were passing places here, where gateways had been cut into the bank on the left hand side. After half a mile the road twisted back towards the reservoir and I caught sight of the farm buildings. Just before the farmstead the road dipped down next to a dense stand of Scots pine. There was a single storey cottage on my left and opposite that there was a small parking area. I pulled over next to Jack's car. I shivered in the shadow of the pine trees. The place was unadorned with home comforts like hedges or gardens. All around, beyond the small plantation's shadow, the land was lit with low evening sunshine and for a moment it was as if I had brought my own personal chilliness with me. The sudden boom and crack of a test blast for the opencast made me jump. It was much louder on Barley Hill than at home, without the intervening hill. A second dull thud reverberated through the rock below me, felt more than heard this time, more like a growl than an earthquake. I shuddered with a sudden wave of revulsion against the closeness of the brooding hillside crackling beneath me. I almost got back into the van, but I didn't want to leave any unfinished business that evening.

I had thrown away Jack's address, but it had been on a business card, so I took a guess and headed for the small building with a sign swinging above the door. It was about the size of a large loosebox and was very nicely done. Too nicely done; it reminded me instantly of the gingerbread house.

I saw Jack before he saw me. A lonely old man bending over a bench carefully cutting something with a craft knife. I tapped on the glass of the French window. My heart dropped when I saw how his face brightened with recognition. He jumped to his feet and opened one half of the French windows. It opened outwards and he stepped out, ostensibly to keep hold of it in the brisk breeze, but in effect penning me in so my only easy way was forward. He seemed to have grown now he was on his home turf.

'Emily, how nice to see you.'

‘It was on my way back on my delivery round.’ No, it wasn’t, not a mile down the Cronkley lane. I was already straying from the intended concise finale to this messy acquaintance.

‘How are you? Can I make you a cup of tea?’

‘I’m alright, I just wanted to thank you—’

‘No need, it was my pleasure. Come in out of the wind.’

I had to step forwards to wriggle my arm away from his hand. He looked taken aback.

‘Sorry, is your arm sore?’

I shook my head.

‘You’re not alright, are you?’ he asked. ‘Wait in here, where it’s nice and warm.’

He pushed me inside. I couldn’t avoid it without making a fuss and it felt important to keep this as low key and casual as possible. The last thing I wanted to do was to give him an excuse to come round to apologise. He was humming to himself as he left by a side door.

The studio smelled of glue and resin and sawdust. I sat on Jack’s chair. His tools were so small they looked like toys. I was used to Grandad George’s tools at the nurseries which were adapted from farm implements. The ash handles were the colour of the lining of walnut shells, polished silk-smooth by the passage of hands over decades and cured to iron with sweat and grime and the occasional oiling. Grandad hung obsolete tools on the kitchen wall, a billhook, a scythe, the seat of horse-drawn plough, a nod of respect to the skills of the past. Some of Jack’s tools even had plastic handles.

There was a dolls’ house on the bench beside the French windows and a dozen more models on a bench running along the wall behind me. The room was bright and the late afternoon sun lit up the corner of the eastern wall as it flooded through the glass doors. I stood up to look at the view. I had to shade my eyes to see out over the reservoir. The wind was whipping up white crests on the wavelets. The yacht with the orange sail must have headed back to the sailing club. A small fleet of clouds raced across the water, their shadows were almost indigo. It made the reservoir look fathomlessly deep. I didn’t take my jacket off even though the studio was very warm.

Jack came back in through a side door carrying a tray with mugs and a sugar bowl and a plate of cookies. He glanced from where he had left me to the window where I was standing, ready to leave, with a hurt expression.

‘You’re busy, I’ll —’ I said quickly.

‘No! No. I’m not that busy. It’s nice having a job when you lose someone. Work is very good for making things feel normal. Do you take sugar?’

‘I can’t stay,’ I said.

‘I won’t bite, but if you’re in a hurry… it’s only I haven’t spoken to a soul since yesterday.’

I think my internal groan was audible.

He smiled without looking directly at me. ‘Bickie?’ he offered as if I was a child.

‘No. Thank you.’

‘How was the funeral?’ he asked when I picked up my mug.

‘It was fine.’

‘You must have been very close.’

He was manipulating me into conversation so I just nodded.

‘Claire’s send-off was very quiet. She was a country lass, you know. No-one on her side, not big on religion, her lot,’ he sighed. ‘She’s in the churchyard at Blanchland. It’s where we got married.’

‘I cremated my grandmother.’

He sighed again, then changed the subject completely, trying to tell me some of the history of the farm. I glanced at my watch. The slight movement jolted him back into the present.

‘Would you like to take a closer look at my houses?’

‘Houses?’

He twisted on his chair and gestured towards the wall of dolls’ houses. I was only a metre away from the nearest one. I could see it perfectly well from where I was.

‘Very nice.’

‘Not your sort of thing?’ he sounded disappointed, the gingerbread witch finding a child lacking a sweet tooth. ‘Didn’t you want one when you were growing up?’

‘How do you know I didn’t have one?’

He took a slurp of his tea. I had hurt his feelings, but maybe that was just as well.

We sat for a minute or so. It was very quiet. The glazing insulated us from the noise of the wind. I watched a ragged but purposeful v-formation of geese fly across the water.

‘The head of the family is always the lead bird,’ said Jack.

‘Thank you for the tea, it was lovely. I really need to get back.’ I stood up.

‘You’ve not finished it,’ he said.

‘No. Look, Jack, I just came to say that you’ve been very kind, but I really would rather not be reminded of that day, so if you don’t mind, please don’t call round again.’

‘Oh,’ he said. He picked up small screwdriver and turned it over in his fingers. ‘Of course. I didn’t mean to upset you.’

He kept his eyes on the screwdriver. My fingers tightened around the door handle.

‘Well, goodbye. And thanks for the lift last week.’

‘Of course we might bump into each other again,’ he said, ‘it’s a small world.’

I slipped out of the door and tried not to look at him as I turned to shut it. I got the impression he was smiling again. I didn’t look back until I was within touching distance of the van. The sun had set and his studio looked like Santa’s grotto from that distance in the gloaming. I could just make out his figure bent over the workbench.

7 Jack

Jack works late into the night. He has an order to complete for the following week and already he has another project in mind. He returns to the workshop after supper and locks the side door carefully. The breeze still holds some of the day's warmth. It blows the smell of the moors down the valley and leaves the taste of heather honey on the back of his tongue.

The dolls' house is just a kit house, nothing special, but he has made something new out of it. The roof is decorated with slates, each fixed individually and some of the floors have flags made from slivers of real sandstone. It lights up with forty different lamps, the hearths flicker and glow. The front panel is already decorated, velvet curtains swinging from brass rods and a green front door with an opening letterbox and pots of topiary on either side. Fixing the panel is the last job on the house. Jack cradles the heavy, awkward panel under one arm and patiently aligns it to mark off the screw holes for the cranked hinges. He positions a wedge of wood to brace the panel while he works, checking all the time that it has not slipped.

Twenty-four little steel screws later and the French windows behind Jack have become a looking glass with a black nothingness beyond. His reflection is doubled in the glazing, one superimposed upon the other so that his reflected movements seem liquid and distorted as though he is rushing to keep up with himself. Jack puts on his jacket. When he switches off the lights the windows turn back to windows, dimly visible through the blackness of his studio.

Rain slaps into Jack's face as he swings the side door open. He yanks the handle upwards and turns the key in the dark. The noise of the wind in the Scots pines is like a raging sea beside the farm. He stumbles the ten yards to his cottage, slipping on the wet cobbles as he gropes for the corner of the building. He feels his way to the door, eyes shut against the stinging rain. He bundles himself inside and lets the door slam shut. The quiet and stillness of the cottage wraps around him. He kicks off his shoes and hangs his jacket up to drip in the porch and steps into the deep warm blackness of the kitchen. He walks across a space so familiar he doesn't need light to navigate and clicks on the lamp beside the television. The room is suddenly all shadows and corners, the single light source picking out the strange shapes of driftwood and bunches of dead flowers which litter the beams like giant lichen. Jack swipes at a couple of bunches above his head.

The brittle leaves crumble at his touch. He stalks out of the room, causing a draft which shifts the brown flakes so they flutter into a drift in his wake. When he returns he carries a large cardboard box. He begins to unhook the bunches of herbs and flowers, and all the rest of the detritus which dangles from the beams. He moves methodically, starting at one end of each beam. He cannot keep his arms above his head for more than a couple of minutes. Some of the items won't come down quickly enough so he tugs hard to snap the red thread which holds them. Dust and cobwebs, and strings of water-worn flints with holes, and little shells and feathers and twigs all rain down on him until he is overcome by a sneezing fit. His arms ache from holding them above his head for so long. He blunders blindly around the room now, struggling for air. His mouth and chin are covered in slime made black with the dust and tears track down his cheeks through the dirt. He wipes his face with a cotton handkerchief and blows his nose. Blearily he looks around. He has not greatly changed the room. Most of the mess is on the floor now, rather than tied to the ceiling, but he has made little impact other than that. He looks round for a second, sure he heard laughter, but it's just the wind. Still wheezing he shoves the box behind the kitchen table and puts the kettle on.

Jack is woken by the sound of motors in the night. Lights rake across his bedroom ceiling. It has happened before. The main house is empty now, Jack's brother recently moved to another farm on the estate. Jack is alone. The council stopped maintaining the road between Cronkley and the next farm when the reservoir was built so it's long since washed away as though it was never metalled, just a steep track of clay and stones up the hillside between the gorse. It is too rough to get any vehicle other than a tractor up so when joyriders come out from the town and find Jack's lane they reach a dead end at the farm. There they usually spin their cars around on the green in front of the main farmhouse. It's half an acre or so of grass which Jack keeps mown so that it looks tidy next to his studio. They rarely do any harm beyond making a mess of the turf. Now the bass thump of their music blasts through the stormy night so that Jack can feel it in his skull between the pillow and the duvet. Even their falsetto shrieks penetrate faintly, so that he stops suffocating himself and throws the covers off his face and lies on his back, waiting for them to leave.

There are three cars tonight. They slither across the wet grass, revving and skidding, missing each other with skill that suggests they have done this before. Five,

six tight circuits, almost bumper to bumper, in a cloud of exhaust fumes. One breaks away and drives off the green, back onto the road right next to Jack's studio, scraping the undercarriage as the front wheels hit the tarmac at a steep angle. The driver floors the accelerator as he passes Jack's bedroom window. Then the next one. The last driver has a final spin then bumps down onto the road. He yells something, the sense of which is almost drowned in the noise of music and engine as he passes Jack's bedroom window. They want to let Jack know that they know he is in there.

'Little toe rags,' he spits out into the falling silence.

8 Emily

It was a busy weekend at the nurseries. I had offended Stuart's sensibilities by tacking up signs saying 'autumn colour' and 'ideal planting companions' onto the ends of the wooden benches where the plants were displayed. I thought about one saying 'ask our friendly staff for advice on autumn bedding schemes', but the irony seemed unfair to our customers. Stuart felt they should not confuse our nurseries with a garden centre. I agreed; I took a degree of pride in my family's business, but there was no harm in also catering for the sort of people who couldn't tell an anemone from an artichoke. They were often less trouble than the old blokes who came in and fussed over their pot leeks every spring and they certainly spent a lot more money.

The weather stayed fine for the whole weekend and Stuart had to grudgingly admit that we'd shifted a lot of perennials alongside the usual winter pansies and polyanthus. Dawn had tied red florists' ribbons around some potted hollies and every one had sold, whereas no-one had asked for the larger, cheaper bushes Stuart had lovingly tended from cuttings down by the roses. He grew them ready to be lifted bare-rooted for the discerning customer, but there were very few of those around. I let Dawn enjoy her moment of smugness when I pointed out our volume of sales to Stuart as we tidied up on Sunday.

'Get in,' said Dawn.

Stuart looked pained and shook his head at me.

'But people won't want to learn about gardening if they don't have a success when they're brave enough to begin,' I said to him as he stacked the empty trays next to the shed.

'Yeah, I don't know anything about gardening but it doesn't stop me selling plants,' said Dawn.

I avoided Stuart's eye.

'We'll be getting a bloody café soon. Dawn would like that; she doesn't know anything about cooking, either,' he said.

'Yes, then we'll start selling candles and plastic flowers and before you know it there'll be no room for plants. We've had this discussion a hundred times, Stuart. I put up a few signs and Dawn made some pots look pretty. It's not the end of the world.'

'It's none of my business. I just work here,' he said.

He'd finished stacking and he walked right past me.

'If I were you, I wouldn't let him talk to me like that,' said Dawn.

'He's been here longer than me, he's entitled to an opinion.' It stung, though. For a moment I regretted my resolve to hand over the business into Stuart's safe-keeping. 'Would you mind doing some more ribbons next weekend? Maybe you could jazz up some tubs nearer Christmas, too.'

'Tinsel and little bells and stuff?' she asked.

I was glad that Stuart was out of earshot. 'Yes, that sounds great.' Tinsel was probably a bit much, but Dawn reminded me a lot of the semi-stray cats, purring when I was kind to them and scratching me when I needed them to move. I was trying to encourage pleasant behaviour by positive reinforcement.

The sky was clear but the breeze was still warm despite it being October. I set off to walk on my usual route around the grounds. The air was thick with rosebay willow herb seeds. They caught on all the spider webs in the holly hedges and collected in fluffy tumbleweed clusters that rolled across the tarmac of the car park. A large silver 4 x 4 pulled in just as I was about to swing the gates shut. A woman let down the driver side window and barked a greeting.

'I'm sorry, we're closed,' I said.

'It's not five yet.'

'We close at four on a Sunday.'

'I've not come to buy anything,' she said, getting out.

I felt my hackles rising. The woman was a walking cliché in her magazine-perfect country gear, a padded green jerkin, a corduroy skirt and leather wellies. Her hair was lacquered into a wavy ash-blonde mop and her face was Botox-ed into a mask of indifference over which she had painted her makeup.

'So how can I help you?' I asked, still holding onto the gate.

'This place hasn't changed since I was a girl.'

'We open at nine. Nine to Five, except Sundays.'

'Do you still get customers?'

I raised my eyebrows.

‘Oh. Of course you do… I came to ask you to put up some posters. Maybe you would like to come along to our meeting on Tuesday in the church hall at Snod’s Edge?’

I think she was trying to smile. She reached into her vehicle and passed me a roll of lurid green and orange posters.

‘What’s it for?’

‘The opencast proposals, of course. It comes right up to Whittonstall as you are no doubt aware. It will affect a lot of your customers, you know. Not to mention the damage to the environment. You do care about the environment?’

I resented her tone. ‘I’m not political. It will be three miles away from here, anyway.’

‘It’s a mile and a half away, and some of the site traffic will be going along the main road through Ebchester. We intend to protest to the very end. I have personally pledged to lie down in front of the contractors when the blasting begins.’

‘It’s a done deal, surely. They’re already doing the test blasting. You can hear it. It’s not too bad.’ It sounded a lot worse at Barley Hill.

‘Really?’ she asked, ‘how about that noise constantly for weeks at a time? It’s the method they use to clear the rock face now. The coal level is deeper down, you see, and it’s quicker for them to blow it out than dig it.’

I didn’t know that blasting would be part of the opencasting process. I’d assumed that test blasts were something to do with sampling or safety checks. I hadn’t really given the opencasting much thought. I knew the hillside above the nurseries had been opencast in the sixties, and the area was now all green fields and hedgerows and new housing estates. Compared to the slag heaps and water contamination and dangers of deep pit mining, opencasting seemed an almost benign process. It was all a little hazy and it had never occurred to me that methods might have moved on. A flutter of panic started in my stomach.

‘It’s scheduled to last for twenty years, and that’s without extending the extraction west to Barley Hill. That’s why we are still campaigning. This is far from over.’ She was less shrill now. I imagined her fixed expression as the bulldozers approached, the only panic showing in her eyes, trapped in a face that couldn’t scream.

It must have been obvious that she’d got through to me. She rested her hand briefly on my arm as I took the bundle of posters and thanked her for her visit.

Instead of locking the gates I got in the car after she had gone and drove down the bank and over the river. I kept an eye on the odometer as I drove over the hill from the Dewent valley into the wider Tyne valley. She was right; it was only a mile and half to Whittonstall. Grandad George had worked out years ago that we wouldn't be able to see anything from the nurseries. He had said 'three miles' and I had absorbed the erroneous fact and kept it with me. But we would hear the blasting, and the woman was right about the site traffic, too.

I parked at the pub. Their car park was very quiet for Sunday teatime. I walked along the narrow pavement through the village, past the school with its emblems of protest and turned down an old lane. This footpath would be lost. Banners painted on plywood showed how close the extraction plant would come to the schoolyard and back gardens. Beneath me the valley was drenched in the rosy sunset and the colours were so intense they hurt my eyes. I turned away because I couldn't bear it.

I cried for the countryside as I drove home, probably more because I hadn't cried for my grandmother. Maybe it was too late to cry for either. I decided to go to the meeting on Tuesday and see if there was anything to be done.

It was almost dark when I got home. I dragged the wooden gates together and padlocked the chain around them. There would not be a frost. The sky was clear but the wind was in the south and the air that flowed through the garden was mild. I wanted the solace of a garden more than anything. I walked under the buddleia tree by the potting shed and stepped down into the shelter of my flowers. It was cooler there, where the long autumn shadows had been, although the goldfish were still jumping for flies. I went round the pond and down the path to the bottom of the nurseries to the place where Grandad George used to have his bonfires. It was too close to the new polytunnels to use anymore but the earth was still bare. He'd kept a fire going all year there, kippering his lungs while he sat in a deck chair and entertained his cronies. I could smell Stuart's bonfire in the far corner. It would smoulder now until the new growth started next spring, poked back to life every morning. It was very dark down by George's old bonfire site, beyond the reach of the streetlights with no cloud cover to reflect the diffuse orange glow from the distant city. I think I saw him though, my father's father. It wasn't a movement, more an absence of movement, an utter stillness the size and

shape of an old man sitting on an upturned metal bucket. I don’t think he’d come back to see me, it’s just that he was part of the garden’s memory.

‘George?’

Something pounced under the hedge. I nearly jumped out of my skin. There was a scuffle and a pitiful squeak as some hapless shrew met its maker in the jaws of one of the cats. I shivered and turned back to the path.

9 Jack

Jack has built up a little routine now. He drives up the bank past the nurseries, past the entrance to the old railway line where he saw Emily walking last week and down through Shotley Bridge to the road where Emily's grandmother lived, then loops back through the back roads behind Ebchester to come out just below the nurseries again. The short muddy passing place on this lane presents the only angle from which you can see the back of Emily's house between the holly trees. He's aware that she wouldn't thank him, but it pleases him to keep an eye on her.

A new sign catches his attention, fluttering against the wooden gates as he passes the nurseries on the way up. He recognises the symbolic diagram of turbine blades from all the other protest banners he has seen. He is disappointed. He has had enough bleeding hearts and environmental campaigns with Claire to last him a lifetime. He had thought that Emily had more sense. He keeps to his route, but the poster has spoilt the drive. He pulls up in the layby on the way back. There are no lights on in the house although the sun has set. A ginger cat stands motionless in the hedge, one paw raised, assuming itself unseen. Time is getting on. He heads for home.

Splinters of orange and red plastic sparkle in Jack's headlights as he turns into Millshield road. They have cleared away most of the crashed car now but a number plate still dangles high in the hawthorn hedge at the top of the bank. It happened sometime early on Saturday morning. Jack heard nothing above the wind, though he remembers the joyriders. The ash tree is charred from the fire and there is still a stench of burnt rubber as Jack pulls up. He gets out of his car and crosses to the tree to tug down the bunch of flowers. Cheap gaudy daisies, wrapped in yellow cellophane. He glances at the card.

To our Carl. You had so much to live for xxx

There's a name now to the little thug. Of course, Jack can't be sure this boy was one of the lads who drove round the green, but Jack likes to think he was. He puts the flowers on the passenger seat and drives home. On the way to the back door he drops the tribute into his wheelie bin which is kept in the small parking area. There is a horrible smell nearby. Jack casts around for a few moments but can't locate it.

The kitchen is still a mess. The table is littered with unopened letters, mostly plastic-wrapped circulars, and fluffy drifts of crumbs and dust swept ineptly into arcs. The grey dishcloth he last used to wipe the table still sits there marking the extent of his domestication. Jack sinks down on the sofa with his outdoor shoes on and waits for the kettle to boil. He looks at his watch. The woman is due any minute to collect her dolls' house. He listens for her motor. The wind is picking up again. Car headlights sweep across the room. Punctual. Too late he decides it would be best to receive her in the studio. In the absence of lights in the workshop she comes straight to the cottage door. He hears her tentative knock and switches on the porch light.

'Hello, Jack, how are you?' she asks.

'Fine,' he says, 'And you?'

She's about Jack's age, stocky and plain. The wind catches the cape on her nylon raincoat and slaps it loudly against her shoulders.

'What a night!' She peers past him. She has never seen the inside of his cottage before. 'You're all in the dark.'

'I've just got back,' says Jack.

'But you're managing, alright, pet?' She assumes the familiarity that people her age extend to the bereaved. Time will inevitably make this loss a shared experience.

Jack pretends she hasn't asked the question. 'I'll take you round to the studio.'

He unhooks the key from the carved wooden rack next to the light switch.

'Has there been a crash at the end of the lane?' she asks. She has to clutch the flapping cape so that she can hear his reply from inside the porch.

'Yes, some youth in his mother's car. He was going so hard he hit the tree on the other side of the junction three feet off the ground.'

'What a shame, just a boy you say. Was he killed, then? What a waste.'

'Natural selection,' Jack says, putting on his coat.

'Oh. That's—'

She has to step out of the way to let Jack out of his door. She follows him across the cobbles to the studio. She can't keep up with him. He opens up the studio and flicks on the light.

She hasn't been through the side door before. He brushes past her and switches on the lights in the dolls' houses along the back wall.

‘That’s nice,’ she says. ‘It’s marvellous what the right lighting can do. Eeh, Jack!’ She spots her house on the workbench and stands in silence before his creation.

He lets her stare at it, standing aside quietly in a display of humility which is not altogether feigned. She may well stand there all night. He steps back and unlocks the French windows. It will be awkward carrying the thing down to her car with this wind. When he turns back to her she is hunkered down, her hands between her knees, her face pressed against the windows of the model. Her broad rear end is in danger of knocking into the shelf of houses behind her. Jack assesses the risk and decides that his models are not in immediate danger.

‘Oh, Jack.’

‘Here, I’ll just turn the lights on for you. There.’ He reaches round the house and flicks the lights on at the transformer. ‘I’ve put a couple of screws into the front panel while you’re transporting it, so you’ll have to remember to take them out when you get home.’

‘Thank you, Jack. My sister is going to be thrilled.’

‘Are you going to furnish it before you give it to her?’

‘Oh, no, that’s going to be half the fun for her.’

She immediately looks crestfallen despite the anticipation of the pleasure she will deliver. Jack is used to this. So many of his customers suddenly realise that someone else will take over the project and finish it. It’s then that they ask for a house for themselves.

‘It’s so perfect, so complete—’

Jack smiles at her.

‘If I send my Howie over one day, could you tell him I really like that tall one behind you? Just a hint, like, don’t say I said anything.’

Jack turns and points to the four-storey mansion. She nods. He knows from her address that she lives in a modest two bedroom terraced house not far from Emily’s nurseries. Will her Howie wonder why she’s chosen that model?

‘I just hope Eileen doesn’t notice it’s bigger than hers.’

‘I’d hate my houses to be the cause of a family feud.’

She giggles, covering her mouth with both hands as if in prayer, her eyes remain on the tall house, not the one she has ordered for her sister. She doesn’t notice Jack’s expression.

‘Well, I’d better get this home,’ she says after a moment.

Jack passes her the invoice. Claire laughed at him once when she saw him presenting his bill, but the formal bow takes away the sense of the customer doing him a favour, removes the sense of patronage. The woman giggles again. Her hand shakes as she bends to write the cheque out on the corner of the workbench. It’s a lot of money for someone living in a little terraced house. She tears the paper carefully and passes it to him. It’s a lot of money for a toy for anyone, but Jack knows these models mean more than that.

The trip to the car is as awkward as Jack anticipated. The customer twitters with nerves and has to have her role in each stage of the manoeuvring explained to her as Jack hefts the house into his arms and staggers with it through the double doors. From the moment he steps out of the studio the wind is constantly trying to wrench it away. It’s so large that his arms are at full stretch and it hurts his shoulder blades and neck to carry the model. His fingers are pulled almost beyond bearing. Now he finds that she hasn’t even put the back seats down ready. Jack smothers his impatience in light of the potential for future custom and wedges the model against her car with his body to relieve the strain. She fusses with the catches while he stands in the cold wind counting under his breath. He gets to fifty and starts again. His overstretched palms sting when she finally moves out of the way and allows him to slide the house into the back of her car.

‘There you go,’ he says.

‘You make it look so easy,’ she says.

Jack holds her car door open for her.

‘Thank you again, Jack.’ She has to raise her voice above the wind.

‘My pleasure.’ He slams her car door and steps back into the dark.

She toots her horn as she drives off.

Jack shuts the French windows on the night and the quiet and stillness of the studio settle into place. He tidies his tools into their allocated spaces in the drawer and puts all the odd and ends that accumulate during any project into various boxes and then he replaces the boxes in the cupboard. He takes the small dustpan and carefully brushes up the sawdust and slivers of fibreboard which had been caught underneath the dolls’ house then takes up the little hand held vacuum and finishes off the work surface and the floor. Finally he rubs down all the surfaces with a wipe from a tub, and cleans his

hands with a second one. He stands back for a moment, then picks up a tape measure and checks the width and depth of his workbench. This next house will be something else. Even this elementary preparation has cheered him. On the way out he remembers something. He pauses to rummage inside the four storey mansion and retrieves a small doll dressed as little girl in jeans with a flowery top and very long brown shiny nylon hair that flows over his knuckles down to her waist. He sits the doll on the edge of the bench. 'You wait there,' he says.

It is raining now. Jack bows his head into the prevailing wind and stumbles back to the cottage.

Much later, after he has eaten and washed up and filled in the bank book so that he can deposit the cheque tomorrow, Jack turns on the telly. He slumps on the sofa while adverts for online gambling games wash over him and flicks through the channels without knowing what he would like to watch. He settles for the twenty-four hour news and lets the stories burble on in front of him. Drowsy and tired, Jack barely registers the brief interruption to the power supply until the television comes back on at full volume. He jolts awake and stares around him blearily, then tries to focus on the shifting alteration in the wall in front of him. For a moment the wall seems about to disintegrate, then the disruption heals itself as quickly as it appeared and the room is as it was before.

He knows he did not turn up the volume on the television but he can't be sure about anything else. He turns the set off and unplugs it at the wall. He looks around the kitchen, his eyes travelling over the mess without registering it. He is looking for change, indications of another's presence, anything to explain what has made his flesh crawl. He is not given to remembering his dreams, but even so he knows this was different, external: something *other*. He gives an involuntary shudder and with one last glance around he turns off the light and leaves the room.

10 Emily

Monday mornings were usually quiet. I didn't hurry. Stuart was waiting for me to unlock the gates at ten to nine, standing with his hands in his jeans pockets. He had his own key; he was making a point. From a distance he could have been half his age, a teenager, slouching and moody. He didn't mention the poster, but he was glaring at it as I unfastened the padlock. He spat on the ground just as I pulled the gate back for him.

'Emily,' he said, but then that was as much greeting as I usually got.

'Morning, Stuart.' I didn't ask what was wrong. I had paperwork to get on with.

Halfway through the morning I had to come out for a delivery of young plants. Dawn mustn't have noticed the poster by the gate, but she saw the one by the till when she was serving her first customer of the day.

'What's this all about, Emily?' She brought the poster out with her, waving it like a bloodied rag at a crime scene. The lorry driver glanced back at her tone as he swung himself into his cab. I waved him away and turned back to her.

'It's self-explanatory, surely?'

'It's coal, Emily. Jobs. You're trying to take the bread out of the mouths of working men.'

I saw Stuart shaking his head as he bent to pick up a large roll of bubblewrap.

'I'm doing no such thing,' I said loudly enough for his benefit too. 'The jobs won't be for locals anyway, the men are already employed by the contractors, they won't hire anyone from round here.'

'It doesn't matter where they come from; you're taking away their jobs.'

'It's not about that. I don't want them spoiling the valley.'

'You're a nimby.'

'Yes, alright, Dawn. Can you put the poster back up, please, before you take these plants down to the bottom polytunnel?'

'I will not.'

'I'll do it,' said Stuart, taking the poster from her.

'You're a traitor to working men,' Dawn called after him.

'You don't know any working men except me,' he retorted without turning round.

‘Can you get a move on with those pots, Dawn? The wind’s picking up and you’ll have to sort them out if they blow over.’ I smiled at her and she scowled back.

She muttered something under her breath and I had to simulate intense interest in the delivery documents I was holding to avoid acknowledging it.

The morning didn’t get any better. I had to deal with one of our suppliers who wanted paying a month earlier than their agreement, then as soon as I’d put the phone down, a man came in trying to return an azalea he’d bought six months before and managed to kill. Dawn ignored me when I asked her to sweep up the pile of soil which had fallen from the exhumed plant’s roots onto the shop floor. All morning I had noticed the punctuation of the testing blasts, booming like a distant thunder crack and it didn’t help the growing anxiety that chewed at my gut. I’d hoped everything would be fine once I was rid of my grandmother’s house, but now the wretched business with the opencast seemed to loom disproportionately large over the future of the nurseries, a nagging worry I didn’t want once I had moved away. On top of this Stuart was still plainly offended, despite helping me with Dawn’s insubordination. He took his mid-morning coffee away with him down to the polytunnels instead of staying to chat. I emptied my mug down a drain after a mouthful, the milk curdled in my stomach.

It was quiet again until lunchtime. Stuart and Dawn were eating in the top shed which doubled as a bait cabin. Dawn and I still weren’t really speaking so I told Stuart I was going out and selected a couple of screwdrivers, a mallet and a tyre lever to help persuade open the jammed doors at my grandmother’s house and the old rusty billhook from the kitchen wall to hack down some of the vegetation around the back door. The woman from the auctioneers would need access through the jammed study door in a couple of days’ time and I thought I might as well have a go at the front door, too. Stuart watched me collect the tools but didn’t pass any comment. He finished his sandwich and picked up the shovel he’d leant against his chair. Dawn shifted a little so I could get past them both in the small cluttered space.

‘Bye, Stuart,’ I said.

I almost asked him to come along to help, but he was making a pantomime of searching for something in his coat pocket. Anyway, I didn’t want to offer Dawn any more excuses to feel hard done by.

‘Bye,’ I said again at the door, but they both had their backs to me.

The front door of my grandmother’s house looked as though someone else had been trying to get in. The paintwork around the escutcheon had been gouged and the brass itself was scratched. The key wouldn’t turn properly and I wondered if the problem could be with the locking mechanism rather than with swollen woodwork. That was a job for a locksmith. I decided that I had better not have a go myself after all in case I broke something I could not mend, leaving the house unsecured.

The back door was stiffer than the week before. The key turned easily enough but I had to shove it open with my shoulder. When it gave way I staggered over the threshold. The scullery still smelt stale and sickly and damp. The oppressive clamminess of the air wrapped around me and made me feel grimy. I tugged the back door open again to let the mild breeze in, using an old fashioned iron as a door stop. The iron had always been kept by the back door for that purpose, next to the umbrella stand, and had always been heavily corroded, the colour of dried blood, but this time it left an orange triangle of rust on the stone flags when I moved it. Maybe my grandmother had stopped propping the back door open after I left, or else the house was rapidly getting damper. I wiped my hands on my jeans and noticed the spare back door keys were hanging up on the hook above the sink. As far as I knew there were only the two sets of keys for this door and it was comforting to know that my cousins wouldn’t be able to get in now even if they had been entrusted with keys for the front door. Perhaps I should postpone getting a locksmith out until the house was put up for sale? It would certainly make me feel safer when I had to come back to the house, knowing I was the only one who could get in.

I opened a couple of windows in the kitchen. The sounds of traffic and birdsong from outside reduced the feeling of isolation. The room looked less shabby than it had when the estate agent had been there but I would never be able to see it in the same way as before. Maybe this was a useful part of the healing process, letting go. I walked quietly along the passageway from the kitchen. It felt like the house was sleeping.

The windows in the hallway all faced west, but the sun didn’t get far enough around this late in the year to come in. The stairs were dim and the dark panelling absorbed what light there was. When I was small Mrs. Stokoe let me ride my tricycle in

here sometimes on rainy days when my grandparents were out. The space echoed like a cave as I walked across it.

As soon as I opened the drawing room door I suffered a vertiginous rush of nostalgia. The room was unchanged. Nothing had been moved or replaced, just polished and rubbed and gently worn down to a soft shabbiness. Ever since my grandmother first became ill and I had to come back here, this had bothered me. Recently I'd had to consciously stifle the mounting desire to return one evening and light a fire and put on the table lamps, and to bury my face into the chintzy sofa which still smelled of my childhood.

There was nothing here worth even the cost of taking it to the salerooms and there was nothing I needed, not even small items of sentimental value. I could hardly claim the whole room for sentiment. I roused myself and moved on.

The library door beside the fireplace was a tall gothic arch made to look like part of the pele tower, but it was a fake, a pastiche. This had always disappointed me. It had nothing to do with the old building, just part of the Victorian fantasy that had reimagined the house and not quite got away with it. The original way into the ground floor of the tower had been more like a sally gate, with a low flat lintel, long since walled-in although plainly visible from the garden when the herbaceous border died back in winter time.

The library itself felt cool and dry. It had a wide bow window facing south which was another Victorian addition, and a tall narrow window facing north that looked over the gloomy garden. I was told that the floor where the cattle had once stood was still underneath the Victorian parquet. The knowledge had set me off on a hundred time-travel fantasies involving the discovery of ancient trapdoors to the past.

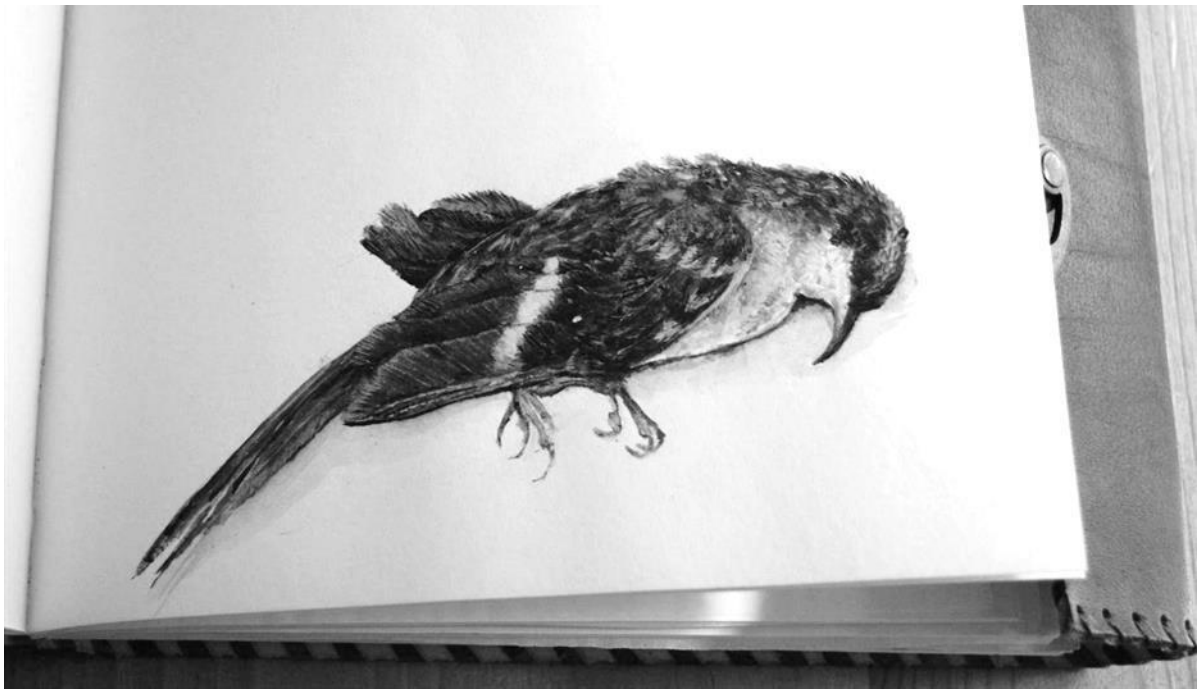
I reckoned the library was the only room that might hold something valuable because of my grandfather's book collection. He called himself a bibliophile, although the term never seemed appropriate to me because he didn't love books for what they really were, only for their outsides and their rarity. Some of these volumes had pages which hadn't been cut properly when they were printed. They had never been read by anyone and I had once been smacked for tearing two pages apart. Grandpa had shelves of first editions which he had never read. I had tried with *Waverley*, but it couldn't reach me, even though its past was closer than the churning hooves of the cattle that stomped through my imagination. Besides, the fear of somehow damaging the books detracted

from the reading experience for an anxious child, so I watched Grandpa enjoying the books instead, looking them up in catalogues and curating his shelves. Thus the books he collected were reduced to objects rather than a medium for human thought. Sometimes he would simply take one of the books down from the bookcases and run his hands over the cover as though it was the skin of a thoroughbred horse that he owned but did not ride.

My grandmother collected books on horticulture. I never saw her even pick one up but at least she was not precious about them and I did not need to have my fingers inspected before I was allowed to touch them. On long lonely weekends they kept me company. I sat at the library table sketching the plants and learning their names long before I'd ever visited the nurseries or knew my father's family.

I began to sort through the gardening books and put twenty or so volumes onto the table. Once I had a written valuation I would take them home with me and have the money deducted from my share. They probably weren't worth anything to anyone else anyway.

In amongst her books I found one of my old sketchbooks. It had been a birthday present, a leather-bound volume of thick cartridge paper hand stitched together. My grandmother must have chosen it, taken my nature and interests into account and considered what would please me. I had forgotten that she could be like that. She had kept it despite everything. I sat down on a chair at the table and turned the pages. I had used it as a sort of diary, writing my thoughts and feelings alongside the sketches. I could remember doing that, but not that I had used red and green inks and codified it in places. The watercolours were vaguely familiar, plants mostly, some dead wildlife, victims of the tabby cat, but the writing seemed to belong to another person. The little studies of plants were at least workman-like. As I sat there I remembered that I hadn't painted for months, not since my grandmother's illness, and the irritation and embarrassment mixed with a sort of melancholic envy for the free time of youth.



