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English: Creative Writing

the women come and go,

a novel in three parts

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Abstract

Focusing on the stories of three women shaped by the expectations and attitudes of the times in which they live, my novel covers the periods 1921-1937, 1937-1972 and 1973 and participates in the discourse on women's changing historical circumstances and new class and gender identities. It therefore can be read in the category of a novel of manners or a middlebrow novel. My purpose has been to explore, through creating my own characters and story, the dramatic social, cultural and economic changes that have taken place in the middle part of the twentieth century for Western women. In tracing the trajectory from one generation to the next, my fiction responds to and is inflected by the style of narration obtaining at the time. It engages, for instance, with the 'reality' constructed by writers such as Virginia Woolf, Christa Wolf and Margaret Drabble within the genre of women's fiction: of women writing for each other, in a small-scale and intimate way, and integrating the story of an individual life with the circumstances of the time. My aim has been, through writing fiction, to re-examine certain concepts of the past for myself and for the contemporary reader in order to reach slightly different conclusions and to begin to understand the past in a new way.

Contents

Declaration of Authorship

I, Carole Smith, declare that the thesis entitled *the women come and go*
and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
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- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission.

Signed**:** ……

Date **:**……

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the women come and go

Prologue

'The way you raise your eyebrows and smile, Jo, reminds me of Sarah,' my mother's friend tells me.

Phyl then leans forward from her armchair to hand me a large black-and-white photograph of my mother, who must have been in her late teens when it was taken. She's wearing a pale, short-sleeved dress, with a flimsy scarf tied loosely around the neck. She seems poised and confident, smiling at the camera.

When I visited Phyl two weeks ago, she promised she'd look out some photographs that Geoffrey, her husband, had taken. This morning I rang her to say I was coming to Southampton for last-minute shopping and she asked me round for tea, as I hoped she would. I wouldn't drop in unannounced on this precise little woman, but I'm intrigued by my mother's early life, my pre-history. She wasn't much given to stories of the past.

'So you're travelling back to Washington in a couple of days. I read in *The Times* about that funny man, Nixon,' Phyl says. 'Take the photo of Sarah with you. I'll look out some more that Geoffrey took and send them on. I'll also scribble a few notes to put them in context.'

'I'd like that,' I say, though I don't expect, with her narrow perceptions, Phyl will have much of interest to tell me.

I smile to myself as she walks into the kitchen to make tea. In her tartan trousers, and with her grey bob held back on one side with a Kirby-grip, she looks like a middle-aged child. She seems an unlikely friend for my mother.

I peer around the living room. Frugal shabbiness. Even though a small fire has been lit, there is none of the quirky comfort I noticed as a child the day my mother took me to tea at the house where Phyl and Geoffrey lived, crammed as it was with china and silver and ivory figurines. I wonder what she has done with the bits and pieces.

I have an urge to draw the blue-green curtains across now it is dark outside. We've had a week of cold rain and it would make the gloomy room cosier. This

block of flats, built a couple of years ago, stands on land where the farm was. As a child, I used to play in the fields. If it was still light outside, I might have caught a glimpse of our old house, Tanglewood, across the road, not quite hidden by the trees.

Phyl soon comes back with a tray on which she's placed two pink-and-gold cups filled to the brim with tea. She hands me a bowl of sugar knobs, then holds out a plate of Rich Tea biscuits.

'Sarah and I used to dunk these,' she says, smiling.

While we drink our tea, she tells me about when she worked with my mother at Brintons' nursery in the late 1930s. 'Soon after we became friends, Sarah invited me round to Tanglewood. We went for a walk to the lake, then came back for tea and scones,' she says. 'I hadn't known before there was a lake nearby. I remember we walked through the farmyard, then over several fields. The sky was cloudy and I feared it might rain, but that didn't seem to bother Sarah, even though she had on only a light woollen jacket.'

I notice a small frown between Phyl's eyes. She is speaking precisely, as if what she's saying has been picked over many times. She goes on to tell me about Geoffrey's orchid display at the Chelsea Flower Show and how my mother was then wearing a pale-green frock. She remembers scenes vividly. Perhaps when women observe other women they become engrossed in small details, or maybe Phyl just has a keen eye because she paints. She gave my mother a couple of her water-colours and I had the one with primroses hanging on my bedroom wall when I was a child.

Phyl is now talking about a time during the war when my mother invited her to come with her for a week to Sandwich to stay with Kit and Frank. 'It was a week full of sunshine and kindness,' she says. 'I remember how blue the sea was, and the briny smell and the sound of waves.'

I try another sip of the too strong tea I'm trying to swallow. Does Phyl know the whole story? Sarah, my mother, would surely never discuss her background with someone so prim.

Phyl adds, looking at me closely: 'Kit and Sarah seemed almost like sisters.'

I am beginning to think I might not have fully appreciated Phyl. There must have been something about her that made my mother fond of her, prudish though she thought her. I feel a blur of goodwill towards her and tell myself that I really will stay in touch with her.

An idea occurs to me. 'I have some of Kit's letters,' I say. 'I keep telling myself I should try to piece together her story. You know what life must have been like between the wars. Will you help me if I get stuck with details?'

She gives me a smile which crinkles up the corners of her eyes. 'I should like that,' she says. 'The past comes back to me easily.'

I never got round to telling my mother that I had Kit's letters. Besides, if I'd asked her to look over any attempt I made to put something down on paper, I can imagine her exclaiming, 'Darling, of course it was nothing like that.'

I look at my watch. It's six o'clock and I tell Phyl I must go. I say a few words, I hope appropriate, about Geoffrey, who died in December, the month after my mother. I remember how, when I was a teenager, my mother and I used to giggle about him, knobbly knee-ed in his khaki shorts, even on the coldest day. I was about sixteen when Sarah told me that, before the war, Geoffrey had been set on marrying her. She'd joined the ATS to escape him. As he was forty-something then, she thought he should have been past all that, so she'd been astonished when, a couple of years after her own first marriage, she'd learnt that he'd married Phyl.

While Phyl is standing next to me in the lift, I wonder to myself whether she ever knew about his wish to marry my mother.

Once in the lobby I bend down to give her a peck on the cheek. Her parting words are, 'I think you should make time to put Kit's story together. It might help us both understand more about Sarah.'

Part 1 – *Kit*

Chapter 1 - 1921

The rooks

The rain had stopped and the sun was warm on her face. Winding her way through the maze of streets near the docks, Kit felt neat and well protected by her olive serge coat and the tight green hat her eldest sister had given her. She could now present herself as a woman who was sensible and trustworthy, suitable to be a nursemaid.

An elderly man passed her on the pavement, raising his hat. She must at least appear respectable. She glanced down at her shiny black boots and the inch of lisle stocking showing above them. 'You look as neat as a doe,' her father used to tell her when she was dressed up to go to church.

She walked on down the street of flat-fronted grey houses, staring straight ahead, trying to stop tears pricking at her eyelids. Three weeks ago her father had written again, more insistently, asking when she was planning to come to Devon to see them. She had no money for the rail fare from Southampton, but she couldn't tell him that. She knew he was hurt that she hadn't been down for over two years. The prodigal daughter, she thought, but no fatted calf would be dressed for her.

The last time she'd travelled home was at Harvest Festival, a month before the end of the war, a year after her brother, Reg, had been reported missing. The church had been freezing and the organist was thumping out: 'Come then, Lord of mercy, come, Bid us sing Thy Harvest-home … Free from sorrow, free from sin.'

Striding out now, Kit started to hum the tune in her head to boost her courage. All three of her sisters knew that two years ago she'd had a child but none of them would dare tell their father or mother. They were a respectable family in a close-knit West Country town – a claustrophobic town, she felt when she was growing up. Her mouth tightened as she remembered her mother saying of a pregnant housemaid she'd dismissed: 'A fallen woman always keeps falling.'

She bit her lip hard to hold back the tears. She'd woken at five, desolate without her daughter's warm little body beside her. She had to keep telling herself that the Brides were good people, with money enough to bring Sarah up properly.

Thank God, she was such a winning child, with her fair hair and hazel-green eyes. She had to pull herself together; she mustn't miss the Hythe ferry.

As she turned into the park, she saw that the municipal flowerbeds had been planted with bright yellow tulips and red wallflowers. Winter was over. She smiled at a toddler perched on a bench next to her mother. The small girl had been tightly buttoned into her blue coat with its velvet collar and was clutching a well-worn doll in her arms. The mother smiled back at Kit, a smile that seemed to say, 'Yes, I'm proud of her.' She felt a lump in her throat again.

Kit could see the pier up ahead as she pushed open the park gate onto the road. To her right, sitting on a low wall outside the Royal Oak pub, was a group of silent, grim-faced men. She supposed they were dockers turned away without work. Her brother-in-law, a stevedore, hadn't been taken on for months. In spite of that, he'd counted thruppence from the tin of money put by for the rent and handed it to her for the ferry ticket. Had he and Maria not said she could come to them to have her baby, God knows where she would have ended up – in the workhouse or on the streets? One day she hoped to be able to repay them for their kindness.

She sighed to herself. Pass the parcel. She'd been living in Clapham with Ellen, her eldest sister, when she worked on the railways, her wartime job, her contribution to fighting the Germans. Ellen and her husband were so respectable. When she came out of hospital the week after they'd found her on the river steps, Ellen had been quick to tell her, 'You've brought this on yourself, taking a married man as a lover.' But because she could still barely sit upright and was unable to speak, Ellen had relented, pronouncing that she could stay on for a month or two, until her swollen belly became apparent. After that she must go elsewhere, for what would the neighbours think?

When a few weeks later Ellen went with her on the train to see Maria, her youngest sister, to probe whether she and her husband were willing to take on the problem, Maria had just laughed and said they'd say the husband was away at sea. Besides, in the neighbourhood she lived in, few people would ask questions.

As Kit stepped from the road onto the quayside, she noticed a man in a shabby grey demob suit playing a violin. A pock-marked boy by his side was rattling a few coins in a tin: 'Spare a few coppers for a meal?' he called to her. She shook her head, smiling weakly, pitying them. The only money she had in her purse was for her ferry ticket.

The ex-soldier had fair hair and a wheat-coloured moustache. The moustache made her think of Charlie, her lover. How much she missed him, and London, too, with the excitement and mystery of the streets, especially at night. Charlie had shown her the West End and its squares, Whitehall, Piccadilly, Rotten Row and Regent's Park, a little piece of the country in the big city. Walking with him she'd worn out a lot of shoe leather. She remembered the August day they'd walked holding hands, watching bare-legged children paddling in the pond in Hyde Park, while old ladies knitted under the trees and young men lay with their heads in their girls' laps. With her wages from the railway, she hadn't been dependent on charity then.

But Maria's kindness went further than mere charity. After a couple of weeks of staying with Maria, when Kit was still tearful and able to utter a few words only occasionally, she suggested she might write to Charlie at Clapham to tell him her new address.

Afterwards, when Sarah was born, Charlie sent small sums of money to buy clothes for her. In her letters to thank him, she'd tried to pick stories about herself and the baby that might amuse him. She never let slip how run-down Maria's house was, with its back-to-back privy down the garden and only a cold water tap in the lean-to scullery. Lately though his letters had become less frequent and she missed the encouragement they gave her. Was there someone else in his life, another substitute for his marriage to an invalid? She felt achingly jealous.

Kit could hear the ferry's engine thudding slowly, ready to go. She bought her ticket and hurried along the gangway to sit inside, on the lower deck. She didn't want her hat to blow off. Cramming her springy hair into a hair-net and easing the felt hat on top had taken time and patience.

As the boat pulled away from the pier, the sea was so calm on either side of them that it looked like a flat pavement. Soon they were passing towering cargo boats loading and unloading on the quayside. The wheeling cry of the seagulls made her look back, towards the shore, where the vast redbrick hospital loomed above a clump of trees. How many poor young men were still in there, their minds deranged by shell-shock? She couldn't take her eyes off the building. It brought back her pitiless,

recurring nightmares of being shut up with Sarah in a workhouse with starving, cursing paupers.

The siren blast seemed to split her eardrums. The ferry had reached the far side. A lumpy woman in a worn coat stepped off the boat in front of her, her feet slipping on the wet boards of the pier. Kit grasped her elbow to prevent her falling. They then walked side by side to the shore and the woman told her the way to West End, the next village, she said.

After the treeless street that Maria lived in, with its close-packed houses, a walk through oak woods and heathland would be a treat. In the hedge-bank along the lane from the village were patches of primroses, which reminded her of Devon, but then so many things did. She walked at a steady pace past a few scattered cottages with pigs and hens scratching around in the bare soil. A small girl with bird-thin legs was sitting on the doorstep of one cottage playing with a black puppy. Poor child, Kit thought, she looked as if she needed a good wash and a square meal.

As she hurried on, she began to wonder what Sarah might be doing. Was she missing her? She had reluctantly agreed not to see her for six months in the hope that this would help her settle down more easily in her new home. She could feel the tears welling up in her eyes again. She must keep telling herself that Maria's neighbours, the Brides, would look after Sarah well. They were comfortably off and sensible.

The first time she'd seen Janet Bride, Maria's new neighbour, the weather hadn't been much different from today. It was one of those still, settled October days. She had been in the back garden watching Sarah toddle along to the end of the path, then turn back to face her, laughing in triumph at her success.

'Such a pretty, happy bairn.' A small, fragile woman was observing them through the fence.

Maria had told Kit a week or so before that people from Scotland had moved in next-door. 'He's a clerk with the council,' she added. 'Too good to remain in our part of town.'

Kit and the new neighbour introduced themselves and soon the older woman was sending round treats for Sarah: a few biscuits she'd baked or a bowl of junket.

Kit suspected Janet Bride knew, in spite of the pretence, that there was no husband away at sea.

The Brides had an unmarried daughter, Mabel, living with them. She was not much older than Kit, perhaps in her late twenties, but her hair was already grey. Maria liked to gossip and had learnt that Mabel's fiancé had been killed at Passchendaele and the morning after she received the telegram, streaks of grey appeared in her hair. Within a month all the colour had faded. Kit supposed it could be true.

On another occasion, Maria told her that Mabel had until recently been nursing an elderly colonel in Dundee. 'He proposed to her and she fled back to her family,' she said.

Because of their kindness to Sarah, Kit quickly warmed to the timid, self-effacing Mabel and her no-nonsense mother. They often invited her over for tea, and of course she was to bring Sarah. She smiled to herself, remembering Sarah on one visit sitting by the kitchen table on a chair piled high with cushions and rolling a knob of lard around with some flour, pretending she was making pastry.

It was in the Brides' kitchen just a month ago that she'd broken down. It had been teeming with rain outside and the kitchen windows were steamed up. She'd been sitting chatting with Mabel, trying to drink a cup of too-strong tea. She could almost taste the acrid drink now. Sarah was upstairs with Janet Bride searching for an old teddy bear. As she put down her cup, Kit had found herself shaking with impossible, uncontrollable sobs. In one incoherent stream she babbled to Mabel that Sarah must go into an orphanage - her brother-in-law had no work - she had to find a job and not be a burden on them.

Mabel had leaned forward and taken her hand. 'I once worked in an orphanage,' she said in her quiet, precise manner. 'There may be another way.'

Then Janet Bride had come back down the stairs carrying Sarah, who was hanging on tightly to an almost hairless teddy bear. She looked so happy. Even though it was raining, Kit had to hurry out into the garden so that Sarah wouldn't see her tears.

The next morning, as she was giving Sarah her porridge and milk, she heard a knock at the front door. Maria went to see who it was, then returned to the kitchen. 'Mabel and her mother are here for some reason. Can you bring a pot of tea into the front room?' she'd said.

The front room meant that it was something formal, serious. She wondered whether, after her outburst yesterday, they might be going to offer herself or Maria housework as they were soon moving into their new house.

The kettle hadn't had time to boil before Mabel opened the door into the kitchen. 'Kit,' she said quietly, 'if you agree, we'd like to offer Sarah a home with us.'

She was trying to recall what she'd replied. She could remember that afterwards they sat together on the kitchen bench watching Sarah play with the pans she'd taken out of the cupboard, fitting one inside the other. She also remembered that Mabel's short-sighted blue eyes seemed the loveliest eyes in the world. What suffering could have brought about such kindness from people she hardly knew?

Kit shut the picture from her mind. She must stay in the present. She was walking down a pot-holed track that smelt of the damp, peaty ditch which ran beside it. The lane curled back on itself and she could see the church ahead, its roof smothered in ivy. Opposite it was a gravelled driveway and a hedge of scarlet-flowered rhododendrons. She smoothed down her coat and rummaged in her bag for her compact mirror. It was the first present that Charlie had given her, wrapped in pale mauve paper. 'For my beautiful Kit,' he'd said, 'so you can admire that delicate oval face and charming little chin.' Then he'd kissed her on her hair. It was one of those sweet moments in life that she'd never forget.

Standing close to the hedge, she held the mirror up to her face. Her nose was shiny and her eyes looked red, as if she'd been rubbing them. All she had time for was to dab on some powder. She pursed her lips: did she look suitably serious and capable?

She took a deep breath and turned into the driveway of the manor. She could hear her feet crunching along the gravel as she stared straight ahead. The azaleas and magnolias massed together on either side and in full bloom seemed like a tunnel, and then a lawn and rose beds opened out in front of the house. She felt awkward and obvious as she got close to the tile-hung gables: someone was probably watching her.

She'd been instructed in the Markhams' letter to call at the front door, and her hand was shaking as she tugged on the brass bell-pull. A broad-faced girl in a blue pinafore and printed cotton day dress appeared at the door almost immediately.

'I have an appointment to see Mrs. Markham about the post of nursemaid. I am Miss White.' How sharp and hurried her voice must sound. Could the girl also hear the thumping of her heart?

'Come in,' the girl said bluntly.

The hallway was square, with a greyish-blue flagstone floor. She could smell damp plaster and wet dog. The riding boots by the door reminded her of home, of the neatly lined up boots of her father and Reg; and the big bowl of tulips and daffodils on the round oak table pleased her.

The girl opened one of several high oak doors and, as Kit followed behind her, she caught a glimpse of herself in a round, gilt-framed mirror. She tucked back a strand of hair and raised her chin. She looked tidy enough. The untidiness was what she felt inside. She knew she had to lie, and she wasn't good at it.

She stopped just inside the door of a low, comfortable room with great beams running across the ceiling and. Sunlight was splashing through the casement windows onto a fine Turkey rug, making it seem like a carpet of flowers that she shouldn't tread on. Should she sit down on one of the side chairs or just stand and wait? The girl was already on her way out of the room and called over her shoulder, 'Mm'll be here shortly.'

Kit was fidgeting uncomfortably, still considering whether to sit down, when the door edged open and a black and tan dog bounded up to her. He licked her hand wetly and enthusiastically.

'Sam, Sam, come here!' A small woman in a tweed suit was standing outside the door. Kit thought she looked haughty, her lips a little compressed, but then she gave her a quick, amused glance.

'You're not afraid of dogs, Miss White?'

'No, Mm.'

'Please sit down. My father will join us. My husband's up in London.'

Mrs. Markham sat on the broad sofa and clasped her hands round her knees, Sam, the Airedale, flopping down at her feet. Her plain pearl earrings looked just the thing to be wearing in the morning, Kit thought, and the greyish-blue scarf reflected the colour of her eyes. She would always remember how Mrs. Markham looked that

morning, with her copper hair drawn back from her face and shaped into an elegant chignon. They were about the same age, Kit guessed, and she felt clumsy and badly dressed perched on the upright chair opposite her.

When the servant girl came back carrying what looked like a hastily-laid tray, with a heavy silver coffee pot poking above haphazardly arranged china, Kit stood up to move some books from the low table between Mrs. Markham and herself.

'Careful with my books!' An elderly man with white hair and a bushy beard had followed the girl in. As Kit bent down to place the books on a chair, she realised that his tone was only half-serious. She thought of her father when he was pretending to be stern.

The man sat down by his daughter on the sofa.

'Sit down, sit down, Miss White. We've read your references. Two years as a ticket collector on the railway. Strange job for a girl, but the war I suppose. Your letter says you came to live in Southampton to help your sister with her child. Why are you now seeking a post as a nursemaid?'

Kit stared down at her lap. Her hands were shaking and she made an unsuccessful effort to speak slowly. She felt sly and underhand. 'My sister's husband has lost his job. My sister was once a nursemaid and believes I am suited to such a position. I'm fond of children and have experience in looking after her son, who's now at school.'

She was trying to appear brisk and purposeful. She looked up at the man and was aware of his quiet, observant eyes. He seemed uncertain about her. His bushy eyebrows arched, then joined together in a frown.

'My daughter chose the last nanny, Miss White. She drank. We don't want yet another change. It disturbs the child.'

Kit bit the inside of her lip, a habit she'd had since childhood. She felt inappropriately self-righteous. 'I don't drink, sir,' she said stiffly, but she was silently hurling at him, I know too well what change can do to a child. She remembered Sarah clinging to her, choking with sobs, when she left her with the Brides. She tried to breathe calmly and maintain the correct, diffident expression on her face.

She kept her eyes on the white-haired man while he continued his probing. She hoped she was giving the information as honestly as she could, but her cheeks were burning and her stare was too fixed. He was firing too many questions at her.

She was getting confused. Then she was aware that he had stopped. He rang for the girl. 'Take Miss White to wait in the hallway,' he said to her.

Kit sat on a hard hall chair, her fingers working nervously, picking at a loose thread on the sleeve of her coat. The daughter, Mrs. Markham, hadn't asked her one question, but before the door was shut, she'd heard her whisper, 'She has a kind, open face, Pa - and I think she has some spirit.'

She stared out of the window. A thrush was whistling and gurgling on a flowering bush. The noise seemed tremendous. Rooks swarmed above the fir trees like black cut-outs in the sky and clouds were beginning to form. It looked as if it was about to rain and she hadn't brought her umbrella.

Why today did images of Charlie keep coming into her mind? Perhaps it hurt less to think of him than to remember that she was now losing Sarah as well. The first day she'd ridden on an omnibus with Charlie they'd travelled down Oxford Street, past Jones and Brown's and the other smart drapery stores. They were sitting on the top deck and when it started to rain, he'd held her hand under the oil sheet. It was 1917 and the last Saturday before Christmas. She'd known then that she was hopelessly in love with him. Even in the drizzle, the pavements were silver-grey, the pillar boxes glowed red and the policemen's uniforms were a clear blue.

Twice that summer Charlie had taken her to London Zoo. She can remember every detail. How his eyes laughed as she told him that she longed to stroke the little white foxes with their black noses. Even the big grey wolf with his shaggy throat looked friendly to her that day. She remembered how it felt to have Charlie standing close to her as they watched the seals with their whiskered sergeant major faces slither into the pool. It had been a perfect day that first day at the zoo, in spite of the rain.

Were Charlie's side whiskers still the colour of ripe corn, like his hair and his moustache? When they were alone together, she would take pleasure in putting up her hand to touch them.

The second time he took her to the zoo, while they were watching the acrobatics of the silver-haired monkeys, Charlie had slipped his arm around her waist and told her she reminded him of the leopard they'd just passed, sleek, with green eyes. He had a wonderfully warm, cosy way of holding her with his arm. He'd kept

it around her while they walked on, laughing at the baboons with their uncanny little human faces.

When she heard footsteps on the oak staircase, Kit turned her head and her daydream was broken. The servant girl, clutching a laughing, wriggling child with a mass of chestnut curls, was clumping down the stairs. The old man was standing in the doorway watching them, then he motioned to Kit to come back into the drawing-room.

'Take a seat, Miss White,' he said settling back on the sofa by his daughter. 'This is Elizabeth.'

When the child was placed down on the carpet, she toddled straight to the Airedale and threw her soft little arms around his neck, kissing his ears. She was charming, Kit thought. In her primrose pinafore with its fine smocking, she looked as pretty as Sarah had done in the simple mushroom-pink frock she'd dressed her in to go to the Brides.

'Well, Miss White, we can offer you the post – on three months' trial. And we would like you to start next Monday. The advertisement in *The Lady* set out the conditions.'

'Thank you, sir.' Kit said.

'Don't look so solemn,' he said, smiling at her now. 'You must go up to see the nursery.'

She could smell the sweet scent of dried lavender and petals in the bowl of pot-pourri on the side table by the window. The child's little rosy fingers were clasped around the dog's collar in case he tried to escape from her embrace. Like most small children, she was perfect.

The grandfather clock in the hall was striking one o'clock as Kit left. She'd been in the house two hours and felt drained of energy. It would be an effort to walk back to the ferry.

When she reached the lane, she found that her knees wanted to give way. She also had a splitting headache. She was on her way back to Maria's house and Sarah would no longer be there.

As she forced herself to walk on, she felt a few drops of rain on her face. Like a benediction, she thought wryly, brushing them off her cheek. Her stomach was rumbling. She remembered the wedge of fruitcake Maria had wrapped in a napkin and put in her handbag. Beyond some gorse bushes she saw a fallen tree and sat down on it to eat the cake. As she pinched up the crumbs from the napkin with her finger and thumb, she thought of the woman in the torn coat she'd seen yesterday slumped on the kerb near the park chewing a mouldy piece of bread, her tangled grey hair hanging down her back. Perhaps she was a whisker away from ending up like that.

It wouldn't do to feel sorry for herself. She stood up. She must get to the ferry. It was still drizzling and her hat and coat weren't much protection against the rain.

She would write to Charlie to tell him that she had a job and that Sarah had a new home. They would no longer need the small sums of money he sent them.

She blew her nose. Tears were running down her cheeks, mixing with the rain. Only in her dreams would the three of them be together. Learn to practise caution and restraint in life, Ellen used to say. She'd never been good at that, but she would have to hide her past thoroughly and bury her memories.

Now she had another child to care for. She had carried Elizabeth back up to the nursery and watched her as she tottered over to a chair, returning with a doll in a blue muslin gown she was pulling along by its arm. The child had then slipped her small, warm fingers into her hand.

Chapter 2 - 1926

A train journey

1

'I spy with my little eye something beginning with "D".'

The train was pulling out of Southampton station, passing behind a row of pink and white villas. Each one had a shiny galvanised dust-bin outside the back-door.

'Dust-bin, Kitty!' The child laughed, pleased with herself. Kit wanted to lean forward to give her a hug. Instead, she patted her knee. She was thinking she would have let Sarah's pretty fair hair grow longer. Someone had cut it in a bob, probably Janet Bride herself, and a small bunch of it was tied back on one side with a brown ribbon.

My gangly-legged daughter looks happy, Kit thought, and 'I Spy' will help pass the time. The five-hour journey to Devon was a long while to sit still for a six year-old. 'I'm seven next week, Kitty,' Sarah had said weightily when Janet Bride handed her over at the station.

Kit had last played 'I Spy' with Elizabeth travelling to Dinan on the boat train with the Markhams. When whatever it was had been spotted, they'd tried to find the word in the English/French dictionary: dust-bin was '*boite à ordures*,' if she remembered rightly, though she wasn't sure of the pronunciation.

She watched now as the steam from the engine looped down to the rails and the train slowed down for Salisbury station. Then she gave Sarah the letter 'D' for dog, because there was a small white Sealyham on the platform, accompanied by a fat, bejewelled woman wound up in fox furs. She didn't think Sarah would know 'S' for Sealyham. They giggled together at the sight of the heavily powdered and rouged, cream-puff of a woman looking down her nose at the dark-suited office clerks and insurance men hurrying to work.

A woman with straggly grey hair and hardly any teeth slid open the door from the corridor and settled herself beside Kit, all the while smiling at her. From Southampton they had had the third-class carriage to themselves and were sitting

opposite each other by the window. Kit, with her back to the engine, was watching the fields galloping away from her as the train gained speed. The mist was burning off and it was becoming a clear day.

When the train rushed with a roar through the blackness of a tunnel, Kit looked across to see whether the noise had startled Sarah, but she was concentrating on unwrapping the book she'd given her for the journey, an early birthday present, *When We Were Very Young*. She'd chosen it because Elizabeth had been delighted by the rhymes when her grandfather bought it for her last Christmas. Kit had had to pawn a treasured present from Charlie, a diamanté pin in the shape of an arrow, in order to buy the book for Sarah. Walking away from the pawn-broker's, she'd felt as if she was leaving behind a piece of herself. Perhaps it had helped her accept that she was now settled in her solitary life. All passion spent: she had heard the phrase somewhere.

The unkempt, jolly woman was rustling a brown paper bag, holding it out to Sarah and telling her to take a biscuit. 'No, thank you,' the child replied primly. 'We have our own sandwiches in this tin box. Hard-boiled eggs, too. And an apple.'

Kit smiled at the woman and took a biscuit when the bag was passed to her. The woman would assume that this precise little girl with the turned-up nose was her daughter, even though she was trying to play the part of her nursemaid, practising before they arrived. Sarah looked trim enough in the rust-coloured coat with its brown braiding, but Kit's canny mother might realise her clothes were hand-me-downs, not smart enough to be worn by a child with a nanny.

Money, almost everything came down to money: she bit the inside of her lip. Sarah's foster father had been dead now for over a year. His liking for whisky had probably brought on the final heart attack. She fretted constantly about how Janet Bride could afford to keep Sarah, even though she sent her what small sums she could; but she and Mabel had made it clear that, come what may, they'd take care of Sarah. Mabel, she knew, had a little money of her own, but there wasn't enough to spare for clothes.

Kit thought of the poetry book that she herself had been given, *London Visions*. It was a present from her father for her own first train journey, up to London stay with Ellen. In the carriage she'd read 'London Beckons' three times: 'The full streets beckon … O let us out and wander the gay and golden night.' The first evening that she and Charlie had walked together around Soho, she'd asked him about

the young men in evening dress waiting outside stage doors with bunches of flowers. She guessed they were for their sweethearts. How daring and wicked such courtship seemed. He'd laughed and told her that the fathers of most of the chorus girls would turn up after a show to escort their daughters safely home.

Her job as a ticket collector at Clapham Junction had been an education in itself. When she first spoke to Charlie, she'd been having trouble with a drunken passenger who didn't have a ticket. Charlie had been standing on the platform by the engine that pulled the night Continental boat train, holding a flag and about to blow his whistle. He seemed part of the magnificent bulk of the machinery, with its gleaming brass pistons. He was equally polished and well cared for. Among the noise, the crowds, the people kissing goodbye and the train breathing steam, he'd quickly spotted the difficulty she was having and sent the drunk packing. Later he told her that for days he'd been admiring her neat ankles which he could just see beneath the long serge ticket collector's skirt. From then on she had nicknamed him 'Sir Percival' after the engine, though it was a year before she told him that.

The two years after that had been the best years of her life, but the time had gone too quickly. She pictured in her mind the night she went with Charlie to the Vienna Grill Room to celebrate the second anniversary of their meeting. The string orchestra had been playing gay Strauss waltzes. She still hummed the tunes when she was happy. It was the evening he told her that if he could have one wish, it would be to turn the clock back, to have the time to love her properly, to make promises.

Everyone in the restaurant had been drinking and laughing. She'd been excited by the buzz of the voices and the music. She smiled to herself, remembering the movement of Charlie's eyes and mouth as he lit his cigarette, tilting his head back and inhaling the smoke. His jaw bone looked as if it had been carved out of stone. She'd smoked her first cigarette that night but couldn't manage to inhale the fumes. Charlie had chuckled when, in disgust, she'd almost dabbed it to death after the first puff. He'd then taken her hand and called her his Pre-Raphaelite angel.

So that she could go out with him that night, she'd lied to Ellen, telling her that she was working a late shift. She'd then had to change out of her uniform in the Ladies' toilets, leaving the skirt and jacket folded in a bag under the desk in Charlie's office.

When the train stopped next it was at Yeovil station. The journey was half-over. Kit realised that she must have dozed off and the jolly woman was standing up and opening the carriage door. 'Goodbye, dear,' she said. 'You have a bonny daughter, so quiet and well behaved.'

The train began to gather speed, settling down to its jicketty-can rhythm. Sarah was now sound asleep. Kit stretched across to take the book from her lap and her hand started to tremble. In spite of Sarah's fair hair, Charlie's hair, her oval face reminded her of herself at that age. What a silly fancy to think that she could pretend to her mother, even for a day, that Sarah was a temporary charge, a friend of Elizabeth's whom she was looking after while her own nanny took a holiday. She was now certain that, when her mother saw them together, she would know Sarah was her child. She remembered her mother telling her as she was growing up that she was easy to see through, so she should take especial care to tell the truth.

At least Sarah called her 'Kit' and seemed to look on her as some sort of aunt who was especially fond of her. She also knew that she worked as a nurse-maid to another girl of about her age. Janet Bride was 'Mother' and Mabel, even though she was older than Kit, she called her sister. However, she and the Brides had agreed that when Sarah was old enough to understand, she should be told the truth.

The train was rushing at full speed through the countryside. The chalk hills would soon give way to the loveliest fields in England, the red ochre of newly turned earth and emerald green grass. There was no going back now.

The week after she'd come back from Dinan, just two months ago, she had written to her middle sister, Enid, to ask whether she could bring Sarah down for a few days to stay in Beer. Enid replied by return of post that they would be welcome, so Kit had concocted a story for her mother that she was bringing a temporary charge down to Devon for the sea air and would come over for the day to see them. She realised now that that had been a mistake: Sarah lived near the sea and she wouldn't want her to lie.

Kit glanced across at the child, who was still asleep, her head nodding gently with the vibration of the carriage. She wanted to show this pretty daughter to her family. She was proud of her. She half-smiled: Enid herself had had a seven-month baby, but getting pregnant when the man was able to marry you was acceptable. Inconvenient dates were soon forgotten.

An hour later she woke Sarah and they ate every scrap of the fish-paste sandwiches, the boiled eggs and the apples, washed down with hot tea from the flask she had prepared. In no time after that the train began to slow down for Beer. The fishing port and the hills around it, with their patchwork of fields, hedges and thickets of trees, were part of the landscape of home. She had to stop worrying. It was important that Sarah should enjoy her few days away. In her letter Enid had said that in the summer now the town attracted tourists: they came for the lobsters and cream teas. Up by the old fort a charabanc park had even been marked out.

Kit pointed out of the window to show Sarah a low stone house where a mad woman used to live with peacocks and a tame fox. Probably she'd been a spinster like me, she thought, but better off.

Each of them carrying a small suitcase, they set off from the station to walk the short distance to Quarry Street. Enid had moved to the cottage when she married and Kit had never before been there. Like most of its neighbours, No. 56 was built of flint-stones and whitewashed. Outside the porch was a pile of enormous elm logs, newly stacked for the winter.

Kit hesitated on the pavement by the gate, but she was encouraged when Enid instantly opened the front door. She must have been waiting for them. They hugged each other, laughing, while Sarah stood and watched them, hoping for her turn.

'You'll want to go to your room and freshen up after the journey,' Enid said; and Sarah quietly followed them up the stairs to a small, cream-painted bedroom in which there was just enough room for the big bed, a table and a washstand. Kit could smell lavender and wax polish.

'Look, Kit, how pretty.' Sarah was admiring the freshly picked roses Enid had arranged in a pewter vase on the shiny oak table. Kit squeezed her sister's hand: she was grateful to her for making them welcome.

Two framed tracts on the wall behind the bed caught her eye. She remembered Enid embroidering them when they were at home together: 'Yet soon man's hour is up and we are gone' and 'Order my Steps in Thy World'. Enid was never wilful like me, she thought. She'll live comfortably with her pedantic school-master husband.

After Enid had left them, Kit picked up the wooden-framed photograph which had been placed by the vase. She smiled when she saw the gauche young girl with a flower at her waist. 'Look, that's me,' she said to Sarah. 'As the youngest, I was bridesmaid at my sister Ellen's wedding. She was the first one to get married. When that was taken, I was only a few years older than you are now.'

In the photograph the older sisters looked poised and fashionable in their long skirts and lace-trimmed blouses, while she, with her unruly hair, stared sullenly into the camera, a skinny twelve-year-old in the high-collared, sprigged muslin dress her mother had made for her.

Kit unstrapped her overnight case to find a toothbrush. She then slid out the photograph of Elizabeth she had folded into her nightdress to show to Enid. It had been taken in the stable yard with Elizabeth wearing her riding coat and leggings, her thick chestnut plaits hanging forward over her shoulders. In one hand she was holding the bridle of her pony and with the other clasping the collar of Sam, the Airedale. Only Kit knew that the little smile meant that she was anxious, wondering how long it would be before Sam broke free and leapt at the photographer.

Sarah came over to see what she was looking at. 'Is that Elizabeth, Kit, the girl you look after?'

'Yes, dear,' Kit said. 'She's the same age as you.'

'How lucky she is to have a pony – and a dog.'

I'd like to have a photograph taken of Sarah down here with me, Kit thought, a seaside photograph, but it would cost too much.

She took Sarah's hand and led her to the window, hoping they might be able to glimpse the harbour. 'Look,' she said. 'The thatch is hanging so low over the top of the window, it seems as if there's a bristly moustache outside.' Compared to Elizabeth's exuberance, Sarah seemed an over-thoughtful child. She wanted her to claim a funnier, more magical world.

2

The weather was fine the next day, and Sarah was excited about going on another train journey, even if it was for only twenty minutes.

Just as Kit had expected, her father was on the platform to meet them in his dark three-piece suit, grey tie and bowler hat. Had she ever seen him walk through town in anything else?

When they stepped down onto the platform, he bent towards Sarah and his eyes wrinkled in a smile. 'And what's thy name, little maid?' he asked.

'Sarah. Sarah Charlotte Bride, sir.'