I was still sitting there daydreaming when I heard him calling.

‘Hello? Anyone at home?’

I jumped out of my seat. There were footsteps from the far end of the house. Someone had come in through the back kitchen. I crept to the library door and across the drawing room and stood listening at the doorway into the hallway. Someone knocked loudly on an internal door.

‘Hello? Can I come in?’

I recognised Jack’s voice.

Indignation took over from alarm. He was in the kitchen passageway by the time I found him. He stopped when he saw me across the hall. He was holding the tyre lever I had left on the bench in the back kitchen while I propped the door open. It seemed an overtly threatening thing to have brought with him.

‘Emily!’

‘What are you doing here, Jack?’

‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Are you alright?’

I straightened up and tried to project my voice with some authority. ‘I asked you, what are you doing here?’

‘What are you doing here?’ He sounded so matter-of-fact.

‘This is my house. My grandparents’ house.’

‘Oh, good heavens. Well, I’d no idea. So your gran was the Prof’s widow? It’s a small world,’ he said.

‘You knew my grandfather?’

‘Eh? Yes. Yes, I thought the name rang a bell when I saw your gran’s obituary.’

‘I never saw you here,’ I said. ‘My grandfather died years ago.’

‘Well, no, I was never invited in *here*. I’d meet him at a book club, sometimes. I thought you’d had burglars.’ He waved the lever and started to walk across the hall towards me.

Jack didn’t seem the bookish sort, nor the sort Grandpa would mix with. ‘What have you come here for?’

‘Well, it’s funny you should ask. I’m building a model of this house.’

I found it disconcerting and annoying; there was absolutely nothing funny about it.

He was by the foot of the stairs now, close enough to lash out now if that was his intention. I wished I’d told Stuart where I was going. I wished he’d asked.

‘Why on Earth are you making a model of my house?’

‘Yours now, is it?’

‘I’m busy, Jack. Who asked you to make the model?’

‘Sort of,’ he said, craning his neck to look up the stair well.

‘Sort of? Sorry, what do you mean?’

He reached out and stroked the curve of the newel post, ignoring my question as if it hadn’t been asked. I’d caught him out in a lie.

I tried another tack, ‘Would you have come inside if I hadn’t left the door open?’

‘Of course not,’ he said, sounding hurt.

‘So why come over here if you weren’t going to come in?’

He turned back to me, smiling. I flinched as he transferred the lever to his left hand. He brought a little silver camera out of his jacket pocket with his right hand.

‘Just taking some photographs to get the proportions right. Now I’m here, I’d love to have some interior shots.’

‘Not now. I’m busy. I’ve told you my grandmother’s death has upset me. I’ve got a lot to do and I’d like to get on. You’ll have to go now.’

‘Oh. Of course. I wasn’t meaning to be any trouble. Is this yours?’

He put the camera back into his pocket and took the lever back into his right hand. He must have been aware of the effect it was having. I took a step backwards. He glanced down at the bar and his smile shifted fractionally. ‘You’re sure everything’s alright, Emily?’

‘I’m fine. There’s a stuck door upstairs, that’s all. It slammed in a draught and I need to open it.’ I held my hand out for the lever.

‘Right you are. Jack to the rescue.’

‘No!’ But he was already jogging up the stairs. ‘Please, I can manage.’ It was like pleading with my bullying cousins, he paid so little attention to my wishes. I felt like wailing with frustration as I followed.

‘This door?’ Jack asked, walking around the gallery and heading straight for the study like a psychic bloodhound.

He rattled the door handle, established it was stuck and made the assumption he had the right door without waiting for confirmation. I expected him to jemmy the door open before I could stop him with splintering wood and mess everywhere, but instead he put the tyre lever down and dropped to his knees. I stood two steps below him on the landing holding onto the bannister rail. He had his own small screwdriver in his hand and he began to unscrew the door plate. He cradled the brass knob as it came loose and gently pulled the bar out after it. He passed me the bits of the mechanism that he had removed.

‘Now, I’ll just give this a jiggle. Ah.’

He got to his feet. His stiffness made me wonder how I could have seen him as a threat just a minute before. He pushed the door open and paused, not quite leaving enough space for me to go past him.

‘Thank you,’ I said, reaching down past his ankles to retrieve the lever.

‘My pleasure. Were you really going to force open a grand old door like this? You’d have done a fair bit of damage with that jemmy, you know. This is oak.’

It was a private love, that door, old and worn, far shorter than the polished pitch pine Victorian panel doors and not faked like the library door on the floor below. I resented the proprietorial way he was showing me my own property as though I’d not the wit or discernment to appreciate it.

‘Thank you,’ I repeated.

‘You’ll need a new lock. The gubbins have worn down so the bar won’t always turn the latch. It’s safer to leave it like this so it that it can’t be shut rather than risk it jamming so you can’t open it. You might get stuck in there.’

‘Right. Thank you.’

‘Can I have a look?’ he asked, peering into the dark doorway.

He was standing in front of me anyway, immoveable as a limpet. The easiest course of action seemed to be to allow him to satisfy his nosiness. I gave a small non-committal shrug which he didn’t see because he didn’t wait for permission.

‘So this is the old part of the house.’

‘Yes.’

I was still holding the heavy tyre lever. I waited to follow until he had gone on into the study so that we did not share the darkness of the passageway through the thickness of the tower wall.

‘This must be the study,’ he said in a tone that implied he was imparting information.

Grandpa’s davenport was still there, a small, fussy desk that demonstrated how little work he ever really did. In this room the books had been taken from the shelves and were piled in cardboard packing boxes with a removal firm’s logo on the side. My hackles rose with indignation. Someone must have been preparing to make off with them. I regretted not systematically checking the whole house while my grandmother had been in hospital. On closer inspection I saw the books were covered in dust. They could have been taken down from the shelves at any point in the last ten years for all I knew.

Meanwhile Jack was nosing around the desk.

‘Excuse me!’ I said, straightening from the books.

He held a book, doubtless valuable and small enough to fit in the pocket of his jacket. He slid his eyes off the pages and gazed at me with bovine tranquillity.

‘Yes, flower, what is it?’

‘I’m not being rude, but I’m busy and you’ve no reason to be here,’ I said.

‘So that’s how it is, is it? It’s fine to have me help, but now I’d better go.’ He spoke in a tone of gentle remonstrance and he was smiling. I was getting sick of his smile.

I nodded. There was no point prolonging this into an argument.

‘It’s alright, Emily,’ he said, ‘I know my place. I’ll see myself out.’

I consciously unclenched my jaw and nodded again. Still he loitered, running his finger along the spine of the book. He put it down slowly and turned to stare at me. I realised I had picked up the tyre lever again.

‘Take it easy, lass, I’ve said I’m going.’

I turned back to the books, putting the lever down as casually as possible. The flash of his camera made me jump. I was uncertain whether he had photographed the room or me but he had already stepped back into the dark passageway. I listened to him go downstairs. There seemed to be a pause, more photographs? Then his footsteps receded across the stone floor of the hallway. I walked as softly as I could back out onto the landing. It was very quiet, only the steady rumble of traffic on the road outside. I edged down the steps outside the study door and tiptoed into my grandmother’s bedroom and across to the window and peered through the thick lace curtains. Jack’s car was parked in the drive right behind mine. Had he forgotten what car I drove? Had he followed me here? I couldn’t see into his car through the windscreen, only the reflection of the pale sky so I wasn’t sure he’d left the house. I listened for any noises inside the house while watching the car. Jack must have been sitting in there for a while because I heard his motor start. I remembered to breathe. It would have been sensible to go down and close the back door, but the afternoon had lost its brightness and the house seemed full of shadows and I knew I wouldn’t manage to come back upstairs once I’d gone down. Why would anyone commission a model of the house? Was it just a lie he’d made up on the spur of the moment? I didn’t analyse at the time why the idea made me so uncomfortable, beyond the indignation of him possessing a version of my childhood home. I filed the disquiet away in the general uneasiness I felt about the wretched man.

I walked back into the study. I remember thinking how odd it was that that I didn’t feel anything in there, no sense of my history. The caryatids supporting the mantle, those hideous little men, still upset me. I sat in Grandpa’s armchair and watched them for a while. I had never realised that they weren’t really a pair. The one on the right was more crudely carved and had been chipped badly, a naïve copy. There was a piece missing from its eyebrow making it look like it was squinting with an eye infection. Nothing sinister, though, nothing really that unusual. They were in bad taste and neither ornamental or useful. They weren’t original either, simply a poor choice in décor. Maybe this objectivity would be part of developing a sensible perspective on the

house. I took a deep breath and refused to acknowledge the smell of the room that lingered in an invisible net.

I got up and put a box-worth's of books back onto the shelf so that I could re-use the packing carton for the gardening books I had selected downstairs. I had the box in one hand and the tyre lever in the other as I passed the davenport. The lid was still up and the book Jack had been looking at was sitting in amongst a clutter of elastic bands, paperclips and wax colouring crayons. I put down what I was holding to read the title. No wiser, I flicked through it. I'm not a connoisseur of pornography, but for what it was the book was obviously a collectors' piece, quarter bound in embossed red leather with gold edging and hand-set type. Trust Grandpa to buy his dirty books in an exclusive edition. After the jolt of surprise it was almost funny before I remembered that Jack had seen it. I dropped the book back into its nest of rubbish as though it had burnt my fingers.

No, I wasn't getting over the house.

I would never gain a sense of perspective because I could never get far enough away. I carried a key to the past in my mind and brought it back here and unfailingly turned it in the lock. The house was inert, the memories didn't run through it, playing themselves like a spool of Super 8. They only existed in me. Maybe I should learn to live with that rather than holding a building responsible for my unhappiness. Maybe, I thought, I had better not come back here again. One more visit tomorrow with the auctioneer and then a clean break. No more house, no more family.

I pushed away the other thought, that perhaps I would carry this unhappiness with me after the house was gone, that maybe even after I had used my share of the proceeds to leave the nurseries behind, I would never be able to fully expunge my past.

I bent down to pick up the cardboard box and stopped suddenly. There were footsteps on the landing. Had Jack come back? Were we being burgled? I straightened up slowly, listening. I must have knocked the desk. The lid fell onto my fingers with a sharp crack. I pulled my hand out and mimed pain because of the overwhelming imperative for silence. Hot blood thrummed into my fingertips, but I didn't think that I had broken them. I took my fingers out of my mouth and listened again for the approaching footsteps. It had sounded like they were nearly in the room a moment before the lid fell, but now the light pattering footfall receded as though someone was

scampering away, light as air. I nursed my smarting fingers under my arm and picked up the tyre lever in my right hand.

It would have been idiotic to search the house on my own for an intruder. I glanced out of the study windows but there was no-one in the garden. The main stairs were shadowy, but open enough to be able to see that there was nobody down in the hall or on the landing above. I went into my grandmother's bedroom and looked out of the window. There was no-one in the drive and there were no pedestrians outside on the pavement obviously loitering, and anyway, there had not been enough time for anyone to run out of the house. I remembered how stiffly Jack had moved, and then I remembered how nimbly he had dashed up the staircase.

The landing was empty. I couldn't tell if the intruder was still on the first floor. I hadn't heard the main stairs creak but then there were also Mrs. Stokoe's stairs at the other end of the house. I walked across the landing and glanced down the passageway towards the spare bedrooms, now filled with the potential to conceal. No movements or noise. I put my weight on the top stair. Nothing responded to the slow creak. I stopped to listen again on the bottom step. The wind had risen and the windows were rattling more than usual because the back door was still open. Quite distinctly above this I heard a loud creak in the drawing room. It might have been the library door, maybe moving in a draught, maybe not. There was a sudden thud, the sound of a heavy book toppling to the floor — I plunged across the hall in the opposite direction and ran down the kitchen corridor, through the kitchen and the scullery where the cold breeze hit me and the wide sky waited through the door. I must have knocked the iron in my hurry because when I turned to shut the door it was already slamming to with such force that I had to jump backwards. I wriggled the key out of my jeans' pocket and deadlocked the heavy door. I had to lean against the jamb for a moment until my legs stopped shaking and I could hear the rooks in the beech trees above my heartbeat.

I walked across the lawn to the old swing. The shrubbery had long since overtaken it with a twiggy tide, it couldn't swing anymore but the seat was still accessible. I sat down on the green slimy timbers and looked up at the house, waiting for my pulse to stabilise. I flexed my sore fingers and steadied my breathing. It felt safe outside, safe enough to feel foolish for running away. Coincidence and imagination and draughts; the holy trinity of the spirit industry. Jack had spooked me, and the rest was pure misinterpretation of the mundane. It was a creepy old house and Jack was a creepy

old bloke. And I was an idiot. Unless I'd just locked an opportunistic burglar in the house. It was a chance I was willing to take.

A slip of colour in amongst the wet black stems in the shrubbery caught my eye. It might have been a crisp packet, but the swirl of orange and blue and green touched a dormant picture in my mind of a plastic ball, a toy, not sports equipment, now punctured and discarded and still there after all these years. I remembered the tug of the twigs in my hair and the prickle of the sharp fallen leaves and thorns in my knees and palms as I tried to retrieve it in tears.

I stood up as if I could run away, clanking the swing seat. The iron chains had embossed a dark rust pattern on my palms.

I remembered as I unlocked the car that I had left the kitchen windows open, but I couldn't face going back into the house that evening.

Stuart was waiting for me at the nurseries. It was getting dark and it was well over an hour after closing time.

'I'm so sorry. Thank you for waiting.'

He grunted and helped me to pull the gates shut, leaving me on the inside and him on the outside.

'I've locked the rest up,' he said.

'Thanks. Look, have I done something wrong? You're upset with me.'

His eyes were in shadow under the orange street light but I could picture the guarded reserve clouding them.

'Good night, Em.'

'Is it the poster about the opencast?'

'I'd best get going.'

There was nothing to stop him from turning away and walking down the bank to his bungalow. I was locked on the other side of the gates.

'Please tell me. I've done something wrong,' I said.

He sighed. His breath steamed around him in the orange glow.

'It's OK. It doesn't matter,' I said for him.

I was turning away myself when he finally spoke. 'I asked you to do something about the opencasting years back when George was still alive, that's all. You weren't interested then.'

‘Oh.’ I turned back a fraction too late. Stuart was already striding away down the pavement, back to his wife.

I drove to the opencast meeting that Tuesday night. Stuart had come in the van. I parked on the wide grass verge next to him. There were no pavements or streetlights, just a handful of houses, a church and the church hall which had been converted from the old school.

The yard outside the hall was crowded and it was very loud inside, the noise and light spilled out from the porch into the gloaming and illuminated the throng of smokers. I saw Stuart forging through the crowds ahead of me, his wife tagging along in his wake. I went as far as the porch door and hesitated. I didn’t like crowds. It would have been bearable in the anonymity of a city, but not here, with almost every face half-familiar. Even the unknown recognisable through ancestry, members of the clanship, locals who saw the same in me, who connected me not just with who I was, but also with who I had been. I saw in strangers’ faces the children who I’d been to school with, either too young or too old, an anachronistic rogues’ gallery, but all, I thought, unfriendly towards me. I have rarely felt so apart, so unable to belong and so out of step. I hesitated. It was standing room only now in the hall, but still I couldn’t go in. I waited another four or five minutes, until the meeting was about to begin, behind me people were stamping out cigarettes. They watched me covertly, looks exchanged. I had no reason to be hanging around outside and the charged debate was causing an almost palpable excitement as its time approached, an anticipation which I could not share. Maybe that’s what set me apart. I turned on my heel, knocking into an old woman who’d been right behind me.

‘Excuse me,’ I said.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said and pushed past.

I weathered the tide of smokers as they surged forward *en masse* around me until I was suddenly on my own. The door had been left open to ventilate the sweltering crowd inside. I thought about staying to listen from outside, but I felt exposed standing there in a pool of light as the evening gathered all around, an outcast.

It was another clear, mild night, the light breeze that rustled through the hedgerows wasn’t cold, but I shivered as I returned to the car. I was glad I’d parked next to Stuart. Without street lights it was difficult to find my way, but the vague pale outline

of the van against the blackness guided me. Even so I scraped my shins twice on other people's bumpers where they hadn't pulled properly off the road. A female tawny owl hooted in the branches above me, a piercing *tu-u whee* that seemed abbreviated without her mate's reply. She was probably still taking this year's youngsters out hunting. She distracted me from the shame of running away from the meeting. I stood by my car to see if I could make her silhouette out against the stars. There was still too much foliage but I felt her presence in the dry rattling sycamore leaves which still clung on in the mild autumn. The village was only a couple of miles from the nearest streetlights, but the skies were beautifully dark. Orion lay glittering, low on the southern horizon.

I stepped out into the empty road to admire the stars better. Only then I became aware of the low rumbling of a motor idling twenty yards away on the far side of the road in the darkness. I felt his presence suddenly, though like the owl he was invisible in the night. I stepped back between my car and the van and groped my way round to the driver's side. The courtesy light came on as soon as I opened the door. I scrabbled for the central locking switch before I put the keys in the ignition.

Even when I reversed onto the road the driver did not put his lights on. I could see my taillights reflected quite clearly on the car's bonnet. I had driven past the church hall before the headlights came on and I watched in my mirror as he pulled onto the left side of the road at a crawl. I don't know if he followed me, I don't even know for sure if it was Jack that night. I drove as fast as I could back along the winding steep country roads to the safety of the street lights. A car did sweep past me as I locked the nurseries' gates behind me, but it could have been anyone.

11 Jack

Jack has slept better than he can remember sleeping for a long time. He is woken by the bin men. They reverse the wagon into the main farmyard with a noise like a medieval battle in full swing overlain by the strident reversing siren. He lies quietly in the dim room, unwilling to get up while strangers are only a few yards away outside his bedroom window. Jack's sheets smell, they have not been laundered since Claire last washed them. The wagon pulls up level with the parking space and pulses of orange light are thrown across the bedroom ceiling. The wagon door opens. As soon as their feet hit the gravel he knows something is wrong. A growl comes from Jack's throat, startling him but unheard above the din outside.

'Aw, fuck'n hell. The bastard,' a thick voice yells outside.

There is clatter of property being dropped and heavy boot-treads stomping around. A second wagon door opens. Jack can hear an angry debate but the words are lost in the engine's rumble.

Now footsteps approach his own front door. Jack hears the noise he is making and tries to stop. He frightens himself with the growling whine which he seems unable to control. The bin men hammer on Jack's door. His legs tremble as he sidles across the bedroom floor and snatches his dressing gown from the hook on the door. There is no time to dress, they sound like they're going to knock the door down.

Jack opens the door a crack. One of the men pushes it wide so violently that Jack has to step backwards. He stands before their disgust.

'Is this yours?' asks the younger of the two men, sweating and stroppy.

At first Jack sees only the black wheelie bin and blinks in confusion.

'Look!' says the man, tipping the bin forwards with practiced expertise and balancing it on its axle. He lifts the lid and makes the bin bunny-hop as he shakes it.

Jack has to come to the doorstep to look into the bin, but as he leans forward he can smell what they are going on about before he sees it.

'Oh, no,' he says, 'how did that get in there?'

'Like you don't know?'

'We don't keep cats at the farm here anymore.' Jack takes a step back into the shelter of his doorway. He pulls the belt of his tartan dressing gown tighter and stares back at the two men. 'I don't know who would do such a thing,' he speaks in his

dealing-with-professionals voice, though he must be aware of his grey unshaven chin and the tremble in his hands.

‘So you’re saying you didn’t put it in here?’

The younger man holding the bin glances at his colleague who shrugs in reply. There is a protocol for pets disposed of in bins. ‘Right, I’d better ring the police, then,’ he says.

12 Emily

The auctioneer was in her late twenties, maybe a couple of years older than me. She was trim and smart and carefully dressed in a vintage dogs-tooth check suit with a yellow polo neck sweater underneath. I hadn't bothered to change after sweeping up the leaves from the lawn. I don't think I'd even brushed my hair. The way she was looking up at the front door reminded me of a spaniel begging to be let through. She seemed very keen.

'Miss Fanklyn?' I asked as I approached her.

'Please, do call me Dana.'

'This door's stuck, I'm afraid. We'll have to use the side entrance.'

I led her round into the garden. The back door seemed to have dried out a little. It opened smoothly.

'Wow,' she said as she stepped inside. It was a refreshing change from condolences. Her voice came from a lost generation, trapped in radio waves from the BBC. I wondered if her accent was genuine or deliberately acquired.

'So what are you intending to do with all this?' she asked, pulling an ancient hockey stick out of the umbrella stand by the back door. The stick had must have been third-hand by the time I got it.

'I was thinking of burning the stuff I couldn't take to the tip.'

She gave a squeak of dismay. It made me laugh. We both listened to the echo in the dimness of the scullery then she turned her attention back to me.

'A lot of our clients use our house clearance service. I can go through the policy with you after I've had a look around.' She slipped the stick back into the stand.

'Maybe,' I said, suddenly unwilling to have strangers living with these things. I hadn't been serious about dumping and burning the contents, but now it seemed preferable to the alternatives. 'Where would you like to start?' I asked her.

'Oh here's as good as anywhere. I hope you don't mind me saying this, but what an eerie old house.'

'It's had its moments,' I said.

'I just love places like these. Did you live here ever?'

'I grew up here.'

'How gruesome.'

There was no need to find a reply as she had already gone into the kitchen. Her tone hadn't been entirely sympathetic. I glanced around the scullery, it felt less secure, somehow. Then I saw the empty hook by the back door. The keys were missing, the spare bunch which had dangled so reassuringly with the hope that no one else could get in while I had the only spares. Dana was chatting away in the kitchen. Had Jack stolen the keys? Anyone could have taken them, the house had been wide open for quite a while, and I hadn't shut the windows, either. I followed the sound of Dana's one-sided conversation. The kitchen seemed unchanged except that she had opened all the cupboard doors. Nothing had been taken as far as I could see. She was making extensive notes on the contents in a thick spiral-bound notebook. I looked at my watch, anxious to check on the rest of the house. She glanced up at me and smiled.

'Of course retro is so popular now, but we'll give you a low estimate. No point paying more tax than you have to at this stage. It's amazing how it all adds up, though. We used to write these sorts of things off as 'kitchenalia'. Ooh, just look at that colander.' She picked it up with one hand and displayed it awkwardly. 'Now that's perfect, cream and green, chipped, looks the part. What a pity you aren't in London. Is this dinner service complete, do you know? What, twelve settings?'

She ran her pen up the side of a stack of dinner plates to count them. She didn't seem to need me to confirm anything. I think she talked more to give me the opportunity to dispute anything that I felt strongly about. As if one could feel strongly about a colander.

The yellowed net curtains stirred in the cold breeze. I stretched across the draining board and pulled the window shut.

'Did you open the oven?' I asked as I turned around. The warming oven door had swung wide open.

'It was like that when we came in,' Dana said, glancing up from a canteen of blackened electro-plated cutlery. She frowned slightly, I had disturbed her counting.

I nudged the oven door shut with my foot, but it wouldn't close. I bent down to see what was jamming it. There it was, a mud pie sitting on a china plate. It was a tapering cylinder of fresh mud moulded from a flower pot and decorated with pebbles and rose hips. I slammed the door hard, so that the exhibit was shoved deeper into the oven.

‘Are you all right?’ Dana asked. She bent down to open the oven door I had just slammed shut and peeked inside without asking, though there was no reason why she should ask. She straightened up and looked at me.

I didn’t look directly back at her, stepping sideways to put some distance between us.

‘Children?’ she asked.

‘What? Sorry?’

‘Children. Maybe some local scallywags climbed in through the window. It looks quite fresh. Very artistic.’

I made a non-committal grunt and swallowed down the rising nausea. Scallywags. I shook my head quickly.

‘I thought perhaps with the window being open? An open invitation. I don’t think they could get through those bars, but the window at the front, perhaps? No? Well,’ she added brightly, ‘where next?’

I ground my teeth, less concerned now with burglary, more scared for what we would find. She led the way into the passageway towards the hall. I waved her into the dining room and continued towards the library. The house itself no longer felt like a threatening entity. I was far more concerned with the human agents who had been in there signalling to me in this rare and exclusive language.

The drawing room was much as I had left it. The big arched door was closed. Maybe it had simply slammed in a draught. I felt sick as I walked into the still quietness of the library. There was no obvious difference at first. I had to think back to my last visit and then I saw that the gardening books I had left on the table had been removed and my painting book had gone. Jack could have taken it and he may well have stolen the gardening books, but Jack could not have known about the mud pie. There were only two other people left alive who would understand that. Had Tim been there on Monday? He could have just walked in while I was upstairs waiting for Jack to leave and I had done nothing to stop it. I had assumed Tim would be at work, I had felt safe there during the day. If my cousin had the keys, would I ever be safe there again?

I didn’t hear Dana come into the library. She rapped her knuckles against the wood of the bookcase beside the fireplace. I was sitting at the table, God knows how long I had been there. I rubbed my eyes.

‘Sorry to disturb you. I didn’t like to go upstairs without you. Don’t worry, not long now. Bedrooms never take — Oh good heavens, are those first editions?’

I followed her over to the shelves.

‘This is a specialist job, a bit beyond me, I’m afraid. I can get someone to come out, or do an approximate valuation using photos.’ Dana had taken down one of the Walter Scotts and was carefully examining the spine. Like my grandfather she saw the artefact, not the words.

‘Is this house haunted, do you know?’ she asked in a matter of fact voice.

‘There are no such things as ghosts,’ I said.

‘Gosh, no need to sound quite so acerbic. I saw a little girl at the foot of the stairs. Thought I did, anyway. Probably a trick of the light.’ She replaced the Walter Scott and took down a John Buchan. ‘I do believe, actually. I see far too much in my trade not to. Your grandparents kept these very well, usually the dust jackets are the first to go. This one isn’t a first edition, by the way, but this series is very popular, Boys Own stuff, ripping yarns —’

‘Did you see a child or not?’

‘Yes, I saw a child,’ she said placidly.

I was halfway to the drawing room. ‘She probably won’t be there now,’ she called after me.

I turned back to look at Dana. She smiled at me over the top of a copy of Dracula.

‘These Folio editions are ten a penny. Pity. Still, lots of books, some real treasures.’

‘Do you have to —’

‘Am I talking too much?’

‘If you aren’t qualified to value the books perhaps we should begin on the upstairs?’

‘Just making a note of the bits a poor humble auctioneer like myself can understand,’ she muttered at her notebook loud enough for me to hear.

‘I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just I’m not used to people —’

‘Is it the ghost thing? Please forget I said anything.’

She gave me another smile. Her teeth were even and very white. I waited for her in the drawing room while she took photographs of the bookshelves.

Dana followed me meekly upstairs. She seemed completely unfazed by seeing her phantom child and blithely unmoved by my discomfort and the atmosphere my earlier irritation with her had created between us.

Dana seemed to sense nothing ill in my grandfather's study and I drew comfort from that. She gazed for a moment at the torrid erotica on the shelves and in the packing boxes before she began her detailed photographic record for the specialist book-valuer.

'No wonder the old chap didn't keep these downstairs in the library,' she said without censure. 'They would have been worth a fortune once, but now their appeal is simply their rarity, what with the internet and so forth.'

I nodded, dumb with shame, appalled at myself for never having noticed the books Grandpa kept closest to him. I was fifteen when I moved to the nurseries, but I'd barely bothered to notice him beyond my childish requirements.

Dana worked systematically through the bedrooms. I had not expected the valuation would take so long, but every time I strayed she called me back with some tedious enquiry about dates or provenance.

I watched Dana as she vicariously enjoyed my past. She revelled in it, sniffed it, stroked it, tried to bond with it in ways that made me feel I was intruding on her privacy at times. Yet my past scared me, almost as much as if it still occupied the present, located and not done with, or not as finished with as I had hoped, a shared past that everyone had to let go of at once or it would still be there.

I followed Dana up to the attic rooms. I was hungry and tired and not in the best of tempers. Dana was still bubbling away. I listened to her inventorying a list of desirable retro nursery fittings under her breath.

I opened the door into my old room.

'Oh, it's like something from a film set,' she murmured, brushing past me.

She lifted the corner of the dust sheet over the bed and wrote something down in her notebook.

I rested my forehead against the cold top glass of the window and smoothed the tape holding the card over the broken pane beneath with my thumb nail. It had been so cold sleeping in that room sometimes that I would wake in the small hours with pains in my feet when my hot water bottle had gone cold.

'Someone's been playing in here, too. Look,' Dana said.

I walked over to her and looked to where she was pointing. The little Edwardian dolls' tea set I thought was mine to keep forever was laid out on a large cotton handkerchief ready for a party.

'Hell's teeth,' I said.

Dana turned around, apparently shocked.

'Someone is playing games, Dana. Not tea-parties, mind games. This has been left here on purpose for me to find. I'm sorry you had to witness this.'

'I think you're wrong,' Dana said quietly. 'This is children's stuff, surely.'

I snorted and bent down to pick up the small clumsy pieces of china. 'Whatever it is, it's my problem.'

'Oh dear,' she said.

She scribbled notes for a while, distancing herself from my upset. I finished picking up the tea set, placing the little pieces of china on the night stand. I stood at the window with my back to her and my hands in my jeans' pockets wishing she would hurry up so I could fret in private.

'Is this yours?' Dana asked.

I saw that she was holding my sketch book.

'Where did you find that?'

'These are awfully good, you know.' She held it open, tilting it towards the light.

‘It’s mine.’ I snatched it back and slapped it shut and fastened the clasp.

‘Emily, is there anything I can do? There are lots of people to help, you know, with bereavement.’

I looked at her concerned little face and shook my head. ‘Sometimes, Dana, people are just sad, or anxious, or alarmed because something really has happened. Life isn’t all cupcakes and *kitchenalia*.’

Dana swallowed hard. I watched her unclench and rearrange every muscle in her face before she answered me with strangled politeness. ‘Yes, quite. I’m sorry. That was very unprofessional of me. I apologise. I spend so much time amongst my clients’ belongings that I sometimes forget that I don’t actually know them very well.’

I realised then that I had spent the whole afternoon in Dana’s company, longer, much longer than I was used to. Maybe I did sound mad, or at the very least paranoid.

‘I was rude. You were being kind,’ I said.

‘I spoke out of turn.’

‘I was unfair.’

I couldn’t think of any sensible way of ending this competition for contrition so I turned away abruptly and walked towards the door, hugging my sketchbook to my chest. Dana trotted after me.

‘Do you know who might be trying to upset you?’ she asked as we reached the landing.

I turned on her.

She took a step back, brushing against the bannister. ‘None of my business. Sorry.’

‘I have a cousin, two cousins in fact. There is a history of unpleasantness there. I also seem to have acquired a stalker recently.’

‘Oh God. I’m sorry. Again,’ she said.

I took a long breath and tried to smile back at her. My face felt as if it had forgotten how to perform the task. ‘This is just a box room.’ I opened the door to show her. ‘It’s empty,’ I said, though I had to look for myself. ‘Through here is my grandfather’s bedroom.’

I led the way. We stepped up into the top of the pele tower. Rain pattered against the single glazing. It was very cold. I don’t think anyone had been in there since he died. The dust was thick on the floorboards and the green Chinese rug was grey. It was

like a monk's cell, furnished only with the bare essentials, all covered now in dust sheets, and lit with a forty watt bulb that barely illuminated the corners. I wondered if Grandpa used to keep a fire up here. It was a long way for Mrs. Stokoe to carry coal and ash.

Dana avoided my eye and concentrated on noting down the frugal personal possessions. I stood by the north window and watched the rain.

I saw the child without registering her trespass at first. A little girl, about eight or nine, pretending to ride a pony around the lawn. She had set up garden canes across large flower pots and was jumping over them, slapping her thigh with a shorter cane. She was wearing a flowery blue smock and jeans and her long brown hair trailed loosely in her wake.

'There's your ghost,' I said to Dana.

She came over to the window to see.

'Yes,' she said.

'She wouldn't have come inside, would she?' I asked.

'I've finished in here now. Have I seen everything?'

'Mmm.' I rapped on the window pane but the girl didn't look up.

'Shall I see myself out?' asked Dana.

'No. I'll come down now.' I was anxious not to be alone again. When I looked back the child had run off.

13 Jack

He's pleased with the staircase. The panels and mouldings are as close to the original as he can remember. He rubs back the varnish with a fold of glass paper, blowing away the dust and smoothing a wet finger across the tiny wooden spindles. He polishes the staircase with beeswax, woodstain and turpentine using a pair of Claire's knickers, the soft cotton bunched up in his hand, his fingertips stained walnut as he works. His lunch time coffee sits untouched and cold by his elbow. The staircase will be one of the last components to be fitted. It has to be assembled in short straight flights and he can see no other way to configure the layout of the stairs but by physically fitting them together. He stands the bottom section of stairs in what will be the hallway. He marks the exact position of the drawing room wall with a sharp pencil and then positions the stair section and holds it in place with tape. Jack carefully extracts his hand without knocking anything. He straightens up in his seat and eases his shoulders. His watch says twenty past three. Jack lowers his head again and places the second flight of stairs up to the first floor. The piece fits, balancing perfectly against the landing floor. Jack withdraws his hand and sits very still for a moment. Then he places the short steps up to the quarter landing on the first floor. There is the study door. His hand lingers. He has spent some time ageing the narrow strips of ply, hammering them to mimic the marks of a full-size adze and staining them with tea and soil. The project deserves proper veneers but he can't afford them. His eyes travel up the staircase from the hall. He reaches out and touches the place where Emily stood. His breathing becomes noisy, he can smell the house, the real house, not the MDF and sawdust and turps and varnish. Phlegm catches at the back of Jack's throat. He clears it with a noise like a cat retching on hairballs. He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. She's in there, he can feel it. He has trapped something of her here in the model, or perhaps made a connection with the real house so that he will know when she is there. Whatever this is, this desire to connect, he sees his will in the carcass of the model sitting on the bench before him.

When Jack steps out of his studio the sky in the west is apricot and the sun blazes in a distorted lozenge of brilliant yellow light as it sinks below the moors. There is a mild breeze still, like yesterday. They are not blasting today. On the eastern edge of the reservoir the colours are already muted into dusk and the control tower and the long dam wall seem like a fictional imposition on the valley, a computer generated mirage that could be removed at the tap of a finger. The waters constantly shift below him, from pale silver to indigo. He can smell resin and mould and sheep and all the moorland smells carried across the water. Jack clears his throat and spits onto the cobbles.

Beyond the boardwalk, as the hillside curves around towards the dam, a reddish stain has appeared by the old drift mine entrance. Jack's brother does not farm those fields, but they are part of the landlord's estate. Jack scans the hillside for other signs of change, an explanation, but the gorse is empty and the turf is pale. Jack locks the studio for the night and sets off to inspect this novelty. There are a couple of cars parked in the

layby at the lane's end. Fishermen or dog-walkers. He takes the new path by the reservoir. As he steps onto the boardwalk he falters, seems to slow for a moment, then strides on. The structure shudders underneath him. He doesn't pause as he crosses his stream and the ducks paddle away without him noticing. His breathing is laboured and his skin is flushed. At the far end he hesitates again, but nothing happens as he steps off the boards. The ground is solid under his feet. Jack takes a deep breath and his shoulders relax. The water laps the shore a few feet below the path and he hears the squabble of geese and a distant tractor engine somewhere over to the west. The sunshine has brought out more gorse flowers but the evening is distinctly autumnal, cooler than the last time he came this way only a week ago and somehow thinner, as though the air is rarified or the altitude has increased. As he walks along the path towards the dam the gorse on the other side of the fence to his left peters out. The field opens into a steep slope of poor pasture above him, weedy with brown and silver thistles, the grass already losing its summer greenness. The old entrance to the drift mine was filled in decades ago, marked only by the contours of a slumped spoil heap long since grassed over and a few bleached posts, sculpted into twisted lignin sinews by seventy years of weathering. Looking at it now, with the sun below the hills, Jack can't see anything unusual. The fence beside the path is made of pig-netting and his boots would get stuck if he tried to cross it. He walks a little way along to the five bar gate and swings himself over. The tenant farmer on this side keeps Galloway cattle. They live like wild things amongst the gorse and they have churned the ground along the fence and round the gate into a miniature moonscape of craters which have hardened like concrete in the dry weather. The soil here dries to a pale grey flecked with orange and blue marl. Each pockmark hoof print is too small to fit Jack's boot, so he has to tiptoe on the ridges in between, risking his ankles with every step.

A few yards past the gate the going gets better and after a couple of hundred yards he is on smooth cropped turf. By the time he reaches the old workings his heart is hammering with the incline. He climbs up the side of the spoil heap and traces the opening into the hillside. There is nothing to explain what he saw earlier except a feeble trickle of water stained red with rust where there was no spring before. Jack leans against a gatepost that no longer marks a gateway and catches his breath. Then, as before, there is a shimmer in front of him, a disruption of light, a shiver through reality and he feels the hillside shudder. This has never happened before, not without the boom of a test blast first. The earth twitches beneath him like a huge dozing animal that has been disturbed by a fly landing on its skin. Jack raises his head and listens. He stands alone on the mound, slowly turning, his head cocked, his whole body tense. Suddenly he bounds down from the spoil heap and runs at full tilt across the pasture. A brace of pheasants clatter up out of the gorse and into the sky shrieking like fireworks.

14 Emily

I couldn't sleep. It had been bad enough going to my grandmother's house before I knew Tim had access. I thought about getting a solicitor, trying to get an injunction or something to stop Tim from going back to the house while I was still executor. There would be so many repercussions, though, and it wasn't helped by his job. He had too much to lose. He would fight it, try to prove I had no right. No rights to anything.

I listened to the soft rain drumming on the slates and watched the occasional car lights track across my ceiling. About half past five I got out of bed and went downstairs. The ginger cat had been conspicuous by its absence for a few days. A thin smoky-grey queen had taken its place, needy and plaintive. It squeaked a welcome and came and sat by my feet while I waited for the milk to warm. There didn't seem any point in going back to bed as the sky was beginning to lighten so I got dressed while my hot chocolate cooled and sat at the kitchen table in a swamp of tiredness.

The day was grey and drizzly. Stuart was taking one of his children to the dentists first thing and Dawn was too preoccupied with some vital texting to bother me much. We only had a couple of regulars come in for compost and weed killer. By coffee time I would have welcomed a distraction of some sort, even from Dawn, but she hardly ever listened to the news and I didn't watch much TV so we had very little to talk about. At least it had stopped raining.

Stuart looked taken aback by the warmth of my greeting when he came in at midday.

'She's missed ya,' Dawn chirped at him as she saw his awkwardness.

It occurred to me that I should stop regarding Dawn as wallpaper.

'Alright, Emily?' Stuart asked.