As they walked along the dusty streets, Kit saw that, in spite of its imposing church and the few fine Georgian houses, parts of Colyton looked even more run-down than when she had been here three years ago. Like most towns, it had suffered because of the war and a lack of money.

'Did you know, my maid,' her father was saying to Sarah, 'this was once one of the most important towns in Devon? We're proud of it.' But then he's never seen St. Paul's or Piccadilly, Kit was thinking.

They stopped in the square by the sweet shop and she watched her father take Sarah's hand and lead her inside, just as he had once done with her. While she was standing outside, several people walked past and nodded and smiled, but no one seemed to recognise her. She noticed that the building opposite which housed the seed merchant's was leaning sharply to the right and half its plasterwork was missing.

Through the sweet shop window, she could see her father pointing to the glass jars on the shelves behind the counter. Then he bent down to Sarah and she whispered something in his ear. Old Miss Strange behind the counter took down one of the jars and weighed out a few bon-bons, while Sarah stood as still as a statue, watching her.

When she came out, she was beaming and held up a paper-twist of brown and white peppermints to show Kit; then she slipped her hand in hers as they walked on.

At the bottom of the hill was the foundry, her father's, with its intricate iron gates leading into the yard, and beside it was their house, which looked just the same. The large tracery windows still seemed out of place: pretty but quite foreign.

Her mother must have seen them coming as she was standing in the porch wearing her long brown taffeta dress with its high collar. Even as a small child, Kit had been aware of her elegance, in spite of having to bring up five children on very little money. Her hair was always neatly pulled off her face and in the afternoons she

would wind her jet beads around her neck, her Queen Victoria beads Kit had called them.

She knew that she herself must look dowdy in her belted mackintosh and simple hat. Walking towards her mother, she felt like a schoolgirl again. She probably wouldn't even approve of the pale grey frock she had on underneath, with its fashionable blouson top and silk braiding. She'd think it was too short, even though it was the smartest outfit she owned. Mrs. Markham's cousin had passed it on to her and she'd managed to let it down to fit her.

Underneath her coat, Sarah had on a cherry-coloured velvet jacket and skirt which Elizabeth had grown out of, with a white cotton apron over it. Mrs. M would offer Kit Elizabeth's discarded clothes: 'For your sister Ellen's daughter,' she would say; and Kit was grateful to have whatever she was given to pass on for Sarah. She had picked this outfit especially for today.

Kit watched Sarah step up to her mother, holding out her hand and saying, 'How do you do, Mrs. White.'

Her mother gave a little nod as she took the proffered hand. Then she quickly said, 'Come inside, then.'

As they took off their coats in the hallway, Kit was aware of her mother's shrewd grey eyes looking, first, at Sarah, then at her. She took a deep breath and lifted up her chin. She must play her role with conviction. It was in everyone's interest.

They followed her mother into the kitchen and she noticed the familiar objects, the copper kettle, the coaching prints, the photographs. Now she was back at home, she felt inadequate again, the last child, the sulkiest, the most harum-scarum. She offered to help prepare for lunch: to spread out the cloth on the table, to lay out the knives and forks, to slice the game pie; but she was told no, sit down by the fire: her mother could manage.

After lunch, Kit's father took Sarah into the garden to show her the ducks and she stayed with her mother to help with the washing up. She found at first that she was nervous, biting the inside of her lip again, but they talked only of Enid, of Ellen and of

Maria. Her mother showed no curiosity about her job with the Markhams, nor, it seemed, about Sarah.

Then, just as they were leaving, her father said, 'No young man yet, Kit?'

She smiled and shook her head, taking care not to look at her mother. 'Perhaps I shall be a happy old maid,' she replied.

On the path down to the gate, they stopped for her to admire the geraniums still blooming in the white-painted tubs and the late roses over the archway. Her mother was a good gardener. As they said goodbye, she handed Kit a package wrapped in brown paper. 'Carry it carefully. It's a sponge cake and some butter for Enid.'

She patted Sarah on the head. 'Be sure to remind my Kit to give you a slice of that cake. She might even teach you to make one like it. All my girls cook well.'

Oh, yes, she knows, Kit thought, when they turned away. She knows, but she won't say anything. She wouldn't want Father to find out that I had a daughter and no husband.

'I'll walk you back to the station,' her father was saying. 'There's something I want to show you.'

He slowed his pace as they came to a fenced-off area by the churchyard. It hadn't been there three years ago. In the centre, raised high on a stepped octagonal plinth, was a stone cross with 'Their names liveth for evermore' carved around the base. Her father took off his hat and pointed to the name 'R.G.White' on the plinth, her brother, Reg. A friend of his who had been with him at Passchendaele had written to her parents to tell them that he'd been killed instantly by the splinter of a shell. She hoped it was true. He was her hero. When she was Sarah's age he would swing her up to sit in front of him on their father's horse and in spring they would walk together to find the wild daffodils. She could never read his last, cheerful letter to her without crying.

'Did you know, Kit,' her father was saying, 'that of the 290 young men from the town who volunteered, 48 were killed and many more were wounded?' He sounded uncertain, as if he could barely believe what he was saying. 'I knew most of the lads named here,' he went on. 'Remember Jim Gosney? I always thought he was sweet on you. He was killed in the same battle as Reg. No wonder there aren't enough young men to go around.'

Kit put her right hand through her father's arm, tucking the package under her other arm. Sarah was quietly watching them both. 'Come on, dear,' Kit said. 'We must catch the train and get you to bed.'

The gas lamps from the street outside the small bedroom were throwing shadows on the wall. Kit could hear a dog barking in the distance, which must have been what woke her. Sarah was sound asleep next to her, her small profile visible against the sheets, her hands upturned into themselves beside her face. At least she'd done what for a long time she dreamt of doing. She'd brought Sarah down here to meet her grandparents. Even though Sarah had been subdued, she'd taken everything in.

Kit turned over on her side, thinking of the coming day and another milestone, an even more foolish one. She was going to meet Charlie.

It would soon be dawn and she was too agitated to get back to sleep. She couldn't for the life of her think why she'd decided to let Charlie know that she was bringing Sarah down to Devon. They wrote to each other only sporadically now, but he'd replied straight away, saying he'd like to see them both. He was worried that he was losing touch with her.

It was almost eight years ago that Charlie had driven her to the Cotswolds for that glorious weekend, the weekend of her twenty-third birthday, February 1919. It was a time of restlessness and change. She'd known that her job with the railways could come to an end at any time, though Charlie would stay on with Great Western. He was expecting to be made a station master. How different she was now from the twenty-two-year-old sitting in the small two-seater Charlie had borrowed from a friend for the weekend.

She'd found it thrilling being driven out of London down streets where rows of bow-windowed, gabled houses were being built, all with their own garages. They'd overtaken two motor-lorries and several vans. 'Look at the houses marching down hill,' Charlie had shouted. 'Last year there was not one here, only fields with cows in them.' She remembered thinking that the people who would come to live in the houses would soon be putting up chintz curtains and buying pianos for the parlour. How cosy they'd be.

For the journey, she had on a beige woollen coat over a lavender-coloured jersey frock, not new but fashionable, and she was wearing light stockings. Her hat had been firmly pinned down and she had Charlie's striped scarf wound round her neck. She'd even put on lipstick and powder and bought herself a dainty leather handbag. It had been necessary to lie again to Ellen, who thought that she was off to stay with a girlfriend she worked with. Not even Charlie yet knew that she'd secretly bought a pretty but cheap dove-grey, lacy nightgown.

The Cotswold town of Burford was as quaint as a picture postcard. It was about the same size as Colyton but much more of a piece, with its honey coloured stone houses. The Lamb Inn had a plaque by the reception desk saying that it was four-hundred years old. 'Not as old as our church at home,' she'd whispered to Charlie. As he signed the register, the high-backed settles and cushioned armchairs closed around them and shut out the world, but she still felt embarrassed standing on the flagstones staring up at the beams and the stone mullioned windows.

As they'd arrived late, they were offered only poached eggs for supper, which Charlie encouraged her to wash down with a whisky and soda. A pink, elderly man at the bar seemed to smile knowingly at Charlie, but perhaps she'd imagined it. Nevertheless, she disliked the man. He wore a monocle and his face showed a certain alcoholic puffiness. She was uncomfortable when he looked at her.

Their bedroom had dark wooden panelling, chintz curtains and uneven floor boards that creaked. In one corner was a fireplace and the fire must have been lit for them by the chambermaid. What she remembered vividly was the vast four-poster bed that occupied most of the room. The canopy was in a floral print, forget-me-nots, the symbol of betrothal.

After the boy who carried up their bags had shut the door behind him, she went over to look out of the window at the street lights. She could feel Charlie watching her, and then he was standing beside her, running his hands down her back, slowly, gently, with great care. She swayed round towards him, feeling numb, half-drunk, without any will. He traced the outline of her mouth with his fingers and her lips smiled under his touch. When she put her arms around his neck, he lifted her up and carried her to the bed. She had relived that night many times.

For breakfast the next morning they'd eaten kippers and drunk hot, bitter coffee. She'd pinned her hair up carefully and her face felt scrubbed and glowing, but she still felt dishevelled and frowsty. The other guests would be looking at her but

she didn't care. After breakfast, as they went back upstairs to get their coats to go for a walk down the main street, Charlie had linked his arm with hers.

Kit hadn't drifted off to sleep. She was still wide awake. The sheets on the bed had been too crisply starched and were rubbing her neck, but she did not dare to move for fear of waking Sarah. Her nightdress felt twisted tightly around her legs.

She could hear her brother-in-law snoring in the next bedroom, a soft, refined snore. Then she heard someone laugh in the street outside, a harsh, cackling laugh. She wanted to go downstairs to make a cup of tea but didn't want to risk disturbing her sister. She was having second thoughts: she didn't feel Charlie should meet Sarah; it might confuse her. She wasn't aware that such a father existed.

Also what could she and Charlie have to say to each other? For a long time she hadn't allowed herself to recall anything too clearly about him, but now, lying next to Sarah, she could remember how it felt to have her head resting on his chest in the big four-poster bed while she listened to the slow rhythm of his breathing.

Charlie's life had overtaken hers. Two years ago he had been taken on by his brother-in-law, a solicitor in Wimbledon, as an articled clerk, a very different sort of job from the railways. His wife, in spite of an operation, was still a cripple.

Eventually she must have fallen asleep, because she woke up to find that it was morning and Sarah was cuddled up in the small of her back.

Chapter 3 - 1926

The cliffs

Purposely, she'd said as little as possible to Enid about her plan for the day; simply that, despite the drizzle, she'd like to walk towards Branscombe, a favourite excursion when they were girls. Enid, like her other sisters, wasn't aware that she was still in touch with Charlie. She would have thought her an even bigger fool to be meeting him

'Why don't you leave Sarah with me?' Enid suggested, while they were washing up after breakfast.

Her offer made Kit feel even more guilty about the deceit but she was also relieved. She'd decided last night that she didn't want Sarah to meet yet another grown-up who would have to be explained away. When with her coat and hat on ready to leave, it pleased her to find Sarah happily settled in the kitchen with Enid's baby, tickling her toes and letting her tiny hand clutch around her thumb.

In less than an hour she was climbing the hill to the fort where she'd arranged to meet Charlie and the sun was starting to shine. The last time she'd seen him was seven long years ago, when she was eight months pregnant. He had come down to Southampton on the train and they'd met in the station café. He'd arrived before midday, the time they'd arranged to meet, and was sitting in the café waiting for her.

She remembered that when he stood up to kiss her on the forehead, the whole room had begun to spin and she couldn't breath. She managed to smile, then told him that she felt like an elephant. He said, 'Being pregnant has made you lovelier than ever;' and as she sat down, he touched her cheek with his fingers.

Over the next few hours they drank several cups of strong tea and each of them ate an iced bun. Charlie repeated what he'd said in the first letter he wrote to her at Maria's house: that, as he hadn't heard from her for two weeks, he'd called at Ellen's to see her but she had turned him away. Kit didn't mention a word about being pulled out of the river. It was something he didn't need to know.

It was also in the café that he'd given her the diamanté pin. She could still see him carefully placing on the table in front of her the blue velvet box with the small

silver arrow nestling inside it, telling her that it had been his mother's and he now wanted her to have it.

They remained sitting at the grubby table all afternoon. Then, in the pouring rain, he'd walked her back to the park near Maria's road. Because they were sharing her umbrella, they'd both got wet.

She was walking too quickly up the hill and struggling to breathe, though as a girl she'd been able to run up these steep Devon hills. She must be short of breath because she had fastened her corset too tightly. She laughed to herself. As they were getting dressed, Sarah had asked her, 'What do you wear that stiff, pink thing for, Kit?'

'To flatten out the podgy bits,' she'd replied. She was conscious that, getting on for thirty, she was losing her neat, slim waist.

She slowed down when she saw Charlie's outline by the hedge at the top, his broad, square shoulders slightly hunched in the way she remembered him. She felt that her hat had slipped to one side and she straightened it. Charlie was smoking a cigarette and looking out for her in the wrong direction. She knew that when he spoke his voice would sound low and clear and slightly amused, just as it always had done. She took a deep breath and composed her face.

When he turned towards her, she saw that he still had the same fierce blue eyes, though there were mauve shadows underneath them now and his cheeks were slightly sunk. As she walked up to him, she noticed that his clothes were smart; he was dressed for the country in a tweed jacket and plus-fours, while she was wearing her sensible mackintosh and felt hat. But she'd washed her hair first thing in the morning and carefully sprinkled her body with talcum powder.

They didn't kiss, yet she'd thought about this kiss for days: it would have made her feel desirable again. They looked at each other and began to smile - and Charlie had his same exquisite smile. She wondered what you said to an ex-lover, someone whose life was now so separate. She asked him, 'How was your journey?' Then quickly told him she'd left Sarah with her sister. Later, when she was older, if he would like, he could meet her. He didn't seem surprised that she'd changed her mind about allowing him to see his daughter.

He was looking at her closely. Then he said, 'Remember in London, Kit, how we used to walk for miles? You'd change out of that heavy serge skirt and jacket, roll it up in a bundle and leave it in my office. Not that you didn't look a perfect picture in your navy uniform.'

She hadn't forgotten one minute of it. The earthy smell of the damp grass under their feet reminded her of their last walk together in St. James's Park. She remembered how the trunks of the trees had seemed to dip into pools of darkness, their leaves shining silvery white in the moonlight.

'I have to catch the 4.45 to Exeter,' Charlie said. 'I'm going on to visit my cousin. But let's walk along the cliff path.' She'd forgotten how he would instantly take charge. She was happy to let him.

The ground was wet and slippery but she was afraid to take his arm. It was the once familiar smell of his maleness, of tobacco and sweat, that made her conscious of how her body was reacting: she didn't have the self-control she thought she had. But just walking by his side she felt happy, more alive than she thought she'd ever feel again.

She knew that Charlie would have far more to tell her than she, with her narrow life, could have to tell him, and he liked to talk. His father-in-law, a widower, had recently died and left them some money, so his wife now had a full-time nurse. Kit said she hoped this had made their lives easier. She hadn't lost the urge to give him sympathy and to protect him.

She could never forget the bizarre afternoon, about eighteen months after she'd met him, when, with Ellen and her husband and their daughter, Annie, they'd been invited to tea in Wimbledon to meet his wife and daughter. It was the time when everyone was celebrating the end of the war, a time of euphoria, but she was still puzzled about why Charlie had invited them. Had he wanted her to see how utterly fixed his life was? Was he saying that he could promise her nothing?

She remembered his little girl, about the same age as Annie, six or so, sitting on her father's knee, whispering to him, smiling up at him. It had been a freezing day but the sun had been bright. All these memories were clear in her mind, including the piano against the wall, Charlie's piano, on which he'd played 'Spring of the Year', written by a fellow Welshman, he'd said, Ivor Novello.

Charlie, as they were leaving, had picked up his wife, who'd seemed as light as a feather, and carried her from her armchair to a wheelchair so that she could come

out into the garden to wave them goodbye. After that, she used to think of him each morning carrying his wife out of bed before he came to work, washing her, dressing her. He told her he didn't mind doing it. He blamed himself for her accident. Their daughter had run across the road to meet him from work and May had dashed after her and been hit by a car.

Two young girls were walking along the cliffs towards them arm-in-arm, laughing. Focusing on them helped her to order her thoughts and gain some control of herself. She wanted to say so much, but would any of it interest him? He'd just been telling her that, with help from his brother-in-law, he now employed a nurse for his wife. As they called 'Good afternoon' to the girls, she couldn't help thinking that he must be paying the nurse a fair bit more than the £30 a year she earned as a nanny, not that it was a problem with money that was on her mind.

The next day on the train back, she was to fantasise about taking the job. She would be with Charlie, look after his wife and daughter and bring Sarah to live with them. She and Charlie would be lovers again.

The footpath now offered two choices. The undercliff track was sheltered from the wind but steep and even more slippery, so she suggested walking on along the top. At one point the path veered so close to a landslip that they could look down on the sea lashing the shingle below. As the waves receded, the grinding rattle of the pebbles sounded like a chain being dragged along the beach. The tide was coming in and the sea was pushing forward inch by inch towards the cliffs.

To their right was Branscombe and beyond it the cliffs became lower as the limestone crumbled to red sandstone. 'Father used to say that these cliffs were more beautiful than any picture in the world,' Kit said, 'and more ancient than anything he knew.'

'Thomas Hardy country,' Charlie replied, as he gestured to the low-sailing clouds. 'And you're one of the Grand Old Man's strong, independent heroines.'

She laughed. Did he really see her like that? 'I've been reading some of his poems. The Markhams, my employers, have a well-stocked library. I find the verses, with their wicked humour, more to my liking than his novels.' A line from her

favourite was on her lips: '"Some polish is gained with one's ruin," said she.' It wouldn't be kind to repeat it to Charlie, though she smiled to herself.

He took her arm and pointed up ahead. 'Can you see, Kit, two people standing side by side on a rock, staring out to sea? Don't they look like a pair of Hardy's doomed lovers?'

She laughed at him again. 'It's the old look-out tower with its two chimneys. We'll walk up there so you can see it.'

She wanted so much to amuse him, to relate some of her West Country tales, as she once did on their walks in London. 'Do you know, Charlie,' she said, 'that Hardy's novels are often based on local stories? My mother once told us of a man in the next town who, less than a hundred years ago, sold his wife, after three years of marriage, for a pound to the highest bidder. I imagine he found the idea for *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from an incident like that.

'I wonder, Kit,' Charlie replied, 'whether the wife had a better life without him?'

She could feel the muscles in her throat clenching. She wanted to say so much more to him, but it wouldn't do. 'I think we've walked far enough, Charlie,' she said. 'You have your train to catch and I must get back to Sarah.'

They sat down on the cob wall by the look-out tower and shared the cheese sandwich and sponge cake she had wrapped up in her pocket. Charlie talked about his work and about his daughter, Daisy, who was now thirteen and hoping to train as a nurse. Kit told him about Sarah and the Brides.

The wind had grown stronger and her hands were so cold they were feeling numb. The path she suggested they went back on led inland, across a field and into a lane which seemed like a green tunnel. She hadn't remembered it being so overgrown and narrow. As they tried to walk along side by side, the lining of her mackintosh caught on a bramble and Charlie bent down to free the snag. She watched while his long fingers carefully disentangled each thread. When he finished, he stood up straight and held her by the shoulders, swinging her round to face him.

'What a glaring ass I am, Kit,' he said. 'I can't let you go.'

His arms were like the arms of a young man, thin and hard; but she shook her head and gave him a half smile. He mustn't see her lips trembling.

As they walked on, her stomach felt tense and she tightened her arms to her sides. She had to hold firmly to her simple world: nothing must happen to disturb

Sarah's life and the small contribution she made to it. She needed to talk, to say something inconsequential and distracting. She told him about the church clock, her father's clock as she thought of it; how the wheels of the movement came from a silk factory and the bevels from a seed barrow and a winnowing machine; how life was recycled and pieced together like that.

When, too quickly, they reached the edge of the town, Kit stopped and pointed back to where the sun had left a dull red bar low down in the west. 'Can you see,' she said, 'the clumps of trees are growing blacker and blacker, minute by minute?'

They heard behind them the low jingle of a ploughman's team returning home. 'Little changes down here, Charlie,' she said. 'That's why I love coming back. But I miss the wartime London we lived in.' She didn't tell him of her trips to London now, staying in the Markhams' flat near Hyde Park and taking Elizabeth to a pantomime or to the ballet. She'd occasionally walk with her by the Serpentine, as she once had with Charlie.

As they stepped onto the narrow wooden footbridge that led into Fore Street, Kit turned up the collar of her mackintosh. They stood there together for a minute listening to the stream gurgling beneath them. Then she said, 'Well, you must catch your train, Charlie. There's only fifteen minutes to go.'

Planting himself squarely in front of her, he said almost angrily, 'You'll get married one day, Kit, and I couldn't bear it.' She fumbled with her gloves and managed a tiny smile. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that she'd recently had a proposal of marriage but had never given a minute's thought to accepting it.

'What is to become of us, Kit? If only I could make promises, put my duties behind me.'

There was less than a foot between them and his hand reached out for hers. He was full of agitation and she was calm. She pressed his hand softly as they stood in silence. Then she said, 'I've never asked anything of you, Charlie – and I know you can't marry me. You must go now.'

He turned quickly and walked away. It was a habit of his, but often before he would return for a final hug. As she watched him disappear, she felt a complete emptiness. She choked down a sob, which came out as a whimper, like a hurt child. Her lips didn't move but she called out to him silently, hoping he'd be aware of it.

It was that moment at sunset before the first stars shine when there's an awareness of another world, of something beyond the everyday. She stood there

remembering, 'some blest bright-time she knows can never be.' She gave a small laugh. Hardy again. She had to return to Enid's to get Sarah ready for bed.

She heard footsteps behind her. 'Night, miss. On your way home?' It was the village bobby.

'Yes, constable. Home.'

Enid's fat tabby cat was sitting outside the front-door, waiting to be let in. Everyone was in the kitchen, Enid sewing and Jack, her husband, a neat little man, with small round glasses, was reading a story to Sarah. It was a cosy scene with the paraffin lamp casting yellow pools of light on the scrubbed table. The next day she'd be returning Sarah to the Brides and going back to the Markhams and Elizabeth.

Kit leant over and put an arm around Sarah. In spite of everything, she'd tried to give her a reasonable start in life. At times she'd hoped that Enid, or even Ellen, might have offered to bring her up as part of their family, but that was another thing that didn't happen.

Chapter 4 - 1930

The forest

1

The rhododendron leaves looked twisted and stiff with the frost and the north wind had blasted the life out of the cherry buds, but at the end of the drive the sun was blazing on the silver firs. February, Kit was thinking, the month I was born, is a mixed blessing. Bundled up in hat, coat and scarf, she was still shivering in the back of the car.

Yesterday a birthday card had arrived from Charlie. He hadn't forgotten. It was an exquisite small watercolour of full-blown red anemones with a white-throated sparrow on a branch nearby. He had remembered that she liked anemones. It was 1930 and she was now thirty-three

'Come on, Nanny, put this rug across your knees.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Mr. Baddeley settled back on the squeaky leather seat. They were on their way to the hospital to visit his daughter, Mrs. Markham, and he looked ill and anxious. 'What do you think, Nanny? How shall we find her?'

'She's being transferred to the nursing home next week, sir, so the operation must have gone well.'

'If only she'd been riding Violet and not that new mare. Too highly bred for the forest.'

Kit could picture how the accident had happened from what she'd been told. Mrs. Markham was jumping a ditch, with trappy, boggy ground on the other side, though the Master said her mare might have put a leg down a rabbit hole. Whatever it was, the horse had stumbled and folded on her side. Mrs. M's hip was underneath and her knees were firmly anchored around the pommel.

The old man picked up his newspaper and started to mutter about something he was reading. As the car jolted along the lane, out of the corner of her eye Kit could see his white beard bobbing up and down. She wanted to lean over and pat his arm.

She would like to tell him that, whatever happened, she, Kit, would take care of his daughter.

How regal Mrs. M had looked at the meet, even with the chestnut mare leaping sideways, ears flat back. The forest hunt was far smarter than the Devon farmers' hunt her father went out with, and Mrs. M had been the best dressed of them all. On horseback, complete with her hat and veil, she looked tall and slender, though in reality she was quite short.

She had been chatting to Lord Hyde, the sad-eyed Master, and Kit had watched him, absorbed in what Mrs. M was saying and looking at her with obvious admiration. When she held up the tray to them with the slithering glasses of sherry, Mrs. M had laughed down at her balancing the precarious offering. 'I'd rather be up here, Nanny!' she'd said.

Kit whole-heartedly agreed: it wasn't easy juggling a tray of drinks among excited horses that were bucking and snorting and shaking their heads.

As the riders set off along the drive behind the hounds, Elizabeth had smiled at Kit nervously. She wasn't a natural horsewoman like her mother, but she was on Joker, her forest pony, and she'd be riding quietly at the back with Dixon.

Kit was thrown against the door of the car as the wheels skidded.

'Sorry, Sir,' Dixon called out. 'The lanes are like a skating rink.'

The sharp braking had thrown the old man forward and winded him, sending into a coughing spasm. Kit felt in her handbag for her tin of soft mints and held it out to him. After he'd taken one, she looked away again as she didn't want to fuss him, and he went back to reading his *Times*.

They got on well together. He was devoted to Susan Markham, as his wife had died when his daughter was only fifteen. He was equally besotted with his granddaughter. He often joined Kit and Elizabeth on their walks and would point out special trees and the bizarre forest place names: Sloden, a miry swine-pasture, Dibden, the deep valley, and Slap Bottom. Elizabeth, at eleven years old, relished repeating that one. He knew the gypsies, too. He and his painter friend, 'that wild, savage adulterer,' as Mrs. Markham called him, had formed an association to defend

the rights of the gypsies. Last spring when the painter was coming to lunch, the old man had teased Kit, 'Keep out of his way, Nanny. He's partial to red heads.'

While she was eating lunch that day with Elizabeth in the kitchen, they could hear the voices of the two men in the dining room. They seemed to be talking about the cruelty of forcing the gypsies into compounds. Then Augustus John, as she'd been told he was called, boomed out, 'And not so long ago people around here thought it good sport to hunt the women and children with bloodhounds.' She was upset that Elizabeth had heard his remark, which she couldn't believe was true.

The car turned onto a tarmac road and picked up speed. Kit could see, even through the thickness of the old man's woollen coat, that his arms were as thin as pea-sticks. His bony shoulders were almost poking through the heavy material. He was now over seventy. She'd grown more and more fond of him over the years. He'd often invite Elizabeth and herself into his library to show them new additions to his butterfly collection or to share a poem he took pleasure in. When he had one of his coughing fits and couldn't breathe easily, he'd persuade Kit to read out loud passages he chose from Thackeray and Trollope. He told her the sound of her soft Devon voice soothed him.

As they sped along, he looked at her across his newspaper. 'Pity my son-in-law's in Nigeria shooting those animals. A couple of weeksago I telegraphed him about Susan's accident but he didn't feel it necessary to come back. Still, you and I, Nanny, are here to look after her.'

Kit nodded her head and smiled at him. He wasn't fond of his son-in-law. She'd realised that even before she overheard his conversation with Mrs. M last September. She was in the garden with her scissors cutting dahlias for the nursery, red and yellow dahlias, she remembered. She was standing by the purple buddleia watching the bees when she heard the sound of voices. He and his daughter must have been sitting in the summer house on the other side of the kitchen garden wall.

'You should never have married him, Susan,' she heard him say firmly. 'He hasn't even provided a home for you – and God knows what'll happen when I'm gone. This place is mortgaged up to the hilt.'

She had stayed to listen to Mrs. M's reply: 'But, Pa, a little independence in marriage is no bad thing. I don't mind him spending so much time in London. I'm happy with you and Elizabeth.' Then Kit had edged away. She found it hard to believe that Mrs. M had ever been in love with Henry Markham. When he was

around, she closed up within herself. And, yes, she herself was also perfectly happy with just the old man, Mrs. M and Elizabeth.

They were now driving down a road of newly-built red-brick houses on the outskirts of Southampton. Over the rooftops Kit could see the bulky grey concrete of the general hospital. She felt her stomach muscles tighten. Would Mrs. M still be in great pain? To mend the fracture, a metal plate had been screwed onto her thigh bone, and she was such a tiny thing. It would help her walk again, the old man had been told, but she'd never get on another horse.

Mr. Baddeley turned towards Kit, half smiling. 'You saw her at the meet, Nanny, while you were handing round the sherry. Didn't she look beautiful in that blue riding habit, with Elizabeth's bunch of violets pinned in her buttonhole? She sat well on that flighty mare.'

'Oh, yes, sir.'

Dixon stopped the car under an iron canopy, the main entrance to the hospital, and they walked into the echoing lobby. It had the sickly-sweet smell of ether and carbolic, which made Kit's stomach heave. The green and cream paint and the over-shiny floor reminded her of the hospital in London eleven years ago, as did the long, dim corridor they were directed towards. But the ward sister, in her neat white cap tied under the chin with a frivolous bow, was less forbidding than the hatchet-faced nurses she remembered

As the sister showed them into the private room, Mrs. Markham, who had been lying back on her pillows, struggled to sit upright. Kit was shocked to see that her eyes were surrounded by dark blue rings and looked enormous. It didn't help that her hair had been inelegantly raked back from her face and tied in a bunch at her neck.

'Pa, Nanny. Come and sit down. I want to see you properly.'

Kit moved one of the tubular metal chairs near the bedside for the old man to sit on and pulled one up for herself. They were warned by the sister they must not stay for longer than fifteen minutes: the patient needed rest.

The room was full of flowers. There were at least six vases with lilies and other hot-house blooms in them. She wished she had thought to send flowers, perhaps a posy of primroses.

Mrs. M smiled at them both. To Kit the smile made her livid white face look like an alabaster mask. She wondered whether she would ever recover properly. 'Elizabeth sends her love, Mm,' she said; then went on, hoping it sounded light hearted: 'She once saw a picture of a man wrapped in bandages from head to toe and will be pleased to know that that hasn't happened to you.'

'But I probably look a sight even so.'

The old man shook his head. 'You look as beautiful as ever, darling.'

While they were chatting, Kit placed the box of sugared almonds she'd brought from Elizabeth on the bedside table and unwrapped a favourite angora bed jacket from its tissue paper.

With the effort of talking, the old man started to cough again. 'I'll go outside and get some fresh air,' he said, taking his daughter's hand.

'Oh, Pa, how thin your hand is,' she said. 'When I'm home, the doctor must come to see us both.'

'Has anyone told you, Nanny, how the accident happened?' Mrs. Markham asked, after he had closed the door and Kit was helping her into the bed jacket. 'I keep going over it in my mind. It wasn't the mare's fault.'

Tears were forming little runnels down her face and Kit took out her handkerchief to dab her cheeks.

'Don't cry, Mm. Don't cry,' she said.

'I'll never ride again, Nanny. I wonder whether I'll ever walk?'

'You're strong. You'll be as right as rain.'

She reached for Kit's hand and held it firmly. 'Don't go. Don't you leave me as well,' she said, but her eyelids had started to droop. Kit watched her head roll forward. She sat by the bedside holding her hand, remembering how regal she had looked at the meet.

The room was stiflingly hot but she daren't even twitch for fear of waking Mrs. Markham. When the old man came back in Kit was still holding her hand. He stepped up behind her and said in a low voice, 'I managed to see the doctor. He promises she can be transferred to the nursing home next week.'

Kit saw Mrs. M's eyelids flicker open at the sound of his voice. She gave them a weak smile as they tip-toed out of the room.

In her own bed that night, Kit couldn't settle to read her book and she couldn't sleep. She tried pulling the sheets up under her chin for comfort, but seeing Mrs. M in the hospital had disturbed her. All those years ago she had been certain that the starched white sheets in the London hospital were her shroud. The shiny brown floor was the icy river water trying to suck her back down. For three days she'd she lain rigid in that bed, unresponsive to everything around her. On the third afternoon, when she heard a doctor tell Ellen that he wasn't hopeful she'd pull through, she'd felt relieved. Even when they forcibly propped her up on pillows, she'd remained quite still and silent, staring out at the grim-faced nurses. Poker-up-the-bum nurses, Charlie would have called them, with their stiff, contemptuous looks. Let me die, she had prayed then.

2

In April, two days after Mrs. Markham had been discharged from the nursing home, her surgeon paid them a visit. 'She can walk a little each day, perhaps ten minutes in the garden,' he said. Kit felt that he was talking to her and that she was now responsible for getting her well again.

After dinner, when Elizabeth was in bed asleep and the old man settled in his study, probably asleep too, she carried her work box into the drawing-room.

'We shall make a comfortable pair, Nanny, shall we not?' Mrs. Markham said, smiling. 'But I'm freezing cold. Perhaps you'd load another log on the fire? It may be spring, but it's still chilly in here.'

Kit rolled a heavy log onto the fire and the flames crackled and sparkled. As she straightened up, the smoke billowed out into the room, stinging her eyes. She blinked and looked over at Mrs. M bent over her tapestry frame. 'How's the cardinal coming on, Mm?' she asked.

'Come and see. Isn't he a dainty little man?'

In the middle of the whorls and scrolls of flowers and leaves, a much more finely stitched figure, decked out in flowing robes and high boots, was coming to life. Outdoors last summer, Mrs. Markham had sketched the design on the fabric herself. Kit thought then that the Italian cardinal reminded her of Henry Markham, elegant, self-absorbed and slightly feminine.

'He's a perfect little mannequin, Mm,' she said, and they both laughed.

'I shall make him into a fire screen. He's based on that portrait of one of Henry's ancestors painted by some famous Italian.'

Kit went to sit back down on the flimsy chair, close to the fire. She had suggested that the spoon-backed chair be brought down from the nursery as it could be wheeled around and placed by the window or by the fire for Mrs. M, but she preferred her sagging sofa with her dogs.

'I thought I was going to die on that icy ground, Nanny, like a bird that had fallen out of a tree on a frosty night,' she said, concentrating on her stitches. 'Even this faded old room seems beautiful now.'

They sat on in silence. Sam's replacement, another Airedale, Toby, was slumped at Kit's feet, his head against her workbox. The two yellow, long-haired dachsies, Minnie and Mitzi, a gift to his daughter from the old man, were on the sofa next to Mrs. Markham.

Kit saw that Minnie's head and rump were still hairless from squirming to get free of a badger set. She'd disappeared the day after Mrs. Markham's accident and they'd searched for her for four days. Then, out on a walk, Kit had watched as the other dachshund ran to the base of a tree and sat whimpering and shivering. She'd hurried back to the stables to fetch Dixon and he'd managed to dig down and pull out an almost bald dog.

'Oh, bugger,' Mrs. Markham was muttering. 'Now I've broken my needle.'

Kit looked across at her, seeing first her small, firm chin, then her nose, then her forehead. With her fine bone structure, she was a beautiful woman, but from the greyness in her face it was obvious that she was still in pain. She saw her wince as she bent over to rummage among the ribbons and beads and tassels in her work table. They'd been told that the fractured hip might always trouble her.

'I've found another needle. Good. How are the geese coming along, Nanny?'

She was embroidering two geese in a meadow onto a piece of loosely-woven blue linen to frame and glaze as a tea tray for the nursery. She'd traced the design from a water-colour Mrs. M had painted a few summers ago.

Mrs. M limped across the room. 'They're good,' she said. 'You know, we could both earn a living doing this.'

Kit smiled. Mrs. M would have no idea how to live on so little money.

'Tell me, Nanny,' she said, as she sat down again, 'have you seen father's friends the gypsies lately?'

She had a story she thought might amuse her. 'When I went down to West End Hollow last week to get a basket mended, Amby, the pipe-smoking grandmother, wanted to read my palm,' she said. 'Well, with her dukkering she announced I'd marry one day. Remember, you told me recently that I'd become a steady, serene spinster?'

She stood up and went over to give the fire another poke. She remained by the fire, watching as the tiny eyes of red and gold tumbled up the chimney.

'Marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be,' Mrs. M said, looking up at Kit. 'It can be a catastrophe. As you must know, Henry and I hardly see each other - and perhaps it's a good thing.' She went back to concentrating on her tapestry and it seemed as if she was talking to herself. 'We're second cousins - and I found him irresistibly dashing in his uniform when he went off to France. Somehow the war changed him - though we carried on with our plans to marry after he came back. Everyone expected us to.'

Kit remembered how, just before the dinner party in October for Henry Markham's fortieth birthday, Elizabeth had been delighted to see her mother step out of her bedroom wearing a new cream satin frock. 'Oh, Nanny,' she'd said. 'She seems to be made all of light.'

From the top of the stairs she and Elizabeth had watched as the Markhams greeted their guests in the hallway. Whenever she saw them together, she would think what a good-looking couple they were, but that night she began to think he was a little too well dressed, a little too precise. She preferred the old man's more comfortable ways. She didn't, however, feel qualified to respond to Mrs. M's views on marriage, even though she was now looking at her quizzically.

'At least there's Elizabeth,' Mrs. Markham was now saying. 'But at times, Nanny, she seems more your child than mine. I watched you two in the garden yesterday chasing around with the dogs. It looked the greatest game. I don't seem to have your gift for being playful with children.'

She paused and pursed her lips, looking questioningly at Kit again. 'I've just remembered something. In the summer Dixon told me he'd seen you in Southampton with a fair-haired child picnicking on the beach. Was that your sister's child?'