'Fine. Everything's fine. It's been very quiet. I've got the bubblewrap up.'

'Did you do the bit I hadn't washed down?'

'Left it for you. I can't reach behind the grape vines.'

'We should take those things out. They're only fit to harbour whitefly and mildew.'

'They were George's,' I said.

‘He’d have taken them out by now. No use to man nor beast. I missed you at the opencast meeting on Tuesday night.’

‘I was busy,’ I lied.

Stuart was standing in the way so I couldn’t leave the shed. ‘I thought I saw you parked up. Mustn’t have been you.’

I pulled a face. ‘I bottled it. How did it go?’

‘Oh, the usual. Most of them are only frightened about their bloody house prices. If they’d just stop being such bloody hypocrites we might get it stopped,’ he said.

House prices had started to worry me, too. At least my grandmother’s house was too far away to be affected by the opencast, surely. ‘So you don’t think the campaign’s going to work?’

Stuart shook his head. ‘Can’t say. You’re looking very peaky, Em. I mean not your usual pale. You’re kind of blue under the eyes today.’

A particularly loud double blast made me jump.

‘Sounds like the bugger’s getting closer,’ said Stuart, ‘You OK?’

I rubbed my hands over my face, ‘The blasting is getting on my nerves, that’s all.’

‘You’re dead on your feet. Come on, sit down. I’ll fetch you a coffee.’

I sat down on the chair we keep for elderly customers by the till and closed my eyes. Outside I heard Stuart ordering Dawn to make me a cup of coffee.

I kept my eyes closed even when she returned, hoping not to have to talk.

‘Are you poorly, pet?’ she asked.

I let her cluck. She had made tea, not coffee. I drank it obediently, feeling like a fraud. I wasn’t ill, just tired and anxious. I wondered about the upbringing that made Dawn know what to do but not know how to be more than she was. Was it just instinct, independent of intelligence, a nurturing function that I had never developed? I felt more at ease than I had since the funeral in those few minutes, and it was entirely down to her. I wanted to convey this revelation somehow, but before I could formulate any way of broaching it Dawn got an urgent text message, and gave me a reassuring smile, her eyes sliding down to the screen. She patted my knee as she stood up and then meandered away, still texting, navigating past the stands of winter pansies by some form of sixth sense she was developing along with her thumbs.

I could have dozed in the chair, but a couple of customers came in. I left Stuart to deal with them and went down to the bottom glass house and began to hack down the thick gnarled wood of the grape vines Grandad George had planted sixty years ago.

Stuart found me at closing time. I was prodding the root ball into the ashy smouldering bonfire heap in the far corner.

‘Bloody hell, Em.’

‘You said.’

‘I said, but I didn’t think you’d come down and do it.’

‘Too late now.’

‘Yes, I can see that,’ he said.

White steam hissed up from the roots. I tried to shut out the shame and loss. The thin smoky vapour was making my eyes smart.

Stuart kicked at the tangle of roots, stamping them down into the heart of the bonfire. Flames flickered up, freed from ash.

‘So, what’s up?’ he asked.

I hesitated, almost told him my plans; one day all this will be yours. Something, some chink in his concern, a glint of impatience or unfriendliness, stopped me though.

‘Come on, this isn’t like you.’

‘Tim left a message at my grandmother’s house.’

‘What sort of message? What did it say?’

‘It wasn’t a letter, just — just something silly from when we were kids. Enough so I’d know he was thinking about me.’

Stuart put his hands in his pockets and stared into the distance. ‘No point saying anything, is there?’ he said eventually. ‘You know what I’ll suggest and you’ll say just leave it, it’s best forgotten.’

‘Because it is.’

‘So forget it then. Let it go. Get on with your life before it spoils anything else.’

A sudden gust of wind sent ashes into stinging eddies. We both stepped back. I fished for a handkerchief and blew my nose. *Get on with your life*. We walked back up past the polytunnels together in silence. There was nothing else to say.

I spent the early part of the evening trying to construct a scathing comeback to Stuart, partly from hurt pride and partly from genuine indignation. He'd known me since I was fifteen, how could he sum up and dismiss all my sorrows so easily; *get on with it*. Stuart was always the nurseryman, like his father before him, and I had grown up and become his employer without developing any further skills, or any reason for being his boss other than a name on a birth certificate. And he was right, which made me feel worse.

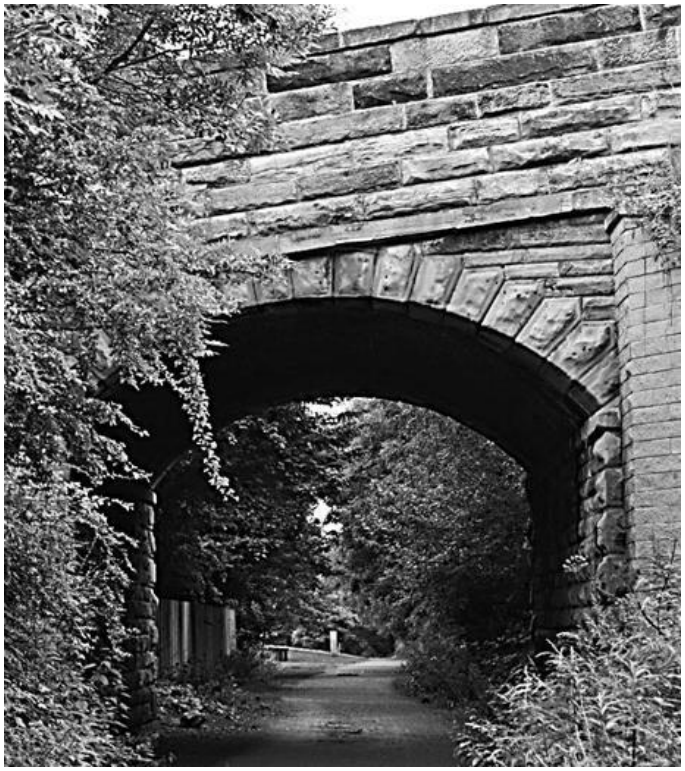
For the first time since my grandmother became ill, I began to have doubts about my escape plan. People don't just give whole houses and businesses away. It wouldn't make him like me more. He would be embarrassed by the confusion and gossip it would cause. I began to doubt my own motives, or maybe understand them better. I wanted Stuart's gratitude and approbation. I wanted him to be impressed by my magnanimous gesture. Most of all I wanted him to see it as a golden gift, not a shambolic passing of the buck to appease Grandad George and make up for the freak accident of my birth. Me, the most unsuitable mess, incapable of controlling anything, least of all myself. If I'd died in that car crash, too, George would have passed the nurseries to Stuart. End of.

The night stretched out ahead of me. I was dog-tired but there was no point going to bed, I couldn't just turn off my worries.

Once there had been a railway carrying steel from Consett down to Newcastle. Other freight also travelled on the line, and passengers. Before Beeching's cuts the nurseries used to send produce up to Consett. The strange little station yard was still there across the road from the nurseries. The station master's house and the two linesmen's cottages were built from yellow bricks made of clay dug out from Medomsley colliery. Every pit round here made bricks once, the earth's bowels gouged out and portioned and shaped and dried and fired and built up into homes for the miners. When my father was a child the hillside was still covered with slag heaps, mountains of slag and shale. The waste lay there so long that sheeps fescue and annual meadow grass began to colonise the lower slopes in flapping mats of rhizomes, and even gorse took root in places. For a time there were no farmers to shoot or trap anything and skylarks and kestrels floated up in the blue skies of memory. The children made slides down the black hillocks and became as filthy as the wasteland they played on.

The railway line was turned into a footpath. Most of the little bridges were taken down and the path rose and fell with the land in some places and flew through the

woods and fields on embankments elsewhere. The road bridge over the old railway next to the nurseries was still there. There were stalactites under the arch and an echo that Stuart took me to visit in the late summer evenings when I first moved here. But that night the archway beneath the road was a black hole in the shifting mist that drifted beneath the streetlights.



I soon realised that it was too dark to go for a walk. Maybe if there had been a moon it would have been pleasant enough, I often walk in the dark, but a few metres away from the car park it was like stepping into nothingness. I turned around while I still had some sense of direction. The lamp by the corner house could barely penetrate the murk.

As I began to edge forward a car pulled into the old station yard. Something made me stop, wariness of strangers in cars at first perhaps, but then a sudden jolt of recognition. I knew it was Tim's car before there was any logical way I could have come to that knowledge. He always bought Volvos because my uncle had favoured them. Big hefty cars, ugly and expensive. I knew how the interior would smell, heavy with new-car and cologne, sweat and his feet.

I reached out for the cold wet metal of the gate that stops motor vehicles getting onto the footpath and waited on the very edge of what light there was. Tim never did

anything by accident. He couldn't have seen me, but I had no idea why else he would have come there. He was parked between me and the road, me and the nurseries. I would have to go under the bridge and take the little cut up onto the other side of the road and hope he didn't see me. I stepped carefully back into the darkness and skirted along the perimeter of the car park fence towards the safety of the tunnel with my heart thumping.

Suddenly the springs of the car creaked as someone shifted inside. I froze, maybe five metres away from its bonnet, protected only by a fence and the foggy night, a short sprint from the shelter of the bridge. Dogs began to bark in the old station master's house.

The passenger door swung open and the interior light came on. A young girl, still in her teens, climbed out. She bent down to speak into the interior of the car. The barking rose to an outraged crescendo. The dogs were in a frenzy by then, hurling themselves at the door. Lights came on in the house, but before I could move the driver turned on his headlights. I was stranded, standing right in front of him. The distance shrank to a few feet with two fence rails between us. The girl turned round to peer at me, her hair rucked up into a white-blonde halo, her eyes black smears in the orange gloom. She was only a kid.

The cottage door opened and a man's voice called out, 'Jemma, is that you?'

The driver started his engine. I didn't want to move in case he guessed where I was going. The gears ground into reverse and the headlights raked around the car park as the heavy Volvo turned for the gateway, creaking as it lumbered over the potholes. The girl skittered towards the house.

I crept into the darkness of the tunnel. There was a sharp stench of dog mess and rotting leaves. I pressed my back against the slippery wetness of the calcite ripples running down the walls. My thin nylon jacket was soaked through almost instantly. Through the muffled watery dark I could hear the girl's voice, high and plaintive and the low mumble of a man's voice in counterpoint in the little brick house next to the bridge. The whole weight of the night pressed down on my lungs so that I felt it would squash me.

I wasn't even sure it had been Tim. I couldn't read the number plate, and I didn't know what his registration was anyway. Of course it was him. I ground my shoulders

against the hard stone, but it proved nothing. There never was any corroboration. In the blackness the stalactites dripped.

Above me on the road a car door closed. The dogs burst into a fresh wave of barking. I couldn't hide in the tunnel all night, what if I was right and it was Tim and he had come back to look for me? I couldn't hear anything now above the blood pounding in my ears. I stared back towards the car park and strained to see anything in the vague arch of paler night. Very, very softly I took a tentative step backwards towards the other end of the short tunnel. Still fixed upon the foggy arch I edged back so slowly I made no sound. I stepped out of the dark archway into the relative light of the path. My breath seemed to be reflected in the close mist so that it sounded for a moment like the night was breathing back at me. Then I took another step backwards.

'Hello.'

'Jesus Christ!' I span around.

He was standing in arms reach, he must have been there all this while, watching. He caught me by the wrist before I could run.

I tried to scream, but it was locked away. I tugged at his arm with my free hand.

'Are you spying on me, Coz?' he hissed, hushed as though there was an imperative for quiet.

'Let go!'

He lifted my wrist right up above my head. I stopped struggling so he'd stop hurting my arm. All around us miniscule whirling droplets held the faint orange light from the road far above. I couldn't make out his face centimetres from mine, but I'd known it too well, so my brain inserted the details, the excitement, the dilated pupils, the sudden flush, the horrible, horrible twist of his mouth.

'You did not see me here, understand?'

I nodded. 'Yes,' I added in case he hadn't seen.

He dropped my hand and shoved me hard, both hands on my shoulders, so I fell backwards into the bank of fireweed and wild raspberries, and Tim was gone into the shifting gloom, as if he'd never been.

15 Jack

The landlords have put the farmhouse next to Jack's cottage up for rent as his brother no longer lives there. He found the sign when he came back yesterday and now they are here again to take photographs. There is a broken pane of glass in his old bedroom window. They have put up a sheet of ply instead of mending it straight away. The estate agents must not be expecting a rush of interest. No land goes with the house and the outbuildings are still in use. The big byre next to the farmhouse has had scaffolding up for five years at least. Jack listens as he sits at his bench in the studio. The agent is talking to a smartly dressed man. They are discussing the crack in the wall that looks like it will tear the masonry apart and sever the byre from the house. They walk right past Jack's window.

'We'll get someone in before we start pouring money into it,' says the city gent.

'It may be difficult, looking like this. And the winter's coming,' warns the agent. Jack recognises him.

'Well, no point fixing it up before the spring. It's a big house, someone will leap at the chance.'

'The house is not in the best state of repair. If you were selling it, maybe. Tenants looking for a big country house tend to expect upmarket fittings.'

The voices fade as the men walk down towards the road at an angle so that they can stand in front of Jack's cottage. The gentleman wears a suit beneath a tweed overcoat. Jack leans forward to get a better look, but they are beyond his view. He hears them knock at his cottage door.

The agent walks back into the road. 'His car's here, let's try the workshop.'

'There's someone in there. I saw them earlier when you were taking photographs.'

Jack cannot avoid them. The big French windows let in so much light you can see the whole room if you press your face against the glass. He picks up a sheet of sandpaper and folds it into four so he is ready for them when they knock.

'Yes, Mr White?' he says, displaying the sandpaper to demonstrate that he is in the middle of something.

'Morning, Jack. This is Mr Bakerson, one of the estate owners.'

‘Pleased to meet you, sir,’ says Jack. He makes a tugging motion at his forehead instead of shaking hands and registers the look of disgust that flits cross the agent’s face but is at a loss to understand it.

Bakerson quickly withdraws his own hand. ‘Good morning. Very pleasant for the time of year.’

‘Yes, sir. It’s different to yesterday with all that fog. I see you have my Dad’s farm up for let.’

‘I was meaning to ask you about that, Jack,’ says the agent. ‘There’s a broken window, someone has thrown a stone through it. Did you see anything?’

‘It’ll be them youths, Mr White. They were round here the night of that accident.’

‘Have you had any bother since then?’

‘Bother?’ asks Bakerson.

White waves his hand, wafting the problem aside, ‘Some kids, they drive round and tear up the grass occasionally. Those tyre marks you noticed. I did say.’

‘Well, I think they’ve been round since, but just a feeling mind, like they’d been here,’ says Jack.

White frowns, ‘Well, did you notice when the window was broken?’

‘Derek might have.’

‘Derek?’ asks Bakerson.

‘Your tenant at Barley Hill, Derek Roberts. Jack’s brother,’ says White.

Bakerson seems not to notice White’s tone. He turns around and watches the breeze ruffling the deep blue of the reservoir.

‘Lovely spot,’ he murmurs.

The agent takes a deep breath. ‘So, Jack, are you keeping busy?’

‘I have a big job on at the moment.’

‘Good, good. Jack has just lost his wife,’ White explains to the back of Bakerson’s coat.

‘Oh dear,’ Bakerson turns, ‘I’m sorry for your loss. Did I ever meet Mrs er…’

‘Roberts. No, I don’t think so,’ White says, avoiding Jack’s eyes.

‘You must be rattling around in that cottage on your own.’

White continues to study the stonework by the door, but he stiffens.

‘We should see if there’s something more suitable for you on the estate. The apartments above the stables, perhaps?’ suggests Bakerson. He is referring to the cramped three room flats near the original estate house, little improved since they were built for Victorian stable lads. No-one stays there if they can help it.

Jack shifts in alarm and opens his mouth to protest, but White shakes his head at him almost imperceptibly. ‘Jack has a long-let tenancy agreement on his cottage, and his workshop is here. He can stay on after he retires, if he wants to,’ he says, glancing at Bakerson.

Bakerson wrinkles his nose. Jack folds his arms across his chest. Not often that the agent stands up for a tenant. He’d been impressed until then by the smart gentleman, but now he knows he is protected by the tenancy laws he feels less in awe of this city slicker.

‘Well, we won’t hold you up any longer, Jack. Let me know if there’s any more trouble.’

‘Yes, Mr White.’

Jack steps back into the doorway and closes it. He can hear Bakerson discussing his cottage as they walk away. He makes a snacking motion like a collie snapping at a fly as he watches them walking towards their cars.

The crack seems to be wider, but it’s been a while since Jack last came into the hay loft above the byre. Dust swirls in the crooked shaft of sunlight that splits the huge space in two. This loft is never used now they feed silage. It takes two men to make enough silage for the whole farm, rather than the whole family and casual labourers and schoolboys all needed with haymaking. There is a peculiar emptiness about a space that has lost its function. Even the rats have left.

Jack puts his hands in his pockets and stands staring into the middle distance. The sunlight falters, the bar of light dulls so that Jack can pick out the far corners beyond the crack. The sun will be setting soon. Jack blinks. The air suddenly seems thick with dust. He tries to rub out the heavy pollen from his eyes and sneezes violently several times. A cat shoots past his ankles. He staggers back and for a moment feels the prickle of hay bales on the back of his legs. He is about to sit down to catch his breath when he shakes himself. He cannot see through the tears and his nose is streaming. He pushes his way towards the door past stacks of bales that cannot be there. As he flails

out into the evening he bangs his face into a thick plait of straw that hung there years ago. He leans against the bannister rail that runs around the external stairs down from the hay loft, gasping for air. The rail gives beneath his weight in a soft splintering of rotted wood and he almost falls. He grabs the remaining woodwork for support and swings out over the concrete yard below him. He scrabbles for balance and crawls away from the edge. He pulls himself upright and drags a filthy cotton rag from his trouser pocket to wipe his face.

16 Emily

‘What happened to you?’ Dawn didn’t sound concerned, more disgusted. ‘You had a fight with a hedge or something?’

‘Is it that bad?’

‘I’d go in and put some make-up on before you frighten the customers.’

I checked my face in the foxed looking glass that hung in the potting shed.

‘Watch the shop for me, then, Dawn,’ I said.

I washed my hair first because it smelt of rotting leaves. It took a lot longer than I’d intended because I hadn’t had time to detangle it before getting up to unlock the gates. I was a mess, even with clean wet hair. The scratches on my face were probably from rose briars, red welts already inflamed with whatever noxious poisons rose thorns carry. I had a cut across the bridge of my nose that I didn’t remember getting and a scrape along the left side of my jaw. Trivial injuries, but they made me conspicuous. I don’t know how I’d managed to get home the night before; it was like a bad dream now. The bells of St Ebba’s had tolled two as I’d unlocked my door.

I slathered on a layer of primer, then foundation, then cover-up. I looked like a peach melba. I made the rose welts look angry when I scrubbed it all off and the graze on my jaw began to bleed.

I swore at my reflection and covered my face with a flannel.

‘You’ve made it worse, man.’ Dawn was standing in the bathroom door. I hadn’t heard her knock or even call for me.

‘Dawn!’ I pulled the flannel away from my face and tried to sound composed and responsible. ‘Who’s minding the shop?’

‘I got Stuart to come up from the polytunnels. He’s in a right grump today.’

‘Look. I need to sort my face out. I’ll be down soon, OK.’

‘Give over.’ She had her paws in my makeup bag before I could stop her.

‘No!’

‘Can’t be worse than you were doing,’ she said. ‘You’ll look lovely when I’ve finished.’

There were several customers when I came out, but Stuart stopped in mid lecture on the pruning of primo cane raspberries and barked with laughter. The middle aged woman holding the wire trolley of plants looked at me uncertainly and then back at him.

‘Sorry.’ Stuart passed her payment card and receipt back to her. ‘You cut back autumn fruiting rasps in early spring, right back, six inches above the ground, they fruit on the new canes.’

‘So I can plant these out like this?’

‘Yes, lots of organic material, you can’t give them too much feed. Shall I help you with them?’ He set off with the trolley towards the parked cars.

I opened the receipt roll to see what we’d taken that morning. It was good for this early on a Friday in late autumn.

I was tidying the net bags of daffodil bulbs when Stuart came back.

‘Sorry about that,’ he said, ‘I’m not used to seeing you in drag.’

‘Ha ha.’

‘What’s she done to you?’

‘It’s not that bad,’ I said.

‘It is, you know. What happened anyway?’

‘I went for a walk last night and lost my way in the fog. I couldn’t find the path back.’

Stuart pulled a face. ‘You shouldn’t go on the line after dark. I’ve told you before.’

‘Is the van ready?’ I asked.

He straightened up. ‘Yes. I’ll get on with the deliveries, then, boss.’

‘Thank you, Stuart,’ I said, letting him off the sarcasm because I’d noticed a large man across the yard heading for the house door instead of the plants.

‘Excuse me,’ I called, trotting past Stuart. Then I realised who it was and stopped dead. Tim was already banging on the door.

He turned around.

‘Emily.’

His eyes were like tiny pinpricks in the flab of his face. He was rapidly going to seed. He seemed less dangerous in the daylight.

‘What do you want?’ I asked.

‘I want you to leave me alone.’ He sounded genuinely aggrieved as he came towards me.

‘I wasn’t spying on you, I was taking a walk, I didn’t know you’d be there.’ I was gabbling, appeasing, I couldn’t help it. Part of me was almost relieved that he had really been there, that the night before hadn’t been paranoid imaginings.

‘Oh come off it. Whatever you’re up to it won’t work.’

‘I’m not up to anything.’ I kept my eyes fixed on my feet. I didn’t want to challenge him or do anything that would give him an excuse to prolong the argument.

‘I’ll find out soon enough,’ he said. ‘I always do.’

‘Just go, Tim,’ I tried to say, but I couldn’t find my voice so I only mouthed the words. I took a step back and indicated the way back to his car without looking in his face.

He shook his head. ‘Not until you understand this, Emily.’ He stepped right up to me, bent down and put his face in front of mine so that I had no choice but to glance into his piggy, hateful eyes. ‘I will *kill* you if you try to interfere in my life.’

I couldn’t speak. It felt like he was intending to eat me. I was shaking so much my teeth chattered. I saw Stuart jogging up out of the corner of my eye. Tim suddenly jerked his head up in a reptilian movement.

‘Everything alright?’ Stuart asked coming to a halt about a metre away.

Tim straightened up. He was noticeably taller than Stuart and broad as a rugby player. Soft and flabby as my cousin was he had the mass to bulldoze his way through life.

I turned to walk away.

‘You don’t forget that, now, will you?’ Tim called to me over Stuart’s shoulder. He must have barged into Stuart on his way past. I heard their feet scuffle, but my being there would only make it escalate so I kept on walking.

Stuart left for the delivery round without saying goodbye, but he came and found me in the glasshouse at closing time. He stood in the way while I put price stickers on some small plastic punnets of pansies.

‘Are you OK?’ I asked.

‘Did that bugger do that to your chin?’ he asked. ‘Well?’

I was conscious that Dawn was hovering just outside, even if I had wanted to discuss it with Stuart. I shook my head at him. ‘Are you away now, Dawn?’ I asked loudly.

She poked her head round the door.

‘Yeah, that’s me done. That bloke who was shouting at you this morning, do you know him?’

‘He’s just my cousin, Dawn. He has problems.’

‘Oh, right.’ She sounded pleased. I didn’t often confide in her. ‘It’ll be the will, then. Money brings out the worst in people, not that I’d know. See ya.’

‘Yes, see you tomorrow, have a good evening.’

We watched her walk away, phone in hand. I picked up a tray of pansies. ‘Can you get the door for me, please.’

‘Those aren’t ready,’ he said.

‘We’ve sold the last of the bigger ones today. These will sell tomorrow if they have nothing to compare them with.’

‘Are you going to tell me what’s going on?’ he asked.

I pretended I hadn’t heard him. He followed my back up the yard. I put the pansies down on the empty bench and headed for the house.

He was right behind me. ‘Bye, Stuart.’

‘Wait!’

I turned in the doorway, not quite meeting his eyes.

‘Something’s up, this isn’t like you. The grape vines and the opencasting, and now your cousin coming around again, what’s happened?’

‘My grandmother died.’ I addressed him somewhere around his elbow.

‘Yes, but you hadn’t seen much of her for years. Then you had plenty of time to make things up when she was in the hospice. Isn’t that what they say? Closure?’

‘You know nothing about it.’

‘That’s not fair, Emily.’

‘Look, I’m really tired—’

He nodded curtly and turned away. I heard him locking the gates as I stood in the hall and searched through an ancient tattered Yellow Pages directory. I found the section I was looking for and selected the firm with the biggest advert and rang a

twenty-four hour locksmith. I arranged to meet him at my grandmother's house. I was sick of feeling scared.

The locksmith was a dour, thin man in corporate overalls. He stank of cigarette smoke. He leafed through the ID I'd bought and listened to my garbled explanation of suspected break-ins without comment. He ran his thumb over the scratches round the front door lock and grunted. He wiggled a bit of wire into the lock and then stopped.

'That's been broken. I'll have to sort it out from the inside. You said there was a back door lock, too.'

He fitted the new latch and deadlock on the back door first. I pocketed all three sets of keys. He took longer working on the front door. His firm charged more per hour than I paid myself for a week. I had already resigned myself to this going into a second hour. The new lock looked horrible against the old wood of the front door, grey metal, ugly and utilitarian, but it was secure and I had the keys. I signed the locksmith's worksheet and let him out of the front door. I locked it behind him.

I crossed the dim hall and checked the garden door. I don't remember there ever being a key for this door and it seemed a pointless expense to get a new one made, it would be a job for the new owners. I checked that both bolts were firmly in place and rubbed the condensation from the glass.

Above the tall stone wall that bounded the back of the property the cloud was high and thin with the last tinges of pink from the sunset. The garden always seemed to be monochromatic in hindsight, nothing ever came into bloom and the foliage was dusty and dull and overhung by large trees so that it never seemed verdant. The garden door had been so little used lately that a cotoneaster had grown across it in elegant arcs of twigs clothed in clusters of tiny round leaves so dark they looked black from where I stood. I liked the feeling of the plant protecting the doorway, but it might put potential buyers off. I checked the front door again and went to the scullery to collect the billhook I'd brought from the nurseries on the day Jack came over.

Outside it was still light enough to see what I was doing. I swung the curved blade low down into the arching branches but it glanced off, blunt as a butter knife.

From what I remembered most of the gardening equipment was stored in the garage. A man came round to mow the lawns once a week and presumably he had a key but I wasn't sure where the spare garage key was, or even if there was one. The tool

shed was so dilapidated that no one locked it, much less stored anything valuable in it. All I needed was a carborundum stone. The door was propped shut with a brick and the hinges were rusted fast, so that it had to be prised open in a shower of soft splinters of rotten wood. I brushed the worst off my shoulders and peered inside.

I had vague memories of the way it had been, crammed with redundant equipment. Plainly much had been taken, but there were hopeful shadows along the shelf at the back. I stretched over the clutter on the floor and groped in the powdery grime and webs, feeling my way past jars of rusted screws and stacks of seed catalogues, until I knocked against the abrasive coldness of the whetting stone. It spun under my fingertips and smashed to the floor. I had to lean over the handle bar of the old lawn roller to scrabble around for a piece big enough to use. By the time I had extricated myself the last light had left the sky and the garden was in complete shadow, too dark for gardening. I carried the stub of the carborundum and the billhook back into the house. The scullery was icy cold after the comparative mildness of the evening outside. I locked the door and put the keys in my pocket.

I sat at the kitchen table and brushed the stone along the blade as I had been taught; just like stroking a cat, don't ruffle it, don't press down. It felt odd, bringing vivid memories of Grandad George into this house and using his tools here.

Suddenly there was more to the uneasiness than the drawing of the two halves of my life together. I stopped and listened, but couldn't put my finger on it. I could feel how damp the house was now I was still. The year was turning and there had been no heating on since last spring. I bent over again, trying to concentrate on the task, and as I gently rasped the edge sharp I became aware of the contradiction that made me so ill at ease; no heating, yet I was sitting in a house filled with knocks and bangs and gurgles, the ghost of the central heating system. It wasn't the wind, the night was still. And nothing had been hot enough during the day to contract now. I put down my tools and listened.

The noises came as one would expect, running along the heating pipes, for all the world like pattering footsteps. I checked the shadowy scullery, the boiler was cold to the touch, but the knocking was more persistent. It sounded now more like something trapped. Maybe I'd let a bird in when the windows were open, or a cat. There were mice in the attics, but this was now far too loud and brazen for small rodents.

I stood at the foot of back stairs, Mrs Stokoe's stairs, and strained to locate an isolated source for the noises. A loud bang from the pipework behind the Aga gave me such a fright I was halfway up before without thinking. The bulb on the landing was swinging slightly, sending shifting patterns of light and shade across the corridor. I listened at the spare bedroom door and at Mrs Stokoe's old room. The bathroom on this floor was a lot more comfortable than the one in the attics, but it smelt of old people and medication. The radiator was humming softly.

I thought I would try turning on the bath tap to release some of the trapped air. Just as I reached out to touch it, the tap suddenly spun itself on with full force.

Trapped air and freezing water splashed my sleeves as I reached over and turned the faucet off with some difficulty. Even that release of pressure didn't seem to affect the steady thumping in the pipes, louder here than in the kitchen. It wasn't like a trapped animal, more like a deliberate racket. I felt frightened then, real fear based on facts not imaginings. Tim might be there already; he could have let himself in before I got there. He might have been hiding, not even aware that I'd changed the locks, waiting, using this noise to draw me to him. The stairs at the end of the corridor up to my old attic bedroom suddenly seemed like a cave in which a monster lurked. I crept out of the bathroom, skirting past the foot of the stairs, my eyes on the shadows of the stairwell above. I tiptoed backwards down the corridor towards Mrs Stokoe's stairs and the relative safety of the ground floor. The light bulb in the corridor was still swinging gently, as if in a draught I couldn't feel. I turned my head away for a moment to check the way back down to the kitchen. My foot was on the top step. I could see the comforting kitchen light below, when the sudden sound of crying rose above the clanks and bangs in the heating system. Not weeping, but howls of anguish, wild and desperate. I was running, but back towards the sound, not away from it. I pounded up the dark stairs yelling my cousin's name, cursing him to Hell. The bedroom door burst open so violently the glass in the top panel shattered as it rebounded from the wall, spraying me with sparkling slivers. The room was empty, the furniture as before, the bed dust-sheeted and laid to rest, dimly lit by the streetlight glow through the window. The sudden silence was almost worse than the crying.

It had been me. I had cried like that, but only once. Self-preservation set in shortly afterwards.

I was stunned that I could have externalised the memory so vividly. I'd thought it was really happening, outside my mind, to someone else, another lonely trapped child. The potential, the fear, of being here, alone with Tim, must have been enough. I sank down against the bed with the shock that I had been unable to distinguish between recall and extant reality. Tim wasn't here, why would he be? He'd moved on, as everybody did, except me. All he wanted from me now was my continuing silence so that he could go on pursuing little girls. And had I imagined the banging in the pipework, too? My sleeve was wet. I sat shivering and thought about it. The only conclusion I could reach was that imaginary or real, it didn't really matter to anyone but me. No one cared how frightened I was.

After a few minutes I pulled myself to my feet and found I could walk, stepping back across the room through the icy recognition of my own shame and complicity. I had kept my silence in return for being allowed to escape, the path of least resistance. God only knew what other miseries Tim had wrought after his apprenticeship with me. That young girl last night…Jemma, wasn't that her name? My footfall rang out hollow in the quiet. The light was steady in the corridor beneath and the stairs down into the kitchen barely creaked as I trudged down. I carried the billhook and carborundum through to the scullery and left them on top of the washing machine for next time.

The episode was making my head reel. Hallucination or imagination; that I could so easily believe what wasn't there. As I reached for the back door lock I heard my own voice shriek. It happened out of sequence. I should have seen Jack's face first, floating at the window, more skull than flesh, and then screamed. The disjunction was almost as frightening as Jack's presence. He was gone by the time I threw open the door and jumped out to challenge him. I stared up at where he'd been. The scullery window was so high, how could he have been looking through? There was nothing for him to climb up on and no sound in the garden, no rustling, no heavy breathing in the bushes, no peeping Tom creeping away. I locked the door against a phantom and leant against the sink until I was sure I wasn't having a seizure.

'I'm going mad,' I said out loud.

The indifference was mortifying. I turned off the lights in the kitchen and unlocked the back door and reached up to turn off the scullery lights. My finger was on the switch; the moment darkness fell a hand shot out and grabbed my wrist. A cold little hand.

‘Jesus.’ I jumped through the door and wrenched myself free. The door slammed in my face, just as it had done before.

I didn’t wait to catch my breath, I ran around the house and scrambled into my car and reversed out into the evening traffic without even looking.

I don’t remember the drive home, nor how much I drank when I got there, but I did sleep, a long sleep that carried me safely into the morning.

17 Jack

Someone has been there while he was away. Jack can feel it as he locks his car. He bolts across the lane. His door is locked still, no sign of intruders. He stands on his doorstep and waits until his security light turns itself off. His eyes strain in the starlight. For a moment he sees a man running towards the house. He sees himself but knows it is in his mind, as though his thoughts are now coming in pictures. He shakes his head, trying to unseat the fuzziness that makes him feel indistinct and the rest of the sparkling moorland evening seem so fearsomely real. He checks again, this time crouching low, in case it is some small creature watching him.

‘Claire?’ he asks out loud, voicing his own suspicions.

He lets himself in and cautiously turns on the light. The mess is undisturbed. He holds onto the back of a chair while he lets his heart rate steady, uneasy in his own kitchen. He takes a deep breath and stands up straight. The tricks his memory is playing on him have become a dull worry that reduces his thoughts about his progress with Emily to a pinprick that barely leaves him any satisfaction.

Jack is making a cup of tea when he hears the cars tearing towards the cottage along the lane. The lost boys aren’t early, but usually he’s in bed. It’s as if he was expecting this, as if time has been running backwards. Was his earlier feeling of unease a premonition, then? His heart skips arhythmically as he the cars pull up outside his door as he thinks he knew they would. Car doors bang. Has he locked the front door behind him? They

smash the security light with a whoop and slam their fists against the wooden door, their feet crunching on the broken glass in the dark. They sound as if they are trying to punch their way in. Jack grabs the bread knife and waits.

‘We know you’re in there,’ one of them shouts.

They rattle the handle. Jack cannot see anything through the window from this angle.

‘Mister! *Mister*. We’ve marked your card, you old git.’

‘This one’s for Carl.’

Jack smells the petrol, sees reflected flames flicker in pastel shades across the wall, he knows how bright they must be outside, lighting up the night. His heart pounds.

‘There’s no fuckin letterbox, moron.’

Jack is standing with his back to the wall, trapped like a rat. There seem to be half a dozen of them dancing round with flames spurting amongst them.

‘Hurry up! Fuck that’s hot.’

‘His car!’

One of them screams and a bottle smashes. They all start screaming and flailing. They sound more like kids and less like a lynch mob. Jack leans forward so that he can see, his grip tight on the knife haft. They youths are now a few feet from his door, between the cottage and their cars. They’d never have made it past their own vehicles to torch his. Flames trace the petrol splashes where the lad dropped the bottle in front of the house, licking up every last bit of fuel. Jack creeps to the window for a wider view. In a moment the flames are low enough for the boys to start whooping again. They dance around while Jack trembles behind the curtain. He can’t control the thin growl that comes from his lips.

One of them comes up to the door and thumps on it again.

‘That’s for Carl. Next time we’ll put one down your fuckin chimney.’

The others howl. Jack bares his teeth in the dark and waits while the antics outside simmer down as the flames gutter into thin blue wisps that no longer illuminate the trampled space.

‘I telt yous. Fucker’s out,’ says a voice so close to Jack’s window Jack could reach out and grab his throat. His chest heaves as he draws down deep gulps of air.

‘Aye, but he’ll see we’ve been.’

They all laugh, forced hollow laughter that they can’t keep up.

‘This place gives me the fuckin creeps.’ The voice comes from a little further away. They are moving back towards their cars.

‘Aye. D’you think it was quick?’

‘What, like?’

‘Carl.’

Jack misses the rest of the discussion. He counts them back into their cars. Eight youths, three cars. He can’t read the number plates without his glasses. He runs his finger over the notch he has gouged in the plaster with the end of his bread knife. He reaches for his phone and calls his brother.

His brother’s anger surprises him. It is late when he comes over, almost midnight, but even so, Jack did not expect such admonishment.

‘Bloody hell, Jack. Why didn’t you fetch the police? The buggers might have torched the place.’

‘They were right outside, they’d have heard me. It was too late anyway once they’d gone.’

‘And what the hell’s happened in here? I thought you meant they’d been in here, too, when I saw it.’ Derek waves one arm at the chaos as he pours boiling water into the mugs. The single bulb makes the dusty shambles look worse than it does in daylight.

‘I’m clearing Claire’s stuff out.’

‘I can see that. What a mess.’ He stirs sugar into his mug. There is no milk. ‘Sue’s asking after you.’

‘Tell her thank you.’

‘You need to clear this place up a bit. It would get anyone down living in this pigsty.’

‘I’m busy.’

‘Here,’ Derek says, passing Jack a mug. ‘Too busy to have a wash now and then?’

Jack takes the tea and glares up at him. ‘I’ve no one to keep clean for, Derek.’

‘You smell like a tramp. Sorry, someone needs to say it.’

‘The water’s playing up.’

‘You never said. The water pressure seemed fine when I filled the kettle.’ Derek goes and demonstrates, water cascades over the crockery in the sink. He glances up at

the window as he turns off the tap. Jack's reflection is distorted in the old glass. Derek frowns and dries his hands on a dirty tea towel. He turns round to face his brother, leaning back against the sink, arms folded.

'What happens next time, then, Jack?' he asks.

'Next time?'

'They'll come back now they've had this much fun. These things escalate. What if it's the house next time, or that workshop of yours? You need to call the police.'

Jack stands in the middle of the room, fists by his side, looking like he's about to come over and thump his brother. He's ten years older, but was always a runt compared to Derek, unable to deflect the aggression of bullocks, heave sacks or haul sheep up into a shearing hold. Jack picks his fights, knows when to hide. He knows the boys will be back. The cottage creaks, the moment stretches.

'Your tea's getting cold,' says Jack, eventually.

Derek shakes his head and goes over to the table to pick up his mug. He pulls out a chair and sits down.

'Are you eating properly?' he asks.

Jack remains on his feet and drains his mug where he stands.

'I'm bringing some ewes in by tomorrow. I'll get Sue to fetch over a bit of shopping.'