Kit sat down again by her work table and searched for a reel of silk. Perhaps this was the time to tell Mrs. Markham the truth. As Elizabeth was eleven now, there had been talk of sending her to school in Kent in the autumn. She would no longer be

needed. But how dreadful it would be, in the meantime, to be dismissed in disgrace for pretending to an unblemished character that she did not possess.

Her hands were trembling as she put down her sewing. She glanced around the room at the silver and brass fire irons, the worn chair covers and the faded green chintz of the curtains. The brilliantly coloured china cockattoos on the window sill were a favourite of hers. Over the years, she'd grown to think of the manor as her home.

As she sat up stiffly, she heard the weak joints of the chair creak. How was she to justify herself? How could she explain something that she'd kept hidden for nine years?

Nothing had actually changed, but she would now tell Mrs. Markham about Sarah, calmly and simply. She cleared her throat. 'The little girl was my daughter, Mm. She was adopted by my sister's neighbour before I came to work for you.'

'Good God, Nanny, what a dark horse you are!'

Kit fiddled with her scissors. Her throat felt tight and her shoulders started to shake. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She'd told her employer and that was all Susan Markham had to say. Then she was aware that she was by her side, her arm around her shoulder, trying, in spite of the awkward hip, to crouch down by the low chair.

'I'll pour us a sherry – then you must tell me about your daughter.'

They drank two or three sherries and sat there well into the night, with Kit from time to time rolling more logs onto the fire.

At one stage the old man came in to kiss his daughter good night. 'You two look comfortable,' he said. 'I almost wish I was a woman with this female camaraderie of sewing and chatting – and drinking sherry.'

Kit heard the bracket clock on the mantelpiece strike twelve. Mrs. M would be tired. She'd talked too much about herself, about Sarah and Charlie.

'I'm sorry, I've tired you. You must go to bed, Mm,' Kit said. Then she added, 'Now you know, you may want me to leave.'

'What nonsense, Nanny. You must bring the child here so that I can meet her. No one else in the house need know she's your daughter, except Pa, and he doesn't care too much about such things.'

Kit felt drained. The admission had been too sudden. 'I'll switch off the lights,' she said, 'and let the dogs out for their last run. And thank you.'

She sat on for ten minutes in the small spoon-backed chair by the fire. That night she christened it 'Bitter-Sweet', with no thought of the Noel Coward play but simply for its witness to her impossible jumble of emotions.

3

A month later, in May, Sarah, by herself, came over to West End on the ferry. When Kit mentioned to Janet Bride that she would like to bring her over to the manor for a day, she'd looked hard at her and said, 'It might be interesting for her to see how such people live – as long as she doesn't get grand ideas.'

She didn't tell her that Mrs. Markham now knew that Sarah was her daughter; and she would never tell anyone what Mrs. M had said to her the day before Sarah came over. They'd been walking around the garden, Kit pointing out to her small clumps of speckled fritillaries in the long grass. Quite without warning, Mrs. Markham had said, 'I wish you'd told me about Sarah all those years ago, Nanny, when she was a baby. You could have brought her up here. With his modern ideas, Pa wouldn't have objected.'

Kit had been unable to take in what she had said and she made no reply. Later, alone in her room, she'd cried so bitterly that she thought she would never stop. It was just a chance remark, she told herself, from someone who was still an invalid; and Mrs. Markham knew nothing about her when she'd applied for the job. She didn't for one minute imagine that she would have been taken on if she'd added, 'And may I bring along my illegitimate child?' It was more something to laugh about than to cry over. However, when she thought about it again, it struck her as a cruel thing to say, even though it hadn't been meant in that way.

The day that Sarah came over, Kit was determined that she should enjoy herself and be seen at her best. She hoped that Janet hadn't dressed her in any of Elizabeth's cast-offs, but she needn't have worried. When Dixon drove Kit to the ferry to pick her up, Sarah was wearing a green woollen jacket, a flared skirt and a cream-coloured blouse, which suited her well. The clothes wouldn't have been new, but at least they hadn't come via Mrs. Markham.

The new cook/housekeeper had been asked to serve lunch in the breakfast room. Did she wonder, Kit thought, why they were sitting down so formally, Mrs.

Markham, Elizabeth, Nanny and an unknown child? Elizabeth, who'd been told that Nanny's niece was coming to lunch, had been allowed to choose the menu, cottage pie and an apple crumble, nursery food; but it was neatly served on the oval table by the window. Elizabeth believed that she was the hostess and babbled happily and ate heartily; Sarah sat quietly and watched everyone.

After lunch, with the dogs chasing after them, Kit took the girls for a walk through the back gate and along the path into the forest to search for bluebells. They stopped first by Elizabeth's favourite pond with the bulrushes, and she sat on a log to watch the girls throwing stale bread to the ducks and moorhens.

Sarah, pale and blonde, was going through a long-legged, skinny stage. She'd begun to remind Kit more of Charlie now that she was growing up. Elizabeth was neater and much darker, her tawny hair woven into two plaits that hung thickly down her back. Even at eleven, it was apparent what a beautiful young woman she would become. The girls were laughing together, chasing around the pond to spot the coots zig-zagging in and out of the reeds. Kit gave a quick sigh.

It was a damp, muggy day and she led them further down the narrow, brambly footpath which a month later would be hidden by the bracken. The dogs rushed off to sniff around the gorse bushes, barking. Elizabeth whistled for them, perhaps hoping to impress Sarah, and when they came back she hooked on their leads. But Sarah was calling out that she could hear a groaning noise from beyond the thicket: perhaps someone had had an accident.

Oh no, Kit thought. She'd been so looking forward to this day. Nothing must spoil it. 'You two go on with the dogs - and here's my basket. A little further on you'll see the bluebells.'

She watched the girls walk out of sight down the track. There were gaps in the gorse thicket, she saw, where the ponies had pushed their way in to nibble the new shoots. She squeezed past the prickles towards where the noise seemed to be coming from. Under a crab-apple tree, on a patch of grass, a girl was lying with a grey coat pulled over her. Kit noticed the velvet collar and remembered Mr. Baddeley's worn coat that she'd given to the gypsies.

The gypsy girl's long black hair was matted and tangled and her face was streaked with mud. She must have been biting the earth to stop herself from crying out. An outcast, Kit thought, just like me all those years ago. She took off her own coat and rolled it up under the girl's head, then tried to wipe the mud off her face with

her handkerchief. The girl's forehead was beaded with sweat and she'd bitten her bottom lip so hard that it was bleeding. Kit guessed she was barely a year or two older than Elizabeth and Sarah.

The girl stared up at her and said through clenched teeth, 'It's my first. I was told it'd be over quickly.'

Kit raised the bottom of the coat and saw the top of a baby's head, damp and glistening, poking out between the girl's thighs. Of course, gypsy women went off alone to give birth. There were no clean towels or boiling water or a briskly efficient midwife. She stroked the girl's forehead. 'Push a little harder, dear, and it'll soon be over,' she heard herself say. She was praying there wouldn't be complications.

Beneath the girl, blood and leaves and mud were mixed up together. She should have been lying on the coat, not underneath it, but she couldn't move her. Suddenly the whole baby appeared, tiny and bloody and quite still. Kit put her hands beneath the warm, slippery body to lift it from the filthy ground and, thank God, it opened its mouth and let out a yell.

She placed the baby, miniature fists clenched and eyes tightly closed, onto the girl's stomach. Then as she stood looking at the small creature covered in streaks of blood and slime, trying to decide what to do next, the child-mother sat up and searched for something in her coat pocket. Almost instantly she severed the cord, then clutched the baby tightly to her before holding its now writhing body up for Kit to admire. 'Here, Lady, you've brought me luck. A boy.'

Kit unbuttoned her blue cotton blouse and took it off. 'To wrap him up in,' she said, handing it to the girl. 'To keep him warm.' She bent down to pick up the girl's coat and placed it around her shoulders. Then she eased her back to lean against the tree. She could now unroll her own coat and put it back on, buttoning it up to the neck to hide the lack of a blouse.

'You go now, Lady, but come and see the baby one day,' the girl said as Kit crouched down to hold her hand. 'We're in the compound in West End Hollow.'

Kit stood up and smiled at her. She thought of how the new-born Sarah had looked, veined and downy like a small animal but quite beautiful, and how exhausted she had felt. Perhaps she should have stayed with the girl, but she couldn't leave Elizabeth and Sarah any longer. She looked down at the muddy ground and thought of the photograph on the piano of Mrs. Markham and Elizabeth taken in the maternity home: silk sheets, satin bed jacket, perfectly arranged hair.

Edging back out of the gorse bushes, she saw Sarah and Elizabeth walking back along the path, dragged forward by the dogs. Elizabeth called out, 'We found plenty of bluebells, Nanny.' Then she laughed. 'You've been away so long that Sarah thought you might have forgotten us.'

Sarah looked up at her. 'Oh, Kitty, you have blood on your face and on your hands.'

Kit put her hand to her face, realising she was probably making it worse. 'I'll wash my hands in the pond and splash my face, dear.'

Elizabeth laughed at her. 'Don't forget to wash behind your ears, Nanny, as you make me do.'

Kit laughed, too. Together they could always see the funny side of things.

There was no reason why Sarah and Elizabeth shouldn't know about the girl and her baby. 'A gypsy girl was having a baby and I stayed with her till it was born,' she said. 'It was a little boy.'

'Oh,' Sarah replied, 'I've never seen a new-born baby. How wonderful.'

The girls ambled on ahead of her towards the pond, chatting. She would love them to be friends. Sarah could learn a lot from Elizabeth. But it wouldn't be possible, though she would try to bring Sarah over to West End more often. Elizabeth's life would be very different from Sarah's, she told herself, but then Sarah wasn't doing badly. It was all a matter of degree.

Chapter 5 - 1937

A cottage in Kent

1

In spite of the clouds, they decided to stay with their plan to cycle out to the Saxon church. With its squat tower and low doorway, Elizabeth thought it picturesque. For the past year, she'd been having drawing lessons at her school and her mother was amused to find that, taking after her, she had some talent for it. The day before, while they were sitting in the living-room with Kit bent over her sewing, Elizabeth had sketched her, peering intently at her face, measuring with her pencil the width of her eyes, her forehead and her chin. She had scolded her that, as she altered her expression so often, it made it difficult to capture a likeness. 'Besides, Nanny,' she'd added, 'I never quite know what you're thinking.'

Now Kit was watching Elizabeth drawing the church, getting annoyed and ripping up her first attempt, and all the time she was thinking of Charlie. In the most unlikely places memories came back to her after years of seeming lost. They could be suggested by the oddest things: the weed-green water of the pond reminded her of sitting with Charlie one cold day on a bench by the Serpentine, talking of a different future. She could still remember how it felt to have her arm linked in his and feel the warmth of his body through his thick serge coat.

Elizabeth noticed Kit's far-away look and touched her arm. She smiled gratefully and patted the girl's hand. She was spending too much time lately thinking of the past, though she and Charlie hadn't been in touch for two or three years, which was probably best.

The wooden bench was damp but under the willow by the pond they were at least sheltered from the wind. She unwrapped the egg-and-cress sandwiches and seed cake and poured sweet, steaming tea from the flask into bakelite cups to warm their hands. Elizabeth had wanted to sketch the church in the April sunshine for her as a parting present. Kit would frame it and treasure it.

Their picnic was soon eaten and Elizabeth returned to her drawing. As Kit watched her, she thought of how she had shared with Elizabeth and Susan Markham

what some might say was their long downward progress. When the old man died, Henry Markham had sold West End Manor and moved them to Kent, to Forstal House, which he'd rented from a cousin for next to nothing. She'd disliked the house, with its dark stairways and long draughty corridors. An overgrown magnolia shut out most of the light, and Elizabeth had caught a chill which turned into pneumonia their first winter there. Also once or twice at night she thought she'd heard a child crying on the veranda, but of course she found no one there. The house had a ghost – and she believed in ghosts.

Henry Markham by that time hardly ever visited them. Then a rumour about fraud and flamboyant parties given for a young actor appeared in the newspapers, and shortly after that he went to live in North Africa.

Kit poured the remains of the tea into her cup and smiled to herself. Once back at the cottage, she would have time to prepare a rabbit casserole, one of Elizabeth's favourite meals. It made her think how much all their lives had changed. She'd stayed on with Mrs. M as a sort of companion help when she'd moved to the bailiff's cottage behind Forstal House - a nanny to her and the dogs, and Elizabeth when she was home.

By the time Elizabeth decided she could improve her sketch no more, Kit's hands and feet were freezing, but soon they were cycling home energetically side by side. The lane with its steep banks on either and the lambs high up on the hill made her think of Devon. The wind was blowing Elizabeth's chestnut hair into her eyes, and as she smoothed it back, she cried out, 'I shan't any more have you brushing my hair with a hundred strokes each night, Nanny. Do you think it will grow dull and thin?'

They both laughed, but Kit was thinking how empty the cottage would be without her. After the year in Lausanne and Paris her father was supposed to be funding, she'd never settle back to living with two middle-aged women.

It struck her how easily all those years ago she'd thrown herself into the role of Elizabeth's nurse, accepting that she would rarely see her own daughter. But the guilt of giving Sarah up never went away. She had felt even worse about it lately, now she could acknowledge how much she'd grown to love Elizabeth.

The sun was starting to come out as they cycled up the last and steepest hill. 'Just enough blue to patch a Dutchman's breeches,' Kit called out, short of breath. Her calf muscles were aching and her cheeks were burning. She felt her stomach and

chest grow tight with the effort of pedalling so hard. I'm getting old, she thought. Was that why she was thinking of accepting an offer of marriage?

As if she could read her mind, Elizabeth called across to her, 'How's Baker? Mummy says the cottage has become like a florist's shop with all the flowers he brings, and she's getting fat on éclairs and cream buns and peppermint creams.'

Kit bit her lip. Was Elizabeth amused by the fact that at forty there was still a man willing to marry her? The bicycle wobbled as she tugged the front of her felt hat firmly down over her hair. At least her hair hadn't yet started to go grey.

2

The next morning, Mrs. M drove Elizabeth to town to have coffee with some Markham cousins, leaving Kit to get on with one of her least favourite jobs, polishing the silver. At about eleven, she happened to glance out of the living-room window and there was Frank, and not his delivery boy, striding down the drive with the bread basket. She was nervous as she went to the side door and had to put out her hand to steady herself on the door frame. As she pulled open the door, Frank was standing four-square in front of her, probably more nervous than she was.

'Well, Kit, have you made up your mind once and for all?' he demanded straight away.

She managed a smile. In this determined mood he looked quite attractive, even in his brown baker's coat.

'Come in and have a cup of tea, Frank. Mrs. M and Elizabeth are in Canterbury.'

Newspapers were spread over the table and she was in the middle of putting back some of the silver. Frank pulled out a chair and sat down, and one of the dachshunds immediately jumped onto his lap. She knew he wasn't used to dogs but he dutifully stroked Mitzi, trying not to look uncomfortable. Kit walked into the kitchen half-smiling to herself.

As she came back and handed him his cup, she said quickly, 'I'm going upstairs. There's something I must show you.' Before she could give him an answer, she had to tell him about Sarah.

On her dressing-table was a plain silver photograph frame that Elizabeth had given her for her birthday and in the frame she had placed her most recent picture of Sarah. In it she was laughing and throwing snowballs at an awkward-looking young man, her employer's son, Ralph, she'd explained in her letter. Whoever had taken the photograph had captured her cleverly between two snow-covered bushes, making her seem like a slender, bright haired wood nymph, in spite of the clumsy gum boots and well-worn tweed jacket.

Kit opened the middle drawer of the dressing-table and took out another photograph of Sarah taken the previous year, in which she was clasping huge bunches of sweet-peas in her arms. She'd enclosed with it a snapshot of daffodils arranged in a dark, shiny vase with a dragon curled around it. In a scribbled note she said she'd won a prize for the exhibit at a local flower show and, as a result, her employer was taking her and another girl with him to the Chelsea Flower Show. Kit had worried about that, but told herself that Janet Bride kept a close eye on Sarah; and Sarah seemed to be enjoying life. She decided to show Frank just the framed photograph with Sarah in the snow and she put the other two back in her drawer.

When she came back down to the living room, he was still sitting at the table with the dog in his lap and reading an article in one of the old newspapers. She placed the framed photograph of Sarah in front of him among the other silver and pulled out a chair for herself opposite. She knew her cheeks were flushed and she was trying to stop her hands shaking. On the way down the stairs, she'd rehearsed to herself how she'd tell him about Sarah. Now she steadied her voice.

'I have to tell you this, Frank,' she said. 'A long time ago, during the war, I fell in love with someone - a married man - and I had a child.' She picked up the photograph and handed it to him. 'This is a photograph of Sarah. She's seventeen now.'

He studied the photograph and she could read nothing from the expression on his face. Then he looked up at her. 'She's lovely, Kit, almost as lovely as you.' After hesitating, he asked, 'And where is she now?' She tried to imagine what he must be feeling. He was thirty-six and not unattractive. How many lovers had he had: single women, married women; and were they women his family would have approved of? But the rules were different for a man.

Her voice remained steady as she went on to tell him about the Brides and about what Sarah was doing, which was just as much as she felt he should know; and

all the while she went on buffing the silver. How odd, she was thinking, sitting here drinking tea with a man I hardly know, yet the past doesn't seem far away. If Frank still wanted to marry her, she'd at least have a home of her own that Sarah could come to.

Eventually he stood up and came round the table to her. He took her hands and pulled her to her feet. She noticed that the hair behind his ears was starting to go grey; then she felt a rough masculine cheek against her face. After all this time, it wasn't unpleasant.

'Will you give me your answer now, dear?' he asked, holding her away from him to look at her.

Frank left soon afterwards to finish his deliveries, waving to her from the van parked outside the gate. She heard his tyres squealing on the rough track as she closed the door and he drove off. She made herself another cup of tea and carried on polishing the silver. She hoped her decision had been the right one, for both of them. She would always have her secrets from him. She would never tell him about the night by the river, though she had told Susan Markham in dribs and drabs. They knew most of each other's secrets by now but they never referred to them.

Almost twenty years had gone by. Kit nowadays could barely believe that the girl in the drama was actually her. She walked slowly to the sideboard to gather the knives and forks on a tray, then brought them back and sat down again at the table, reaching across for the long, soft-bristled silver brush. The evening was slipping back into her mind in vivid detail, as sometimes it did.

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The blankness of the faces hurrying past her is intensified by the pale stream of lamplight from Lambeth Bridge. On the other side of the road, away from the river, a man in a boiled shirt, with a silk top-hat in his hand, jumps out of a hansom cab and slams the door. She is surprised at seeing someone so dressed up in that part of London. Music drifts out from a window of the warehouse beyond him. Someone is playing a gramophone: 'For Me and My Gal'.

She hears Big Ben strike ten o'clock with its long, sonorous notes. She has been walking for two hours. She is now half-way across Waterloo Bridge. She leans against the stone wall and stares down at the river. It looks oily and dark. Her sister's neighbour, the police inspector, told her that the seats on the bridge were easy to jump from. He called the pier on the far bank 'The Suicide Station'.

'They undress female suicides, the ones they pull out alive; and there's a warm bath ready, and cordials and a bed made up,' he said, making it sound just part of a day's work. 'Sometimes we see a woman sitting there hour after hour, trying to work up the courage to jump. But once they've jumped, the women don't want to be saved. They've made up their mind.'

She has made up her mind, or almost. What other choice does she have? The workhouse, the streets? She would survive neither; and what of the shame for her family?

She can hear the chug-chug of a boat engine. She thinks it might be the police patrol boat and quickly turns away, walking back to the embankment. The night mist is thickening and the stars have become faint pins of light. The long woollen coat she's buttoned up over her uniform is weighing her down and she feels she is suffocating.

She knows her way back down the river towards the gasometers and factory chimneys. She and Charlie have often walked along there: Lambeth Bridge, Vauxhall Bridge, Chelsea Bridge. She is feeling tired and light headed with hunger. The rows of lights strung across the bridges remind her of fairgrounds, with their promise of fun, laughter and dancing now the war is over. There is a better world ahead, or so everyone says. She thinks of Reg, her brother, killed at Passchendaele two years ago. She's found it hard to believe in heaven and a benign God since then.

A siren toots from further down the river. Charlie would have explained, with his rich Welsh lilt, that it was a late barge or some other vessel on her way home.

It was the careful way that her sister Ellen looked at her at breakfast that morning that made her realise how quickly the days were passing. She knew she must leave before Ellen and her husband threw her out. The smell of fried eggs and bacon made her feel so dreadfully sick that she couldn't even drink her cup of tea. Annie, her niece, stroked her hand and said, 'I was poorly last week, too, Aunty. You'll soon feel better.' She smiled and gave her a hug.

A half moon is now shining on the river, lighting up the path ahead. She recognises the stone wall running along the embankment. At low tide she and Charlie would sit there watching small boys poke around in the mud. She knows there are steps just beyond leading to the water. They will be deserted at this time of night.

The wall by the steps is damp and cold, so she unbuttons her coat and carefully rolls it up to sit on. She almost laughs. 'Don't sit on the damp ground,' her mother would scold. 'You'll catch a chill or get piles.'

The woollen coat soaks up the damp from the wall and begins to smell of wet animal. It reminds her of the rank stench of the brown bear she'd watched at the zoo pawing at the bars, trapped in its cage. She leans forward and is violently sick. Then she starts to cry.

A grey rat runs along the wall towards her: it stops, twitches its whiskers and jumps to the ground. She stares down at the river. The lower steps are green with slime. She shudders: she might slip and bang her head on the concrete and be left lying on the water's edge unconscious while rats scurry over her. The water stinks of oozing mud, rotting rubbish and dead unmentionable things.

She walks down the first few steps, then slowly sits down, no longer caring about the slimy dampness. Her shoes are almost touching the water and she is shivering without her coat. She hardly notices when a bloated dog's carcase bumps against the concrete.

The sky is becoming clearer. She can see Orion's belt and the tip of his sword. Her father taught her the names of the constellations.

A stealthy movement catches her eye. A moth-eaten ginger cat is stalking along the wall above her head and has stopped to sniff her coat. She calls to him though she knows that cats don't like water. She watches as he settles, purring, on the coat, eyeing her in turn.

She has the fleeting, absurd idea that Charlie has come to sit near her, but she knows that he will by now be home from his law classes to make supper and help his wife to bed.

She wraps her arms more tightly around her chest and her head tips forward onto her knees. Even though the water is now lapping around her ankles she no longer feels the cold.

It is so quiet. Hunched over, she can barely breathe. She sits up and glances across the river towards the locked buildings. She is still alive, alone and hidden in

the dark. Her whole body begins to shake violently. She prays that she has a fever from the foetid damp and will die naturally of pneumonia. There will be no shame for anyone then.

A noise startles her. She stares down at the slimy brown river water receding from the steps. The tide is going out, leaving her stranded, like the other rubbish. She looks over her shoulder at the greyness in the sky and the black shadows on the footpath and becomes aware of the shrill call of sparrows. The sound of wheels skidding to a halt and a door banging are coming from the road behind her. She hears a shout. 'I think that's her coat.'

She turns her head slowly and sees that the ginger cat has gone and two men are running towards her. She knows she is no longer part of the respectable world of these people, her brother-in-law and his neighbour, the police inspector, who have come to find her. She is set apart, and shameful. She tries to call out to tell them to leave her where she is but she can't make a sound. Her body goes limp as her feet slide down the steps and the water covers her head.

***

When Mrs. M and Elizabeth returned at twelve-thirty, Kit was in the kitchen chopping up potatoes and leeks to make soup for lunch. She hoped that neither of them would notice how pale she looked. She had one of her migraines, and even though she had swallowed three aspirins with a glass of water, she still felt slightly sick. After lunch she would be able to lie down.

Two days later, on the Saturday night, she plucked up the courage to tell Mrs. M that she was going to marry Frank. She knew there'd be every sort of objection. They were sitting together on one side of the heavy oak table, eating scrambled eggs and looking out into the garden. The white-painted dovecote by the edge of the lawn was Susan Markham's latest acquisition and they were watching the birds on the ground underneath it cooing and squabbling over the grain.

In the eighteen months they'd been in the cottage, Mrs. M had built up a menagerie of pigs, chickens and geese. Kit didn't share her enthusiasm and had tried

to dissuade her from buying the four goats now bedded down in the barn. The dogs were different: they would be company for her when she was gone.

The two old dachshunds, Minnie and Mitzi, were curled up on the sofa. Each of them had had a litter of puppies, and Mrs. M had won prizes with the two young bitches she had kept. She talked of breeding from them in turn, as the puppies fetched a good price.

'Animals are so much nicer than people, don't you think?' Mrs. M said, getting up from the table and limping over to the lumpy sofa. As she sat down, she picked Minnie up and settled her on her lap.

'Apart from Elizabeth, and you and me?' Kit countered.

'Of course,' she replied. Then she frowned. 'But I don't like Elizabeth being so much with that frightful Johnny. He's so awfully fond of himself.'

Kit didn't take to him either, but this wasn't the time for a discussion about what Elizabeth could possibly see in him. She walked slowly over to the mantelpiece and took a spill from the jar. 'It's chilly this evening,' she said. 'I'll light the fire before I make coffee.' She needed a few more minutes before she came out with her news.

As she pushed open the door to the lean-to kitchen, she wrinkled up her nose at the mouldy smell of damp. When they first looked over the cottage, Mrs. M promised to have a proper kitchen added, but there wasn't the money for it. She hadn't even been able to settle the builders' account for the alterations carried out a year ago. Elizabeth wasn't aware of how little money they had. What with the chickens, the goats, the pigs, the kitchen garden and the baking Kit did, they ate well, and her sewing kept Elizabeth in fashion and Mrs. M's worn tweeds respectable. But they were getting further and further behind paying even the smallest bills, Frank's included.

Kit turned the gas on under the kettle and opened the small window above the kitchen sink. She could hear the call of a cock pheasant in the shrubbery. As she bent to pick up the tray, she saw that the green mould had crept further above the skirting board. The problem was that the kitchen butted on to the high wall separating the cottage from the garden of Forstal House and there was no natural light or air circulation. Mrs. M didn't concern herself about such things, but she might, Kit thought, when she had to spend more time in here.

The kettle was whistling away, but she went back to the window to watch the sun setting behind the orchard. It left a lingering crimson glow which she could see through the bare branches. How in heaven's name was she to break the news to Mrs. M that she was going to marry Frank?

As she carried the coffee into the living room, she took a deep breath. This wouldn't be one of their usual spats where one of them would give in a little to keep the peace.

She placed the tray down on the low table in front of Mrs. M, who was flicking through the *Kentish Gazette*, the dachshund still snoozing on her lap. With the large inglenook fireplace and its low oak beams, the room reminded Kit of the drawing room at the West End Manor. The same blue-and-white plates were on the wall and the furniture was much the same. Even the bright china cockattoos had been brought along to strut their stuff on the window sill. The Turkish rugs were now threadbare, but she loved every last detail of what she saw.

After she had poured the coffee and arranged herself opposite Mrs. M, she leant over to pick up her cup but her hand was shaking so much that she rattled it noisily in the saucer. Mrs. M glanced across at her, and she felt at once self-conscious and doomed.

'I've finally accepted Baker,' she blurted out, not at all in the way she intended.

'Don't be foolish, Nanny. You and I are comfortable here together.'

'I'll only be a bus-ride away. I'll come and stay sometimes,' Kit replied.

Mrs. M threw down her newspaper and lit a cigarette. 'A woman gains nothing by marrying. Look what happened to me. I moved down here to that ugly house Henry rented, then he went off with that actor to Tangiers.'

They both started to laugh. The two events weren't directly related.

'Baker wants us to get married in September, just a simple wedding,' Kit said, as she put down her coffee and waited for the next outburst.

'You turned down that hospital doctor when we were in Hampshire and now you plan to marry a man who sells bread. I can't imagine what the family are like.'

Kit gazed into the fire. She was beginning to lose any clear sense of what she was doing.

'You can't possibly marry a man with ferrety little eyes and brylcreemed hair,' was Susan Markham's next thrust. The dog jumped to the floor at the sharpness of her tone.

Kit watched her as, too quickly, she pushed herself up from the chair. The pain from the damaged hip often made her wince. She parked herself in front of the fire, lifting the back of her heavy skirt to warm her buttocks. It was a newly acquired habit which made Elizabeth laugh.

'He so much wants to get married,' Kit said, 'and I think I can make him happy.' Tonight she wouldn't rise to the bait and argue Frank's merits. He might overdo the brylcreem, but she liked his hazel eyes.

'Most men want a mother-wife. I've never been good at that. But you, Nanny, anyone who aroused your sympathy, you'd damn well take on.'

Kit tried not to get angry or point out that for the past year she'd had a strong sense that she was living on charity. However well she managed their budget, however little she spent, they still couldn't settle the accounts. What Frank was offering her was a home and financial security.

'You're better off here. We have Elizabeth, the animals, the garden. Men need constant approval, healing, forgiveness for something unspecified.'

'Elizabeth's eighteen - grown-up.' Kit kept her voice steady.

'Yes, and there's that ghastly Johnny she's out with tonight and his obsession with flying aeroplanes. You don't like him either – and she listens to you.'

They heard voices outside and laughter. Footsteps crunched across the gravel and the dogs ran to the door, barking. Kit went over to the window. She felt reprieved. She didn't want to discuss her decision, and now Elizabeth was back, delivered safely home by Johnny in his sporty little car.

Mrs. M came over and stood by her. 'Don't make up your mind too quickly,' she said. Then she shook her head. 'You know I'm handless – and I shan't eat anything if I have to cook for myself - and if you're not here Elizabeth won't come home after Switzerland.'

Through the window they watched Elizabeth turn and wave towards Johnny and the car, an AC Roadster she later told them. After a minute or two she came in through the front door smiling and looking radiant. That morning she'd asked Kit to take up the hem of her dress so that it hung just above her calves. Kit took in the whole effect with approval. The dusky pink suited Elizabeth and the skirt was

precisely the right length to show off her shapely legs. She wanted to hug her and tell her how lovely she looked, but nowadays she was probably too grown up for that.

'Come on you two, don't look so glum,' Elizabeth said, putting an arm around each of them.

Chapter 6 - 1937

Red-brick villas

1

Later that evening Kit was sitting propped up in bed, reading for at least the fourth time *The Small House at Allington*. She could hear Elizabeth undressing in the room next door, rattling coat-hangers as she hung her clothes in the wardrobe.

She glanced across the room at the fine oak tallboy and the dressing table. They had both belonged to Elizabeth's grandmother, Mrs. Baddeley, whom she'd never met. Mrs. M said she'd been a great beauty but was consumptive and had died shortly before her fortieth birthday, when she herself was only fifteen. Elizabeth, too, was beginning to be much admired. Kit's greatest fear was that in marrying Frank she'd cut herself off not only from Susan Markham but from Elizabeth.

She tried to get back to her novel, but she couldn't stop thinking about last Sunday when Frank had taken her to tea at his parents' house. He'd borrowed his father's Morris-Oxford to drive her over there. How carefully he'd edged the car out of the narrow gate and down the pot-holed lane.

'You have to meet them, dear,' he said as they drove along. He gave a nervous laugh. 'You'll then see why you'd be such a blessing to me - especially with that gentle smile.'

How smart he looked in his blazer and flannels. His cheeks were newly scrubbed, pink and shiny, and he smelt of Wright's coal tar soap. He seemed more masculine and substantial behind the wheel of the car.

Just before they reached Sandwich, he'd eased the car over onto the grass verge and opened the window, pointing across a field to a windmill with a beehive cap.

'We come here for picnics,' he said. 'It's Rosa's favourite spot.' Kit's gloved hands were resting in her lap and he put his hand over hers. 'I've said I have two sisters. Alice, the older one, will be there with her husband; but I want to tell you about Rosa, poor dear thing.'

'You look so serious,' Kit said. 'Are you worried I'm not what they're expecting?'

'I've told Alice a lot about you. She and Wilfred aren't so bad. He runs his father's business, two or three butcher's shops. He'll inherit them one day, but he and Alice don't have children.'

Kit started to laugh, 'The butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker,' she said, trying to make him smile.

'I'm just father's book-keeper,' Frank replied, his lips drawn tightly together, 'and I deliver the bread from time to time.' He half-turned away from her. 'See, I'm the cack-handed kid that harmed Rosa. I was five at the time. I can still see her in her high chair being fed by our nurse. I was darting around the kitchen after the cat and crashed into her chair. As she fell, her head hit the stone flags. She screamed and screamed.'

Kit leant towards him and kissed him on the cheek. She might be able to give him confidence in himself to balance out the damage his family had done. His cheek was damp with tears. 'I'm sure Rosa and I will get on well,' she said. 'We can bring her here together for a picnic in the summer.'

As Frank started up the engine, she noticed that the pink May blossom in the hedge had begun to burst open and the scent drifted into the car. It was unlucky to pick the blooms and take them indoors, her mother had told her, and she never could forget the old superstitions. The clouds were scudding across the sky above the windmill and its sails spun round faster and faster. Mother would read something into that, too, she thought. And what would she make of Frank, or would she just be relieved that her daughter, at last, was getting married?

Five minutes later they were driving through the narrow streets of the town, with Frank pointing out Holy Ghost Alley and Paradise Row, now trying to make Kit laugh. He's not dull, she thought, or too set in his ways; and I can put up with his brylcreemed hair. Mrs. M would just never approve of her marrying a tradesman.

The car slowed down half-way along a tree-lined road and they turned into the drive of an ugly red-brick Victorian villa. Mrs. M. would have called it suburban gothic, with its projecting turret and the steeply pointed gables. Kit bit the inside of her lip as she stepped out of the car. It was a bullying, domineering house, she later told Elizabeth.

In the hallway she removed her hat and coat and handed them to the thin, timid girl who had opened the door to them, and she hung them on the towering coat stand. Kit glanced at her reflection in the inset mirror. Would they be expecting a younger woman or had Frank told she was forty, four years older than he was? Before straightening up and walking ahead of her into the drawing room, he gave her a quick, approving smile.

The room was full of heavy mahogany furniture and showy bits of silver and china. It smelt of cigar smoke. A portly old man in a wing chair placed by the fire made a gesture of getting to his feet as she came in, but he seemed to think better of it and sank back down. Later she told Elizabeth that he made her think of an angry walrus, with his long moustache and droopy, sharp eyes.

Frank's mother and Alice were standing near him and both attempted a smile. As she held out her hand, Alice said, 'Hello, Miss White,' with just enough warmth. They both had plump, manicured hands and rather large faces. Kit thought that Frank, slight and spare and with bright hazel eyes, resembled no one in his family.

Wilfred, the brother-in-law, came over to shake her hand. He and Frank's father were wearing dark suits, with heavy gold watch chains looped over taut waistcoats – tradesmen's Sunday best, Mrs. M would have said. Alice had on a sober, well-cut jersey dress, with a lace collar and cuffs, but her jewellery was what caught Kit's attention: rings on each hand, several gold bracelet, two brooches and a necklace. She found her herself lifting up her hand to touch her own cheap and cheerful beads and feeling conscious of her shop-bought dress, but she knew the pink-mauve suited her well.

Alice disappeared into the kitchen and Kit tried to talk to the old lady. She told her about stopping on the way to look at the windmill, but the woman just stared steadily at her and blinked. Kit thought at first she might be deaf but concluded later that it was a deliberate attempt to make her feel uncomfortable. They didn't approve of her age and lack of money.

By then she had had time to notice the table at the far end of the room weighed down with vast plates of ham and tongue and chicken in aspic, savoury tarts, beetroot and pickles and jams, sponge cake, fruit cake and scones and whatever else. Frank had told her that high tea on a Sunday was a family tradition; afterwards the table would be cleared and they would play Sevens or Gin Rummy, but only for pennies.

'Frankie', a plaintive voice cried out, and Kit saw a pale woman sitting in a rocking chair by the bay window. That must be Rosa, she thought. The expression on her face as she stuck out her bottom lip was that of a stubborn, solemn infant and she seemed to be screwing up her eyes to get a better look at Kit.

Frank went over to her and Kit followed him. 'A friend for you, Rosa,' he said. 'Kit.'

'Kit, Kit-Kit, everybody kisses me,' she said, offering up her cheek, taking hold of both Kit's hands and pulling her down towards her. Poor woman, she thought, and how sad for them all. She sat down by Rosa and watched her pick up her sewing and weave her needle through a square of strawberry pink silk. When she'd finished a row of stitches, she pulled out the thread and added it to a huge colourful ball on her work box. It must have taken weeks and numberless bits of thread to form.

Soon Alice came back into the room, followed by the timid girl struggling with a large teapot. This was Frank's cue to offer his arm to Rosa, as she clumped forward to the table on her orthopaedic shoes, her head poking forwards. The girl rushed to the sideboard and came back with a carefully folded floral apron. While Rosa held up her hands, she slipped it over her head and tied a bow at the back. As she pushed Rosa's chair in towards the table, Frank pulled out the chair opposite her for Kit.

As she sat down, she felt bewildered by these people. The bold chintz curtains and the busily patterned carpet were a statement of money and confidence, as was the bright oil painting of Highland cattle in a heavy gilt frame; but they coped with looking after Rosa when another family might have put her in a home.

The old man stared down the table at Kit. 'Frank tells us, Miss White, you work as a nursemaid for a family near Canterbury but that you're originally from Devon.'

'Yes, sir,' she said. She was trying to make herself like him, even a little, but she was beginning to feel annoyed. His voice sounded coarse and bullying. What would he say if he knew about Sarah? They wouldn't have grandchildren of their own now, but when she married Frank they'd acquire an unknown step-granddaughter.