'No need,' Jack says.

'Sue's not seen you since the funeral.'

Jack puts his mug down on the draining board with a clatter. 'So I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Well, I'll be off, then,' says Derek after a while. He stands up and stretches, circles his head to click the joints in his neck. 'Mind, if you don't ring the police by the time I've fetched the sheep over, I will. I can't have thugs like that round the stock.'

Jack follows him to the door. There is a green sheen over Derek's black pick-up. Jack has to come out of the house to see what his brother is looking at. Behind the cottage, above the roof, the aurora borealis ripples across the sky. They stand side by side, very small beneath the shifting glow.

'It's not been like that ever. Not even when we were kids,' says Derek.

'Strange days,' says Jack.

‘I hope it’s still going when I get back. I’ll get the lads out of bed to have a look.’

Derek climbs up into the cab and the quiet is shattered by his motor. The fumes seem to dim the sky, coming between Jack and heaven. Already the aurora has faded, just a trick of the eyes, as Derek sweeps the pick-up round and bounces off up the lane.

Jack closes his door and quietly slips across the cobbles to the studio. He lets himself in. No lights, no one to know. He can breathe again without the weight of the sky over him. He curls up on the armchair and dozes with his eyes half open, resting, semi-conscious of the road out there, waiting for them to come back.

18 Emily

‘Afternoon,’ said Stuart as soon as he saw me.

‘Yes. Sorry.’ I glanced at my watch, it was almost ten. At least I felt better after some sleep, but the nightmare events of yesterday evening seemed to hold me in a miasmic prism which dulled and distorted the world around. I touched the awkward bunch of keys in my pocket as though they were a talisman. I’d put the spare sets for my grandmother’s house in George’s safe in the cupboard under the stairs.

‘Sorry, Stuart, I missed that?’

‘I said, I think Dawn’s promoted herself in your absence.’

I followed his gaze across the car park, squinting against the low sunshine. Dawn was talking to some customers about a big planter of Michaelmas daisies.

‘Probably telling them when it fruits,’ said Stuart.

He would have been well within his rights to sulk at being left in the lurch to open up on a Saturday morning without instruction or explanation. The relief of being tacitly forgiven washed over me, diluting the foggy feeling of horror to a point where I could at least try to interact. I smiled at the bemused couple walking away from Dawn with the large pot in their arms.

Dawn waved at me.

‘Got to ring Marshalls, be right back,’ I called to her.

‘Right-O. I’ll put the kettle on.’

Did you see the Northern Lights last night?’ asked Dawn, ready with the tea.

I shook my head. My neck felt stiff. I yawned and tried my best to listen to her.

‘Never seen them like that before. The whole street came out to watch. It was better than fireworks.’

I remembered Grandad George waking me to see them once. I was sorry I’d missed them. I leant against the window sill, my back against the shed, absorbing the sunshine. It was a beautiful day, still and warm with the faintest haze. There were several customers milling around and Stuart was talking to a couple down by the roses.

‘You’re letting your tea go cold,’ said Dawn.

‘What? Oh, sorry.’

‘Want another?’

‘No, this is fine. I’d better see to these people, anyway. Thanks, though.’

I turned to a couple of customers who were hovering around the chair with the bell on it next to the sign saying ‘please ring for attention’ and plainly not wanting to be so demanding. As they fussed over choosing a plant I noticed Dawn standing in the middle of the yard, still holding her mug and staring into space as though deep in thought. There was something different about her, but I couldn’t work out what it was.

I put the tepid tea to my lips. When the trembling began I thought it was me for a moment, but all around the hum of conversation rose to a crescendo and I realised the tremor was underneath us. The packets of seeds shook on their stands inside the shop like soft percussion instruments and a stack of plastic plant pots fell over of the counter. It wasn’t violent, more like a shiver. Almost as quickly as it began the quaking ground was still again, but it left a sort of ringing in my head, not as unpleasant as tinnitus, but I couldn’t shake it free.

‘That was close.’ I heard someone say.

‘Everyone alright?’ I asked, looking around for Stuart.

There was a general aggrieved mumbling. Of course they weren’t alright, we didn’t have earthquakes here on these ancient hills. Sometimes there was subsidence, but that was rare and easily explained by mining. This quake was new and unreasonable, and within three minutes blame was firmly apportioned to the blasting over by Whittonstall, not an irrational assumption given the distant thuds of the blasting which continued in ignorance of our little quake.

‘Stuart!’ I called.

I found them in the garden, down by the pond. Dawn was huddled on the bench, Stuart awkwardly standing next to her. He stopped talking when he saw me.

‘You two OK?’ I asked.

‘Just a fright,’ said Stuart. He helped Dawn to her feet.

I recalled what was different about her now, ‘Where’s your phone?’

She looked at me as she passed me on the way to the gate, a look as vague and disconnected as I felt.

‘Dawn?’

Stuart shook his head at me. I followed them, and paused to try the garden tap beneath the roses. At least the quake hadn’t broken the water pipes.

Lunch time was busy. The car park was crowded, even the overflow carpark down the hill was almost full.

I only saw him by chance, a movement near the front door, caught across the hazy tarmac while I was serving in the shop. I hurried the transaction through and jogged across the yard.

The front door was ajar, though I knew I had shut it on the sneck. I picked up one of George's walking sticks in the hall and proceeded down the corridor. I gently swung the kitchen door open and stopped dead in my tracks. There was Tim, sitting at the kitchen table in his shirt sleeves.

For a moment I thought I would collapse. All I could hear was the rush of blood thundering through my arteries.

I found my voice, 'My God! What the hell d'you think you're doing?'

He continued to sit, as though his presence was answer enough.

'Get out. *Get Out*! This is my house. It has nothing to do with you.'

He glanced down at the glass between his fists on the table.

'Who drinks sherry, for God's sake?' His voice was thick. 'Don't you have any proper drink in?'

'Get out!'

'I went over to our house this morning, just to go through a few things.' He paused heavily. I realised he must have drunk a fair amount of the sherry, enough for his words to blur slightly and his cheeks to glow. I saw him in high definition, as though the rest of the world was behind dirty glass. I saw the new blunt bristles pushing up through the follicles on his jowls, the blackheads on his nose, the smooth area between his eyebrows where he'd plucked his werewolf fur into a more normal growth pattern. His Saturday casual shirt was carefully ironed, but he had sweated great round dark patches under his arms. The memories of the foul smells of his body made me sick.

'Get out,' I whispered.

'I will, just as soon as you give me the new keys. I'll let you keep a set.'

I shook my head.

He reached across the kitchen table and unhooked my shoulder bag from the back of a chair.

'I had to leave them at the solicitors,' I lied.

He leered at me. His teeth were huge and yellow and glistening.

Without watching his hands, keeping his eyes on my face, he rattled out the contents of my bag onto the table; lip balm, hand cream, tissues, crumpled receipts, an invoice from the seed supplier I'd been looking for, the old, redundant keys and a handful of change. His face lit up when he heard the bunch of keys clatter down. He pounced on them. I took a deep breath as he looked down and began to edge away into the corridor.

'No, you worm,' he spat with disappointment, 'I want the *new* keys.'

I dropped the walking stick with a clatter and sprinted towards the front door, with the bunch of new keys digging into my skin through my jeans pocket as though they were trying to propel themselves out. I heard his chair crash to the floor. It took all my energy not to clap my hand protectively to my hip. I wrenched the door open; he was too slow. I flung myself forward, but not before he'd breathed his sherry-fuelled rejoinder into my ear, the halitosis and obscenity mingling so that I was desperately trying to rub off the contamination when Stuart skidded to a halt in front of me.

Tim straightened hastily and spoke to the back of my head. 'I'm going to check up on you as soon as the solicitor opens up on Monday. I am entitled to keys for my grandparents' house. You had no right to change the locks without my permission.'

I didn't turn around. I observed my cousin by watching Stuart's body language. I knew Tim was puffing himself up. I didn't need to see his pompous attempt at dignity as he brushed past. Stuart stared at me, but didn't speak until Tim was out of earshot.

'You let him into the house?' he asked.

I shook my head.

'Call the police.'

'It didn't do me much good last time.'

'Just call them.'

'What's the point?'

'Yeah, well, you keep saying that. Look, I'm run off my feet down there, Dawn's wandering around like one o' clock half struck—'

'Yes, fine, of course.'

'I wouldn't ask…' he said, and left it trailing.

I deadlocked my own front door this time in case Tim had enhanced his house-breaking skills. Stuart was already dealing with the queue by the time I got down to the shop. Being busy helped for a while.

19 Jack

Jack lifts a small table and model telephone carefully from one of the display houses and repositions them in the hallway of Emily's model. He angles the telephone ready for her to pick up so that if she was only a few inches tall she could hold the receiver and still see the garden door.

Sections of the house have not been finished yet, but Jack has worked on the sitting room all morning. His workshop was cold last night, but it's warm now with the sunlight pelting through the French windows. It smells of wood glue and the sour odour of his body. Jack reaches into the model with his index finger and strokes the fabric of the miniature sofa, denting the cushions where Emily might have sat. He jumps when he hears a horn honking in the road and quickly withdraws his digit.

Jack comes out of his workshop to give Derek a hand unloading the sheep. It's warmer and brighter outside. He has to shield his eyes against the sunshine flashing from the reservoir below.

The sheep have just been separated from their lambs and the green space between the buildings is filled with their frantic bleats. Derek's big tan and white collie is sitting on the passenger seat of the cattle truck. Jack can't hear its growl above the sheep and the rumble of the diesel engine, but he sees that it has its teeth bared and its hackles rising as it catches sight of him.

His brother turns off the engine. The dog leans into him. Jack can hear it growling now.

'Give over, Gyp,' says Derek, pushing it away so he can unfasten his seatbelt.

The dog crouches lower so that Jack can't see him anymore.

Derek jumps down from the cab.

'Gyp!' Derek calls over his shoulder as he goes to let the ramp down at the back.

'Back field?' Jack asks his brother.

'Get the gate for us. What the hell's the matter with that dog. Gyp, Here.'

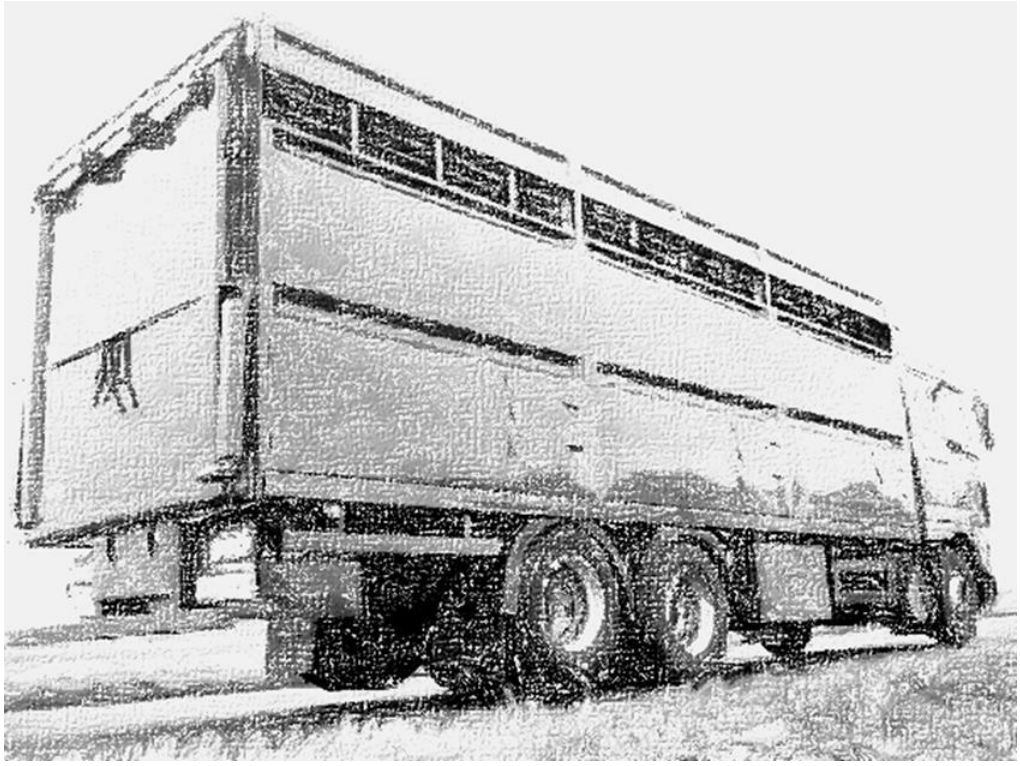
Jack jogs to the field gate and opens it, then trots across the green to stand in the road to stop the sheep running back down the lane. The wagon can't be taken up any closer to the gate. There is a lot of open space, the job needs a dog as well as both men. Derek strides back to the cab and bellows at his collie until Jack can hear the damage

his brother is doing to his voice. Jack leaves his position and comes over to help. Gyp is a big dog, rough haired and muscular. He stands up on the seat when he sees Jack, and looks the size of a wolf as he bunches himself and springs. He lands on Jack and balances on his chest as Jack falls backwards, staying just long enough to tear at his ear before bolting away down the lane to where the tarmac stops.

Jack staggers to his feet holding onto the side of his head. Derek ignores him and runs off after the dog. The sheep are stampeding inside the wagon. Jack leans against the wagon side and slams his fist into the metal body.

‘Shuddup!’ he yells.

The bleating stops, but Jack’s shouting makes the commotion worse. The sheep make intermittent rabbit-squeals of terror as they kick and jump. The smell of their fear smothers everything. Beyond the yard the valley lies quietly under the midday sunshine. Jack is rooted by the rocking wagon and the thuds of crazy animals hurling themselves into each other’s way. They tumble against the hot metal of the wagon body so hard that they are beginning to dent it. Sweat mixes with the blood pouring down the side of Jack’s face. He’s helpless to do anything but suffer the terrible noise of this self-destruction. The sheep will scatter and panic if he lowers the ramp. They will try to jump the holding gate before the ramp is down. He won’t be able to get out of the way, squashed by the broken bodies of the fallers. He daren’t try.



A minute passes, but he can't think what to do. He thumps the side of the wagon again, but with less force. Inside the dark container the swelter and chaos settle. One ewe begins to emit long high-pitched bleats. Jack finds a footing and swings himself up to look through the horizontal ventilation slits. The noise stops abruptly. There should be sheep eye to eye with him, but none are standing. Jack drops back down onto the tarmac. Blood mixes with the urine that drips from the floor of the wagon. The tang of spilt guts fouls the air. Jack backs away.

Derek is coming down the track. The gorse hides everything below shoulder-height. He rounds the corner, out from the gorse and onto the tarmac. No dog. A hush has fallen, the wind has stilled. The sun burns the back of Jack's neck. He realises he is holding his breath. He can feel his pulse in his throat and blood throbbing round his damaged ear.

Then it starts; a whip-crack of thunder makes the ground shudder beneath him and the pain in his ear irrelevant. It cannot be thunder. There is not a cloud in the sky, not even an autumnal haze. The noise rumbles on right underneath him, too loud and immediate not have been accompanied by lightning, too loud and close to be blasting. Derek struggles to keep his feet, staggering in a pool of violet shadow. Behind him the whole hillside begins to slide. Jack cannot take in what he is seeing, the trees and turf move with the soil as if they are on a conveyer belt, down, down into the reservoir. Derek is running up the tarmac now, full pelt towards him, though the landslide is a good quarter of a mile behind. The noise of the impact with the water seems to be delayed, so that Jack witnesses the turmoil of trunks and roots and mud before the thundering of the water hits him. The deafening roar reverberates, echoing in the acoustic curve of the dam. The reservoir itself flies away from the fallen valley side and coalesces into a wall of water below the road, travelling past him with unreal speed. The farmhouse is high enough to sit above the waves, Jack knows they are safe, the top of the dam is lower than the field in front of the farm, but the path has been washed away. The boardwalk fragments on the crest of a wave as it is carried away twenty feet below where Jack stands. The broiling water churns into the colour of milky coffee. The liquid waves reflect and echo like the sound, getting bigger as they rebound from the far shore until they amplify into a hill of water in the centre of the dam which rises and falls like a single deep breath.

‘Jesus—’ Derek comes up beside him, heaving like a drowned man, though he hasn’t been in the water. The reservoir begins to settle as he speaks, to find a new level. God knows how many million gallons have sloshed over, but half the hillside has fallen into the valley bottom and the water is still pouring into the overflow over half a mile away with a noise so great that they only feel it as if their brains refuse to hear any more.

Derek sinks down into the road beside him and puts his forehead onto his knees.

20 Emily

We heard the blasting all that afternoon, and everyone was in uproar at it continuing after our own little earth tremor. I was conscious of a pulsation, a sort of resonance, too. Stuart said he couldn't hear anything. We didn't know about the landslip into the reservoir, it was only when the vibrations shook the land in a shudder far more fundamental than the twitching quake that morning that we realised something had happened. Five miles downstream from its origin it set the church bells ringing in St Ebba's in the valley below us and in Mary Magdalene's a mile away in Medomsley. The usual Saturday regulars stood beside Stuart and me in the yard in the stillness of the sunshine listening to the distant clanging. Gradually the bells stilled but the birds were silent and even the traffic seemed to have hushed.

'Bloody hell, I thought they'd dropped the Bomb!' said Mr Granger, my neighbour.

We all laughed with relief. I remember how close the fear was, that something like bells ringing could make us all instantly come out to gather in the open air and wonder and hold our breath, this fear we'd shared across the centuries since bells were first made. What did we listen for before there were bells?

'I reckon the blasting's got something to do with the Lights last night, electro magnetism. They don't know what they're playing with,' the one called Frankie said. He kept his hair clipped short and the sunshine came through the skin of his large ears with a rosy glow so that he looked like some kind of night creature caught in the firelight. I could see the blood veins like a map in the leathery skin.

'How would that make the bells ring? Take a strong magnet to do that, it's got to be the blasting, man,' said Mr Granger.

'Mebbe it is a bomb, then,' said Frankie.

'It's that test drilling and blasting over on Greymare Hill,' said Mr Granger. 'That, or they're using the big guns up on the Otterburn ranges. A volley of heavy artillery fire.' He sounded pleased with himself, but even as he spoke we heard the roar of the displaced water coming down the valley. I grabbed Stuart's arm.

'You know what that is,' said one of Frankie's cronies, 'The dam's burst.'

'Never,' said Frankie. 'Well, we're safe enough up here.'

Stuart patted my hand and I let go of him. 'I'd better take a look,' he said.

‘I’ll come with you,’ I said. I could hear sirens now along the bottom road.

‘You can’t leave Dawn in charge, look at her,’ said Stuart.

We all turned. She was standing next to Mr Granger like a frightened bunny.

‘Are you alright, flower?’ he asked.

‘It won’t stop,’ she whispered.

Behind me I heard the van door opening. I glanced around and saw Stuart, his hand on the door.

‘OK if I take the van?’ he called, already climbing in.

I turned back to Dawn. ‘Do you want to make us some tea?’

‘She shouldn’t be making tea, poor lass. I’ll put a brew on,’ said Frankie.

I didn’t like his tone and I was annoyed with Dawn. I shrugged acquiescence.

‘Come on, pet.’ He took Dawn by the arm and steered her towards the shed. ‘You’ll feel better after a nice cuppa.’

‘That’s you told,’ said Mr Granger.

I glared at the van as Stuart drove out of the yard. ‘Yes, well, Frankie doesn’t have to put up with her every day. It gets wearing.’

Mr Granger smiled.

‘Do you think the dam really has burst?’ I asked him.

‘It’s possible. It sounds like water down there, don’t know what else it could be, hasn’t rained properly for days. I can keep an eye on the place if you want to go and look.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Gan on, lass. We’ll not let the place fall down. I’d go myself, but I haven’t got the puff to get back up the hill.’

I hesitated. There were at least half a dozen people milling around the yard, but I knew most of them and they all seemed more interested in talking than pilfering plants and Frankie was doing a head-count for mugs.

‘Thanks, Mr Granger,’ I said.

By the time I’d jogged the half mile down the steep bank Stuart had parked the van on the pavement at the junction. The river roared below the trees, but I couldn’t see it from the main road. There was no traffic. Normally it would be difficult crossing the street at this time on a Saturday, but the only vehicle was a bus in the distance, the driver obliged

to keep to the timetable instead of stopping to wonder. I passed a small group of people standing on the corner, barely murmuring above the rumble of the water below.

‘Oi!’ someone shouted behind me. I pretended not to hear and set off down the Chare.

I didn’t have far to go. I felt the torrent rather than hearing it; the ground was trembling under my feet as I walked towards it. The whole valley bottom thrummed with the water’s energy, so that it seemed like some huge universal choir was singing, too loud for the music to be discerned by human ears. I’d only gone a few yards down before I could see trees sailing past in a brown silky ribbon of noise. I’d seen the Derwent in flood before, watched it sweep away a footbridge even, but it had never been like this. There was so much debris the water seemed incidental, little whirls of foam between the moving branches and tangles of fence posts and wire. The river’s course was no longer there. Nor was the road. The tarmac had been torn away fifty feet from where I stood. I knew the people who lived over the old bridge, but now that was underneath, somewhere. The new bridge had gone, too. The unfamiliarity was staggering yet it was already changing as I watched. A huge oak scudded to a standstill on its side right below me, dropped by the falling waters. I could have almost reached out and picked the little acorns rocking among the brown leaves but the yawning gap in the road reminded me how precarious my footing was.

Stuart grabbed me by my shoulder, his approach unheard in the din.

‘Emily! Did you not hear me shouting?’

‘It’s alright, the water’s going down already.’

‘It’s not safe.’

His voice was jagged. Abruptly it didn’t feel safe, as the unreality evaporated and left only the throbbing noise and the smell of water and earth and crushed leaves. All that magnificence and might was a present and very real danger. I followed him back up the abbreviated road away from the deafening river. More people had gathered in the road.

‘I can’t believe it. The dam was supposed to withstand anything,’ I said.

‘C’mon. I’ll give you a lift back up the hill.’

‘Have you tried to ring your mum?’ I asked, suddenly remembering that Stuart’s mother lived at Blackhall Mill, two miles downstream.

‘What do you think? She’s not answering her phone. No one can tell me anything. Shelley was taking the kids over for lunch. She’s not answering either.’

I climbed into the van. He slammed his door and honked the horn at a driver who had pulled up behind the Transit. He reversed off the pavement with a crash and over-revved as we set off in first gear. The air filled with the smell of diesel. I knew I should say something, but my mind went blank and the few moments the journey lasted left me no time to think.

The small crowd in the yard had swollen like the river. The nurseries had suddenly become a meeting point, a convenient place to talk about the drama. There was a festive excitement which sent a shiver down my spine. Five or six of them mobbed me when I was barely through the gate.

‘How is it down there?’ asked Mr. Granger.

‘I’ve never seen it like that. It’s taken the road away at Chare Bank and the old bridge is completely submerged. The new bridge is gone too, I think. There are so many trees in the river it’s hard to tell. Whole trees uprooted. Can you hear that, a sort of a humming?’

‘They say Stuart’s mam’s missing.’

I nodded and headed for the house, but Frankie called to me from the shed door.

‘Hey, Emily, come and have a look at Dawn.’

I felt my jaw clench. ‘What is it?’

‘She’s in a right state.’

He was standing next to her amongst the cobwebs and clutter. My eyes adjusted to the gloom. At first glance Dawn seemed perfectly normal, slumped listlessly over a mug of tea, sitting on the seat Stuart used when he was waiting for it to stop raining and he needed to keep an eye on the yard.

I looked up at Frankie. He reached out and touched her gently on the shoulder. Dawn shrank away from him. She was holding her head oddly, as though she had earache, and she was trembling so much it made her fringe quiver. I crouched down in front of her.

‘Dawn? Are you OK?’

She raised her eyes to mine, pale grey eyes I’d never really noticed before. She swallowed so hard it was painfully audible.

‘I’m just so scared,’ she whispered.

Frankie shook his head. ‘She won’t be told.’

‘Dawn, it’s over. The river is already going down.’

She dropped her gaze. ‘You’re wrong,’ she said.

21 Jack

The Ministry vet is inspecting the cattle-truck. Everything is reduced to paperwork and Jack's brother will see to all that. Jack walks away from the farm with his torn ear untended, bitter and fuming over Derek's silent blame.

A mist is rising from the reservoir below him and the air is rapidly cooling as evening approaches. The skies are clear enough for there to be frost tonight, the first frost of the year. Jack's shadow is vague in the confusion, the low sun projects it twenty feet in front of him shifting and distorted in the swirling water vapour. Wisps scatter in front of him and drift out over the water. The new hillside is a slope of mottled orange clay, smooth and featureless. Already Jack cannot remember the proper contours and is uncertain about where the path should start. His feet sink at every step into the unsettled ground. Someone yells at him in the distance but he ignores them and begins to pick his way over the landslide. Along the road across the top of the dam they are busy reversing the army trucks. Even at this distance Jack thinks he can see the red and blue wires they have threaded into the concrete, the electronic tell-tales to monitor movement. All that power, that energy, it must have gone somewhere.

The shape of the shoreline has changed. Jack's stream is gone, but a new trickle of water is flowing down from a different direction. As he stumbles further along he finds more streams nosing down through the soft earth. The quake has cracked open the aquifer and is forcing water up out of the ground in a new spring line. Jack's giant shadow ripples over the clumps and clods.

Now he slips and lands hard on his hip. The setting sun blinds him for a moment and as he struggles back to his feet, he sees the hillside green again. He rubs his eyes and the Martian landscape returns.

He must be level now with the drift mine entrance. He turns and squints into the sunset and reads the Ruffside hills across the water like a script; they are there, so he must be here, though here doesn't exist anymore. The alien hillside glows orange above the rising mist. He turns to see how little of the drift mine still shows and finds the red stream. He scrambles up to it, scattering loose clods, and has to put his hands out to climb. The bank is steeper than it was. When he comes to the spring he is already sinking onto his knees and he crawls to where the water bubbles up with enough force to make a little fountain about six inches high. As it rises it twists and catches the light,

the sky, the blood-red sun. Jack lays his cheek on the wet ground and puts his face into the kaleidoscopic water. He can feel his bristles scraping against the grain of the clay. Each droplet settles on his skin and finds its own way down, mixing with the blood from his torn ear. He opens his mouth and lets the water flow over his tongue and into his throat. He closes his eyes and digs his fingers into the wet earth. He doesn't stop drinking until his belly is tight. When Jack stands his shirt and the knees of his jeans are soaked but he doesn't seem to feel the cold. On the side on which he lay he is all clay. He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand and strides down the bank towards the dam and the thundering overflow.

The bank directly above the overflow marks the end of the landslide. The dark stand of Sitka spruce still lowers over the site, and seems to hold a darker, wetter climate beneath it which the sunset cannot reach. The thrashing water below is half vaporised as it crashes into the overflow barrier and the vegetation drips. The grass is slimed and sopping wet and a big chunk of the picnic area has fallen away, leaving an empty space hanging over the broiling water and only a few yards of turf between the trees and the new shoreline.

Straight ahead, men in Hi Viz jackets cluster around the overflow channel, ants from a distance, just as purposeful, but resolving into individuals as Jack approaches. He stands twenty feet from the brink and watches them. They are fishing in a dangerous tide on this inland sea. The reservoir is still finding its new level and its intake has increased now the aquifer has been breached, pouring out the fossil water it holds. The excess slides over the concrete barrier, frothy, brown and bristling with jetsam. Pale limbs bob and bang against the rim. The channel is taller than the men and wider than their arms can span and it is slick with slime and knee deep in water and debris. It is designed to be smooth and the steepness of the channel makes the water flow fast. The men struggle to stand among their ropes as they make repeated attempts to haul their catch over the top of the overflow so that it can be hoisted out.

Jack watches as one of the team slips and falls. He floats face down for a moment, then twists and grabs a blue rope and pulls himself to his knees. His chin is only just above the foaming water. A colleague rushes to help him stand, but in doing so releases the body he is holding. The fisherman's body, purple and twisted, is sucked past them into the overflow tunnel mouth.

The rescuer yells something into the face of the man who fell and they both turn to push against the flow, wading slowly back to their comrades holding onto the web of ropes.

Jack can see the men are struggling to save themselves now. They use some sort of sign language, form themselves into a Day-Glo millipede and clamber up onto the grass. They don't notice him standing nearby as they collect themselves, some on their knees, some flopping onto their backs. Jack steps into the trees.

22 Emily

Dawn was still sitting there as closing time came and went. Everyone seemed to have enjoyed themselves, drinking free mugs of tea in the sunshine and exchanging doomsday predictions. The army had been called in to monitor the dam, as if they could hold back another landslide, and the visitors saluted the helicopters as they flew over. I was aware of the absence of the test blasting now more than I had noticed its presence before the earthquakes. Frankie was the last to leave. Stuart still wasn't back with the van.

'Our Hilda got like that by the end,' Frankie said, nodding towards the shed as I walked him to the gate.

'Dawn's not got Alzheimer's, Frankie.'

'It can happen very young, they say.'

'Not in one afternoon.' I was tired and using the impatient tone with which I addressed old people when I wanted them to leave. Frankie looked hurt.

'She's just making a fuss. But thank you for looking after her today.'

'Aye, well. Oh, here's your chap.' He waved at the approaching van and had to step out onto the pavement as Stuart swung the Transit in. I took the opportunity to drag one gate across, effectively shutting Frankie outside.

'Bye-bye,' I said.

He cast a long look at the van, but Stuart didn't get out immediately. 'Oh, right, yes, goodbye,' Frankie said reluctantly.

I watched him begin to trudge down the road to his little house with a stab of remorse. I knew what it was like, evening after evening on your own, and Frankie's last conversation of the night was me wanting rid of him.

I turned as Stuart slammed the door. 'How are they?'

He locked the van before he turned around.

'They're safe. All of them.' He sounded tired and spoke without looking at me.

'Thank God.'

'Mam's a bit shaken, the river came into her front room. Sorry I took so long, I had to make two trips, she's staying with us tonight.'

'It could have been a lot worse.'

He nodded. 'Dawn's car's still here.'

‘So is Dawn,’ I said.

‘Why did you shut the gate, then?’

‘I’ve been trying to hustle everyone out for the last hour.’

‘Oh.’ He turned for the exit.

‘Actually, Stuart, I could do with a hand. Dawn’s just sitting there, in the shed, and she needs to go home.’

I needed her to go home.

Stuart spun round and strode across to the shed so that I had to jog to catch up with him.

Dawn snuffled into a grubby paper tissue as he opened the door. Her makeup was mostly rubbed off and she looked young. I leant against the door frame. It was awkward. Dawn always seemed so hardened to her haphazard life; this soggy little girl crying in my shed didn’t seem to be the same person at all.

Stuart hunkered down in front of her. ‘Hey,’ he said.

‘Is it safe?’ Her voice was husky with crying.

‘Course it is. Everyone’s fine. It’s time you got home, though.’

Dawn nodded and looked at him through the pink tips of her bedraggled fringe. ‘I’m so frightened, just this … can you hear that noise?’ Her voice raised into a question. She breathed out raggedly, trying to stem more tears.

I cleared my throat, ‘Everyone’s safe. The river’s getting back to normal. That’s all you can hear, the river.’ It was easier to pretend that I didn’t understand what she was talking about, though the strange reverberation was filling my head like a distant song.

Dawn began to cry in earnest. ‘It ha-ha-happened so fast—’

‘But it’s over now,’

‘But there’s—’ She hugged herself.

Stuart reached out and rubbed her arm. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘We’ve all been frightened today. But it’s alright now. Everything’s going to be alright.’

I would have believed him, if he’d spoken to me like that. We waited while the sobbing wound down. She blew her nose wetly.

‘Are you OK to drive, or would you like Em to give you a lift home?’ asked Stuart.

Dawn shook her head. She seemed stiff, shrunken somehow into a little peg doll. It must have been cold sitting there all day.

'I'd better get going,' she said eventually.

Stuart held out his hand to help her up. I held the shed door open for them. Stuart supported her like an invalid across the yard. He helped her into her car, then he bent down to talk to her for a moment. He held the gate open for her as she drove through and before I could say anything he waved to me casually and slipped through the gates after her.

The weight of the day fell on my shoulders as I watched him walk away, his gait familiar, the slight defiance in the angle of his shoulders, braced against the world, a young man, almost, from this distance, even though he was heading towards forty with two kids. I stretched, trying to shake off the familiar feeling of loneliness when they left. My shoulders were tight and my teeth were aching from holding my peace and not snapping at everyone until they went. I had been treading on other peoples' toes all afternoon. I felt restless and impatient, as though I'd been cooped up for days; cabin fever, born of being honour-bound and shackled to a place where I had very little natural inclination to be, surrounded by people I barely knew, not really. Grandad George had been good to me at a time when nothing could have been worse, and he would be so disappointed that I wasn't happy. I knew he'd missed his son, but I'd never known my father; we hadn't even shared that loss in common, yet he'd loved me as naturally as if I'd always been part of him. He had felt I belonged here even if I didn't.

Now I was on shifting sand, this background uneasiness sharply counterpointed the real prickling nervousness of my recent encounters with Tim, both real and imaginary.

The telephone began to ring while I was still standing in the yard feeling sorry for myself. I picked up the shed extension as it was closest. This was the phone Stuart usually answered. The receiver was gritty and smelt like the shed itself, dust and weed killer and oil.

'*Emily? It's Angie.*'

'Hello, how are you?'

'*Very cross, if you must know. I've had this letter from the solicitors*.'

'Oh?'

‘*There’s no breakdown in the valuation of individual items. I specifically told you I wanted the dining room table*.’

‘I’ll sort it out.’

‘*When —?*’

She continued for some time. I should have managed it better and I was in the wrong, but it seemed so petty after the reservoir overflowing and people being in real danger. Angie sounded very like my grandmother. I hoped my mother’s voice had not sounded like that.

‘*Emily? Are you still there?*’

‘I said I was sorry. You’ll get your paws on the money as soon as humanly possible.’

‘*How dare you! I’m devastated at Gran’s death, so is Tim. Devastated. Tim says you’ve even changed the locks so we can’t get in.*’

‘Speaking of Tim, did you know your brother’s still picking up young girls?’

She made a strangled retching noise. ‘*Not this again*—’

I slammed down the receiver so hard it bounced back out of its cradle and swung below the bench. I replaced it and sank onto Stuart’s chair. The draught I made caught a newly spun cobweb that stretched from the shelf above the telephone to a stack of musty telephone directories that had lain unmoved since George was still alive. A small stripy spider scuttled into the centre of it. I watched it for a while. Angela had the integrity of a holocaust-denier. She had once held the power to set my life straight, to corroborate and exonerate me. I would never forgive her for keeping her silence, and she would never forgive me for telling the truth. And she would be straight on to Tim, and he would be straight back to me. The shed wouldn’t offer much sanctuary. I wished I’d kept my mouth shut. Reluctantly I levered myself out of the chair and went to fetch my jacket.

As I locked the house I thought of never seeing it again, just driving away. It was Saturday and I should have been heading off for a night with friends, or a boyfriend, company and fun and happiness. A night of possibilities. I had let this life happen to me so maybe I had what I deserved. I stood and looked out across the yard at the valley, unchanged from this distance, soft in the low evening light. Poor hillside, it had no choice about the blasting, it had to just lie there and take it.

It seemed like a good idea, driving out to Barley Hill to see what had happened at the reservoir. Tim wouldn't look for me there and I was curious to find out what had happened to the dam, and if it was the blasting that was to blame.

I had to circumnavigate round the area, driving up onto the moors, on a road that followed the top of the valley's watershed, because all the more direct roads were closed. The bridge in Blanchland was upstream of the reservoir, but I guessed that most of the other bridges over the Derwent had been washed away as the reservoir shed its burden down the steep little valley.

The sun had set and although the sky was still bright I realised it would soon be getting dark. It already felt more like night than evening by the time I turned down towards the car park at Millshield. I'd never seen so many cars there. I guessed a lot of people had come to have a look at the landslide, tourists like myself, but three of the vehicles were paramedics and there was a coast guard Land Rover which seemed unnecessary to me at the time. Its floodlight made the rustling waterside beyond the car park darker.

As I walked across the rabbit cropped turf down to the shore I felt a misanthropic surge of hope that Jack and his wretched cottage had been crushed under the landslide. Up close the water looked black and viscous, like molasses, as though it had lost its ability to reflect the sky, and it sounded different.

As my eyes became accustomed to the dimness, vague blots of darkness around me resolved into three or four groups of people looking out across the water. I could hear them murmuring as softly as the breeze in the goat willow. My heart began to race. Although I often walked in the dark, meeting others doing the same always alarmed me, always giving me that sick lurch of panic, mind blanked, ready to run.

The sky still held some light, but down there it was getting too dark to see much. The reservoir was so full it seeped ink-black between the narrow stems and now I could hear its soft sucking noises in the quiet lulls between their conversations. I had intruded on their private vigil. I slunk towards the darkness at the edge of the picnic field.

‘Hello?’ A man called, only a few metres to my right.

‘Hey, who’s that?’ A challenge, just behind me.

I turned and ran without thinking. My heart thumped so I couldn’t hear properly as I ran. I nearly turned my ankle as my foot landed on the loose tarmac and flotsam on the old road. I sprinted up, away from the water, guided by the gap in the trees above the line of the road, and turned blindly into the shore-side pathway. There was a gate a few yards along the path with some sort of hunting-wicket fastening that I had no time to work out so I climbed over it instead. The gate rattled loudly as I jumped down into the dark. I crouched down and tried to hold my breath to listen. I could hear people talking, calling, searching for someone, possibly me. A dozen heartbeats later and the voices began to recede. It was very dark. I had fled without thinking that these people might be just as disconcerted in the dark as I was, that they might have spoken for reassurance, not to threaten me.

I didn’t dare go back, though. If they did mean me harm I’d never get to my car without being seen because it was parked too near the floodlights of the coast guard’s Land Rover. I decided to follow the path around the reservoir to Jack’s farm and go back to the car park via the lane from Cronkley. I hoped that the strangers would have gone by then, whatever their intentions.

The way ahead was mostly imagination, a rumour of reflected light winding through the blackness. I pulled my phone out of my jacket pocket. There was no signal and I didn’t have enough battery left to use it as a torch. I edged forward, the water licking the bank not far below me on my right. I’d come to see the landslip, not meander foolishly through the night. I’d lost all sense of purpose except evading the people at the picnic site.