'What's your father in?' was the next question the old man fired at her.

'He's retired, sir, but he ran a foundry in Colyton.' She wanted to giggle and say, 'He's a candlestick maker. Butcher, baker and candlestick maker.'

The old bulldog quickly lost interest in her. She heard him mutter to his son-in-law in his bronchial voice: 'Talk of another war … some people say it'll be good for business.' She watched as the three women resumed their eating, the bread and butter and cake slowly rising to their mouths, and she felt Frank's foot nudge hers under the table. As she turned towards him, he half-smiled. She wasn't sure whether he was signalling that the ordeal would soon be over or apologising for his father.

Mercifully, by the time they'd finished eating, the glass-domed clock on the mantelpiece showed that it was ten-to-five. Alice was clearing the table for the card games, but Kit caught Frank's eye and he announced that it was time to drive her home. His mother and father wished her goodbye stiffly but Rosa said that she wanted another kiss.

As they stepped outside, Kit saw that it had begun to drizzle. It did not matter one bit. She was just relieved to be outside in the fresh air. She wondered whether Frank was used to his family's small wants of courtesy.

'Well, now you've met them,' he said, opening the car door for her, 'you'll probably change your mind about marrying me.' He sounded apologetic and dispirited.

'We don't choose our families,' Kit said. 'It's you I would be marrying.' She couldn't think of anything else to say at that moment. She glanced over at the house and saw a movement at the bay window. It was Rosa waving and smiling, trying to attract her attention for one last time. She waved back. Poor Frank, she thought, having to bear the guilt for Rosa. His family had probably dominated and manipulated him all his life.

Now lying in her own cosy room, by the dim light she could make out the shape of her Victorian chair by the fireplace and next to it, blocking out the chimney draughts, the tapestry of the cardinal. The *blanc-de-chine* figure on the mantelpiece of Kuanyin, the Chinese goddess of mercy, left to her by Mr. Baddeley, reflected back what little light there was. All these objects were woven into her past. How different her life would be in future.

She never could have had a life with Charlie. They still wrote to each other once a year, and he was now a junior partner in a law firm in Wales. He wanted her to keep him up to date with what was going on in Sarah's life. In his letter last

February, on her birthday as usual, he had asked whether, when Sarah was twenty-one, he might meet her. Perhaps she owed them both that.

2

Six months later, in October, Kit was unlocking the front-door of her own new house and putting her shopping down in the hallway. Though the sun was still bright, there was a cold easterly wind which had made her cheeks glow. The stark white paintwork inside always took her by surprise. She hadn't yet fully convinced herself that this semi-detached house on the edge of Sandwich was now her home.

She gave a resigned shrug: life would always be complex. An awkward fact was that the house was owned by Frank's parents. It was one of several they rented out; they'd even provided the bedroom furniture. She couldn't help feeling that the fortnightly visits by Alice and Wilfred for Sunday tea were in order to inspect the property and collect the rent. When they said goodbye on the doorstep, their air of benevolent superiority implied that they expected her to be satisfied with everything, grateful for everything. A fortnight ago they'd arrived half an hour early, and she'd asked Frank to keep them talking on the doorstep while she stuffed the unwashed lunch dishes into the oven. Alice was quite capable of ambling into the kitchen and nosing around.

She needed a cup of tea to cheer herself up. She'd unpack the shopping later.

Kit carried her cup into the living room and sat down on the small chair close to the fireplace. At least the furniture in this room had come mostly from Mrs. M, bits and pieces she'd had in store since the move from Hampshire.

The last rays of the sun were shining on a photograph on the circular table by the window. In the photograph Elizabeth was standing by the gate of a castle in Switzerland on the edge of Lake Geneva. She was wearing a simple blouse and woollen skirt and smiling her wonderful smile. Next to it Kit had placed a studio picture of Mrs. M and the two younger dogs, but there was no photograph of Sarah. When they came to tea, Alice would have asked, 'Who is that, Kit?'

The largest photograph, standing behind the other two, was of Kit and Frank on their wedding day. She went over and picked it up. Did they look like two people

who should have married? In all the circumstances, they'd decided on a quiet wedding, and Ellen, her sister, had organised it from her house in Clapham.

Kit smiled to herself. How calm and serene she looked in this formal photograph taken in front of the rose arch in Ellen's garden. The lilac chenille dress had been made by her mother-in-law's dressmaker and it draped elegantly to her ankles. The silky cream camisole was suggested by Ellen to emphasise the V-neckline. Even Mrs. M, when she gave her a copy of the photograph, had complimented her on the fashionable hat, with its chiffon and velvet flowers.

Frank's father's tailor had also done him proud. His suit was perfectly cut. With his shoes shining like glass, the gold watch and chain, the carnation and the silk handkerchief, his turn-out was faultless. It was only when she looked closely at the photograph that Kit realised how tense he looked. He was gripping his white gloves tightly and standing too upright, with his neck muscles rigid.

Unlike Charlie, Frank had little self-esteem. She remembered how, during the preparations for the wedding, he was too much guided by his sister's advice and was never quite his own man. Afterwards, though, he had said to Kit that Alice, in spite of her money and talk of fashion, couldn't come near to her taste and elegance.

She slipped the photograph back in its place on the table and went into the kitchen to unpack the shopping, still smiling to herself about Frank. The honeymoon he'd planned had been two nights in a modest hotel in Ebury Street, a hotel his father stayed in when he came up to London for his guild dinners.

They had ridden there in a taxi from Clapham, and she remembered thinking that London had changed a great deal. All those years ago when she was with Charlie, in spite of the war London had had more light and colour. It was noisier now, with far more cars, and much more crowded. She noticed, too, that many of the buildings were black with soot and the pavements were littered with rubbish.

'Where shall we go tomorrow?' Frank had asked, squeezing her hand. 'You said you'd like to walk by the Serpentine to a round pond to feed the ducks, and perhaps I could take you to lunch at Lyons Corner House?'

After the taxi had crossed Chelsea Bridge, he pointed out a small park with four beds of brilliant red roses still in full bloom. He knew she loved roses and was pleased to have spotted them.

The hotel didn't look inviting from the outside, but in the entrance lobby there were two comfortable chintz sofas and a huge vase of rust-coloured dahlias on a table

between them. Their room, they were told, was three floors up and, together with the bell-boy carrying their overnight cases, they'd squeezed into the cramped lift.

Even though the bedroom was small, it smelt fresh and clean. But immediately they were alone, Kit opened up the window so that they could look out over roof tops and see the church spires in the distance.

Frank lifted their overnight cases onto the powder-blue counterpane while, perched on the arm of a well-stuffed chair by the dressing-table, she watched him. When he wandered over to the window to smoke a cigarette, she sensed that he was feeling nervous and unsure of himself.

After he'd put out his cigarette, he sat on the bed while she hung up their clothes for the next day in the creaking wardrobe. She then shook out his crimson-striped pyjamas and woollen dressing gown and laid them beside him on the bed, before unfolding her pink night gown from its tissue paper and smoothing out the bits of lace around the collar and sleeves.

As she finished, Frank stood up and came over to her, but he seemed afraid to touch her. The street lights were shining in through the curtains and she could hear the shriek of the trains coming and going at Victoria station. She put her arms round him and hugged him as if he were a child. The small room with its over-sized furniture seemed to shrink around them.

'I'll walk down to the bathroom. Let you get changed and put on that lovely nightdress,' he said, picking up his sponge bag, his pyjamas and his dressing-gown.

She sat down at the dressing table to unpin her hair and examine her face in the mirror. She'd be forty-one in a few months' time and there were one or two fine wrinkles at the corner of her eyes. She turned her head sideways and noticed her image reflected again and again, to infinity, by the narrow side mirrors, like a tiny marionette. Then she held out her hand and stared at her brand-new wedding ring. She was married, and to Frank. Never before had she come first with anyone, but now with him she always would come first; and he must come first with her.

When he walked back into the bedroom she was sitting on the edge of the bed in her nightgown. Frank's hair had been neatly brushed and his skin was shining after what she guessed must have been a quick and unnecessary shave. Faintly, she heard the musical notes before Big Ben struck nine o'clock. As he put his sponge bag on the night table, she held out her arms to him and he sat down beside her, kissing first her hair and then her lips.

Kit sighed to herself as she finished putting the shopping away in the new, neat kitchen. She would now make a treacle tart to go with their supper. She slipped her arms into her bibbed apron. She'd put her heart into playing all the roles required of her, for everyone's sake.

She thought of when she'd woken in the hotel bedroom the next morning. It was still dark and she heard Big Ben strike six o'clock. Frank was curled up on his side, his head buried in the pillow. She didn't switch on the bedside light in case she woke him. She'd lain there for several minutes listening to the rhythm of his breathing and then put out her hand and lightly touched his back. He'd rolled over, half-opened his eyes and smiled at her. She'd promised herself then that she'd do her best to make him happy.

Part 2 - *Sarah*

Chapter 7

Meeting Sarah

I can still picture the tight, fresh buds of the jonquils and the bright yellow daffodils I was sorting and wrapping the day that I met Sarah in the spring of 1937. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon and I had been taking time pulling them out of the buckets of water they were crammed in. The driver of the Ford 'T' van was waiting impatiently to drive them to the docks for the '*Berengaria*' which was sailing that night.

'Go and find the new girl to help you, Phyllis,' Mr. Brinton said. 'The foreman's son is showing her how to pot on azaleas.'

When Sarah's daughter, Jo, came to my flat for tea two days ago, she was pleased to see framed in the hallway the black-and-white picture Geoffrey had taken of the sunset as we came out of the crematorium after Sarah's funeral. I had sent her and Adam, her stepfather, a copy and written on the back: 'Sarah's sky'. I remember it in Technicolor: the crimson glow on the horizon, the luminous-pink mackerel clouds and the dark-mauve silhouette of the pine trees. It is the other black-and-white photographs I have, the photographs of Sarah and of the extravagant plants that we grew at the nursery, that now, more than anything, remind me of the early part of my friendship with her.

Jo would like me to write down my memories of Sarah for her. 'She told me how close the two of you were in those days, Phyl,' she urged. However, I'm uncertain about the wisdom of writing anything down. I have always been such a private person. Besides, the way I think of Sarah won't tally with Jo's own recollections.

Just before Jo went down in the lift, I pointed out the house across the road, almost hidden by trees, that Sarah had lived in as a teenager when we first knew each

other, thirty-five years ago. I didn't choose the flat for that reason though. It's pure coincidence.

This morning, from the post office down the road, I bought a child's ruled exercise book so I could scribble down a few notes, just for myself to start with. I have my memories of Sarah stored away in my mind, but in no particular order. I have left the exercise book on Geoffrey's scarred old table near the window that I use as a desk to encourage me to begin.

Sarah never saw this little flat. She would have found it dull, but the plain, uncluttered rooms and tiny kitchen suit me. I don't cook much and have few visitors. The majority of our furniture and knick-knacks I sent off for auction and they fetched a reasonable price.

From the low window in the living room I have a clear view of the huge trees opposite which are spectacularly different in each the season. Even when it's dark, I leave the curtain open so that I can watch the sky change as the clouds cover the stars, blow away and then cover them again.

When she came to see me, Jo had just finished reading a history of the time between the two wars, *The Long Week-end*, which she found among Sarah's books. She was especially interested in what her mother did in the Second World War. I'm not sure how much Sarah told her about that time. I am very aware that she tended to live by her own rules and, to me, during the war parts of her life remain a puzzle. But I am beginning to feel I have an obligation to recreate some of her past and to make it more solid for Jo. I also want to recapture my memories of Sarah so that I can see my own life more clearly now I am alone, but I'm not sure what I shall pass on to Jo and what I shall leave out.

When Sarah started work at Brintons' nursery, it was then on the outskirts of Southampton and surrounded by fields. I'd been there for about a year, as I arrived a couple of months after Geoffrey's wife died. Mrs. Brinton, Geoffrey's mother, was a distant cousin of my father, which was one reason why I found myself lodging with them in their draughty, damp house. I thought it a melancholy place, perhaps because at that time Geoffrey was newly widowed. He and his father were great collectors, of ivory, bronze figurines, pictures, stuffed animals, old china, anything they took a fancy to, and the clutter made the house even more comfortless.

Now, at my age, the distant past comes more easily into focus. I have in my head many images of the past but it may be difficult to put them into words. I can

even remember the tea break that day, before I'd even seen Sarah, and what Mr. Gilmore, the foreman, said to one of the men: 'A real cracker, blonde hair, long legs.' Grace, who until then was the only other girl working there, was standing with me, and she muttered, 'She's got even more darns in her stockings than you have, and the overall they've given her is far too short.'

The hot house where the azaleas were grown was one of the largest and, as I went to fetch Sarah, the heavy, sweet scent of the blooms made me feel giddy. I couldn't hear voices, so I set off along the central aisle, peering through the shelves to see where the foreman and the new girl might be. As I came to a walkway cutting across at right angles, an ear-splitting crash from the left startled me. Then I saw a girl standing there perfectly still, hands on hips, staring at something outside. She must have heard my footsteps because she turned towards me, frowning slightly, before giving me an amused smile. 'Oh, well, that's that,' she said.

Everything about her face was well balanced and pleasing and I liked the way she wore her fair hair pinned back on one side with a plain hairclip.

'As I was bending down to replace a pot, the rogue pinched my bottom,' she said, 'so I slapped his face - and he fell backwards through the glass.'

We stood side by side gazing out at Jim, the foreman's son, who was now sitting upright among the shards of glass examining the torn sleeve of his overall and the blood pouring from his elbow. I had to stop myself smiling, but then I felt anxious because new girl could easily have been dismissed. Jim was used to being in the right.

'I'd better go and see whether he's all right,' she said. Her voice was low and clear and quite matter of fact. I realised then, as I saw her stride towards the door, that this girl, not much older than I was, was someone who had her own ideas.

I watched through the broken glass as she put out her hand and helped Jim to his feet, and I heard her say to him, 'I'll come up to the house with you. We'll clean up your elbow and bandage it.'

Then he started to laugh. 'I suppose it was my fault,' he said. 'We'll say it was an accident.'

Sarah was so very natural in those days, though at times I worried that her careless, free behaviour would get her talked about. She surprised me by laughing with the men at risqué jokes that made me blush. Geoffrey, I noticed, was drawn to her like a magnet. I think she might have had much the same effect on him as she had on me: she gave me confidence in myself and made me feel that life could be more of an adventure than I'd imagined.

Old Mr. Brinton was still nominally in charge of the nursery when Sarah came to work there, but Geoffrey made all the important decisions, even though he was often away at exhibitions or on some other business. I heard the foreman say that, since his wife's death, improving and expanding the nursery had become his obsession.

Geoffrey's son, Ralph, a lanky, timid boy, with a high-pitched voice, was about the same age as Sarah and myself, seventeen or eighteen. I imagined that he took after his mother, who'd been a concert pianist before she married Geoffrey. I wasn't sure exactly what she'd died of, though it was rumoured to be consumption. They must have been an ill-matched couple, as Geoffrey was an outdoor man.

I think Sarah felt sorry for Ralph and tried to make friends with him, teasing him sometimes, but he was even more morose when she was around. The men laughed at him behind his back, as he always wore a tweed jacket which seemed too tight for his round-shouldered, squat little body perched on top of his stilt-like legs. However, Grace, the girl who'd been working there even before I arrived, had set her cap at him.

When Jo came to tea, she told me that when she was going through Sarah's papers she'd been surprised by the fact that she hadn't come across any of the rather beautiful black-and-white photographs of her mother she remembered from her childhood. Then Adam, her stepfather, told her that, soon after Sarah became ill, she'd burnt a large number of them. I can't help seeing this as part of her wish for secrecy. Perhaps she didn't want her life to be pieced together by other people, even her own daughter.

However, I showed Jo the few pictures I have of her mother doing various jobs around the nursery, and I made a mental note to go through Geoffrey's albums to

see what other photographs there are of her. I also have a couple of charcoal sketches I made of Sarah after we grew to know each other better. Though she praised them, I never could capture her likeness to my satisfaction.

Jo, in turn, had brought with her a couple of poetry books she thinks her mother might have left for her to find. Sarah has scribbled notes in the margins and copied out other bits of verse which she's Sello-taped inside the front and back covers. I'm fairly sure she must have done this when she was living away from home during the war. At that time she also sent me a poem in her own writing she called, 'Old Men', and I learnt it by heart: 'Only the very young … can be young enough and clear enough to think and be able to say "This is the world we imagine and will make it be."' Perhaps one of her admirers was a poet. Now I think it isn't well-written, but it impressed me then, when we were looking forward to a brave new world after the war.

There were certain things I decided not to mention to Jo when she came to tea. I didn't tell her that I still have most of the letters Sarah sent me over the years, or that I'd burnt her olive green notebook, as she asked me to before she died.

When I found Geoffrey's albums last night in a packing case, I was reminded that his photographs were much more than mere snapshots. He was a gifted photographer and the leading light of the camera club for many years. In the early ones Ralph and Sarah are always standing together as part of the picture Geoffrey was composing. She was as beautiful as he has made her look, though not nearly so remote. Her candid smile never changed. The photographs will help me to put into sequence what I think I remember.

I can recall the first occasion that Geoffrey met Sarah, as I was with her at the time. The afternoon the foreman's son had crashed through the glass, Geoffrey had been up in London, but the following day Sarah was still at the nursery at six o'clock when Mr. Brinton asked me to check the humidity in the fern house. It was a job I never liked. Once the street lights had been lit, great shadows seemed to loom over me and the earthy smell and the drip, drip of the moisture from the rafters made it seem as if I was stepping into a long forgotten world. I think Sarah must have sensed how nervous I was, as she came along with me, linking her arm through mine.

After I'd noted the readings on a slip of paper, I took her back to the house to show her how I logged them on the chart in the kitchen, and Geoffrey was sitting at the oak table talking to his father about the RHS show. He glanced across as I came

through the door and then he noticed Sarah. I saw a faint movement of his eyebrows and he couldn't seem to look away from her, though she hardly took account of him as she politely said good evening to the old man.

When I had marked in the figures, I went back outside with her to collect her bicycle which she had left leaning against the wall by the gate. She wasn't even interested enough to ask me who Geoffrey was, but from then on he was around the nursery almost every day.

Sarah quickly learnt the various jobs to be done in each of the hot-houses and soon she was put in charge of the much-prized Japanese pot chrysanthemums. Often at shows Geoffrey won medals for them and I still have the articles from horticultural journals praising them. Their compact shape made them especially suitable for decorating the liners. He also taught Sarah the geometric patterns to think about in flower-arranging and how to cut the stems under water to make the blooms last longer. The first time he took her to a local show she won a third prize with a vase of narcissi.