The silhouette of a little stand of trees stood out vaguely against the sky further along the path. The water on my right was invisible and the scrubby bankside rising on my left was impenetrably black. Suddenly the danger transferred itself into the night, from flesh and blood to the horror of malignant darkness sneaking up behind me. Too late I recognised my paranoia, choosing the dark path over the slight chance that strangers would mean me harm. The choice was based on risk aversion rather than common sense and now I was too frightened to make a rational decision. My teeth were chattering so much I had to clamp them shut to hear the water and the wind above my heartbeat and the constant thrumming in my head. I took a tentative step forward, then another, feeling the grit on the path through my trainers. I started to count my steps, a hundred and fifty, two hundred, three hundred, five hundred. I was going uphill now. The land rose above the reservoir before dipping down below Jack's farm; I could remember that much from driving along the lane to his cottage. The trees closed around me. It seemed intensely cold under their branches and I was surrounded by dripping water, though there had been no rain for days. I could no longer distinguish any path. I stood still and listened, as if sound might guide me. At least it might stop me falling into the water. The wavelets slopping on the rocks below me seemed closer than they should have been. I tentatively teetered on, one foot in front of the other, following my nose, but making sure I was going up rather than down. There was nothing else I could do. A few metres further on I stubbed my toes and tripped, landing on a small pile of heavy flat stones. They grated and slid under me, several thudding onto the soft floor of the wood. I levered myself gingerly upright and listened, but there was only the dripping foliage and a breeze rustling high above me and the slap of water again on my right. I felt my way around the pile. It did not seem to be part of a wall leading anywhere so I set off again, this time downhill, hoping I was still going in the right direction by following the sound of the shoreline. There were lights in the distance, moving lights, flickering between the tree trunks. I guessed there would be people working on the dam. If I could find the path again I could walk along and get help, maybe a lift back to my car. I checked my phone for a signal, but there was still none. As I put it back in my pocket a twig snapped close behind me. I held my breath but everything seemed as it was before, the wind in the branches above me, the water on my right and the soft dripping all around. I began to pick my way along. Now I could make out where the trees ended. There was a gap, a place where the path left the trees, a vague smudge in

the darkness. Softly, at some distance, something padded forwards. I couldn't see anything and it wasn't loud enough to be human. I fought to curb my panic; there were a dozen wild things it could be, all of them with more business here than me. I stumbled onwards to the relative brightness in front of me and after a few metres I plunged out into the open, out of the trees, into a circle of faint light held in the mist. There was wire fencing on either side of me, defining the path. The relief left me feeling dizzy.

The lights on the dam were still there and I could see the new moon through the mist. Feeling braver now the trees were behind me, I stopped to listen for a moment. The quiet footfall stopped a split-second later, a fox maybe? Curious, perhaps, probably as frightened as I was. Did everyone feel so scared so much of the time? Was it normal?

I could make out Jack's farmstead, dark shapes above me to my left, and a faint glimmer of light in an outbuilding. The path was squelchy underfoot, but easy to follow, although I slipped once or twice.

The path rapidly became wetter as it dropped down to the waterside until I was slopping along through puddles. I came to a fork in the way and stopped. My companion waited out of sight. I could either almost double back onto the Cronkley road, sneak past Jack's place and walk back along the lane to the car, or I could continue to the dam. If I went back to the car park those people might still be waiting for me. I decided to continue towards the lights. I walked as briskly as I could in the mist feeling for the wire fence to keep me straight. Water squidged out of my trainers with every step.

I'd not gone far when I realised I was almost level with the reservoir, ten yards further and I put my foot into the water. It felt very different to the puddles, for a start it was moving. It was also deadly cold. I tried to pick my way along the edge, reasoning that even if I got wet feet at least I couldn't miss the dam this way. The lights and the moon were obliterated for a moment by the swirling vapour. The darkness was already playing on my mind; it felt more like blindness than something outside. In my head the reservoir was a bright memory of flashing sunlight and intense colour and it seemed impossibly different now in the dark.

The earth by the waterside was loose, like a ploughed field, and very soggy. I hadn't gone more than a few metres before I tripped on something. When I put my hands out to save myself my left hand was sucked down into the mud and my right hand slid along a cold, wet object the shape and texture of a wet rounders' bat. I struggled to

stand up in the sucking clay but there was no purchase against the slimy substrate, and I landed on my knees in the water. I put my weight on what I thought must be a branch to lever myself up. The limb rolled away as I thrashed around, and for a moment I found a hand, stiff and cold, the fingers curled into the palm. I screamed in the dark and I swear I saw a head and shoulders bob up for a moment. There was a horrible plop and water sloshed against me as I crawled away on my hands and knees, groping in the mud for something like firm land. I felt grit against my knuckles and finally my knees knocked into the broken crust of a manmade surface and I scrambled to my feet.

'Help me!' I yelled towards the lights. Behind me something scattered off along the path.

The lights on the dam were too far away, the ground too treacherous. Jack's farm was the closest thing to help there was.

I banged on Jack's front door and called until I was hoarse. I was dripping wet and shivering so violently I thought my teeth might break against each other. My phone had slipped from my pocket when I was thrashing around in the reservoir and I wasn't going to go back for it. I couldn't be sure of what I'd found in the dark, but I should do something, tell someone, let them find it and take the onus of comprehension from me. It couldn't have been merely imagination, could it? I had not been expecting to find a body and I had no memories of such things to become confused with reality. I had never encountered a drowned corpse, nor even been here before in the dark. But I had dreamt of tangled bodies in that water since I was small. It was dark and cold and I had already been frightened. It was an ancient thing that I had found, stiff and hard and slippery: a drowned man, lost with the flood only hours ago, a fisherman perhaps, would still have been pulpy, soft and fleshy. And it wouldn't have grinned at me as it sank.

Dear God.

'Jack!' I thumped the door one last time. Maybe it was Jack that I'd found, cured to leather somehow.

I groped my way back to his workshop across slimy cobbles and tried the handle of the side-door. It was unlocked. Jack had trespassed on my property but it still felt wrong to go in, even through the deadening cold and wetness.

I fumbled for the light switch and sat down on the chair by the workbench before my legs gave way and tried to force myself to think. All I had to do was to

follow the road back to the car park and get into my car. It was only a mile or so, but my trainers had worn holes in my heels where the back of the wet shoes had rubbed through my socks. I couldn't remember running, but I must have. Then I thought I heard Jack's voice, an urgent whisper right beside me. I turned and looked for the first time at the large model on the bench almost touching my elbow.

It was unmistakably my grandparents' house. Raw and unfinished, but there in the bones, a three dimensional sketch in MDF. He really was making the model.

It presence drew my eyes, like a voodoo doll, as though I should be watchful of it. The house was easily two metres long and it opened on three elevations. The front needed to be divided into four separate openings to get at it all. The attic bedrooms opened too, with hinged flaps in the roof. One section was open into the hallway displaying the main stairs, the stone floor, the details of the door into Grandpa's study, all laid bare like an autopsy. I scrambled out of the chair as if the house might suck me in. Jack's obsession surrounded me with his claustrophobic miniature world of condensed reality, lining the shelves and benches in his workshop. And yet I had already returned to the model, my hands inside and exploring it before my chilled brain could consciously resist.

The pele tower section of the house opened on a side elevation. When I pulled it wide the dark velvet curtains swayed in the windows. The books were already in the library. Jack was moving in. They were just folds of leather, stuck down, faked in the most part, except for a tiny gardening book which lay open on the table, printed in extraordinary detail. I knocked it off when I reached for it and couldn't pick it up again because my hand was trembling so much. Above the library, in my grandfather's study, I saw the desk and the leather chair by the hearth and the cruel caryatids holding up the fireplace, and the tiny simulacra of his shaming pornography.

Jack had made these, somehow, either from a blind compulsion to copy or from some attempt to communicate what he knew. The half-finished carcass felt like a message. Did he hope I would come here to see it one day, or did he know?

There was not yet a front panel for the kitchen end of the house, and very little detail yet, no flags, floorboards, tiles or skirting or cornices, just the light fittings. I lifted up the roof section where my bedroom and the nursery should be in the attic. These rooms were unfinished too, even the doors were missing. All except the door at the top of the flight of stairs that led to my old room. Perfect in every detail, the pane of

glass lay shattered on the floor. My body convulsed so violently I thought I would be physically sick. I knelt on the floor of the workshop and rested my forehead on the side of the bench. He'd been there, he must have been: last night while I floundered around in fear and uncertainty he'd been orchestrating the whole thing.

For a moment I hoped with all my heart that it had been Jack, cold and stiff, in the reservoir. But if it wasn't, I really didn't want to meet him again. I pulled myself upright and glanced around. In the windows I saw only my reflection. Jack's wall clock said ten to eleven. He would know someone had been here. I had dripped everywhere, even in the dolls' house and the soles of my trainers had made muddy patterns on the floor. My clumsy hands had disordered Jack's essay. This building was no more shelter from the dark and cold than the road outside. I stumbled out into the night.

I was limping by the time I'd walked to the end of Jack's lane. There were plastic barricades at the junction. I had to feel my way between them. They must have closed the road earlier, after the landslip, and forgotten the fishermen's footpath. I found my way down the blackness to the car park guided by the floodlight on the coast guard's Land Rover still shining in the car park. Only the emergency vehicles and my car still remained. I trudged to the Land Rover and banged on the window. The door was locked, no help, no human company. I was stiff with cold and my skin stung where my sodden clothes had chafed. I opened my car door and sat in the driver's seat and tried to take off my trainers, but my fingers were too numb. I started the motor and sat for a few minutes, steaming up the car.

I meant to report the body in the reservoir. In all the long and miserable walk back to my car I had thought of little else, anxious I would be treated like a fool, but so frightened that it really was just my imagination that I would prefer to know that there was someone bobbing dead in the reservoir. I had touched it. If only I could be sure. It had been such a brief contact, there would be branches in the water and it was too dark to see what I had seen. I couldn't even try to explain. Before I got to the *thing*, my description of the crowd of people would sound unbalanced, and my reason for taking the waterside path now sounded stupid, even to me. If Jack had drowned, then more than anything I did not want that abominable miniature house to connect us. I put the car into reverse. It had been nothing but fear and circumstance and an insanely over active imagination. I had form for doing this. They would know, they would all know.

And then again, I told myself, if — *if* — it really had been a body, then it was already too late and I need play no part in it.

Driving hurt the blisters on my heels. If half the roads in the area hadn't been closed I would have been in trouble. As it was I could barely manage. The fragile bubble of tin around me and the ribbon of tarmac across the moors were flimsy protection from the vast night that stretched out in all directions. High up, above Blanchland, I could see the lights of Carlisle in the west and Newcastle in the east, from coast to coast, but scarcely another light between.

23 Jack

The sickle moon has set; the sky is dark except for the faintest brightening just above the brim of the eastern end of the valley. It's cold and there's a strong smell of rotting vegetation. The lights over the dam have gone and a soft rain is falling now, but there are other lights, dim and green, almost imagination, like the fading Northern Lights. It seems such a long time ago. So much is blank, so much lost, he cannot be sure. The rumbling song in his head sounds more like shrieking now, an age-long splintering of protesting wood. He has caught his death skulking under the wet trees until the men packed up and left.

Jack creeps out from the dripping shadows. He follows the new path he made with shorter strides than his outward journey so that every other step sinks down into the crumbled clay.

He is almost back onto the solid chipping path, above the tide marks where it has not been swept away, when the dog lopes forward and stands in his way. He takes a step towards the collie and it growls at him. Its tail wags slowly.

'Gyp, man, give over.'

The dog's growl falters, but still it holds its ground.

'Down boy!'

Gyp doesn't lie down. He stands between Jack and his cottage.

Jack sniffs the air and growls back at the dog. The dog's aggression falters and it begins a thin anxious whine. Jack walks forward and grabs it by the collar.

Jack knows. Emily's footprints are here on the floor. The front of the dolls' house is open. He imagines these strange changes in the earth have left him with the ability to see so far that he feels he can see Emily now, just by being next to the miniature. He sinks down in front of the house and sniffs in the fine MDF dust in case her fingers have left a trace. It makes him sneeze. He creaks to his feet leaving a broken crust of orange clay dust on the floor. Out of habit he fetches the long handled dustpan from the corner and sweeps it up, then returns to the dolls' house. He stands for a moment, then reaches for the front panel of the next section and aligns it carefully, making sure that everything is tight so that the model will fit closely enough to give the illusion that the parts are one whole, a real building.

The model is there to be finished, but already Emily has seen it. Does the excitement balance the disappointment? His hands tremble as he lays the section of MDF down. He rubs his chin and sheds a powder of fine particles. His reflection in the dark window shows a man half made of clay.

The noise of a chopper motor makes him jolt. Has he been asleep? He opens the French window and watches as a helicopter search beam sweeps over the dam, making the distance disappear. He can see the flood lamps again and the tiny figures moving with unreal clarity as the beam rakes across the barriers. Slowly the chopper begins to trace the new shoreline, fingering the water's edge, retracing Jack's steps. He slips back inside his workshop and switches off the light, waiting in the dimness of the early morning until the searchlight sweeps past.

He sits for a long time, listening to the rain, pondering where all that power went to. He feels it's only right and just that some should come to him. Barley Hill is where he belongs.

24 Emily

‘Sorry, did I wake you?’ Stuart wasn’t smiling. I hadn’t even put my slippers on and stood barefoot on the doorstep in my dressing gown.

‘I slept in.’

‘I can see that. Are we going to open today?’

‘It’s Sunday. Why wouldn’t we?’

He reached round the door and clicked the light switch a couple of times.

‘Oh.’ I wrapped my dressing gown tighter around me. It suddenly felt colder, knowing there was no power to warm up with.

‘Apart from anything else we can’t use the card machine; it would have to be cash only,’ he said.

‘Is Dawn here yet?’

‘I haven’t seen her. The gates were locked when I came in just now. Look, I won’t open the gates yet. You go and get dressed and I’ll phone the electric board again. Maybe it’s going to be fixed soon.’

My bedroom was so cold when I went back up that I imagined I could feel the warmth radiating off the bedclothes still. It was ten o’ clock. I’d slept through St Ebba’s Sunday morning bells, but they’d become caught up in bad dreams. For a minute I forgot that the body hadn’t been part of the nightmare, too.

Stuart had lit the sitting room fire by the time I came back down. I could smell the smoke from the kitchen. He put the matches on the table.

‘Where did you get to last night?’ he asked.

‘Nowhere,’ I said.

He shrugged and washed his hands under the kitchen tap. My trainers were standing in a muddy pool on the tiles right beside him.

‘It’s not safe, wandering around in the dark on your own.’

‘Has there been any news?’

He dried his hands carefully, looking like he was debating if he would accept the change of subject.

‘They can’t say when the electric will be on. Its local, some places still have power. It made the national news last night, the landslide and the reservoir overflowing. Did you miss it? They’re going to have talks about suspending the blasting and test

drills, but they're trying to say it had nothing to with it. They reckon five people are still missing, four dead confirmed so far.'

'Drowned in the reservoir?'

'I don't know any details. Are you OK?'

'Won't you have a coffee? I can boil a pan of water as soon as the fire's caught.'

'I'll get back home if we aren't opening.'

'Then you think we shouldn't open at all today?'

'Well, people are still missing. We can't take card payments, and anyway, no one's in the mood for shopping. It looks bad, business as usual.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right. But stay for a coffee, at least.'

He hung the hand towel over the back of a chair and shook his head. 'No, I'll get home, if that's OK. I'll have to give Shelley a hand with Mam. She's still shaken up.'

'Of course.' I stood back to let him past. 'See you tomorrow, then.'

'Aye, course.' He was already heading up the passage towards the door. 'I might pop in later, tidy up a bit, if it fines up.'

The breeze caught the door and slammed it shut behind him. I don't know if I would have told him about the reservoir if he had stayed, but the opportunity was gone anyway. The daylight dropped a curtain of unreality between me and the events of the night before. The police would be inundated with information. I'd read somewhere it takes three days for a body to rise to the surface in fresh water. If it was a body, then it would be found by someone else. It was a reservoir, not the Atlantic.

I don't have days off. A long lonely Sunday stretched out ahead of me. I turned on the tap to fill a pan. The water ran brown and smelt like the reservoir. I poured it out and drank orange juice instead and went upstairs to put on another sweater.

I brought the book down from my bedside and dozed in front of the fire for most of the day, waking a couple of times to put more coal on the fire. The third time I woke with rain pelting against the windows like handfuls of gravel. I'd slept through the afternoon.

The new grey cat was watching me. I tried to get it to come and sit on my knee, but it didn't trust me. At least it was company and I was pleased when it curled up in front of the sitting room fire as though it always did. I sat there into the evening. The

light was too poor to read, so instead I cradled the book on my lap like a child and talked over it to the cat.

‘I don’t know what to do, puss.’

The cat stretched out, warming its stomach and purring up at the fire.

‘I think maybe I have gone mad.’

The cat flicked the end of its tail, but continued to purr, competing in volume with the rain pelting down the windows in the dark outside.

‘Some sort of a breakdown, do you think?’

The corners of the room were deep in shadow.

‘Paranoia mainly. And imagination.’

The cat yawned and curled up into a bun. I knelt down on the hearthrug next to the fire and she finally let me stroke her head. Madness seemed preferable to all the worry about the house and Tim and Jack. It might be quite restful.

When I opened my eyes the fire was out and it was very dark. I was leaning back against the armchair and my left foot had gone to sleep. The cat had gone, but the dream stayed with me. Tim, full grown, sweaty and angry, searching my grandmother’s house, not for me this time, but for the child I had seen playing there. In the dream I knew I had to do something to stop him, but Stuart kept shouting from somewhere, ‘*Are you mad?*’ so that I was torn between saving the child and not upsetting Stuart. And someone called my name again but I couldn’t be sure if that was just part of the dream.

I stood up as silently as possible and crept to the light switch. The power was still off. I had no means of telling what time it was. It was raining, which would delay the daybreak, and I had wrecked my internal sense of time by sleeping through the day. I felt my way along to my jacket hanging up by the umbrella stand in the hall and rummaged through the pockets for my phone and the comfort of connection. Remembering I’d lost it brought back other things I wanted to forget.

‘No!’ I said aloud. I put my hands up to my ears to try to shut out the awful thoughts and the low, persistent hum that still afflicted me. I felt it through my jaw, rather than hearing it, like the throb of a bass speaker transmitted through the ground.

I opened the front door and stepped out into the evening before my head burst. The yard was not much lighter than inside, but the car’s courtesy light lit up, warm and inviting and the engine started with a sound of modernity and safety. The clock showed

half past four, a couple of hours until dawn, too little time to try to go back to sleep, too long to bear feeling so uneasy on my own in the quiet and dark. I turned the heater up.

25 Jack

The wind has dropped and the waters have stopped heaving. The rain falls in sheets, grey veils dragging down the clouds. Water, rain and vapour limit the valley. The reservoir might be an ocean or a flight pond, it's impossible to tell in this weather with its definition washed away. Soon it will be dark. The nights are drawing in fast.

The workmen tramp out of the greyness along the lane. They knock at the farmhouse door. Jack switches off the desk lamp. Above the rain their footsteps sound strangely echoing on the tarmac. Their noise is distorted by the mist enclosing them on this cold Sunday afternoon. They march past the workshop to the cottage and hammer on Jack's front door. Jack sits still and strains to hear what they are saying. One of them thumps on the side door to the workshop.

'Hello. Northern Utilities here. Anyone home?'

Jack shrinks back behind the dolls' house, but there is another man at the French window.

Jack's voice wavers. 'Go away!'

'We've come about your electricity supply.'

'Leave me alone.'

There is a pause. He can hear them shuffling outside the French windows.

'Mr Roberts?'

One of them has his hands cupped round his face, pressed up against the glass. Jack gets to his feet. The man raps on the glass when he sees the movement.

Jack edges towards the door and fumbles with the bolts, top and bottom, and the key.

'Mr Roberts. Hello, this is just a courtesy call to make sure you're managing and to let you know that there will be a power outage for the next few hours while we undertake some major emergency repairs in the area.'

There are only three of them, Jack thought there were more. He relaxes his grip on the door a little.

'Come again?'

The man sighs. Water is running in rivulets down his chin. The company issue sou'wester protects his face and neck when he's looking at his hands, but not when he holds his head up to talk. He licks the rain off his upper lip.

‘We’re turning your electricity off for a few hours. Will you be all right?’

‘Dark early today.’

‘Can you go to a neighbour’s?’

‘What neighbours?’

The man glances sideways at his colleague.

‘We don’t have to do this,’ says the third man, speaking in the direction of the reservoir. ‘It’s a fucking courtesy call.’

‘Is the house next door empty?’

Jack does not think it is empty now. It’s full of the sounds he’s heard at other times and pictures that cannot be there, but that stand out so bright they make the world around him dimmer. It didn’t used to be like that, memory used to be contained inside his head, not spilled out in front of him.

‘Are you alright, Mr Roberts?’

‘Shouldn’t we take him with us?’

‘Shit, Si, this is daft. We’re not Social Services. Leave the miserable old sod,’ the third man hisses as if Jack was deaf.

Jack can hear him. And he can hear his wife screaming *you miserable old sod*, like she’s in front of him, and Mr Rogers, his teacher, shouting, and his father and his brother. And all the aggravation one human brain can hold wells up and smashes down with the quiet, competent force of a hillside sloughing its soil off into the reservoir… and they are gone into the fog, and Jack can still hear them as clearly as if they were still standing there so he waits until he is alone. He does not know how this happens, that is something he can’t see. It leaves him like a tide leaves the beach, stripped bare, with everything needing to be learnt again. And it is getting worse each time and he doesn’t know how they can’t hear the hillside, too.

The rain is soft, an insistent hiss on the surface of the water below the house, like the crackle of electricity. Water gurgles in the down pipes from the gutter. Inside his workshop it’s easier to ignore the sounds in his head. It’s far too dark to see so Jack walks through the dolls’ house with his fingers, tracing the paths Emily has taken.

26 Emily

The new lock turned smoothly. I reached for the lights but nothing came on. The darkness took on a distinctive quality around me. It seemed solid, as though the old vicarage permitted me to push through, but could stop me if it wanted to. It was unfair, the streetlights were on, why was the electricity off inside? I'd come all this way for more than this.

Had the streetlights been on? I had driven through town (why? It wasn't on the way), and had been unprepared for the blackness. The streets were empty, mine was the only car. The few people I saw were outside the big supermarkets, a group of teenagers hunched like moths in the vague blue emergency lighting that spilled out onto the parking area, their faces gaunt and bleached like skulls. It was always darkest before the dawn and whatever arrangement people had made in the dark, none showed now. Cemetery Road looked so different, the abandoned church seemed so much bigger and the large cemetery was a black void on the other side of the road beyond the railings. The night was filled with distant sirens and burglar alarms and a constant drizzle.

So now I groped my way through the house. The watchfulness I had expected, but not that I would be completely blind, so that the knowledge was all one way. I slid along the walls towards the kitchen. I could remember where the candles were, Dana had found them last Wednesday. Had it really only been last week? I closed my eyes and negotiated the furniture by memory. The last matches I had seen were in the sitting room.

I'm not sure why I came upstairs, but I walked through the bedrooms, the best bedroom, my uncle's old room, Mrs. Stokoe's bedroom, I must have been in there before. Upstairs, in the attic, I showed the little candle round, took it into corners, shone its trembling light beneath the beds and into the linen cupboard and the ancient bathroom tucked under the rafters. I showed it the streaks of verdigris, the cracked bar of soap, veined like marble, and the rusty tin of Vim. We went together to my Grandpa's bedroom and gazed on the religious texts, framed and faded, on the walls.

Then I took the flickering companionable light to show it round the lumber room. It wasn't empty now, nor was it filled with rubbish. It was a bedroom. I should have known. This had been my mother's room. Some of the ornaments, the little tea-set and the Russian dolls, they had been hers, too. My candle began to gutter, I held my

hand around the flame, but there was only a puddle of wax in the holder now. When I looked up from the dying flame the room was filled with the rubbish I had known, a brief glimpse before the candle went out and I could hear footsteps coming back….

I sat bolt upright, aware I had screamed to wake myself up.

I was in my car still, the engine running. The nurseries' gates were padlocked shut in front of me. It wasn't footsteps I could hear. They had resumed the blasting. The new day was so miserably dull I had to look at the clock to see how late it was. It was still raining, but gently now. My throat hurt and I was sick with hunger. I wiped my mouth on the side of my hand. I switched off the windscreen wipers and released the handbrake to let the car trundle backwards into its normal parking space.

The dream was bad enough, but I had fallen asleep in the car with the engine running. I walked stiffly over to the house. The power still wasn't on. I found some crackers in the pantry and ate them with cheese and piccalilli while I waited for the pan to boil on the sitting room fire. I choked on crumbs when the phone rang, and couldn't speak for a moment.

'*Emily? Emily? Are you OK*?'

'Stuart?'

'*I'm down at Ebchester. It's Dawn.*'

'It's eight-thirty.'

'*No, Dawn. Our Dawn. She's down here.*'

It took a few attempts to understand.

Stuart was waiting for me at the bottom of the bank when I got there. I parked on the pavement where he had parked on Saturday.

The street below was thronging with people waving banners. The main road down the valley was still open to traffic, although there were diversion signs, advising motorists to avoid the Lintzford Bridge and go up the bank through Medomsley and Burnopfield. The river had broken the bridges, but travel was still possible, or would have been if it were not for the crowd blocking the road. There were chainsaws screaming through timber down below the road on the riverbank.

'She's with them,' he said.

I couldn't see her. There were maybe three hundred people all milling round. Some were knocking on doors trying to enlist others. I stepped into the crowd and they

flowed around me as though I was a rock in a stream. Everyone was being so quiet that I could still hear the chainsaws above them as they passed around me. Stuart's voice rose behind me and I waited for the current to carry him to me. He was holding Dawn by the arm of her favourite nylon bomber jacket. She was wearing cream coloured leggings and a short pink corduroy skirt and she was holding a flimsy placard made from the inside of a pizza box tied onto a garden cane with wire ties, the sort that are used to fasten freezer bags. It had 'STOP THE DIG' written in marker pen in Dawn's careful, rounded letters. Many of the other banners said that, or simply had the symbol of the wind turbines, the emblem that embodied the local protests. They passed us by with the determined urgency of somnambulists following a predestined path that they had no conscious control over. A middle aged man trod on my foot and murmured an automatic apology, but didn't stop. He looked earnest and anxious, his face tense, his mind elsewhere. Stuart came up, still holding on to Dawn.

'Dawn?' I said.

She gazed at me with wide, vacant eyes that reflected the pale grey sky.

'Hey,' said Stuart, gently shaking her shoulder.

She turned to him for a moment as the crowds around us began to thin. We were being left behind. Dawn lunged after them, so that Stuart had to let her go because he couldn't have stopped her without using physical force. We caught up with her and walked along on either side.

'Talk to me, Dawn,' Stuart said.

'They have to stop the blasting.'

'OK, but it's Monday. You've got to be at work in ten minutes.'

'We have to stop them.'

'Hold on, wait a minute, Dawn. Stand still, can't you.' Stuart sounded exasperated.

Dawn glanced at him, she looked close to tears. 'We have to stop them,' she hissed. 'Can't you feel it? The whole place, underneath, it's going right through me. Like the ground's groaning at me.'

I put my hand up over her own small hand as she gripped the bamboo shaft. She shuddered so violently it passed a shiver down my arm. I let go quickly.

'You wanted the opencasting last week,' Stuart said.

She shook her head at him and pulled away, trotting to catch up with the stragglers. Her makeshift sign gave up and folded itself in two around the cane and slipped down towards her knuckles. She held her arm up higher. Stuart dropped back and we stood together in the middle of the street and watched the crowd walk on up the road. The patter of feet sounded like leaves rustling in a forest. They were maybe two hundred yards away when they began to sing. No-one seemed to know the words, it was just a dirge-like murmur with a vague tune. It made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. I gave an involuntary shiver.

'Are you cold?' asked Stuart.

'Someone trod on my grave,' I said.

'Well, I never thought Dawn would turn political,' he said, watching the crowd.

I turned around and we began to walk back towards the car, stepping up onto the pavement although there were no cars or buses.

'Did you hear, there've been more landslips,' Stuart asked.

I shook my head.

'Yeah, over at Hedley on the Hill and at the quarry at Newlands. They did a test drill to find out what was happening an hour ago. More of the bank has fallen into the reservoir at Cronkley as well, near the dam. They can't stabilise the bridges because the river flow is so erratic.' He sounded excited, enthusiastic. 'Are you sure you're alright?'

I looked back over my shoulder. The tail end of the protest was almost out of sight now. I couldn't see Dawn's pink hair anymore. It was impossibly quiet for rush hour on a Monday morning, just the sounds of the timber operations on Chare Bank where the road had been washed away. I felt a tension in my jaw from the vibrations of the humming crowd, though they were out of earshot now.

'Where is everyone?' I asked. 'I mean the traffic. This should be rush hour.'

'Too scared to drive, probably. No-one knows when the next hole is going to open up.'

'Or else they're all out there trying to stop it,' I said. 'D'you think they might be right?'

'Eh? No, Dawn's just using this as an excuse to bunk off.'

I looked at him.

'Well maybe not this time. Give her the benefit of the doubt. Are we going to open up today?' he asked.

‘What’s the point? There’s nobody about.’ We both climbed into my car. I turned around and drove up the short, steep bank.

‘What have you been up to, then?’ He still sounded quite jolly, as though the change from routine was doing him good. ‘Did you enjoy your unscheduled holiday?’

I pulled into the yard. ‘I slept most of yesterday. Stuart, could I have a word with you?’

‘That sounds ominous. Can it wait till I’ve got a brew on?’

We opened the gates just in case anyone urgently needed some pansies or compost. There was still no power. Stuart lit the fire in the sitting room again, I filled the saucepan. The water was clear, but smelt faintly of swimming baths, as though they’d had to increase the treatment dosage. It was companionable enough, the two of us.

‘Mam’s going to walk along to the community centre this afternoon. They’ve got a generator rigged up,’ Stuart said, settling the blackened pan onto the coals.

‘How is she?’

‘You’ve met her. Didn’t take long for the shock to wear off and she’s not stopped talking since. She gets along with old Frankie, so they’re gadding about making sure all the neighbours are OK.’

‘That’s good.’

‘And the schools are closed. Half the buses aren’t running and the teachers claim they can’t get in.’

‘So it’s quieter here than at home.’

‘Yeah, I only come into work for the rest.’

We sat on either side of the fire while the water in the pan began to steam.

‘Well, don’t keep me in suspense.’

‘I don’t know how to begin.’

He stood up to prod the fire. ‘Then you’d better start at the beginning.’

‘I went over to the reservoir on Saturday.’

‘After work?’

‘It was getting dark by the time I got there.’

‘Did you see where the landslip had been?’ He had his back towards me.

‘I didn’t get that far. It was dark.’

‘The water’s boiling. Put the mugs down on the hearth, will you.’ He lifted the hissing pan carefully off the glowing coals. ‘I was going to drive over yesterday, too, but the petrol stations in Consett were closed. Everyone had stocked up and it was a Sunday. Panic buying.’

I tried again. ‘It was dark and there were people, a group of people just standing there by the water’s edge. I ran away.’

Stuart finished pouring the water into the mugs and carefully put the pan down. ‘The milk will be off by now. It’ll have to be black.’

‘I ran away, along the path that follows the reservoir.’

‘In the dark?’ he asked quietly. He sat down and held his mug in both hands.

‘Have you ever been along that path?’

Stuart was watching me through the steam from his tea. ‘And?’

‘It was very dark, but the people in the car park…’

‘Oh, Emily. Not another story.’

‘Please.’

‘You’re too old for this. I’m too old to listen to it.’

‘I found a body in the reservoir, a corpse, Stuart.’ I spoke without thinking because he hurt me. I should have qualified it immediately, explained my uncertainty, but his face had already changed to thunder.

He reached down to put his mug on the hearth. ‘You walk in the dark, you like walking in the dark. You knew there were people drowned. How could you just stumble across a body? In the dark?’

‘I fell in and landed on it.’

‘You fell into the reservoir?’

‘Just on the edge, it was shallow.’

‘So, have you called the police?’

I shook my head. He was speaking to me like I was a child.

‘Hadn’t you better do it now?’

‘I can’t be sure.’

‘Ah.’ He rubbed his face with both hands. ‘And this gang of people?’ he asked from between his fingers. ‘Can you be sure they were there, either?’

‘So you think I should call the police?’

He picked up his tea again and blew on it.

‘I think what I thought right from when I first met you. You need to get yourself some help. You need to sort out the difference between your imagination and what’s really out there and do something about it.’

‘I—’

‘Have you any idea what it was like?’ his voice was loud now, ‘Eh? Hearing about what your cousin did, how your family treated you, watching it chew you up, and you refusing to do anything about it? It was so—’

I wiped my eyes with the heels of my hand.

‘Don’t.’ He took a mouthful of tea and pulled a face. ‘Anyway, even if you did trip over a corpse, I’m sure it will have been found by now, so I wouldn’t worry about it.’

‘Don’t patronise me.’

‘Don’t tell me stories.’

I stood up and walked out of the room. I cry silently, always have. I wanted to make enough noise for Stuart to know how deep the wound was, but I couldn’t bring myself to pretend. I groped my way upstairs. I was lying face down in my pillow when I heard the front door slam.

At midday the bells began to ring again.

A fire engine was blaring past the gates when I joined Stuart in the yard.

‘Another landslide?’ I asked him stiffly.

‘Dunno. Mr Granger says that there’s been subsidence over at Medomsley, the old pit workings. Someone’s garage has fallen down into it. At least they reckon they’ll have the power back on soon. Look, I’m sorry…’

He stopped and glanced towards Frankie who was tottering towards us from the shed.

‘Hello, are you alright, Frankie?’ I asked.

‘Morning, petal. What a to-do, eh? At this rate they won’t need to opencast, the bloody coal’s just going to come tumbling out of the hillsides.’

‘Do they know why it’s happening? Was it the blasting?’

Stuart snorted. ‘Apparently not. That’s what they’re saying, anyway.’

‘It’s all over the news,’ said Frankie. ‘Sodding gov’ment’s not got a clue, ’scuse my French, Emily.’

‘Well it was a bloody stupid idea in the first place,’ said Stuart.

I could hear another siren in the distance. ‘Have they found those people yet? There were a lot still missing yesterday.’

‘They’ve got another fisherman out of the reservoir,’ said Stuart, ‘I’m sorry, pet.’

My insides contracted sharply. Was I in trouble for not reporting a body?

Frankie was watching from the corner of his eye. He cleared his throat. ‘Yes, well. Aye. And there’s five lost down the valley, altogether. Poor souls. And I hear young Dawn’s off gallivanting with them protestors.’

‘Yeah,’ said Stuart.

‘Eeh. Well, I’d better fetch your Mam and sort out these old folks down at the community centre.’

We waited as he hobbled towards the gates.

‘Old folks, he’s eighty if he’s a day,’ said Stuart. ‘Are you OK? At least you don’t need to worry about calling the police. They’ve found the body.’

‘They found a body. The one I found could have still been imaginary, couldn’t it?’

He straightened up. ‘I’ve said I’m sorry.’

I wished it was as easy as that. Despite telling Stuart I was less sure than ever that I had found a real body. I couldn’t get the image of the grinning head out of my mind. The phone rang and Stuart went to answer it. I could hear him assuring someone we were open, then the power came back on and things returned to normal for a while.

27 Jack

Jack is sitting on the doorstep of his workshop listlessly following the group of geologists with his eyes. Half the field below the farm has fallen into the water. There is an almost vertical cliff face now, only thirty yards away from the lane, with a drop of twenty feet into the choppy brown reservoir. The land has slumped so cleanly that the soil structure shows in stripes like a textbook diagram of a podzol. The grass roots cling to a thin brown crust, beneath the roots this soil blends into gritty yellow mottled clay a couple of feet thick, then there is a narrow black band, heavy metal chromatography left by rain water filtering through the soil. Below this the subsoil is almost white and littered with fragments of the bones of the hillside. Further down still, sandwiched in the friable bedrock, there is another black line, a thin coal measure. The rocks that hold the main coal measure are many fathoms deeper in the Earth's skin. The blasting is not supposed to cause landslips. The geologists do not see how this can have happened. There are so many risks, but local disruption to drift geology was not supposed to be one of them.

Jack is not interested in the science, even when they try to explain to him what they are doing. He does not need satellites to know where he is and he doesn't need

geo-thermal imaging to know what's wrong. He concentrates on Emily, trying to channel the song the hillside is singing to him into something he can use.

He knows Emily is unhappy, but he could have guessed that anyway. He has spent his life among unhappy women. The ones he sees out hacking, or walking along the footpath with their children, seem to belong to another species. Their clear high voices sound like so much birdsong to him, attractive yet meaningless. But Emily, she's like Claire, like his mother and his brother's wife. A misery weighs them down to the Earth so they can't fly away from him. Claire tried to fly, but the cancer dragged her back. Emily belongs to people like him. She's been before. She will come again.

Derek stands beside him in the wounded field. It's the coldest day yet this autumn, the wind blows across the water carrying the faintly rotten smells of soil and rock-dust. The reservoir doesn't look clean. It is a sullen battleship grey and the wavelets crest in dirty foam.

'I hope we get a rent adjustment. I've lost twenty acres here,' says Derek.

The grass is bleaching now with autumn. Tufts of wool flutter on the brittle brown dock seed heads. As pieces of land go it isn't much of a loss.

'They had people round this morning,' says Jack.

'The estate?'

'Dunno. Men with tripods and lasers. Measuring stuff.'

'Well, I hope someone does something soon. I want some compensation. This is my livelihood. Jesus, Jack, when did you last have a bath, or a shave? Have you looked at yourself recently?'

They stare at each other for a moment. Jack tears his eyes away with a cry like a gull.

'What's the matter? It's true.'

But Derek doesn't know; he can't hear it. Jack takes a step back. He's shaking so badly his teeth rattle, audible above the low moan of the wind in the telegraph wires.

'Come on, I didn't mean anything by it. You need to wash. You aren't looking after yourself properly.'

'Not safe here,' Jack hisses between his lips.

Derek is staring at him. The wind tugs at Derek's trousers and cuts through his sweater. He sounds cold and annoyed. 'It's stopped. Must have. The buildings are still miles from the water. They say it'll be safe enough to start drilling again soon.'

Jack shakes his head, makes a choking sound.

'Bloody hell!' Derek reaches forwards and claps his meaty hand on his brother's bony shoulder. 'You OK?'

Jack pulls back. 'Go. Go, Derek. Run.'

Derek stares at him. Jack isn't running so he doesn't.

'Get away from me, Derek.'

Jack falls to his knees in the wet lank autumn grass and lifts his face to the flat grey sky. He doesn't know that he's praying, doesn't know what he says. Derek hesitates, torn, repulsed, lost. This is his big brother, outdone and overtaken so many years ago, now shrunken and pitiable, yet emitting such a force of will that it nearly throws Derek off his feet. He turns and runs.

Jack falls forwards onto his knuckles and topples slowly onto his side panting with the effort. His tears add to the wetness of the grass. He has never loved his brother more.

28 Emily

We'd had quite a few customers in the afternoon. Mostly they'd come to talk, but I let Stuart handle that. His good mood had returned and his jocular friendliness grated on my nerves every time I passed.

I drove Frankie and Mr Granger over to Medomsley to look at the subsidence after lunch. It was at the far edge of the village, where an old farmstead had been turned into badly executed 1980s conversions, all PVC windows and steel lintels, now with the addition of a gaping hole ripping the original farmyard in two. The houses on the eastern side were roped off with red and white tape that billowed in the wind. The outbuildings had already slid into the earth. The mine beneath had killed several miners a generation ago and it hadn't finished.

I parked the car a couple of hundred yards back and we walked along to join a handful of chilled onlookers standing by a cordon of purple plastic fencing units in the entrance to the development. The hole beyond seemed fathomless from our vantage point, sheer sided, five metres across, but more like twenty long. A group of men in Hi-viz jackets and yellow hard hats stood with clipboards and mobile phones at the far end of the crack.

You saw things like this on the television. We weren't used to it being this close to home. It seemed crazy that they were still trying to say this was coincidental to the test blasts. No one really believed that. You could see everyone wince each time the faint charges thudded in the distance.

Further along the grass verge had been planted with placards, featuring the familiar wind turbines. I looked around the silent bystanders and saw that their faces were painted as sugar skulls. It was a fortnight until Halloween. I felt Mr Granger stiffen beside me. They reminded me sharply of a recurrent dream I used to have as a child, a clown running down the stairs, its face hadn't been a clown's though, it had been painted like a flowery skull, like these people, in fact. It had yelled at me but I couldn't make out the words.

'That sort of thing is the last thing we need,' Mr Granger said, loud enough for them to hear; they were only a couple of metres away.

Frankie looked at him surprised. I don't think he'd noticed the face paint. Now we were being stared at. I tried to smile at them, but the makeup had a way of de-personalising them and forming them into a group to which we clearly did not belong.

'Come on,' I said.

As I headed back towards the car the sugar skull people began the same dirge-like humming that Dawn's group had used. It sent a shiver down my spine.

Mr Granger stopped to challenge one teenage boy closest to the car. His eye sockets were painted a deep blue surrounded by a circle of pink petals, his face was whitened and a wide skeletal mouth was drawn in a smile that wasn't reflected in his eyes. His lips were whitened, too, and teeth drawn on them.

'This isn't the way to do things, son,' he said

The teenager gazed at him, still mumbling the wordless anthem. I grabbed Mr Granger's arm.

Mr Granger fumed all the way back to the nurseries. I was glad it was only a short drive.

'But they're just having a bit of excitement,' Frankie repeated mildly. I wasn't sure he'd really taken in the full effect of the protestors and their death-masques. In their

own way they seemed more fatalistic and resigned than the old men. Things happen. Their quiet performance was a way of acknowledging the accompanying fear.

Mr Granger's assumption that I agreed with him irked me. I hadn't taken sides; it seemed idiotic that there should even be sides, unless it was us against the Earth, and that would be even more stupid. I didn't want the opencasting and I, too, felt ambivalent about the massive turbines. They stitched the landscape together, linking places I had never consciously placed in spatial proximity, but had always known, mapping areas too familiar to map, robbing me of my understanding and replacing it with facts.

I let Mr Granger continue unchallenged, and looked, really looked at the land I was driving through, a few fields, a village, cottages, and realised how temporary all this timeless familiarity was. The slag heaps from the last opencasting had gone by the time I was born, but the hillside was still on fire above the nurseries when I first knew it. Sometimes the soil would turn to ash amongst the gorse. Little wisps of smoke would rise from the dry summer grass stalks as the coal bed burned in what little oxygen the fire found in the deep mine workings that pre-dated the opencast by a hundred and fifty years. I'd thought the smoke was from abandoned campfires, a strange secret in a private world, a mystery in the wilderness of the overgrown bankside, hidden from everything but the birds above, until Stuart explained it away one day. But that was ten years ago. The hillside no longer smouldered.

Already there was a palpable acceptance of the new danger in our lives. I felt it when we got back to the nurseries. Those who weren't protesting knew that mine shafts had fallen in before and that the river often flooded. Nothing compared to this, yet this, too, would become normal. Always, without exception, everyone I met that afternoon referred to 'them' and 'they', someone else, people who were out there, answerable and able, who would sort it out eventually. The general consensus was that the protestors would calm down or get bored and stop making a scene.

I had looked into Dawn's eyes and I wasn't so sure. And still there was the faintest pulse of music vibrating through my skull.

I began to tidy up at half past four. I was picking up an empty potting tray when Stuart tapped me on the shoulder.

'You've got a visitor.'

I turned around and felt my innards turn into cement. Tim was pulling up in his Volvo in front of my door.

‘Shit.’

‘D’you want me to deal with him?’

‘No. It’s my problem.’

Stuart followed me anyway. I could sense him behind me.

Tim clambered out of his car. His face was contorted with dislike. He was wearing a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches and a red tie. Evidently he’d still had to go into work despite the disruption. Expensive private grammar schools don’t run themselves. I often wondered how well he knew his students.

‘Emily!’

‘Tim.’ I stopped a good six feet away from him.

‘What do you think you’re playing at, eh? Eh?’ he hissed, leaning forward.

‘Angie rang. I told her I’d seen you.’

I heard Stuart swear under his breath and wished he’d mind his own business.

‘You said I was with someone.’

‘You were.’

He paused, regrouping his anger. ‘Why would you do that? I told you what would happen if you did.’

‘You said you’d kill me.’

He stepped closer, his protruding gut nearly touching me. ‘Oh, Emily, I’ll do worse than that. I can make you wish you were never born.’

‘Right,’ said Stuart. ‘Enough. You can’t make threats like that. Get back in your car and leave.’

‘Piss off.’

‘Now.’

I held my breath, prayed to a God I don’t have that he would just go, but Tim stood there like a slow, stupid, dangerous bull.

He leant towards Stuart, his spittle flying in Stuart’s face. ‘Bite me.’

Stuart squared up to him. Tim dwarfed him.

‘Forget it, Stuart,’ I whispered.

A disgusting smirk spread across my cousin’s face. ‘Aw, see, she’s trying to keep her boyfriend safe.’

Without warning, Stuart smacked him hard in the face with the back of his knuckles. Tim barely flinched. He took a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket and unfolded it without hurrying. He dabbed his nose, smearing a thin line of blood and mucus across the pristine cotton.

'*Stuart!*'

'You're going to regret that,' Tim said, looking at me, not Stuart, ignoring the tears running down his cheeks from the smarting blow. Stuart had done no lasting damage.

'I'll be back, one day,' Tim said and turned on his heel.

We stood and watched as he swept his Volvo round in a wide circle.

'He's a bully. He just needs someone to stand up to him, that's all. He's gone now,' said Stuart.

'But, Stuart—'

'Oh, come on! I just punched your bloody cousin on the nose for you. You can't let him get away with this. I'll go to the police with you.'

I shook my head and pushed away his care.

'But he's just threatened you in front of a witness.' Stuart called out after me.

29 Jack

It's quiet. Dusk brings the sounds of the waterfowl, but not tonight. Not a soul about. Jack takes his spade and an empty plastic feed sack and walks down to the little thicket of alders on the edge of the landslip. He rolls Gyp's body onto the sack and pulls it like a sled over the wet grass towards a boggy patch where it will be easier to dig, away from the roots of the bushes. He digs this grave for his brother's sake.

The recent days have taken their toll. He wheezes with the effort of breathing and the cold air makes it worse. Steam rises from his shirt back as he bends and pushes and hauls. He keeps going into the night. The bottom of the pit oozes and sucks at his wellies, but it yields for him. When it is done he is too exhausted to be able to lift the dog's body. He tries to kick it into the grave, but it resists. He slips and lands on his knees and pushes at the smelly, hairy little body. Finally he overcomes the inertia and it slips forwards and topples into the hole with a plop. Jack almost follows it headfirst.

He remembers another dog, a terrier, and the picture is in front of him, another grave, the loss a physical pain, fresh as the day it happened, and he's a boy, eight years old with no experience to draw on and he cannot bear it. Jack howls like the memory of wolves running across the hills and the Earth shifts and answers, but he doesn't know what it is that he's hearing.

The dolls' house is an anchorage, a mast to tie himself to so that he doesn't lose himself. He works at the model all through the night. He made the windows in a batch when he first began, they are ready to assemble and insert; neat ranks, mullions, casements, polymer glazing and internal frames. He's glad of that, no longer confident that he has the ability to perform close work. His cough wracks his body every few minutes and he's burning with a fever.

He works on the front of the next section, not yet ready to be hung on the carcass. He rests the section between his lap and the bench and bends over it. The first window goes in neatly. He uses a little too much superglue when he puts in the glazing, but he can clean that off later with a craft knife. The mullions of the next unit won't go in, though. He applies force, but fears to break the slender slivers of wood. When he tries to remove the window to see what's wrong it jams, stuck half in the aperture at an angle. He wheezes in frustration. His patience is exhausted. He tries to waggle the tiny

frame loose. But the whole thing collapses in his grasp. Tears splash down onto the MDF board on his knees. His head hurts and the only things he sees clearly he knows can't be in front of him.

He bends double over the panel, panting, fighting. His hands are clenched into fists with the effort. He fixes an image in his mind. This he knows has not yet happened, but it blazes in front of him with such terrifying colour. He concentrates on the fantasy, builds it up around him and snuggles into it like a blanket across his shoulders. It is an imagining, human, flawed and inaccurate, but it is Jack's alone, and his to command, rather than a hole poked through into his memories. He reconstructs the daydream of Emily, and in controlling her, he finds he can control himself. Minutes pass. Jack sits up, his breathing is steady and the headache has eased.

He lays the front panel down gently and hunts for the pieces of the window where they scattered across the floor. He whistles to himself as he begins to mend the little window.

30 Emily

By Monday night the protest marches had made the national news. The landslips seemed to be almost forgotten, incidental to the main story. There was no footage of soggy households or acres of naked hillsides. Instead the reports focused on the people humming, clogging up motorways and shopping centres. The reaction, not the cause, grabbed the headlines, with only a token line-up of professors earnestly explaining why the blasting could not have caused the landslides and subsidence. The local news concentrated on the groups of protestors who had clashed with the police so that Newcastle city centre had ground to a halt at one point. The opencast marchers had been joined by climate-change protestors and the animal rights brigade. Some petrol stations, far from being inundated by customers, had been blockaded. A large dairy farm had been broken into and smashed up. I worried about the cows turned loose in the cold October night, bellowing to be milked before their udders burst.

The nursery gates were locked and the doors bolted. The little grey cat had come back for the fire, and its presence gave me an illusion of safety, like a canary in a mine. I watched the headlines again on the twenty-four hour news channel and drank enough sherry to make me sleep when I finally went up to bed. In the dark I dreamt repeatedly that someone called my name and woke so often that I lost count of the times. Far away I heard sirens, but I was listening for bells, church bells and footsteps.

I was surprised when Dawn drove into the yard on Tuesday morning. The schools had reopened and it was very quiet. I'd left Stuart looking through the seed potato catalogues while I raked the lawn and dragged leaves off the top of the fish pond. She was the first vehicle in that morning. I'd kept hold of the rake as I walked back to the yard. It was a relief to see her battered little car, not Tim's bloody Volvo.

'Oh, hello,' I said.

Her eye-liner looked more like war-paint than ever, but she wasn't wearing as much eye-shadow or foundation as usual. She still had that distracted air about her.

'Can I have some bits of wood?' she asked.

'Depends how much you want... I take it you're not working today?'

'Just scraps, doesn't matter if it's rotten, even. Whatever there is.'

‘Help yourself. You know where Stuart stacks the firewood.’

She grabbed a wheelbarrow and set off down the yard. I had never seen her, ever, use a wheelbarrow before. Stuart came out of the shop and we watched her trundling it away. She was wearing jeans and a parka, sensible clothes for an active day. I hadn’t known she possessed such garments.

‘I’d better go with her,’ he said.

‘Yeah. See if you can find out what’s going on.’

I crossed the yard to the shed and put the kettle on. I thought maybe Dawn could be lured in with a cup of tea. I could treat a couple of days AWOL as a sickie, but if she didn’t get bored soon then it would be a problem. The paperwork for small businesses was a nightmare.

Ten minutes later they came back up the yard. Stuart was straining with a barrow-load of assorted scrap timber and Dawn staggered under a bundle of half-rotten tree stakes.

Stuart threw me the van keys and I opened up the back for them.

‘I’m just running this over for Dawn,’ he said.

‘Hang on, where, exactly?’

‘Only up to Consett. Twenty minutes, I promise.’

Dawn didn’t speak, but got on with unloading the barrow, clattering the wood so that it was hard to talk over it.

‘Is it for firewood?’ I asked.

‘A bonfire.’

‘Bonfire night’s not for another three weeks.’

Stuart straightened up. Dawn pushed the barrow back against some bags of compost.

‘Look, you may as well know, Dawn’s group had a sit-in last night around the council offices, like they’re doing in Morpeth. This protest’s spreading.’

‘What are they protesting about to the council, for God’s sake?’

Dawn gave me a resentful glare, almost reminiscent of her old self, and walked off towards her car.

I turned back to Stuart. ‘Seriously, what precisely are they protesting about?’

He shrugged. ‘What you got?’ He was trying to joke, but the smile faded when he looked at me.

‘If this is wood for a bonfire for the protestors, where there’s likely to be trouble, then you can’t take the nurseries’ van. You can’t associate our business with them.’

‘I don’t think anyone’s really going to notice.’

‘Yes they will. It’s on the news, the police are stopping the protests now.’

‘Fine, I’ll take my car, then. It won’t all fit in Dawn’s.’

‘But what if Tim comes back?’ The truth slipped out before I could stop myself.

Stuart hesitated. ‘He’ll be at work, won’t he? OK. Come with us. It’s early yet, we’ll be back by half-ten. I’ll put a notice on the gates.’

Dawn was already driving away. Stuart was on the balls of his feet, ready to spring into action. I didn’t want to be on my own. I was more nervous of Tim than the risk of ruining the business’s reputation.

I used to like van drives. It was a novelty when I first moved to the nurseries, sitting high up, able to see over hedges and walls into gardens and houses, so much freer-feeling than in Grandpa’s car. Since then it had become a chore, another layer in my stifling life. On that Tuesday, though, it felt new again, a small adventure.

Half a mile from the nurseries we passed another protest, this time on the crossroads at Medomsley Edge. Dawn had already pulled up and Stuart stopped the van behind her car. The protestors had set up large whiteboards covered in photomontages of the hillside when it was being opencast fifty years ago. The boards wobbled in the gentle breeze, and the photographs were faded old Polaroids mostly, but someone had cared enough to take them, to chronicle what had been done. Next to these were A4 printouts of the landslides at Cronkley and Hedley on the Hill. Above it all, the banner simply read ‘STOP’.

Stuart got out to speak to them. Dawn was signing a petition on a clipboard. I recognised one of the women, a customer. She was retired and spent a lot of time on her garden. She favoured alpines and dwarf maples. Today she had painted on a sugar skull on her face like the teenagers. The infectious meme had jumped across the age-barrier, if age had ever been a barrier. These people presumably all knew each other as neighbours, but they had deeper bonds now. It was a long time since I had felt such complete isolation. No one came to the van to pass the petition to me. I put on the radio while Stuart chatted to one of the demonstrators outside.

… further developments on the riots in North East England. Now we return to Sasha in Gateshead. Sasha, can you tell us anything more about what's happening up there?

— Hello, Ahmed. Well, it looks like the situation has calmed down. This morning it was very different, though, with one of the construction workers needing hospital treatment for a reported broken arm following a scuffle with demonstrators, and with six demonstrators hospitalised during further clashes with the police.

— Any news, then, Sasha, on that injured construction worker…?

Stuart broke into the repetitive cycle of no new news. The radio was silenced for a second as he started the engine.

… go now to Morpeth in Northumberland where Cliff has news on the rioting outside County Hall—

Stuart's hand paused halfway to switching off the radio. He put the hand brake back on. We looked at each other.

— Yes, Ahmed. Things are moving rapidly here outside the County Hall buildings. The police are enforcing a massive cordon around the protestors and have now officially applied to the Home Secretary for emergency powers under the —

Stuart switched the radio off without asking me. 'Graham was just saying. There's a march in Durham too.'

'Bloody hell. Are you sure we should be doing this?'

'We're only going to Consett.'

Stuart's face was flushed with the excitement. He let the brake off and rolled after Dawn. One of the protestors slapped the van in approval as we went past.

'I'm not sure, Stuart.'

Our way was hindered by a group of schoolchildren wandering up the middle of the road. Stuart tooted and gave them a thumbs up and they parted for us with a flurry of rude gestures.

'Maybe we need something like this to set a few things straight, make everything better.'

'It'll be different once the shops run out of food,' I pointed out.

'This isn't about anarchy. We don't want to bring down the state. They just need to listen to us.'

I sat and thought about the 'we' and 'us' while he followed Dawn's car along the road into Consett.

Consett has never been a pretty place. Four hundred years ago, before the start of the Iron Industry, the site must have been a windy moor with beaten trees and juniper and gorse, the last rocky outcrop of the Pennines. Ever since it has been blasted and burnt, hammered and concreted into an ugly utilitarian existence; a town grown out of necessity rather than from any desire of man to actually inhabit it. I knew there had been marches and protests before. It had always been a place of riots, migration and dissent. There had been demolition and rebuilding on a vast scale, low brick heaps replaced by others, but the shift never seemed comprehensive enough to remedy its problems. The streets were no longer covered in red dust from the steel works that used to burn like an active volcano on the hilltop, but you breathed a cold, bleak air up there, and it could never be homely.

Now the town was burning again. Thick smoke billowed up above the squat modern buildings. The protestors had made an enormous bonfire in the central parking area of the new retail park. The pale flames licked up the sides of the wood, driving out the steam in billowing white clouds. We had to drive past one side to get to the entrance, and I had a good view of what was happening. A ring of people stood around the fire, and around them, in groups of six or seven, stood the police in riot gear. Behind the police stood others, people not joining the protest, some lunging forward and shouting, their faces contorted, but mostly they were standing with one hand held up, recording the protest on their phones. Outsiders, observers. Our load of timber seemed insignificant compared to the mounds already on fire as Stuart pulled up in the standing queue of traffic at the roundabout. Dawn got out of her car, leaving it stuck in the jam, and came towards us crouching low at a run.

She paused to hiss at Stuart through the window. 'Quick, man. Give us hand.'

While Stuart was unloading onto the grass verge I slid into the driver's seat and watched anxiously for anyone approaching us. I realised I had been holding my breath when Stuart slammed the back door shut.

'Move over,' he said as he opened the driver's door.

I glared down at him.

'I mean it, Em. If you want us to get away before the police cotton on to what we're doing, shift yourself.'

I slid back to the passenger side.

'What are —?'

He wasn't listening. He set off with a squeal of rubber and overtook the standing traffic. He drove down the wrong side of the road, directly at the roundabout island. It was a large gravelled mound with some windswept cotyledons bent into a parody of tropical planting in the centre, Stuart charged the van straight onto it, bumping over the kerb. Drivers tooted and some shouted. One car was trying to follow our route. I saw it swerving in the wing mirror. The Transit slid and skewed and bounced, but made it across onto the other side and Stuart forced someone in a little red Suzuki to back out of the way, so there was just enough space to squeeze between it and the car in front. Stuart whooped. He was laughing. We were suddenly out of the traffic and on the Castleside road, leaving the town behind.

'What are you trying to achieve?' I asked as soon as he had slowed down a little.

‘Me?’

‘All of you. Dawn’s lot.’

He stopped laughing.

‘So when we get arrested you’ll just say you got carried away, then?’

‘We won’t get arrested.’ I rarely challenged Stuart. He sounded annoyed.

‘Are you sure? D’you not think someone will have photographed us? Or even remembered the name on the van. Half the town was there, filming the fire on their phones. They’ll come after us on anti-terrorism charges.’

‘What for? Don’t be silly.’

‘What do you think that was back there?’ I almost shouted in exasperation, ‘They’ve set fire to the middle of Consett, Stuart. It’s more than a bit of civil disobedience; they’re out of control.’

‘It’ll be fine.’

‘Will it? All those shops, all those protestors. Do you reckon there’s the slightest chance one of them won’t decide to start looting? It only takes one. You saw the police. They’re waiting for an excuse to go in. There’ll be riots, proper riots like they have down south.’ I didn’t often express myself with such vehemence and already I could hear the strain on my vocal cords. I swallowed painfully.

Stuart had slowed down and he glanced at me in alarm, more at my loudness than my words. He turned back to the road without comment.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

He made a face without looking at me, and pulled into a gateway to turn around.

It was midday when we got back to the nurseries. The chain was off the gates and one was pushed open wide enough to allow cars in. Stuart frowned.

‘Check the shop!’ he said as I got out to open the other gate so that the Transit could swing in easily.

There was nothing missing, no deliveries, no vandalism, no reason why the gate had been opened. It was impossible to make sure no plants had been taken without a full stock check, but at a glance everything was as we’d left it. Stuart and I met back by the van after I had looked round the house doors and windows.

‘Cousin Tim?’ Stuart asked.

I would have rather we'd been burgled. 'I should have put the padlock on, not just wrapped the chain around the gates. It wouldn't fool anyone.'

'Don't fret,' he said, 'No harm's done.'

It couldn't have just been the wind, could it?'

Stuart held up the sign he'd written, it had been torn off the gates and scrumpled up.

'I should have locked the gates.'

'It's one of those things, Em. No point getting upset. Anyway, we've left the gate like that before plenty of times, people just drive past.'

I was relieved he wasn't suggesting that I called the police. Whoever had been there was welcome to have taken a couple of plants, just so long as I could be sure it hadn't been Tim. The stress seemed to make the ringing in my ears worse. Logically it could be wax or the beginning of an infection, pressure changes in the partially blocked intricate passageways inside my head. A hundred rational explanations. But I knew now it was because of the blasting as surely as the protestors knew to paint skulls on their faces.

31 Jack

From this distance the bonfire is still visible, though the orange flames seem pink and the sounds of the clamour are lost in the intervening miles. The smoke drifts slightly westwards, hesitating as the breeze drops. The wind is changing. The vast wind turbine blades pause and the heads shift on their horizontal axis, grinding around on the computer governed yaw-drives, groping for the wind. The new air movement is from the north, cold dry air pushing under the mild moist southerlies with blunt fingers. Suddenly the vast heads of all nine turbines align, like the subtle alertness of a pointer. Moments later the blades begin to spin again, thrashing through the air. The variation of wind-speed over short distances makes the lack of synchronicity disconcerting. Considered singly or from a great distance they have sculptural elegance, magnificence even, but it's disorientating to watch a field of turbines close up.

Jack stands at the top of Greymare Hill, by St Andrew's church. From here he can feel the turbulence of the air as it passes over the hill tops. The church has no road to it, only a footpath, a relic from when parishioners walked to their services. When they stopped, so did the church. The lead from the roof was stripped a few years back and no one knew to question the thieves barrowing it the quarter of a mile to their van. It took them two days. Somehow the roof has been replaced, though.

Jack has never been inside any church, unless for weddings and funerals. Hill-farm harvests do not coincide with harvest festivals and the harvest of tins at the village school was always celebrated in the school hall.

He comes here sometimes, to St Andrew's churchyard, to sit quietly outside the redundant building. It's good to get some distance, and there is always a lee-side with the little church no matter which way the wind is blowing. From here he oversees his domain, the top of Barley Hill and the shape of the reservoir-filled valley beyond. He also comes to gaze at the strange Hopper Mausoleum. The nineteenth century inscription is wrong, ascribing the work to a Hopper a hundred years later than the actual architect of 1663, the grandson, not the grandfather. Jack likes knowing more than the Victorians. There is a little railed yard in front of the mausoleum with two much older carved figures lying in state, plundered from elsewhere to give the mausoleum authentic ancient lineage. The flagstones around the graves lie at jumbled angles as though something has been trying to get out. The fancy stonework seems

unexpected within the walls of the modest churchyard, but it is worn with the same winds and suffers the same vandalism and thefts and neglect as the little church and was known by the same people.

The overcast sky is clearing to the east, a blue-green line widens above Newcastle as Jack watches. He has gone beyond cold. The keen wind abrades him as though he was another edifice, smaller and more easily eroded than the Mausoleum, but part of the place, laid down there like the local stone.

He left the workshop filled with frustration. He could not get anything to work, his hands clumsy, his head throbbing so that he became muddled and confused. Now the wind has blown him empty. His head no longer aches and his vision is so clear there seems no difference between inside and out, a continuation of Jack. What he is within is projected outside because he sees, and knows what he sees. Under his feet the ground is riddled with mine workings. They undermine the Mausoleum itself, so the bodies might

fall through the earth to mingle with the little fossils in the coal. Jack might fall, too, if he forgets himself again.

‘Emily,’ he says out loud, and the wind carries his word south across the valley.

32 Emily

The riots made the top of the six o' clock news again. I encouraged the grey cat into the sitting room with a tin of tuna and she sat next to my chair while I ate baked beans and watched the television. The night was dark and clear. I normally never bothered with drawing the curtains, but I had been on edge since we'd found the gates open.

A spokesperson from the mining company was saying that they would resume blasting the next day with police protection for his employees. He spoke of the irrationality of connecting the landslides to the blasting and admitted that they had begun to strip back the hillside at the eastern perimeter of the site already despite the lack of full planning permission. The camera on location panned across protestors behind a wire fence. They were singing the same droning dirge that Dawn and her companions had sung. They seemed genuinely frightened rather than dangerous. Their song set my back teeth on edge. I turned down the volume.

It was very quiet. A branch tapped at the window.

I'd never been nervous at the nurseries before. If anything I was quite territorial, prowling the boundaries every evening, checking everything was OK, that there had been no intruders on my patch. It was different tonight. It wasn't about property; it was my personal safety that concerned me. I'd accepted Stuart's offer to do the evening rounds. Suddenly *out there* felt like a threat. It wasn't just the old railway line that had been removed beyond my borders thanks to Tim, but now the nurseries, my own flower gardens even, frightened me.

This is how agoraphobics must feel all the time, I thought. Pull yourself together. But once I had turned the sound down low, I didn't dare turn it up again. The little grey cat sat up, alert. She turned to look at me. Her eyes were black, the yellow irises reduced to thin glowing circles. She made the smallest 'keck', more a squeak than a miaow. We listened to the light rapping at the window. The programmes on the television slid past, a slow way to get through the evening. I was scared of going upstairs.

By ten o' clock it seemed reasonable to retire. I'd had a hell of a few days, an early night was just what I needed. If I could get upstairs… if I could sleep…, I knew I'd have to check the windows and doors to make sure I was secure. Maybe I'd feel better if I stuck to my routine and walked around the nurseries but I knew tonight

everything was not alright. Tonight there might be someone there. Tim might come back. I would sound stupid and vindictive if I called the police. They wouldn't come anyway, not unless something had happened, something more than the conviction that I was no longer safe. The insecurity was not good for an active imagination. I tiptoed round the house in the dark so that no-one outside could tell what I was doing. I left the reading lamp on in the sitting room and bolted the front door and crept upstairs.

St Ebba's bells tolled eleven. The blood that thumped in my ears sounded like muffled footsteps. I pulled the duvet over my head, but that intensified the noise. The humming tinnitus competed with my heartbeat. It now seemed more like a Welsh choir heard in the distance, a song from the hillside. Gradually my grip loosened on the edge of the cover. I felt the blood returning to my fingertips. Despite the fear I was slipping into sleep.

The cat woke me. Terrible yowls of utter anguish. I know cats make these sounds, but this was worse than anything I'd ever heard. I pulled a sweatshirt over my t-shirt and stumbled down the stairs.

The yard was sharply lit by moonlight. The gates were still closed. There was a small bundle of dark inside them, a stone's throw from the road. I was halfway there before I realised. I don't get sentimental over cats. It was fear making me cry. Poor little creature. Then I was crying for the cruelty and horror in the world. The nurseries didn't scare me anymore. Tim didn't seem real anymore, nothing did. I didn't care who saw me, this was worse than any humiliation. I sank onto my knees and howled at the night and all around me the whole garden watched my lonely protest.

33 Jack

The Derwent valley is lost in murk, but higher up the sun is setting and the air is bright and cold.

Along the trunk road Jack meets a group of protestors, thirty strong. Their faces are painted like pretty skulls, they carry gaudy banners along the uneven grass verge. He stops and they do too, strangers meeting on a road. They stand speechless before his filthy dishevelment. He is dumbfounded by their pastel solidarity.

‘We’re marching to stop them hurting the hills.’ That’s what he thinks the nearest girl says to him. He can’t remember when a pretty girl last spoke voluntarily to him, but her costume reminds him too much of Claire.

‘Bloody hippy,’ he mutters.

They move to step out around him, they flow half past him, so that he is in the middle of the group when the singing starts again, a thrum through the ground beneath them and a tremor carried on the wind. He puts his scratched hands to his ears and they stop suddenly, collecting round this strange specimen.

‘You can hear her, too!’ They seem so pleased by this curse.

Light, gentle voices all around. They start to hum, a soft syncopation that seems to fill in the hollow gaps in the music in his head. The pressure in his skull eases, passes, almost. For an ecstatic moment he raises his own crow-like squawk with theirs and sees himself carried along in the midst of all that soft fleshly innocence, pardoned and yet satisfied.

The harmony disrupts, broken by little gasps of disgust. They still hum, but they shuffle away from him, continuing on their way. Their giggles and squeals carry back to him on the breeze and he is left with nothing to hit out at, no means to retaliate or to vent this furious disappointment that even they could spurn him.

He runs after them as they round the corner shouting filth, but the wind blows the words back at him and they show no sign of hearing him. He is left by the side of the road coughing and wheezing. And he can still hear the earth groaning below him.

‘I hope it swallows you up,’ he yells to the empty road.

34 Emily

‘It’s a fox,’ Stuart said. ‘I’ll get a shovel.’

‘Not Tim?’

He stared at me for a moment. ‘No, Emily,’ he said carefully, ‘an animal did this.’

I watched him stalk down the yard.

‘Knock knock.’

It was only Mr Granger, but I was tired and my nerves were shot so I snapped at him when I turned around. ‘Wait a moment can’t you.’

He hesitated, ‘Oh dear, has puss had an accident?’

‘Stuart says it’s a fox.’

‘I know it’s your day off today, but I just came to ask if you’ve heard about those riots in Consett? They say that your Dawn’s been arrested.’

Her mother had rung ten minutes before Stuart arrived. ‘Yes, I’ve heard.’

‘Bad business, I told you —‘

‘—Well, what’s done’s done, Mr Granger. Dawn was doing what she felt she had to.’ I had a sudden vision of Dawn lying there, mauled and bloody, instead of the poor cat.

‘Are you alright?’

I nodded.

Mr Granger let himself through the gates and skirted around the sticky mess. ‘Come on, I’ll make you a nice cup of tea. Nature can be very cruel. Ah, here’s Stuart. She’s had a bit of a turn,’ he said over his shoulder to Stuart who was carrying a spade and a plastic trug.

I let him walk me to the shed and sat while he filled the kettle in the cracked and stained old pot sink. I could feel a headache beginning behind my eyes, small pulses of pain syncopating with the ever-present humming.

‘They’re idiots, these people, the way they’re going about it. I’m disappointed you can’t see that.’

Even the tea made me feel nauseous. ‘But, Mr Granger, sometimes it takes drastic action to make anyone listen.’

‘Who’s not listening?’ Stuart asked, making me jump.

‘Nobody’s listening,’ I said. ‘They only dig up fuel because we use it. And now this is happening.’

He hadn’t had time to bury the cat. I wondered what he’d done with the body. He washed his hands in the sink and picked up his mug.

‘So you’ve heard about young Dawn, then,’ Mr Granger said to him.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m not at all surprised.’

‘They’re making a really big thing out of it,’ Stuart said, picking up his mug and blowing on it.

‘I told you they would,’ I said.

‘Yeah, well. I’ll take the blame if anyone comes round here.’

‘Not you as well, Stuart?’ Mr Granger asked.

I braced myself. ‘Stuart used our van to run some wood over for the bonfire in Consett yesterday. I went with him, despite misgivings.’

‘I don’t know what’s got into people, I really don’t. I’d credited you with more sense, Stuart. And you, Emily.’

‘Yes.’ I closed my eyes, but it couldn’t shut him out.

‘It’s wrong, all this violence, all this fuss. Those teenagers with face paint. I really did think better of you, Stuart. Young Dawn, on the other hand—’

‘She thought she was doing the right thing,’ Stuart said. ‘You know they’re going ahead with the opencasting already. They’ve started above Milkwell Burn woods.’

‘Yes, but how was lighting a bonfire going to make that better? And the looting. *Thirty-two* arrests! Have you seen the pictures on the telly? And now it’s like that here.’ He took a sip of his tea. ‘I know these landslides and floods have upset people, but there’s no need for them to make such a scene.’

There was another thud from over the river.

‘They’re getting closer,’ I said.

Mr Granger shook his head, but apparently couldn’t think of a way of making this new observation further his argument.

‘Can I have a word with you, Em?’ Stuart asked, ‘Thanks for the tea, Arthur.’

I could feel Mr Granger casting around for reasons to stay.

‘Yes, thank you for making the tea.’ I said, ‘I’ll let you know if we hear anything from Dawn.’

‘Right, well. Good morning. I’d better get on. I’ll keep your little escapade from yesterday under my hat.’

Stuart was already stalking across the yard towards the shop. Mr Granger set off purposefully for the gate. Half the village would know we’d provided firewood for the looters by lunchtime.

I followed Stuart. He kept walking until we were down by the roses, out of sight.

‘There was someone down by the bottom hedge just now,’ he said, not looking at me. ‘I wasn’t sure if I should mention it. I know you were jumpy last night, but after the gate was opened yesterday mebbe—’

‘I’d rather know.’

Stuart nodded. ‘I think it was that bloke who brought you back after your Nan died. He’s been around since then asking after you.’

‘Did he say anything?’

‘No, just kinda scuttled off. Someone local would’ve said hello or something.’

At the time Jack being responsible for the open gate seemed so much less sinister than if it had been Tim that I felt relieved. Stuart picked up his spade.

‘You go back up. I’ll deal with this.’

I mumbled a thank you and paused to dead-head a few late roses. The mild autumn days were coming to a close. I wondered if I’d still be there at Christmas.

The shop door was ajar. I was fairly sure it hadn’t been when we walked down this way ten minutes ago. I approached warily, but was still unprepared. I stood and gaped.

‘My God.’

The shop had been decorated— there was no other word—with red cotton, thread running back and forth and around the space, like some crazy menstruating spider, and trapped in this web were little clots of weird ephemera, bundles of leaves and twigs, a dog collar, stones with holes in them, silver strips of dimple packs full of prescription pills and a sheep’s skull, supported on metres and metres of thread wrapped through the eye sockets, so that it dangled at head height from the baton which held the fluorescent light fitting.

I knocked the customers' bell off the seat as I sat down. It clanged and the sound echoed round the yard, held in by the heavy sky.

It was too much. I screwed my eyes shut and covered my ears and tried to lose myself in the infernal tinnitus. Stuart had to shout to make me look at him.

'Emily, what is it? What's wrong?'

'In there!' I gestured wildly.

Stuart flung the shop door open.

The long narrow shed was lined with shelves on either side. The till was standing unmolested on the desk just inside the door. The stands of seeds were in place. Nothing changed, nothing out of place.

I hid my face in my hands.

He tried to get me to stand up, but I couldn't. There weren't any tears left, and there was nothing to say. Stuart stood beside me, awkwardly rubbing my shoulders. Presently his phone rang. He sounded conciliatory. It was supposed to be his day off. I could hear his wife's Shelley's tone.

'…a spot of bother…won't take long… yes, yes. I won't forget.' He put his phone back in his pocket. 'Sorry about that, I've got to go. Will you be OK?'

How anyone could think I could be alright was beyond comprehension. He simply needed me to confirm he could go. I nodded without looking up.

35 Jack

The Ruffside Hills on the opposite bank are red. Something about them, the vegetation, perhaps, has made them like this for as long as the hills have been here. That's what Ruffside means; rufous, the reddish brown that is particularly noticeable in the sunsets in spring and autumn. The dull reflected glow on the reservoir casts a strange light into the cottage. Faint ripples of colour flicker across the ceiling where no light was ever reflected before. The closeness of the new shoreline makes Jack uneasy.

The cat hesitates in the shadows beside the sink unit. It's a tortoiseshell, with delicate white paws. Jack is standing behind the sofa, staring into space. He smells of illness. The cat twitches its tail and fades away into the dark.

It hurts to breath. Jack leans against the back of the sofa to aid his laboured gasps and ease his aching back. Each lungful rattles, a sound he is familiar with. He heard it as Claire lay drowning, slipping away with pneumonia. His mother would have called it 'the old man's friend', a better end than the cancer that had led to the infection. But Jack doesn't see himself as old and he feels there has been a sort of promise: he houses this awful song that churns through his head in exchange for a share of the power. Such powers. He has seen how Emily bends to his bidding. But now he is ill and the hillside itself is disappointing him.

'Yeh bastard,' he says through the window to the evening.

The sight of the tabby cat blatantly crossing the road and sitting down next to his car to wash its paws, makes him choke again. Claire's little pet, back despite everything he has done. The cat is never far away from him now, watching. He keeps glimpsing it out of the corner of his eye. He masters the surge of impotent rage once the coughing has subsided and counts to ten to calm his voice before he opens the front door of the cottage.

'Here, kitty, kitty.'

The cat stretches as Jack crosses the cobbles. It gets to its feet and saunters along the road towards the farmhouse, its tail waving provocatively in the air. Jack plays Grandmother's Footsteps with it. He is always just too far behind. It pauses in the driveway and looks over its shoulder at him, waiting for him to catch up. When he is five yards away it sits down on the tarmac and begins washing its paws again. Jack

picks up the fence post Derek keeps handy for propping open the yard gate and holds it behind his back.

The cat remains unmoved.

He edges closer with exaggerated care.

‘Here, pussy, puss-puss.’

He is within swiping distance, he raises the post like a club and chokes, doubling over. The post clatters to the ground and Jack goes down on one knee landing forward on his knuckles in a parody of a poised sprinter, coughing and spluttering. A sudden blazing chord of music stabs through his head, making his teeth hurt. He emits a howling counterpoint, exhaling until he can’t squeeze any more sound out. The coughing this time is more like a seizure.

He wipes the tears from his eyes and looks up. The cat has only moved a little further away and is gazing at him dispassionately. Fury rises up like bile, fury that it is still there despite weeks of killing every bloody cat he sees, but more that it is no longer afraid of him. His powers are rapidly failing, dimming like the western sky. Vaguely he perceives that it is better to conserve his energies, rather than trying to catch the wretched beast. He uses the fence post as a staff to help him rise to his feet and walks shakily past the cat towards his workshop.

The dolls’ house remains largely unfurnished. He has done most of the work, but hasn’t the energy to finish it. He searches through the rooms and his fingers find the model telephone. He feels a surge of excitement as something flashes, a picture projected into the miniature hallway. He picks up the little doll and folds its limbs until it is sitting on the floor next to the telephone table. He rocks back in the chair, thrilled that he is still able to get these visions. He wants to see for himself, though, to check that this is no fantasy.

The brilliant colours pass as instantly as they came. It is suddenly very dark in the workshop, Jack cannot see his hands in front of his face, although he was sure the desk light was on when he sat down.

36 Emily

It didn't seem to matter that the nurseries closed on Wednesdays, people turned up anyway. Stuart came back after his lunch and offered to work in the afternoon. I said he could have Friday afternoon off in lieu if he finished the deliveries in the morning. I had never felt less like making an effort to deal with customers, but after an hour or so the strain wore off and I was beginning to be thankful for the distraction. The day was so miserably overcast that even out in the yard I felt oppressively claustrophobic. The blasting had become noticeably more frequent now the mining company had progressed to stripping the surface off the hillside. It was not deafening, nor even particularly loud, but it reverberated round the valley with a repetitive irregular dull thump which got on my nerves. It seemed more bearable with company.

I'd asked Mr Granger to keep an eye on the shop so that I could avoid going near it. He seemed pleased to be given the responsibility. He took his role of Dawn's stand-in very seriously, adroitly shaming those who had only dropped by for a gossip into making unplanned purchases. He had not forgiven me for helping Dawn the day before, but I had spent a lifetime disappointing people of his generation, and I was used to the mild jibes and barbs.

Around three, the first convoy of tipper lorries crawled up the bank past the gates. Everyone turned to stare. I straightened up from the bags of compost I was stacking. The wagons growled in low gear, laden with mounds of clay which shed such a cloud of fine orange dust, despite the net sheeting, that I could still taste it after the grinding roar had passed away. My bloodstream flooded with a rush of loathing that left me shaking. I sat down on the plastic sacks.

Frankie hobbled up. 'Did you see that!'

'I knew this would happen,' said Mr Granger.

Frankie gave him a look and turned to Stuart who was carrying several mugs of tea.

'Budge up,' Stuart said.

I moved aside to let him put the mugs on top of the compost.

'Who's was the sugar?'

'I hear ye've bin a naughty boy, Stu,' said Frankie.

'News travels fast.'

There was another thud from the opencast.

‘I hope they don’t set off more landslides, they’ve not finished fixing the last lot yet,’ said Frankie.

‘Arthur, here, thinks it’s not worth making a fuss over,’ said Stuart.

Frankie picked up his tea and blew on it. ‘Well he’s tucked up in a comfy little house way above the river, isn’t he?’

‘I’m not saying the opencasting is right, Frankie, I just don’t feel that this is the way to go about it. And we need electricity. The old folks didn’t manage too well when the power was off.’

‘The kids drove Shelley up the wall on Sunday,’ said Stuart.

‘Yes, and your mother’s been getting under her feet as well, I hear,’ said Frankie.

Stuart shifted uncomfortably, unable to comment further without criticising one of the two women he shared a roof with.

‘Yeah well,’ he said, ‘I’m going to go and pot up those hollies down at the bottom. No-one’s going to buy them bare-rooted now.’

I’d told him that last year. Now he had a five foot high hedge of holly beginning to get straggly, but mercifully covered in berries.

‘Try not to knock too many of the berries off,’ I said. He had already started walking away and he showed no sign of acknowledgement.

The flow of customers and locals had slowed to a trickle by then. I drank my tea and worried. My companions were unusually quiet. I imagined Mr Granger was formulating his next argument against civil disobedience. I didn’t know what Frankie was thinking about, but he seemed suddenly frailer and rather vulnerable. The trucks of waste seemed to have really upset him. The only customer in sight was a smartly dressed woman pottering around the perennials over by the shed.

‘You know, I don’t mean to speak out of turn,’ Mr Granger began, ‘but I’ve known you since you were a girl, Emily. You really need to —’

‘Sorry, Mr Granger, I’d better see to this person,’ I said.

I emptied my half mug of cold tea out into a tub of camellias.

‘Hello, Emily!’

That voice was unmistakable. ‘Dana!’

‘Thought I’d get some plants to cheer up my little patch.’ The uninspiring pots of lanky leafless stalks she had lined up in her trolley were the antithesis of cheer. I wasn’t used to having customers with that much foresight.

‘Um, yes. It’s always good to plan.’

‘I hope my valuation was alright. I know it’s hard having things you’ve grown up with put into pounds and shillings.’

‘Actually, my cousins—’

‘Wanted detailed itemisations. I know, and I’ve sent them out. Hope I didn’t get you into hot water over that. Mrs Barclay seemed rather cross.’

‘Mrs Barclay is always cross.’

Dana clapped her gloved hands together to knock off invisible crumbs of compost. ‘Better pay for this lot, then.’

I walked down with her to the till. She pushed the trolley despite wearing tiny boots with vertiginous heels and a very new-looking pale wool coat fastened with two ridiculously big buttons that kept catching against the handle bar. It seemed safe, somehow, going to the shop with her. Dana exuded a sort of normality, though I suspected her entire demeanour was a performance. I opened the shop door cautiously but there wasn’t a thread in sight.

Stuart came up with a newly potted holly. He set it down beside the wooden folding chair next to the customers’ hand bell.

‘Ooh, look at those berries. You know what would really set that off?’

I looked at Dana, uncertain. Her endless chippy enthusiasm was so bizarrely at odds with the way I was feeling that I couldn’t grasp what she was talking about.

‘Some lovely florists’ ribbon…’

Stuart was gazing at her with unabashed admiration. ‘That’s an excellent idea,’ he said without a trace of embarrassment.

I bent down to price the pots. Stuart always had a soft spot for smart lady customers. Usually I would have teased him about it, but not here, not now.

‘That’s sixty-five pounds please, Dana,’ I said.

‘And how much is that gorgeous holly?’

I glanced at it. Stuart was wiping the sides of the pot and he was holding a roll of broad red florists’ tape. I didn’t know he even knew how to use the tape. We watched as

he tied a knot and pulled the ribbon into a vast pompom of shiny red with shredded curls of ribbon floating around it.

‘Wow,’ said Dana.

‘Please, it’s a gift,’ I said. ‘Stuart’s got at least twenty more to dig up this afternoon.’

‘Poor Stuart.’

Poor Stuart stood and waited while she paid for the rest of the plants and made big eyes at him while the card machine connected. I was saved from having to watch any more by the telephone.

When I came back out they were still there, Dana leaning towards Stuart in a confidential way. I’d noticed she had a habit of doing this, it had made me uncomfortable at my grandmother’s house, but Stuart seemed to be enjoying it.

He straightened up to speak to me. ‘I’ll deliver the plants after we close. Dana’s going to get her car dirty.’

‘We wouldn’t want that.’ I said.

‘Are you alright?’ Dana asked.

‘It’s the gas. That was the gas company on the phone. They need me to check the house, there’s a gas leak with the land shifting nearby and they need to inspect all the houses.’

‘But we don’t have gas at the nurseries,’ said Stuart, using a possessive plural.

‘Would you like me to come with you?’ Dana asked me before Stuart had worked out which house I was referring to.

I shook my head. ‘I’ll be fine, thank you. Look, I’d better go. Can you man the fort for me, Stuart? I’m sure Mr Granger won’t mind looking after the shop until closing time.’

Stuart nodded.

I picked up the unwieldy pot of holly and walked towards the car park. Dana skipped along beside me.

‘Isn’t Stuart wonderful?’ she said. ‘So genuine and, well, nice. And those dreamy eyes. How old is he?’

‘Old enough to have two kids and a mortgage.’

‘Ah.’

She waited by the van while I pushed the holly in as gently as I could to avoid shedding berries. Stuart could wheel the cart of pots up. Dana made no sign of going to her car.

'I need to fetch the keys for my grandmother's house from the kitchen.'

She followed me across the yard, right to the threshold, then hovered on the doorstep, waiting for some more elaborate farewell or maybe to be invited inside.

'Ooh, original flags. I would *kill* for something this authentic.' Her voice followed me down the corridor as I fetched the keys from the table. I saw her silhouetted in the doorway as I walked back out again, posing like a fashion photograph from the early sixties.

'Would you?' I asked.

'Would I what?'

'Kill for the sake of authenticity?'

She laughed. I turned to lock the front door. I walked her back to her car. It would have been too small to carry all the plants, let alone the holly. And the pots would have made it dirty.

'Are you sure you wouldn't like some company? Going over to your grandmother's house, I mean.'

'No, no, but thank you.' I avoided her eyes, ashamed of my unhappiness.

'Oh well. I'll just have to go home and wait for scrummy Stuart to deliver my plants, then. Afternoons do drag when you finish work early.'

'Thank you for your custom,' I said.

'Thank you for the gorgeous holly. That was so kind. I hope the house is all right. Horrible if it had a gas leak. I bet you'll be glad when you're rid of the responsibility.'

She wound her window down and waved as she drove away.

I was suddenly aware that I'd been holding my breath. I exhaled and caught myself out by nearly laughing with a sudden sense of relief. It was very unlikely that the house would be blown up in a serendipitous gas explosion, but Dana had reminded me that soon it would be gone, no matter what. It had begun to rain softly and I stood in the drizzle, barely more than falling mist, in the middle of the yard and smiled up at the sky feeling the freedom in my chest, a sudden easing, a lighter burden.

‘Hey Stuart,’ I called as I walked past him loading Dana’s plants into the Transit. ‘You’re officially scrummy. According to Dana, that is.’

Mr Granger turned round in surprise. Stuart straightened up slowly. I couldn’t tell if he was blushing under the grime, or simply flushed from digging.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Dana. Nice, isn’t she?’

‘Very. Smart.’

‘Extremely,’ I said. ‘She is a lovely person.’

I watched him struggle to say something, those fine eyes that Dana had noticed now clouded and wary of traps, too scared to reassure me in case I took it the wrong way, not wanting to offend, caught in the constant awkward balance between friend and employee. He was the closest thing to a family I had left, and we were so far apart I couldn’t even tell him about my escape plan.

‘I’m off now, Stuart.’ I said. ‘Don’t forget to lock the gates.’

It was already getting dark at half past four because the clouds were so low. The roads were quieter than usual. There were neither gas vans nor road works on Cemetery Road. Perhaps they were simply taking precautions, though the man who rang had been insistent that I check immediately and wait for them there.

I parked in the driveway and used the front door. A wave of nausea flowed over me as I reached into the icy dark of the hallway, groping for the light switch, terrified I was about to relive Monday morning’s dream or even experience another hallucination and scare myself to death. The dream evaporated with the light. There was no detectable smell of gas, which was just as well as I had clicked the lights on without thinking about potential sparks. Now I was here I wondered what I was supposed to do. The man I’d spoken to hadn’t given me any instructions on how to tell if there was a ruptured pipe and I hadn’t thought to ask.

I stood in the hall and waited for my heart to slow down.

The house was full of whispering. I tried not to worry that it was imagination, or that I might frighten myself again with impossible noises and phantasmagoria. It was certainly no worse than the constant humming I’d had since the earthquake. All the same I would have preferred to search the house without the murmurings all around. I would have preferred not to be there at all.

I flicked the switch for the passageway to the kitchen. The light was the only defence I had. My head was filled with the pictures of the dining room; so many places that someone could wait. The heavy door swung slowly inward when I pushed. I held my breath. The shadows stayed a fraction too long. I would have given Dana all the vintage china in the world to be with me at that moment. I breathed out. There were only shadows beside the heavy chiffonier, only reflections from the china cabinet. Nothing beneath the table. My heart was pounding so hard it was easy to put the whispering down to blood pressure alone.

The corridor felt colder than before. Both the Aga and the boiler in the scullery ran on gas. I didn't disturb the shadows further by turning on the lights in the kitchen. The revenant smell of steamed vegetables hovered in the room, no gas. Outside the sky was a deep slate grey, already under-lit with the reflected orange of the streetlights. It would soon be dark and Stuart would have to lock up on his own. I wondered if the mud pie was still in the stove, but I couldn't bring myself to look. The stinging punishment had not burned as much as seeing Tim's look of triumph as I stood too honour-bound to implicate the others. It had been a test to see if I would tell. I went through to the scullery to check on the boiler.

Very little light came in there even on a sunny day. I sniffed, but smelt only the faint familiar smell of detergent and drains. I turned on the light. The old boiler was silent and the hushed voices seemed absent here. I couldn't see if the pilot light was on, and I didn't know if that was a bad thing or not. I wondered if it was possible to turn off the gas supply into the house, or if that would even help if there was an explosion outside. I checked that the back door was locked. Shivering now, I walked back into the kitchen and listened as the whisperings increased.

'Hello,' I said, knowing there was nothing in the house to answer.

'*Emily*.'

I jumped. I knew I had heard my name, a statement, not a question, an acknowledgement.

I took my hand away from my mouth. I really was going to scare myself to death if I didn't get a grip on my imagination. 'Who's there?'

The murmuring stopped abruptly.

It was almost worse in the silence. I listened with one foot on the bottom step of Mrs Stokoe's stairs. There was nothing but the velvety quality of interior darkness that I experienced when I dreamt of the house. The stairs squeaked as I jogged up them.

'Hello,' I called again on the landing, already unsure of what I had heard.

I went to the end of the corridor and began to systematically search all the rooms on the first floor. It was pointless; I didn't know what I was looking for. I started with Mrs Stokoe's bedroom, surprised at its familiarity, as though the dream would be more accurate than experience. I had often been there, sent on errands, or loitering for favours. The whispering began again. I wondered who had taken away her personal belongings. I don't know if she had died in service, or went home to her family in her old age. My grandmother had sent a clipping from the paper for the funeral service, but I hadn't gone.

All the rooms were disturbed from Dana's rootling, but other than that everything was as you would expect it to be, cold and dusty and mostly under covers. I left a trail of lights behind me on the way to my grandfather's study. The door swung at a touch, I had forgotten the knob had been removed.

'*Emily…*' a sing-song voice, a challenge.

I wasn't mistaken. Was this some brain disorder? A tumour or imminent aneurism?

'*Emily…*'

The voice was close behind me in the main house. I shot away from it through the thick wall into the old part of the house. I lunged for the light switch. The study was bitterly cold and quiet and slightly damp. This time of year the wide south-facing window caught the dregs of the setting sun, even now the left side of the window recess reflected the glow from where the sky was brightest still. The books had been moved again, I was almost sure.

I opened Grandpa's desk and picked up the little book that Jack had found. I took it to the hearth and fanned out the pages. There was a box of Swan Vestas on the mantle shelf. The first few matches snapped and the abrasive paper had begun to rip before I managed to get one to strike. I nursed the flame but the paper would not burn. I crouched down and tried again and again. It took nearly the whole box of matches to set fire to the pages and burn enough to make me feel I'd made a point. The room smelt of phosphorous and potassium chlorate. The sulking wisps of smoke wandered in lazy

curls towards the top of the fireback then whisked away up the chimney. I stood up stiffly and the air filled with the smell of my grandfather's aftershave. I lowered my face to the back of his chair. The leather smelt of him but the illusive waft was already fading in the cold and damp.

'Is it you?' I waited in the empty room.

Silence.

'I burned your precious book.'

Silence.

A book club, that's what Jack had said. He'd said he knew Grandpa from a book club. *That* sort of book club? A time before the internet and ubiquitous pornography. I felt a shift in my heart as I revised my feelings towards my grandfather. He had been the only one who'd listened to me, the only one who'd credited it. He'd never done me any harm, and he had tried at first to stand up for me in the maelstrom of venomous denunciation. But now I'd never know if it had been the shame of rotten genes rather than his faith in me. Of all the betrayals that would be the worst.

I turned off the lights as I left the study. I had no wish to ever go back there again. I slipped back out onto the main landing into the relative warmth of drier air. I didn't want to explore any further.

'*Emily…*'

'It's only my imagination,' I said, looking down into the main stairwell, 'an auditory hallucination.'

Above me, on the top landing I heard a scuffle, as though someone had been sitting there watching me. Suddenly angry with myself I ran up the stairs instead of down, angry with my brain, my lack of self-control. There was nobody on the landing. I was a fool. I slammed open the door into the nursery. The windows faced west over the garden, but this late in the year there was not enough light to see clearly. I raised my hand but it hesitated halfway to the switch as if of its own accord. The room was just as Dana and I had left it. The whispering had stopped, but the whole house held its breath. Very slowly, almost indiscernibly in the gloom, the door at the far side of the nursery began to move. It might have been a draught, and I felt no imminent sense of danger, but there was a feeling of purpose. Gradually the pale wedge of faint light increased. I waited until it was more than imagination in the dimness. The door halted halfway. I walked forward softly, my feet remembering which floorboards creaked. The window in

my old room faced north, but it seemed to hold the twilight somehow. I pushed the door a little wider and found the girl sitting on the rug by the bed where there should be a scatter of glass from the pane I had broken in the door.

She looked up from the book in her lap. The vague light was far too little to read by.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘He said you were coming.’

‘Who did? Why are you here?’

‘Shhh, he’ll hear us.’

My mouth went dry. I felt the lurch of fear again for the first time since I’d heard my name called.

School would be over by now, Tim would have finished work.

‘He’s here?’

‘I think he’s here, but sometimes I’m wrong,’ she whispered.

I strained to hear the sounds of someone moving around the house below us.

She moved over a little. I sat down beside her in the shelter of the bed, as though that would stop Tim finding us. She shifted her position. She was cold beside me, but flesh and blood. I felt so hollow it was as though I was the ghost.

‘Has Tim done something to you?’ I asked reluctantly. I could hear the ice in my voice. I felt an almost overpowering revulsion.

Her long hair had fallen like a curtain between us.

‘Why didn’t you stop him?’ she asked eventually.

I didn’t want to listen to her, the tone of bewilderment edged with blame, but there was no-one else that would hear her in the cold, empty house, only me. I swallowed hard and put my arm round her shoulders. She was so cold. ‘You poor little lamb,’ I murmured, pressing my face into her hair.

‘Why? Why didn’t you tell on him when you were bigger?’

‘I couldn’t. I tried.’

‘You should have tried harder.’

I couldn’t justify the compromises and bargains, sitting there in the cold twilight. I hadn’t tried hard enough.

After a moment she wriggled a little, squirming to get the hair out of her face. ‘Can you hear him?’ Her voice was so low it was barely a breath.

I listened carefully. The house was very quiet.

‘I’ve checked all the doors and windows, and the cupboards, and under beds and tables. There’s no-one here.’ I whispered.

‘You didn’t look in Grandpa’s bedroom or the lumber room,’ she said.

I pulled away. ‘You were watching me.’

‘Sssh. I’ve been watching you for ages.’

I looked down at her serious dark eyes, smudges of blackness in her pale face. Hard to tell now which one of us was real.

‘So it was you?’ I asked, ‘The mud pie, the books, the tea-set?’

She ducked her head down again.

‘You really scared me, you know.’

‘You shouldn’t *be* frightened. You’ve grown up.’

I drew in a deep breath and let it out loudly.

‘I didn’t want you to be frightened, ever.’ She carefully put a leather bookmark in the book and put it down beside her. ‘You weren’t meant to be.’

We sat. The room was getting dimmer and the darkness was taking on that solidity that I had felt before.

‘It’s so cold up here,’ I said. ‘Shall we go downstairs and I’ll light a fire?’

‘Is it better, now you’re grown up?’ she asked suddenly.

The silence stretched. I could feel her willing me to say what she wanted to hear.

‘No, not really.’

‘Oh.’ She hugged her knees to her chest. ‘Oh, that’s awful.’

I sat beside her with the cold creeping up through my seat bones. She was crying. It was the quietest sound I’d ever heard, sucking all the pain in instead of letting it go.

I rubbed her back between her shoulders. ‘You shouldn’t cry like this. It isn’t good for you. No-one can help you if they don’t know how unhappy you are.’

We sat for a while longer. I slipped my arm around her shoulders again and after a while found I was rocking her like a small child. She rested her head against my shoulder. I began to sing very softly. Almost imperceptibly the house began to whisper again. We sat like that for several minutes until I had almost exhausted my repertoire.

Suddenly she sat bolt upright. ‘He’s here.’

‘Jesus.’ I held my breath, but I couldn’t hear anything. ‘Are you sure?’

We looked at each other. Even this close she was only an indistinct presence in the dark.

Emily. The sing-song voice of an adolescent boy. *I’m coming to get you.*

‘He’s coming up the back stairs,’ she hissed in a sublimated shriek.

I pulled her to her feet. ‘Run!’

I stumbled to the door and plunged through the blackness of the nursery dragging her behind me. Out in the echoing stairwell I realised my mistake, he was below us as we crossed the gallery. I pulled the key out of the lock in the lumber room door and bundled us through and slammed the door shut it in the face of emptiness. I braced the door with my shoulder and ran my fingers over the lock until I found the keyhole and managed to insert the key. I had to use both hands because I was shaking so much. I think she must have collapsed onto the floor by this time. It was very dark in there, worse than before, a cloying, sooty dark. I couldn’t find the light switch at first. I faced the door in the dark and tried to control my breathing. I put my hand onto the crumbly plaster and slid it down next to the doorframe to where the light switch should be. Tacky webs and plaster dust trickled through my fingers. I could hear her laboured breathing somewhere by my knees. My fingertips brushed the smooth corner of the plastic fitting, I scrabbled for the switch. The bulb lasted a second before blowing. I had barely turned around, just registered the room full of junk, the way it had been when I lived there, the dust sheets and clutter, when the glass shattered, leaving the imprint of a glowing orange filament burned onto my retina. The absence of light was so absolute that it seemed to rob the room of oxygen as well.

Quite distinctly through the timber of the door I heard Tim snorkel up a nostril-full of snot, remembered his adenoidal phlegm, and knew he was coming for me.

There was noise outside the house, too, cars and voices, but I was stuck, unreachable, while he thumped on the door and rattled the handle. Deep in the house below other doors began to slam.

‘*Em-mil-ly.*’

I felt the resistance on the door knob falter, but then the key begin to twist as though it was being poked from the other side. The metal was icy cold. It hurt my fingers as I tried to clutch it steady. I didn’t dare hold it too tightly for fear it would snap

and trap me in there for ever. I tried to make the child stand with me, to fight against the disembodied snigger that was breaking in.

‘Take my hand,’ I told her. My voice had changed, high and brittle.

Then someone called my name, not a whisper or that dreadful sing-song taunting, but someone real. I dropped through the nightmare that was holding me with the full vertigo of waking, jolted from a fall.

‘Emily!’ Someone was trying to get in, rattling the door. I fumbled to unlock it. The key turned, warm now to my fingers. Stuart nearly fell on top of me. Dana was at his shoulder, silhouetted again.

‘Good God, look at the state of you!’ Stuart glanced around the empty room in the light from the landing. ‘I thought you were talking to somebody?’ His breath was steaming in the chilliness. ‘Is there someone else here?’

‘No, no…body.’ My teeth were chattering but my voice was my own again.

‘We heard you.’

‘I was talking to myself.’

‘For pity’s sake, have you any idea how worried we’ve been?’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

Dana gently pushed past me into the room, walked into the middle and turned around. I could feel her staring at me.

‘I mean it,’ Stuart continued his grievance, ‘no-one knew where you’d gone. Your phone’s off. And I checked with the gas people and they said they hadn’t called, then I thought about that old bloke hanging round down by the bottom gate, and your bloody cousin…’

‘I said thank you. Thank you for looking for me.’

He became aware of Dana. She stood beneath the broken light fitting on a powdery dust of glass which sparkled beneath her boots in the light from the landing.

‘Has she gone?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think she can, poor thing.’

Stuart shifted sharply, peering further into the room. ‘Who? What are you on about?’

Dana swept briskly out of the room, brushing Stuart as she passed. He followed obediently in her wake. I hesitated, half expecting the room to be filled with clutter again.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said into the bleak emptiness.

‘What’s going on?’ Stuart was asking Dana in a plaintive voice. ‘Why did she lock herself in?’

Dana had skirted the top banisters and began to trip-trap down the stairs in her stupidly high heels. ‘Come on, Emily,’ she called. ‘Best not stay round here. It won’t do either of you any good.’

I moved the key from the inside back to the outside again and locked the lumber room door behind me. I put the key in my jacket pocket. Maybe it would stop anyone going back in there.

We stood in the drizzle on the pavement outside the drive. Dana pulled me into a hug before she got into her car. She smelt of cologne and woollen coats and something, that vague back-of-the-wardrobe scent, which probably came from spending her life amongst redundant belongings.

‘Promise to call me if you need to come back here again,’ she said.

I shrugged and apologised and pushed away her concern. I watched her drive away. She was possibly the only person I knew, or had ever met, with whom I could discuss what had just happened.

‘You should tell the police,’ Stuart was saying as we walked back into the drive. ‘Find out who made the call, getting a single woman to come out to a deserted house in the dark; it’s not good.’

‘It’s not that dramatic. A mistake, maybe. But I will call the police.’

‘It did happen? You did get a call — this wasn’t just some wild goose chase?’

I winced. He was waiting for an answer. I turned my back on him and unlocked my car.

‘Emily…’

‘I’ll see you in the morning, Stuart.’

‘Don’t be like that. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just so much happens that you don’t tell me about and then the stuff you say…’

‘Can you move the van, please? You’re blocking me in.’

‘Emily…’

‘Have you left the yard gates open?’

‘Yes. I only expected to be half an hour,’ he said impatiently. ‘Please stop going on like this.’

I stared at him in the street lights. ‘Like what?’

‘Like I’m just some employee who’s overstepped the mark.’

‘Like a foreman who has just complained that his employer is a liar, you mean?’

He was still standing close enough for me to see the muscle jumping in his cheek.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said through clenched teeth. ‘I spoke as a friend.’

He turned and strode back to the van.

I watched him drive away. I only had Dana’s confirmation that the children had been anything other than hallucinations. For all I knew Dana could be as delusional as Stuart plainly thought I was. Maybe I had imagined her, too, but I didn’t think so.

The house was a brooding presence behind me. I turned and glared up at it.

‘You should have looked after me,’ I said, not sure if I meant my grandparents or the old vicarage itself. Maybe I should have looked after myself better, placed a higher value on my peace of mind. Was it too late? I had no idea where to begin.

I slipped back in through the front door. It was all quiet now, not quite deadly silent, more a ruminating, sullen hush. I couldn’t hear the children, or feel their presence watching me. It was as if Dana had somehow discharged the other two, the girl and boy, like static. There was something else, though. The fabric of the house itself was paying attention, it felt as if it was about to ask me a question.

‘Hello,’ I asked. ‘Are you there? Is anyone there?’

Silky, vaporous silence, an absence of noise. The house sheltered its incumbents and I was left out once again.

The truce with the house felt too temporary to hold and I was wary all the time of falling back into the nightmare as I pulled my grandmother’s address book out of the drawer in the telephone table and looked up Tim’s number. It was not one I’d ever had any cause to use before.

A child answered; my nephew. The last time I’d seen him was at my grandmother’s funeral.

‘Hello, can I speak to your father, please?’

‘*I’ll see if he’s home yet. Dad! Dad, some woman’s on the phone…*’

I heard his footsteps coming closer, the familiar rhythm on distant floorboards.

'*Hello?*'

'Tim? It's Emily.'

There was a short pause. '*What the hell do you want*?'

'I wanted to tell you it's over, Tim. I'm going to the police about… about you threatening me and, and about before, when we were young. All of it, Tim. It ends now and you're going to have to face up to what you've done.'

'*Yeah?*'

'Yes. I really will this time.'

'*And why would anyone listen to you?*'

'Because it's true.'

'*I'm a deputy-head, Emily. A successful professional in a position of responsibility at a very select grammar school. No-one ever believed you. You're delusional and you have no proof whatsoever. No-one would ever, ever, believe your word over mine. Not then, not now*.'

'Grandpa believed me.'

'*No he fucking didn't.*'

'And Angie knew. She was *there* sometimes.'

'*Well good luck with that.*' He slammed down the phone.

My hands were shaking so much I had to make several attempts to replace the receiver. What absurd self-destructive gene had made me make the call in the first place? Did I think he would break down and admit it? Why did I go around poking at trouble? It wasn't going to make any difference to the past. Maybe I just wanted to provoke Tim into doing something, something concrete in front of witnesses, to take all this out of my hands.

Was there enough brandy left in the sideboard to blot out what I had just done? Was there enough alcohol in the world to do that? I groaned and slid down the wall until I was sitting by the telephone table on the cold tiles while the house listened in stunned silence.

'Look what you made,' I said, but there was no response.

I was waiting for something to happen. Even then, I jumped when the telephone rang. It rang for ages. I waited until it had stopped then I dialled to get the caller's number. It was Tim. He knew where I was ringing from.

I could stay and wait for him in the unquiet catacombs of this house, or try to drink myself to death at home. But then there was the little girl. It was not that she was talking to me still, but the tingle of her bitter disappointment stirred my conscience. It made my skin crawl, like running a sharp knife across your thumb, the keen twinge before the pain. The memory forced another option on me; to do what I had told Tim I was going to do. The most I could do for my past was to give it back some hope that the future might be better.

37 Jack

Jack's breathing gets easier as he drives away from Barley Hill. The roads are empty although it is still early evening. The nurseries are dark, no lights on, but the gates are still wide open. It's a long way round to get to the other house, but it feels sensible to do it this way, to confirm that Emily is where he meant her to be.

There is an unfamiliar car in the drive outside the old vicarage. Jack does a couple of laps round the back streets, but the car is still there. Has she changed her car? He pulls up round the corner beside the deserted church and crosses the road. From memory he knows he has the choice of going in by the drive or by the garden gate. Whoever owns the car clearly must have used the drive, and presumably the front door, so Jack nips through the smaller entrance to try the back door, the one he has keys for. The heavy privet hedges shield him from the road so that he feels safer as soon as he enters the garden. He moves silently through the shadows. The keys don't work this time. He tries again, but the key simply jams because the locks have been changed. He walks softly along the front of the house through the bars of orange streetlight to the front door, but that, too, is locked against him.

He stands back from the house and looks up. There are lights on inside and a door slams. He retraces his steps round to the back garden. Light from the windows spills onto the lawn. The kitchen window is too high for him to be able to see into the room properly. Further along there is an easier view, but it's only into a passageway. He pushes through the dim shrubbery towards the next patch of light. The garden door is wide open. Broken glass lies all over the polished stone tiles of the hallway, and a drift of dry leaves is already collecting against the skirting. The house is being burgled. Jack hesitates. From inside he can hear heavy urgent footfall above, bouncing across the landing. A door bangs and he hears a man's voice.

'Emily—'

Jack listens intently.

'Emily!'

Burglars don't call for an audience. Jack's not the only one looking for her. He edges over the broken glass as delicately as the tabby cat would. The footsteps thunder up a second staircase, high up into the attics. Jack feels he has the advantage this time though, because he doesn't mind which Emily he catches.

The sitting room is dark; the stranger hasn't searched in here yet. Jack fumbles his way past the sofa he is familiar with at a smaller scale and feels his way to the library door. It creaks when he pushes it and he stands stock still, unable to open it any further without risk of discovery. Upstairs the sounds of the search continue uninterrupted. Jack squeezes through the gap into the cool dark room.

He can sense her here now, in the library, like to like. His feet make barely any noise on the parquet floor.

'Emily,' he thinks her name, but it is enough. Over by the table next to the pale rectangles of the bay window, the shadows shift.

'Got you,' he murmurs.

Like a hare, diminishing as he approaches, the little girl cowers behind the curtains on the window seat. Jack lifts the corner of the long heavy velvet curtain. It smells of dust.

'Shh.' He puts his finger to his lips.

Emily shrinks against the wooden panelling, holding her breath, her feet tucked up beneath her dressing gown.

Jack holds up the curtain with his right hand and reaches out with his left. She can't move her head any further back, she's squashed hard up against the wall. Very softly he runs his fingertips down her wet cheek.

'Be a good girl, now.'

His fingers are on her throat. His thumb is below her left ear, his palm stretched right across the cartilage of her larynx. He can feel her swallow. When he presses harder she can't swallow anymore.

He exhales noisily. Emily can't make any sound at all.

They are poised like that for some moments, translucent figures in the murk. Out in the hallway the intruder is fuming, tearing the phone from the socket and hurling it so far across the hall it crunches on the broken glass and dry leaves by the garden door.

'*Emily!*' he roars.

Now Jack and Emily share the same predator. Jack steps under the curtain and drops the heavy folds so that he is enclosed with the little girl, pushing himself so close that he is almost sitting on top of her, crushing her into nothingness.

The sitting room light is switched on, shedding a thin triangle of light onto the library floor at the other end of the room. Furniture is scraped around, and an ornament

smashed. The library door is flung open and the light instantly bleaches everything. The curtains are flung wide, tossed up, scattering a million motes of dust. The marauder sneezes and Jack *is not there*.

Pleased with his disappearing act, assuming it was his decision to make, Jack lets go of the child's throat and laughs. She seems older now, shivering in her pyjamas, frozen halfway between the bed and the door.

She puts her hand up to her throat. 'Hello?' she whispers.

'It's me,' he says.

She stretches out towards the light switch as though she didn't hear him. Immediately the room and Emily are gone.

…. Jack is outside in the soft night. He doesn't recognise where he is at first, not until he sees Tim heading towards him round the corner of the house. Jack holds his breath as the younger man approaches. Tim seems preoccupied, head down like a bull, striding along the front of the house. He looks up though, as he unlocks his car door. He sees Jack in the shadows of the privet hedge by the driveway gate.

Tim frowns. 'Who's there?' he calls.

…. The street lights vanish and leave Jack in the dark. It's the smell that tells him where he is, the faint odour of formaldehyde and the stronger scent of wood glue, that, and the lapping of the reservoir outside.

He struggles to catch his breath, bothered because he can't remember the drive home. His eyes are becoming accustomed to the deep darkness, or maybe there is starlight reflected from the waters, either way he can see where there should not be enough light to see.

'Oh no,' he says, 'no —'

38 Emily

The police station was busy. The desk sergeant asked me first if it was to do with 'the disturbances'. I said no, and he said someone would be out to speak to me as soon as possible, unless I would like to make an appointment for Wednesday, or perhaps later in the week (perhaps never). I was left sitting in the corridor waiting. At about eight o' clock there was a ruckus behind the fire doors.

'I said, get yer friggin' hands off me!'

Dawn was marched through the doors, a man in uniform on each side. I shrank back into my seat.

'Oh, hello, Emily,' she said, shaking off a restraining hand on her arm. 'They got you in here, too?'

I shook my head. The officers were staring at me. 'No. I'm not here about that.'

'Give over.' Dawn said to one of them. 'Yeh said I was free to go, so I'm going. I'm just having a word with my friend here.' She brushed imaginary dirt off her sleeve where his hand had been.

'Do you mind?' Dawn asked him, her hands on her hips. He actually took a step backwards. She sank down onto the padded chair next to me. 'What a day.'

The other officer was speaking quietly to the desk sergeant. I worried they were talking about me.

'Are they letting you go?' I asked her.

'Yeah. Don't think they're gonna charge me, least not yet. What are you here for?'

'My cousin. The one who's been threatening me.'

'Oh, him. Told you, man, that's just how money gets people. You don't want to mind that. There's so many more important things going on.'

'You've become an eco-warrior, Dawn.'

She smiled at me. Really smiled, like she knew me.

'Couldn't drift my whole life away, now, could I?'

'So you won't be coming in to work tomorrow?'

Her eyes still had that look, as though she was gazing over a vast distance when she thought. She shook her head slowly, still half smiling.

‘*Ms* Cook, if you wouldn’t mind?’ The desk sergeant was holding a pen out towards her over a small collection of personal possessions. ‘Five pounds fifty-eight in cash.’

I could see him poking through the rest of her items with the end of his Biro. I stood up and followed her to the desk. There was the cord from the hood of her Parka, the laces from her Doc Martins, a marker pen from work and a handful of plant ties and some lip gloss.

‘Here,’ I said, tucking a couple of twenties into her coat pocket while she signed the release form. ‘Let me know if you need anything. Keep in touch.’

She felt in her pocket then threw her arms around my neck and hugged me. ‘Take care, pet.’

I hugged her back. There was nothing to her under all those layers of leisurewear, just a skinny girl.

The desk sergeant was looking restive. Dawn scooped up her belongings into her Parka pocket then skipped back from the counter and put two fingers up at him. He swore at her as she banged open the outer door.

‘And you shouldn’t be funding the likes of her,’ he said.

‘She works for me.’

‘Does she now?’

‘Not in the capacity of environmental protestor.’

‘Was that what you wanted to see someone about?’

‘No. I told you —’

He turned away to his computer screen, deliberately ignoring me.

‘Excuse me.’

He pretended not to hear.

‘Look, I’ve been here for two hours.’

‘All our officers are busy, madam. If you’d like to take a seat.’

I slunk back to my seat, wishing I’d gone with Dawn.

I’d tried so hard to let the past go, as if that was possible, lumbered with a family business, surrounded by people who’d known me since I was just another troubled teenager. Yet every time a surge of doubt comforted me with the idea I could forget about it, go home and have a quiet evening, get back to normal, I remembered the little

girl sinking to the floor in the attic, incapacitated with terror. I rested my elbows on my knees and held my head in my hands.

'Emily.'

I looked up, even though I knew it wasn't the desk sergeant. I glanced at my watch. It was a quarter to nine.

I stood up because I was feeling stiff, but the officer leapt at the chance to be rid of me. 'Sorry no-one was available. If you'd care to make an appointment with one of our community liaison officers—' he didn't bother to mask the insincerity and I think I saw him smirk as I turned away.

Stuart had left the yard gates open. It upset me. I parked and locked the car and pulled the gates closed but did not padlock them. The wind had dropped. The yard was very still. I walked past the house and through the garden gate. I was scared, but the garden was a haven compared to the hatefulness of my grandmother's house. It must have been milder than it felt because I could hear the plop of the goldfish jumping for midges. I headed down through the dark towards the bottom corner, to where Grandad George burned his rubbish for decades. We had known each other such a very short time, a few years. He must have known why I had come to live with them, but we never talked about it. His son was gone and I was his only successor, the only survivor of a crash that ruined all our lives. Me, and the nurseries; we were George's legacy, his immortality. All his words were for care and conservation, for preserving the family business, so that he made it feel like family members came and went, but the business should go on. It was his comfort when his son was gone.

I stood in the darkness of the holly hedge down by the clearing where he used to sit.

'Oh, George,' I said quietly, 'I can't do it. I don't belong here. I'm neither fish nor fowl.' The silence swallowed my words. 'I really am sorry. I'm in an awful lot of trouble and I don't feel safe here anymore. You should have left the business to Stuart, he has the pedigree. His father bred him to work here. I don't belong.'

I felt an almost overwhelming lurch of homesickness for the miserable old vicarage and its lousy décor, to leave the wholesome nurseries for the cloying cold and darkly echoing spaces. But I was truly exiled now. Tim was far too dangerous for me to ever go back.

I could hear the soft rain begin, pattering on the shiny black leaves around me, so fine it lay in tiny droplets on my jacket. My father's father wasn't there. I turned away and trudged back up the path. Even the fish had stopped jumping.

Safely locked inside the house, I began to pack. I'd no plans beyond running away, and I couldn't even do that without leaving a forwarding address for the solicitors. There wasn't much money in the bank, in either my personal account, or the business's.

I went down to the kitchen to write a note for Stuart. I wished Dawn hadn't left; he was going to have it rough for the foreseeable future.

> Dear Stuart,
>
> You will have realised I've left by now. I want you to have the nurseries. I wrote a will after George died, leaving the nurseries to you (if I hadn't and anything had happened to me, then everything would have gone to my cousins). There's no need to feel awkward. I have discussed handing it over to you with a solicitor and I'll finalise it over the next week or so. I was going to do it anyway, after I got the money from my grandmother's house, but something's come up. I'm sorry it's not in better shape. I've done my best.
>
> I am very sorry I was so unkind this evening. I know you've always looked out for me.
>
> I wish you and Shelley the best of luck.
>
> Love,
>
> Em

I swiped away the tears of self-pity that leaked out. This wasn't intended to be a dramatic gesture, but a simple business transaction. Supply and demand.

A knock on the door made me freeze.

I stepped into the passageway. The visitor hammered harder this time.

'Who is it?'

'It's me, Stuart.'

I swore out loud.

'Sorry it's so late, but I saw the lights on.'

‘What’s happened?’

‘Can I come in?’

I walked reluctantly to the door and let him in. He didn’t look pleased at being kept waiting. He began talking as he followed me into the kitchen.

‘Your cousin was round about an hour after I got back. He came down to ours on the rampage because he couldn’t find you. He was carrying on so much it frightened the kids. You’ve got to sort this out, Em. It can’t go on. He’s out of control.’

‘I’m sorry. He shouldn’t have involved you.’

He looked uncertainly between me and my rucksack. ‘You’ve packed.’

‘I’m going away.’

‘Because of Tim? Please, Em —’

‘Because of everything.’

‘Don’t run away.’

‘I’ve written you a letter. Read it tomorrow.’

I passed him the sheet of writing paper. I hadn’t had time to put it in an envelope. He unfolded it and pulled out a chair and sat down, quite unnecessarily. It was a short letter.

‘Shit. I don’t understand.’ He shook his head at me.

‘Simple enough. I’m going. I did ask you not to read it here. George should have left the nurseries to you. We both know that.’

He held up the paper, ‘You say, “something’s come up”. What exactly happened with your cousin tonight?’

I looked into his eyes and lied. ‘You’ve seen what Tim’s like. It’s not fair on anyone. I should have done this years ago.’ I couldn’t tell him how stupid I’d been and how much of a coward.

He accepted it at face value, his mind clearly on the future. ‘It’s very, very good of you. But you’re young, you’re just going through a bad patch, maybe in a year or two...’

‘I’m nearly twenty-six.’

‘You don’t know how you’ll feel in a few years’ time.’

‘I can’t stay.’

‘Come here.’ He stood up and held his arms out.

He hugged me goodbye. Stuart let go first.

‘Stay until the morning, at least. We can have a proper talk before you go,’ he said.

I tried to make my aching face muscles smile convincingly. He needed no convincing. I bolted the door behind him. I had a horrible feeling he was off to discuss which of my bedrooms the kids would like with Shelley. There was no going back now. I turned off the lights and went upstairs to my room for the last time.

I should have gone that evening as I had intended, before Stuart arrived. I was waiting for daylight now because it seemed the grown up thing to do. The sheets were cool and the room beyond was cold, a restful lack of heat, not the mausoleum chill of my grandmother’s house. I was so tired that despite trying to stay awake in case Tim came back, I kept drifting off, jerking back to consciousness with every nocturnal murmur. I was dimly aware in this state of semi-wakefulness that I had begun to hum along to the gentle music in my head, only now it seemed to be all around me, too.

39 Jack

Jack is kneeling on the floor, wrapped around the old man's body weeping, hugging it in the way no one ever did in life. It is all too much. He can't bear it now he understands. The thought of rotting next to Claire in the cold wet earth fills him with abject horror. He wasn't expecting it to happen like this. Derek did say he should have looked after himself. Derek will find him, won't he? He'll come to see the landslide. The new earth movements have taken more than he dare contemplate. And now the noise is getting louder with daybreak.

The sun rises over Barley Hill and the crowd comes with it, singing in clear high voices. They walk down the washed-out long-lost track, dressed in gaudy, painted with the smiling skulls that subtract their individuality. They terrify him, but he doesn't want to abandon his body until Derek finds it.

Jack becomes aware of a closer presence. He is no longer alone. He senses them like he sensed the little girl in the library at the old vicarage. He doesn't want to let them know he's seen them. He turns his face a fraction against the old man's ribcage and tries to watch them from under one elbow. Right there — in the workshop — from the dusty corners they creep out towards him, feet so faint he can see the floor through them. He whines like a puppy and leans into his own corpse for shelter, but his eyes are drawn further up. There are his parents and others, more he can't identify. A crowd of nothing.

'Leave me alone,' he whispers.

Have they been there always, or have they spilt out of the cracks in the hillside?

The most solid of them is holding the tabby cat in her arms. He really doesn't recognise Claire at first. He remembers her as a haggard crone, grown old long before her time. He has forgotten her wild hair and her buxom figure, the way she was when he trapped her with the false security of the rented cottage. She'd liked him, and his skill had made her proud. Briefly, for a second, he is relieved to see her. Then he sees her eyes.

Jack screams.

The sound is as empty as the rolling mist across the filthy waters.

40 Emily

It was still dark, a couple of hours until sunrise. I must have been asleep; it felt like a waking dream. Bright colours, a vision, hillside and water, brilliant sunshine and a little orange sailboat. I sat bolt upright at the sound of bells.

I had to be with people who understood, *who knew*. This was how Dawn must have felt. It wasn't a calling, it was a compulsion. I could remember the emotional state I'd been in when I when to bed, but it seemed idiotically irrelevant now. I pulled on my clothes and ran downstairs, a sick excitement building so that a song kept blurting out. And it was a song now. Not a dirge; an anthem. I knew the words as they came out of my mouth, but I could not have told you what they were before or after. I grabbed my jacket. I can't remember if I locked the front door behind me. I climbed over the gates and ran down the steep bank to the village, each footfall beating down on the pavement in time to the rhythm. I met them on the road, and they were walking westwards. The footfall pattered like rain in a forest, the song erupting spontaneously at times, but there was no talking, no conversation, no welcome or introduction. What did it matter? Naming something so fleeting when we could feel the planet…

I tried. I strained to join in and lose myself. I was halfway there, just not enough. I marched a couple of miles with them, willing myself to feel as deeply as they did. At Shotley Bridge we walked down past the King's Head. The road into Northumberland ended abruptly, the tarmac torn away. At the bridge, or rather where the bridge had stood, you used to be able to see the shapes in the rocks where the sword smiths had cut their grinding stones three hundred years ago out of the sandstone of the river bed. Now the fast brown flood swept over the bedrock, loud in the narrow valley bottom and very dark in the pre-dawn half-light. We filed over the stone stile and trailed in a quiet queue along the narrow footpath by the river, walking upstream through the early dawn. The song came in sporadic bursts. I trod in line behind a middle aged man in a Parka and corduroy trousers that squeaked as he walked.

A makeshift footbridge had been slung across the river a little upstream of the road bridge which had perished. It looked dangerously amateur, four chains and unfixed wooden planks spanning ten metres. It bounced horribly beneath us and made me very nervous. The man in front of me began to sing in a deep gravelly base and my own voice rang falsetto with nerves as I joined in involuntarily.

The river Derwent marks the county boundary. The valley there is deep and sheltered and densely wooded with mature hardwoods. It looked like a fantasy arcadia that morning as we walked up through the fields in Shotley Low Quarter. Behind us the village was hidden by mist and we might have been walking through empty *bocage* deep in rural France, or the rolling pastures of the Shire. The trespass bothered me. I couldn't shake off the concerns from a life where boundaries mattered. When our direction of travel crossed dry stone walls, the walls were pulled down so we could climb easily over the rubble. There were so many of us that we were making a whole new path up the valley side. The air was filled with the smell of trampled grass. We joined the road again just below Snod's Edge where the meeting had been for the opencast. Tattered posters still flapped from the chain link fence around the old playground.

As we left the tiny hamlet the sun brimmed over the eastern horizon, making the tower blocks of the far-away city glitter, though the haze of pollution turned the distance mauve. The valley bottom behind us was lost in the rising mist, but the sky above was crystal clear. The tall sycamores and beeches that lined the road scarcely moved in the light breeze. They still had a good covering of leaves in the soft late autumn. A few leaves sprinkled on us as we passed beneath, spirally slowly down as though gravity had less of an effect today.

Some of the company were beginning to flag. We passed a couple sitting on the verge. They smiled at me. I was finding the pace demanding; it was a steep bank and we had been tramping for five miles since I joined, some of them must have been a good deal further.

'Where are we going?' I asked a woman who had caught up and was walking level with me, about to overtake.

She frowned. 'It doesn't matter so long as we're all together.'

'Yes,' I said: I knew if I needed to ask the question then I wasn't really going to understand the answer.

My calf muscles were aching by the time we reached the trunk road and turned north at Carterway Heads. The reservoir stretched out on our left. The new landslip was visible from the A68. The extent of this last one was far bigger. As we drew level I could see below us that the whole shape of the hill had changed, making the valley more like a dish, with the waters spread wide, now almost a circle, glinting reflections of a

darker western sky between the drifting tatters of mist. The view was breath-taking. I had always driven, never walked, this road. The little hills folded in and out, the moors were bare after the lushness of the valley, but the colours were so beautiful it brought tears to my eyes. The muted greens and browns and purples faded into the western dimness which lightened moment by moment until I was standing with a long shadow and it was properly daylight. A new day. I had to run to catch the others up.

'Where are we going?' I asked again.

No-one answered.

Presently we turned left down an unmarked lane towards a cluster of farm buildings. The way was tarmacked and straight with a line of tall Scots pine on the right hand side. We were going down to the reservoir. The song started again and the ground shuddered as we walked. The day's blasting had begun and the pressure built inside my skull until I had to share it. The physical relief of singing took away everything but the niggling doubt that I didn't belong. Five minutes later we were in the middle of the farmstead. A man in blue overalls stood watching us from a barn door, and another sat in a huge green tractor. They wore expressions of alarm, we were clearly more than hikers. I was glad when we left their buildings behind.

The tarmac ended abruptly in a muddy lane of rutted clay leading down through gorse and scrub. The mist thickened as we descended, and the path itself seemed to close around us into a tunnel. The gorse bushes were silver, covered with webs, each one laden, pulled down into a hammock shape from the weight of water droplets. I could barely see beyond a few metres. The going was rough, but everyone seemed so sure, so determined. So happy. I will never be happy, I thought, what am I doing? We went on for maybe twenty minutes. I kept almost finding the resolve to call it quits and turn around, to face the embarrassment of people staring at me as I dropped out.

Suddenly the man in front of me stepped out into dazzling sunshine. I shielded my eyes. We had come down almost to the level of Jack's farm. I was surprised at how close the reservoir was to the farm now. Both the path and the fields ended abruptly where the earth had fallen into the reservoir and we were obliged to teeter around the edge of the recent slippage. I was about twentieth in the line, and the soft edges of the landslide gave a little with each person, so I had to scrabble along leaning into the side of the raw earth, using my right hand to balance occasionally. I realised that the lane we had come down was the one that used to join up with Cronkley. When I looked back

over my shoulder I could see the end of the group. There were maybe fifty of us, more than half painted with grinning sugar skulls. The strange closeness of the mist had held our noise down, but now people were beginning to chatter, an excited murmuration like a flock of starlings.

‘Let’s have breakfast!’ a man’s voice called from the back.

The grassy space in front of the big farmhouse was beginning to fill with people. The troupe began to settle down as if for a picnic. I wondered what Jack was going to say. A group of five or six youths jogged off towards the farmhouse and set about breaking in.

It didn’t take long for them to search the place.

‘It’s empty.’

‘Try the other house.’

I watched them run down to Jack’s cottage and followed at a safe distance. I peered through the French windows of the workshop, cupping my hands against the new reflections from the expanded reservoir. I tried the handle, but it was locked. I walked around the little building, away from the crowd and stood on the cobbles,

shielded from any curiosity, and listened to the gentle sounds of celebration on the green and the frantic noise of scavenging from the cottage. Below me the reservoir was almost still, and very close, barely a breath of air moved across its surface. Ephemeral dollops of vapour rolled of their own volition down the folds in the Ruffside hills. It was too late in the year for the sun to burn up the mist. The sun wasn't warm enough to take away my chills either. The last time I had been there I had been terrified and alone in the dark.

The side door of the workshop was unlocked. A tabby cat shot out past my shins as I pushed it open. It gave me a fright, and I had to pause to steady myself. The air inside was less damp, but cold and fusty.

The dolls' house was finished, a simulacrum, executed in dizzying detail, furnishings and fittings committed to memory and pulled into external existence by some wayward will that was beyond sense or understanding.

'Why?' I asked, speaking to the toy.

I stared into Jack's creation and gradually became aware that I was searching, looking for something I could recognise that made it more than this accessible puppet theatre, a reason for him taking such trouble over my grandmother's house, a more personal message.

Both the middle front panels had been removed and the two hinged doors at either end were swung wide open. There was more furniture than the last time I had looked, but it was meticulously dust-sheeted.

Sick with the fear of what I might find, I opened the roof of the lumber room. It was filled with broken things. When I gripped the sill of the roof-opening to prevent myself toppling forward I could feel my heart thumping against my knuckles. There was an old-fashioned black pram, filled with tiny disintegrating cuddly toys, a mirror, cracked and foxed, several tea chests full of china and other unwanted things, wrapped in tiny yellowed sheets of miniature newsprint. Nothing there that might not have been from my past: nothing missing, either. Jack was showing me what he'd found out. He could never have seen the attic like this; he did not know me then.

I remembered my little ghost sitting beside me in the dark. 'He said you'd be coming…' maybe she hadn't meant Tim after all, but Jack somehow burrowing into my

past. How lonely had I been as a child? Lonely enough to talk to whispers in the shadows?

What was Jack hoping to achieve, was this house a baited trap or a warning? Frantically I began to pull open the remaining doors. The house was as it might be now, furnished, dust-sheeted, cold and empty, no-one home, no matter where I searched. I could hear my own whimpers of panic. There was nothing, no clue.

Except that's what Jack was showing me: I knew someone was home, I knew the little girl was there.

I backed away until I bumped against the wretched houses on the back wall.

Then I saw Jack. His body was tucked down between the arm chair and the side of the bench as if he had been hiding. He was clearly dead. His face was twisted towards me and his eyes were milky and his lips were blue. It was a horrible sight. I shrieked several times, hoping to frighten the vision away, but it persisted.

'Help!' I yelled, but no-one came.

I tried not to inhale the contaminated air. My legs worked despite the shock. I flexed my back and pushed myself away from the model I been pressed up against with a tinkle of tiny displaced toys from inside. I edged back towards the side door, eyes fixed on the corpse, just in case, although he seemed at that moment less material and much less dangerous than the dolls' house between us. It was his expression which printed itself on my mind, unfathomable, wide-eyed and unseeing, the mouth distorted halfway between a snarl and a scream frozen in time. He had been as scared as I was.

I could still move, and Jack couldn't stop me. I hadn't died of fright. It was time to get out of there. Then I saw the doll clutched in his purple-mottled fist.

Even I could see it was meant to be me.

As soon as my heart started beating again I fled from the Lilliputian confines of Jack's workshop. I groped my way around the building to the side nearest the green, supporting myself against the stones as my legs buckled.

'Are you OK?' The boy came closer, speaking softly, not wanting to break the peaceful lull in chatter on the green.

'He's dead,' I hissed through gritted teeth, trying to hold onto the wall to steady my decent.

A brief silence drifted over the picnickers.

‘Who?’

‘Jack. The man—’ I had to stop to gulp in air to push down the nausea, ‘— the man who lives here.’

‘That’s all right then. Never mind. Come on, we’ve found enough for breakfast.’

He didn’t wait for me. The chatter had already resumed around us. I wriggled from a kneeling position until I was sitting on the damp turf with my back against the wall. The watery sunshine fell on my face. I closed my eyes, unable to do any more, too weary to cry, even. I think I slept rather than fainted, just switched off, too exhausted to do anything else. At least Tim wouldn’t find me here.

In my dream they started singing again. I sang, too. There were no words, only an imperative to join in and decorate their sound with my own. My voice seemed to pour out and mingle like a stream flowing into a river. I belonged.

A girl came and knelt in front of me. She set down a blue and white striped mug of water carefully and scattered paintbrushes and small bright tubs of make-up on the grass between us. She could have been Dawn, or maybe that was another time, but a person anyway, with small, quick hands. I didn’t want to force my brain to think clearly. She tied my hair back with a piece of torn cotton and began applying the white paint across my cheeks with a round sponge. I sat very still. I could almost hear the moisture from the air shifting around us.

The others continued the song as they raided the outbuildings for firewood. In the dream I was washed with a feeling of total wellbeing. I began to sing again, it just burst out of me.

She smiled at me to shush and put her fingers under my chin to raise my face and drew an outline around my eye sockets with deep concentration. She finished and held up two pots of colour, blue and yellow.

‘Blue,’ I said. ‘You’re not Dawn.’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t mind what you call me.’

I minded, though. This somniferous gathering was becoming just a fraction smothering. The pleasurable unreality turned into something more like the disconnection of drunkenness.

‘Stay still. I’m going to do your lips.’

She worked away, drawing a wide death-grin, and decorating it with green and violet petals. I felt a fidgeting begin in my legs, like the first tingle of cramp.

‘Would you like a flower or a key on your cheek?’

‘A key?’

‘You’re holding a key,’ she was still smiling.

I looked down. I was holding the key to the lumber room in the attic. I’d left her locked in there.

‘I have to go.’

‘No…’ She grabbed hold of the fist I’d made around the key.

I jerked awake with a pale skull floating in front of me. I staggered to my feet while she held onto my wrist. When I pulled away I nearly lifted the girl off the grass until she let go.

‘It isn’t safe,’ she called after me, ‘it hasn’t stopped.’

The blasting rumbled on.

I ran past Jack’s workshop and onto the road. I stopped to catch my breath. No-one was following me, only the sound of the singing. Jack’s car was in its usual place. I crossed the narrow road. I could see his keys in the ignition as though he had left them there for me.

I was opening the car door when I felt the earth shift again. There was a sudden intense vibration through my hand as though I’d put my palm on top of a washing machine in spin cycle, and a strange grinding noise that ran right through me. I tore open the door and frantically started the engine. I ground the car into reverse and bumped out into the lane. In my panic I had to fight the unfamiliar gear box for first and accelerated too hard so that the car was filled with the smell of petrol.

The road was still blocked at the far end of Cronkley lane. I drove through it: Jack wouldn’t need his car again. The plastic barriers bounced backwards for a couple of metres, then toppled to one side. The steering was heavy and I was driving badly. The car skewed and swerved up the bank. I turned left for Blanchland and slowed to thirty.

After a couple of miles I pulled over in a layby and rested my forehead on my knuckles as I held onto the wheel. The nausea gradually subsided and my heart rate steadied. I took a deep breath and looked around. I had slept for hours next to Jack’s workshop. The dashboard clock said four. The road ahead was bathed in late afternoon sunshine. To my left the reservoir was the colour of a bottle of Bombay Sapphire under the clear sky. It was much fuller now its shape had changed. Behind me the dam was

invisible, lost in the whiteness as though it had been rubbed out. Above it, on the distant eastern horizon, sunlight fell on Consett as though it was a glittering citadel filled with promise, distance presenting a failed perspective. I caught myself in the mirror, an anonymous mask with the indifference of death. The grin alone was enough to disguise me.

Reluctantly I started the motor again.

The only river crossing now was above the reservoir, so I drove into Blanchland. The old carters' way north of the Abbey gates was closed. Heavy earth-moving equipment was rumbling out of the car park. Although the sun hadn't made it through to the valley bottom here, the ancient village square was filled with protestors crowding the wet cobbles and steaming in the mist. There was a festive air about it. People were having their faces painted at a stall and there were children running around. Everyone was busy and laughing.

A group of protestors waved as I drove through, more to my disguise than me. I waved back, just in case. Their solidarity was unnerving and they scared me slightly, even though I was pretty sure I was hearing the same song they were. Back up on the moors the sun still shone but there was rain in the distance, spun like grey fleece, drawn down to earth. I saw nobody else on the roads as I drove home, to my grandmother's house.

41 Jack

Jack struggles to catch his breath, bothered because he can't remember the drive back. His eyes are becoming accustomed to the deepening darkness, or maybe there is starlight reflected from the waters, either way he can see where there should not be enough light to see, the spaces under the trees, the devastation in his plundered cottage.

The green is littered with tents like a Boy Scouts jamboree. There is a strong smell of wood smoke and incense, heavy even under the sky. These people are at peace, it's as though their mindlessness has cast a spell to keep all evil at bay. He is almost tempted to walk among the sleeping bodies, to poke and prod them in their smug hippy rags, but he needs to check on his workshop.

Derek hasn't been. He would have cleared the campers out. He would have seen to Jack, wouldn't he? The body hasn't been disturbed since he left it. It's still so awful that Jack cannot stay there long. He glances at the dolls' house and realises that he must have missed Emily, passing somehow in the twilight. Maybe the bridges are still open for him. He fades in the dark workshop as he tries to remember how he got there.

42 Emily

The central car park in Consett was barred off. Police tape billowing in a perennial breeze that seemed to only blow here on the hilltop. There were protestors at the roundabout. They peered into the car and gave me a thumbs-up.

I had left the nurseries that morning without thinking and I didn't have the keys to my grandmother's house. I was saved from breaking in because someone had been there before me. The garden door was wide open. The cotoneaster which I had intended to chop back was snapped and trampled. Piles of autumn leaves had blown against the panelling of the staircase, a drift so deep it came up to my knees. The telephone had been ripped from the wall and thrown with such force across the hall that it had left a dent in the panelling by the stairs and the handset had split open.

The whispering stopped when I stepped into the house. I had the impression I was expected. I clenched the key to attic door in my fist like a talisman and listened, but it was plain that the violence of the break-in would have warranted other noises. Besides, the accumulated drifts of leaves indicated that the intruder had passed by a while ago.

It's funny, but I was sure that the house had not been burgled, even then. Certain, in fact, that it would somehow have communicated the theft to me and that this vandalism was Tim's doing. I tiptoed over the broken glass and put my hand on the bannister. The house sighed, I swear it did, a sound almost of contentment. I shuddered in the gloaming.

How had this pile of stone become sentient? I looked around me. The hall was full of shadows, but it seemed to me that they crept around, independent of the diffuse and rapidly fading light sources. The broad shallow stairs creaked as I crept up them. I stopped suddenly on the landing. Someone was singing, not the tonal murmur I had become familiar with, but almost my own voice, curiously disembodied.

'*And they will keep on speaking her name,*

Some things change, some stay the same —.'

She was upstairs, then.

I walked across the gallery as quietly as possible. I didn't want to alarm her, but I didn't want to alert anything else to my presence either. Our voices mingled through the thin air —

'*Keep beckoning to me from behind that closed door,*

The maid and the mother and the crone that's —'

Up past the study door, up to the attics, to the box room. The key had left a red imprint on the palm of my hand. I had to use both hands to insert it and turn the lock. She screamed as I pushed open the door and scrabbled backwards.

I spun around, but there was no-one behind me.

'It's me! It's alright, it's just me.'

She looked smaller than last time, younger. I edged forward. She turned her face into what seemed to be a fold of cloth, where there had never been curtains. As my eyes became accustomed to the dim room the cloth shifted, made itself human. Almost human, almost Jack.

I stopped dead in confusion. I saw him through her eyes for a moment. She screamed for both of us. Jack grabbed her with one arm as she swerved into the unexpectedly empty space. He pulled her close to his chest. Her utter confusion compounded mine. I was no more real to her than he was, she conjured us, saw through us, she would put all this down to bad dreams. Dreams I could remember even now.

'Come over here, lass. Be a good girl now.' Jack's ghost reached out its free hand while the child struggled.

'Let her go.'

'It's you I've caught, Emily. I knew I would, one day.'

The child looked at me and screamed again.

'It's your face, it's upsetting her,' he said mildly. 'I've seen people like that all over. What d'you do it for?'

'Get out of this house.'

'I like it here,' he said. 'Too many people back at my place.'

The child was squirming in his grasp, crying hysterically and twisting away from me as much as from him.

'Do as you're told and come over here. You can look after me. They'll never find us.'

'You're hurting her.'

‘I won’t hurt her if you come over here.’

A car pulled up outside. Footsteps thundered up the gravel, loud enough for us to hear at the top of the house. The sound of hammering on the front door reverberated up the stair well.

‘EMILY!’ Tim bellowed.

I was so frightened I couldn’t move. When I looked round again, Jack and the child had both disappeared, as if a screen had been turned off. She was made of the same stuff Jack was. But I was left behind, flesh and blood, and Tim had found me.

With a sickening jolt I realised that there had been no need to come to release her: I *knew* I had been locked in before and therefore I must have been let out. I was busy trying to fix the past as though it could be put right, and now I could hear Tim’s heavy jog around the outside of the house in the all too here-and-now. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Perhaps I stood a chance if I could get to the hallway without him seeing me.

I slipped out of the lumber room and ran down the stairs. Halfway down she was there again. She swung out at me from the doorway to Grandpa’s study, screaming as we nearly collided. I shrieked. She pulled back into the shadow. She was taller, adolescent. I could remember this dream, the terrifying painted skeleton dancing down the stairs, refusing to listen. I kept on running across the gallery, the wide open space that seemed as dangerous as crossing a crocodile river. Below me Tim charged into the hall through the garden door with a blood-curdling yell, his heavy footfall grinding the glass fragments to powder as he skidded to a halt on the stone flags. I floundered into the first floor corridor and dashed for the top of Mrs Stokoe’s stairs. I grabbed the handrail and almost fell, pulling myself to a stop to try to gauge the safest way. The house was loud, thundering whispers, echoing back and forth, I should have stayed with the rabble on Barley Hill, listening to the gentle music in my head. With this unholy racket going on all around I couldn’t hear if Tim had come up the main stairs behind me, or if he had gone along the corridor to the kitchen. He was either hot on my heels or waiting for me down below. Then the whispering dwindled as quickly as it had risen and I heard him.

‘Em-mil-ly…’

Behind me?

Em-il-y… The house was joining in all around.

I couldn't tell where he was. I tentatively put my weight onto the top step. It creaked. I froze. Somewhere *something* laughed softly.

I tried the next step. And the next. I had committed to going down, I might as well be quick about it. I pounded down the rest and plunged into the kitchen. After all the shadows it was almost a relief that Tim was real.

He sat at the kitchen table on Mrs Stokoe's chair. His face was flushed from running and his eyes were black with temper. He had a bottle of whisky in front of him and two glasses, but plainly he'd already been drinking.

'Back again, worm? What do you think you look like?'

'You broke in.' I wheezed.

'You changed the locks.' His voice was thick.

'Just go, Tim.' I had to steady myself against the wall.

'Why should I? ' he drawled as he splashed whisky into his glass. 'This house is mine as much as yours, isn't it, Coz? They were my grandparents, too, but you were always here. It's like you bloody haunted the place. Even after you'd gone I couldn't come back.'

I was so surprised that it drove out the fear for a moment: my grandparents hadn't wanted him here after I'd told them. A shaft of light that gave me a morsel of confidence.

'Fine, I'll leave you to it, then' I said. I took a deep breath and began to walk towards the corridor, keeping the kitchen table between us.

'Too late for that, worm. Sit down and have a drink.'

'I'm going. That's what you want.'

'I said *sit down*.'

I kept on walking.

He stood up with the bottle in his hand and smashed it down on the corner of the kitchen table.

I dived back around the table, heading through the scullery door. I slammed it, but he was already there, dragging it open. I heard him throw down the rest of the bottle so he had two hands free. I couldn't hold the door shut. He wrenched the handle in the way he did up in the attics half a life time ago. My grip wasn't strong enough. I let go and bolted stupidly for the back door, a futile move as I didn't have the key. He grabbed

me before I could have opened it anyway and held me up by my hair. I couldn't stand by myself.

'You've done it now, Coz, haven't you?'

His face was too close for me to focus, just a mass of crumpled hatred, hot and wet and stinking of drink. I brought my knee up, but without enough force to fell him; it just made him shake me like a terrier shakes a rat. My ankle banged into the umbrella stand next to the door. I grabbed behind me and my old school hockey stick came to hand. I didn't have room to take a swing, so I tried to prise Tim away from me instead. He stepped back so suddenly that all the force I was using whacked the stick upwards into his face. Tim dropped me and howled. He backed away, blundering into the Belfast sink with a dull ceramic clang. Blood was pouring between his fingers. I raised the stick above my head and slashed it through the air, but he caught the hook with one sticky hand, midway to his skull, and twisted it from my grasp before I knew what was happening. I was backed into a corner, next to a locked door barring my escape. In desperation I snatched an umbrella from the stand and pointed the metal ferrule at him.

He laughed. I swore. He let go of his nose and made a stupid pose, one arm curled up behind his back like a scorpion's tail. He pointed the hockey stick at me like a foil, all the time dripping a steady stream of blood from his nose onto the flagstones.

'*En guard*.'

'Let me go.'

He waved the heavy unbalanced hockey stick inches from my nose in a circular motion. He was swaying slightly with the drink.

'*Prêt*.'

I bashed the stick away from my face.

Tim clicked his heels together and started again.

'*En guard*. Aren't you going to play?'

I slid towards the kitchen, my back pressed up against the scullery wall. Tim stood with his back to the sink, following me with his weapon. At the closest point we could have reached out and touched each other across the room, but he was waiting, prolonging this encounter like a cat with a mouse. He wasn't going to let me go.

The fear was debilitating. I heard myself whimper. I pressed my lips tight shut and clasped the flimsy bundle of spokes through the slippery nylon, holding it in both hands like a golf club. I struggled to draw enough oxygen in through my nose. In the

light from the kitchen I could see how much blood he was losing. He wiped the back of his hand under his nose and winced. He scowled at me and took a step forward as I retreated.

‘No, you don’t,’ he said skipping round me, getting between me and the kitchen.

‘Tim…’

‘You never put up much of a fight, did you? *Allez*!’ The hockey stick banged into the clothes-airer hanging up above him as he waved it around and he lost momentum.

I threw the umbrella at him and lunged in mindless panic for the locked door again. I didn’t even feel it as he clubbed me across the back of my shoulders. He took hold of my arm and swung me around, pulling me by my jacket sleeve in an arc so that I lost my footing and banged my forehead against the side of the cold white sink. I went down onto my knees. I thought he was about to kill me. He continued to hit me with the hockey stick. The clothes-airer right above us restricted his swing, but it would only be a matter of moments. I reached up for the edge of the sink and levered myself up on one elbow. It was there, the billhook, right next to my fingers, lying on top of the washing machine. I saw it, then it was in my hand. Tim yelled at me, pausing just long enough for me to scramble to my feet. I ploughed towards the light of the kitchen doubled over beneath the barrage of blows. He grabbed hold of my jacket again and I lashed out instinctively. Tim’s own weight did it really, as he spun me round. I don’t think I could have slashed into him like that. He caught the point in his midriff and carried on running, pulling the billhook out of my hands.

The traction between the seconds weakened and time stretched. I felt the tug as the curved point snagged in his flesh, felt it tear, saw Tim run two strides into the kitchen before I could let go, then saw his arms windmill, then his collision with the wall next to the fireplace, all in slow motion. He tried to turn and fell onto his side, sliding in his own spatter pattern to the floor. The air filled with an unreal intensity as the immediate stench of his gut erupted into the present. He came to rest with his right cheek against the paintwork. His left eye was blood red, his cheek dented, his nose sort of twisted. White froth bubbled out of his mouth. And he was still talking. That was the worst thing, like he hadn’t realised he was finished.

‘Call a fucking ambulance.’ Blood dribbled down his chin.

I couldn't. He'd broken the phone. In a daze I went to the pantry and fetched a bottle of amontillado. I still can't be sure how much of this was imagined in retrospect, how much I can really remember. Tim tried to shift position, releasing more blood and a sigh like sand shifting beneath the ocean. A coil of pinkish gut spilled out of his bloody shirt with the sound of forced sausage meat, steaming in the unheated room. I poured half a bottle of sherry over the table, but a small amount splashed into the clean glass. I downed it to try to quell the giddiness and cope with the stench and the obscenity.

'Get help,' he said.

I pulled a chair from the kitchen table and sat in front of him. I put my feet on either side of his legs.

'Ah—Please. Help me.'

'You're already dead.' My voice seemed to belong to someone else. I'd never known I could be this cold. I poured myself another half glass.

'Give me a drink.' He turned his head as far as he could to look at me.

'You've had enough.'

'You're family. Help me.' His voice came now like an empty breeze.

'It's too late,' I said.

And it was. I watched him fail, it didn't take long. At the end he lost his mind, his face slackened and he wailed like the poor old women in the hospice, drugged past dignity and left with only the fear of death. I stayed to the last, his last breath spent.

I sat until I was sure.

It was too big. This was beyond anything I could deal with. I'd met too much death in the last few days. I couldn't feel anything. He was just meat, spoilt meat.

Time passed. I got to my feet. I stood over him and poured the dregs of the sherry over his face.

And there she was, standing by the kitchen table.

'Come with me,' I said, but the child couldn't hear me any longer, didn't see me, no longer knew me.

Even as I watched she began to fade through a tunnel of unfixed perspective, until I was unsure if she was there. A shape, barely visible, then not even that. Tim had brought us together: He had been in both our presents, and now he was no longer in mine the connection had been severed. The past was leaving me behind.

‘Where are you, Jack?’ I yelled, wiping my face on my jacket sleeve. ‘Come on, I’m ready for you.’

The house was silent.

I crept past my cousin and numbly groped my way along the corridor to the garden door. The hallway was dim and the breeze was sifting through the leaves and rattling the landing windows. There was another sound. I looked up the stairwell, but it was too dark to see anything. It was almost musical, a jingling. Not bells, glass. The faintest movement of borrowed light caught in the prisms of the chandelier as the glass teardrops tinkled against one another. Some sense of self-preservation drove me out of the house. I don’t remember running but I must have because when I turned round I was outside the back door with the ground heaving under my feet. The earth groaned and the rumbling intensified. The stones in the wall began to sing. I could feel the sound in my back teeth. The pressure built rapidly until it detonated in a series of short sharp percussive explosions as a fissure opened up, tearing right up from the doorstep to the eaves, a crack wide enough at the bottom to put my fist in. All around powdery pellets of masonry and mortar fell like heavy snow. I ran as fast as I could move.

43 Jack

He's waited for Emily to come back. He looked everywhere after the tremors, anxious he should miss her at the nurseries when he left his vigil here. For a while he even kept pace with the ragged crowds of sugar-skulls that marched for so many weeks before they got bored and went home and forgot the song.

A whole year has passed. The blasting has stopped on Barley Hill. The experts have gone home. It's hard to keep track of the dates, but he's followed the seasons back on Barley Hill, a shadow in the whinnys, a shiver through the trees.

The street lights are casting a dull glow against the old vicarage's walls. The ground floor windows are boarded up. Until now he's always felt safer away from the farm. He clambers through the brambles to get round to the back door. There is a sheet of iron bolted across the doorway and the words 'KEEP OUT!' are legible in the orange light.

Jack stiffens and steps back into the shelter of the hedge. He is not alone tonight. Something moves over by a rose trellis, creeping towards the house, stealthy as a cat.

'*Em-il-y…*'

She's there, standing by the back door. Jack peers through the shadows.

Emily turns round, very slowly.

'*I've been waiting for you*.'

Jack holds his breath from force of habit. Emily presses herself back against the cold iron blocking the door. She can see something by the roses that Jack can't.

There, a ripple, a disturbance in time disrupting the flow of the light from the streetlamps. Emily tries to make herself smaller.

And then the laugh. It is so wicked it blots out the stars for a moment. She crouches down, but it's coming for her.

Jack realises she isn't going to move. He leaps forward and opens his mouth and lets go of the unendurable outrage, channelling the howling fury that has sloughed off rocks and thrown down floods and fire and brimstone. Through the shaking garden he flies to Emily and grabs her shoulders. He wants to pull her back with him to Barley Hill, where Tim cannot follow because he has no connection there. Somehow, though, she has slipped through both their fingers, and it's Jack who stays, one more incumbent in this haunted house.

44 Afterword

The hillside still sings, not the rumble of sliding earth, but a voice that rips time and pours through space as gently as haw frost forming on a blade of grass. I have come to hear it. The sun and the clouds and long dark nights and the perennial wind pass over the enduring hillside and erode it slowly away, until one day, like me, there will be nothing left. Until then this is where I belong. The summer grass is bent over in the wind. The reservoir is shifting shades of indigo and a small yacht with an orange sail bobs without progress. The field below the derelict cottage is supported by an ugly wall of gabions and the farmhouse has been demolished. I sit next to the tabby cat with my knees under my chin and close my eyes, to feel the sun on my eyelids.

Very quietly, I begin to sing.