After she'd been there only a few weeks, when Grace and I were wrapping and packing what seemed like an endless number of red and yellow tulips, I overheard Geoffrey say to the foreman, 'If ever you need something done carefully, you can rely on Sarah Bride.' I saw the tight-lipped look on Grace's square, heavy-jawed face. I don't think I'm being fanciful when I say that, even by then, she'd decided she would marry Ralph. He was her entrée to a better life, as one day the nursery would be his. Someone told me that Grace's father was a bait-digger and her family lived in one of the down-town slum houses. She certainly wasn't going to let Sarah step into Geoffrey's life and upset her plans.

At around this time, too, the musical evenings began again in the orchid house on a Wednesday. I learnt from the foreman, Mr. Gilmore, that when Geoffrey's wife was alive they would practise there most weeks. Mr. Gilmore and Geoffrey both played the violin and an architect friend of Geoffrey's played the cello.

On the second week, after I'd told Mr. Gilmore that she played the piano and also sang in a choir, Sarah was invited to come to listen to them. I, too, was asked whether I'd like to attend, though my knowledge of music was limited. I saw how Sarah completely lost herself in the music that night – I think it was Brahms and someone else – but I believe that Geoffrey thought she was admiring his playing. He

later offered to pay for her to continue her piano lessons, but she said she didn't have the time. I don't think she'd even begun to understand how he felt about her.

The morning after the first concert, I was coming in through the kitchen door when Ralph pushed past me, scowling. Grace was waiting for him outside, and I heard her say, 'She goes out of her way to get in with them. She certainly thinks a lot of herself.'

Once indoors, I heard laughter from the living room and in a couple of minutes Sarah came striding into the kitchen carrying the coffee tray. She was smiling. 'Granny Brinton's been telling me how one very cold night, shortly after they started up the nursery, they had to take the blankets off their bed to throw them over the propagating frames to save the stock - and then they spent all night sitting shivering by the fire.'

It is four o'clock and quite dark outside. I shall switch on the lamp on the side table. The noise of the traffic from the road outside is loud at this time of day. I still haven't made one note for Jo, though I am enjoying re-imagining this time. It is like turning over the pages of a picture book when I was a child. Looking back, I believe that my adult life began with my friendship with Sarah.

I can picture her one afternoon at the end of April painstakingly squeezing what seemed like hundreds of tiny pots of cyclamen on to some high shelving. As she found space for the last one, she gave a satisfied nod. Then while we were collecting up the empty trays, she announced that Geoffrey that morning had said it would be good experience for her to come to Chelsea to help on the stand at the RHS show. She smiled slowly at me. 'And you're to come, too, Phyl. We're going to drive there in his shooting brake, and friends of his are putting us up for three nights.' Even though she said this calmly, her eyes showed her excitement.

We shared a small room in his friends' red-brick house on Clapham Common. Unfortunately, because we were at the show each day, we didn't see anything of the sights of London we'd heard so much about. Besides, Geoffrey preferred the countryside. I don't believe that he ever took Sarah up to London again.

The theme for the show that year was 'Gardens of Lovers' and Geoffrey's display of orchids and other exotic plants was much praised, even though there were

other colourful stands from all over the empire. On the second day Sarah took me over to see the brilliant gladioli from Africa. 'Look at the pagan glow of those orange trumpets,' she whispered, gripping my forearm. Then on the final day, just as we were packing up, a man gave her a prickly pear from a cactus, which neither of us wanted to eat.

The morning after we arrived in Clapham, I watched Sarah pull over her head a pale green, short-sleeved linen frock. When we walked into the kitchen for breakfast, I saw Geoffrey stare at her admiringly, as if she were a lovely picture. I recall that expression from other occasions, too, but I believe that was the first time I noticed it.

The first photograph of her that Geoffrey pasted into this red album was taken later that morning at the show. He'd posed her in profile in front of the orchids, turning back slightly to touch one of the flowers. She looks a little serious, perhaps because we were both feeling nervous, and of course her brown overall completely covered the pretty dress.

It was on that trip that Sarah started writing in her green notebook. I believe the book was a present from Geoffrey. She told me later that she recorded in it only the comedies of life which might entertain friends.

On the second day of the show we had to line up in front of our stalls for a visit by Queen Mary. She was due to walk round at two o'clock and we had to stand in the suffocating heat of the tent waiting for her for well over an hour. Eventually, I saw floating towards me a stiff, grim-faced woman, her frizzy hair piled up under a small hat. Then I fainted. Sarah that evening showed me what she'd written.

> *Blocking QM's line of route, Phyl's legs and sturdy shoes stuck out in the aisle. They looked detached from her body, as if a mannequin had been taken apart. QM didn't hesitate. With her walking stick, she flicked P's skirt out of her path, stepped over the legs and swept on her way. The dozen or so people following her kept on walking, too, just glancing down at the legs to make sure they didn't trip over them.*

Later, back at the house, Geoffrey retold the story, to his friends' amusement. He added that he physically had to restrain Sarah from reaching out and grabbing the Queen's arm to halt her progress. I was embarrassed, as I hated to be the centre of attention, but I did mention how Sarah had knelt down by my side and taken my hand, then cried out to Geoffrey to fetch brandy and water.

I wonder, would Jo be interested in these recollections? I can only relate what I remember from my point of view now and I have a feeling that Jo has always found me dull. I did, however, meet her grandmother and aunt in the summer of 1937, which was several years before she was born. She might like to hear about them.

The Sunday after the RHS show Sarah invited me to go for a walk with her and come back afterwards to tea. I knew where she lived, a medium-sized house called Tanglewood, opposite a farm, only a fifteen-minute bicycle ride away. Its leaded bay windows and low roof made it seem to me like a country cottage.

As I pushed my bicycle up the path, I noticed that the garden was badly overgrown and the paintwork around the windows was peeling. Later, during the war I painted a small water-colour of the house to give to Sarah, sketching in how the garden might have looked. But even with its unkempt garden, the house was more welcoming than the tall bulk of Fernlea, the Brintons' house.

When I rang the door bell, Sarah came to let me in, wiping her hands on a chintz pinafore. I thought she must have been washing up after lunch.

'Come in, Phyl. Come through to the living room,' she said.

Sarah strode ahead of me, leading me over to a small, elderly woman sitting at a table in the bay window reading a newspaper. 'Mother,' she said, 'This is Phyl, my friend from the nursery, the one who tried to trip up the queen.'

'She seems none the worse for it,' her mother replied.

I liked Mrs. Bride's fine-boned, delicate face and the fact that she had a clipped Scottish accent, though it surprised me. Sarah had no regional accent, unlike Grace with her broad Hampshire vowels.

I noticed two small ivory-inlaid tables standing on either side of the sofa and a pair of heavy brass and silver vases on the mantelpiece. A dozen or so brightly coloured plates hanging on the wall near the fireplace then caught my eye. Taken together, these objects had the effect of making the room seem foreign and exotic, in spite of the worn upholstery and faded curtains. Sarah later told me that she had a second sister living in the Middle East with her husband who was in the colonial service, so these must have been gifts they brought back when they came home on leave.

'We're going to walk over to the lake,' Sarah announced to her mother, giving her a kiss on the forehead.

On hearing the word 'walk', a brown and white spaniel that had been lying under the table rushed out, wagging his tail He stood looking up at Sarah and then we both followed her out of the living-room.

A small, stooped woman was standing in the hallway in front of a looking-glass tucking a few wispy hairs back under a hair net. Sarah put her arm around her shoulder. 'My favourite sister, Mabel,' she said.

I was again surprised. With her grey hair and short-sighted squint, she looked easily old enough to be Sarah's mother.

'We'll be back for some scones later,' Sarah said, 'but we shall take Chester for a good walk. Phyl tells me she's a keen walker.'

I didn't know where the lake was, but we crossed the road and walked through a farmyard, then over several fields, the spaniel all the while tight on Sarah's heels. In spite of the earlier sunshine, the sky was turning cloudy. I thought it might rain, but that didn't seem to bother Sarah, who was wearing only a light woollen jacket.

We talked at first about the nursery. I knew a lot more about the Brintons than she did, and she laughed when I said that my father would refer to Geoffrey as 'clever, sensitive Geoffrey'.

Sarah told me it was her mother who'd suggested she should apply for the job there. When she was fifteen, she'd been ill with diphtheria and spent several months in a fever hospital. 'I looked like a jowly frog,' she said. 'Then I was very weak and Mother was told that I needed fresh air. I was happy to leave school. Besides, we didn't have the money for me to stay on.'

I wanted to know what it was like being shut up in a hospital for that long and she described vividly the feeling of being imprisoned, the rows of heavy iron bedsteads and the medicated smells. I couldn't imagine Sarah as an invalid in a hospital like that. She looked so full of energy that day, jumping over the ditches and picking up sticks to throw for the dog.

She went on to tell me that her brother-in-law sent money to England to pay for her to go to night classes to learn French. Then she laughed and said, 'What with

that and the piano lessons Geoffrey wants to organise, I shall one day be perfectly accomplished, though I'll never learn to paint as well as you. My sister thinks a grounding in music, languages and tennis might help me find the right husband.' She wrinkled her nose. 'But I have no intention of marrying for years. I shall ride a motorbike, write poetry and travel. Perhaps I'll end up doing good works in a leper colony. At school we were told about leper colonies. One of my teachers said that I should be a missionary, but I have a problem with the religious bit. Mother and Mabel are principled Presbyterians and they call me a great big heathen.'

We climbed over a stile and out onto a road by a church. Then we turned down a gravelled driveway that Sarah said once led to an elegant, porticoed house which had recently been demolished. She pointed to the left and between some trees I saw a lake bordered by mauve and pink rhododendrons.

'It's been my favourite spot since I was old enough to explore,' Sarah said. 'Isn't it glorious? And it's different in every season.'

The clouds had disappeared and the sky was now a pure, delicate blue.

'Come on, let's paddle,' she called out, taking off her shoes and clean white socks.

I shook my head. I didn't like the thought of the soft mud oozing between my toes, so I stood watching her walk barefoot through the rough grass and into the shallow brown water at the edge of the lake.

When she came back, we lay down on the bank on our stomachs with our chins propped up on our hands. A light wind was rippling the surface of the lake and soon a pair of moorhens swam fussily from the reeds. After a few minutes, Sarah put her hand in her jacket pocket and pulled out a small red book.

'This is my treasure,' she said. 'I was given it by Mabel on my twelfth birthday. It encourages me to write poetry – even if I'm bad at it – as there are instructions after each poem.'

She handed me the book, *Pattern Poetry*. 'Let me show you one of my favourites, *Goblin Market*,' she said.

I later learnt parts of the poem by heart, and enjoy repeating the lines about the luscious fruits:

'Afterwards, when both were wives …
Laura would call the little ones
And tell them of her early prime …

Would talk about the haunted glen,

The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,

Their fruits like honey to the throat

But poison in the blood.'

As well as painting, I secretly wrote short stories at the time, fanciful historical stories, with maidens and keepsakes and gallant young men, but I was too embarrassed to mention this to Sarah. Instead I asked her, 'Has Geoffrey shown you the book-room at Fernlea? Mr. Brinton says that it would be pretentious to call it a "library".'

'He has,' she said, 'and lent me some books, but mainly on plants and music. It's funny how everyone's determined to educate me, my brother-in-law and now Geoffrey.'

I looked at her closely. Was she aware that Geoffrey thought the world of her? I didn't think she was. She seemed naturally to understand many things but not when they concerned herself. Perhaps her brother-in-law found her equally compelling. I had a feeling that, with two older brothers, I knew more about men than she did. She told me later that her father had died when she was four and she'd grown up in a household of strict, older women.

As we lay looking at the lake and the dog chasing around in the rhododendron thickets, I began to tell Sarah about Geoffrey's wife. Granny Brinton used to talk about how much he'd been in love with her. She said to my mother that he'd never been able to face the fact that she had TB, even though she'd been an invalid since the day Ralph was born.

Then I blurted out to Sarah, 'Don't you think he might be in love with you now?'

She blushed, then pulled down the corners of her mouth. 'Oh, Phyl, he's an old man, forty-something. I'm Ralph's age. He looks on me as a daughter.'

Could she really have been that naïve? But I don't think she was aware of the effect she had on men. I felt then that she needed protecting.

'Come on, Phyl,' she said, standing up abruptly. 'I must find something to take home to Mother and Mabel.'

She led me back through the woods to search for bluebells which were just appearing, and she snapped off a few branches of pussy willow. She told me on the walk home that she never liked to go home empty handed.

After tea, as I cycled back to the nursery, I felt elated to have this girl as my friend. Life would now be different. It would open up for me. I was the youngest of a family of five and I had been too timid to have a real friend.

It was later that summer that Geoffrey started taking Sarah and Ralph out for day trips to the New Forest and to other beauty spots further away. When he came back, he would be busy in the dark-room developing and printing the photographs he'd taken to enter for competitions. The scenery he chose as a backdrop was spectacular, glass-like rivers, giant oaks and once or twice a lashing sea. Sarah was always there, the goddess of the landscape. They are wonderful photographs. I can't believe that she would have objected to Jo seeing them.

There are no photographs of Geoffrey in the albums, of course. He was behind the camera, though two small snapshots of him fell out of Sarah's green notebook and I've kept them. I think he must have sent her them while she was away during the war. I presume that he'd carefully set up his camera and taken them himself. He was wearing the same flannels and open-necked shirt in both. He rarely wore a tie.

In one he is standing by a banana palm in the tropical hot-house where we used to grow the exotic fruit. When I first took Sarah in there, she told me she had never seen a banana before. The next time we went together to the hot-house it was to watch Granny Brinton's green parrot on one of the mornings it was allowed to fly free. Geoffrey, as I recall, was standing close to Sarah and she was trying to edge away from him.

The second photograph is of Geoffrey standing in front of rows and rows of ripe tomatoes which the nursery had been ordered to produce during the war. He has written on the back of it, 'When the war's over, we'll grow strawberries and roses again. *Andiamo*, Geoffrey.'

The radiator beneath the window is hissing. I look up at the clock and realise it is six-fifteen. Feeling comfortable in Geoffrey's old upright chair, I must have fallen asleep

and my neck feels stiff. I need to have something to eat and a cup of tea before I settle down to listen to the news. Jo gave me a packet of Twining's Earl Grey tea which I might open.

Having closed the red album and slid it under the chair, I lean over to pick up the poker and break up the fading coals in the hearth. The pallid little room seems cosier now. I'm pleased that I kept the gold coloured rug lying in front of the grate, even though it is threadbare.

I want one last look at the album before I go into the kitchen. I lift it back onto my lap and find the group picture that Geoffrey took of the staff in 1941, the week before Sarah left the nursery to join the ATS. He has placed her in the middle, in the second row back, as she was tall enough to be seen above the people in front. I am to one side, near Grace, who is smiling broadly. Sarah is frowning uncertainly as she sometimes did. Perhaps the sun was in her eyes. She looks older, more determined in this photograph. She was setting out on her own, escaping from the nursery and possibly from Geoffrey. Perhaps that's why I now interpret the smile on Grace's face as one of triumph.

Chapter 8

Keeping in touch

This morning I've been writing dates I'm guessing at on the back of the photographs of Sarah. I've also begun to write one or two notes about when we met during the war. Wrapped up in my old cardigan, sitting at the table near the window, I can return to memories of our friendship to share them with Jo. I've also found my two sketches of Sarah. They're not as bad as I thought, but I might use one of Geoffrey's photos of her to paint a proper portrait for Jo.

Last night lying in bed I was still thinking about Sarah and how some of my memories of her come into focus more easily than others. Of course I shan't tell Jo my opinion of her father. It always surprised me that Sarah could even consider marrying a man with such a cold, loose handshake.

When she joined the ATS in 1941 she wrote to me almost every week and I have kept these letters, with others, in a shoebox which is now on the desk in front of me. She told bright, funny stories about being a 'warrior' and I could picture what she described. In her first letter, she says how embarrassed she was when she had to clamber into the back of a ten-ton truck in a tight skirt; and how she couldn't keep a straight face at kit inspection, with her army-issue khaki bloomers and striped pyjamas neatly stacked on her bed. *But I like the idea of invading the world of men*, she added.

Bunking down with other girls wouldn't have suited me but she was interested in them all. One girl, she told me, had her own privately tailored uniform and another hardly ever washed herself or her underclothes.

After she joined a military transport unit in Norfolk and began to drive lorries all over England, she wrote less often, but on her first leave home she told me she'd learned how to repair engines but was also having a whale of a time socially. Then she said something which stuck in my mind: 'But I've learnt to be more choosy about the company I keep.' I think she was referring to the men she'd met.

Her mother and Mabel also showed me Sarah's letters to them, as by then I had gone to lodge with them. I made my own bid for independence shortly after

Sarah left Brintons' by joining the Land Army, starting off by delivering milk with a pony and cart. Just as Sarah's new, more worldly life seemed to suit her, mine suited me. I enjoyed catching and harnessing the pony before daylight, and on my round people would invite me in for tea to tell me their troubles or gossip about neighbours.

I suppose though I wasn't having much of an adventure compared to Sarah. In a letter she wrote to me in 1941, on 21st December, which I read to her mother, she described driving in an all-night convoy through a snow storm to deliver radio equipment to the north of England. *You may not believe this*, she wrote, *but I even had to change a tyre – with the help of the dispatch rider!* I knew that her mother was quietly proud of her. She told me a little later that Sarah made an allotment of half her pay to help them keep the house going.

By the time I saw her again, in the spring of 1942, when she was home on a forty-eight-hour pass, she had transferred to a medical unit and was driving ambulances. I managed to get to Southampton station to meet her and I found it packed with men and women in uniform with steel helmets and gas masks hung over their shoulders. I must have stood out in my shabby tweed coat and the mauve hat Mabel had given me. As the train drew in, I spotted Sarah leaning out of the carriage window. With her fair hair tucked in a neat roll below her cap, she reminded me of the girl on the recruiting poster. She was even wearing lipstick, and when she stepped down onto the platform and gave me a hug, I could smell scent. Her mother would not approve. I must have given a noisy sniff, because Sarah laughed and said, 'Evening in Paris, Phyl. All I could afford.'

Then I noticed a tall, broad-shouldered man standing behind her, a corporal I saw from the stripes on the sleeve of his battledress jacket. He had a set, hostile expression on his face. I thought it might be because he felt ill at ease, as we were ignoring him.

'This is Ed,' Sarah said. 'He plays the piano for our choral society. He's stopping at the YMCA for a night on his way down to Plymouth.'

We shook hands and he walked out with us to the bus stop, though Sarah was busy talking to me, asking about the air raids which had destroyed so much of the town. There were great gaps where the shops and houses had been reduced to rubble. As we waited in the queue for the bus, I pointed out a house across the road which was still standing, even though the whole front wall had collapsed. Bizarrely, we could see the owner's clothes hanging up in the wardrobe.

'But Mother and Mabel will be all right, won't they?' Sarah said. 'They're far enough out of town and away from the docks.'

Ed stayed close behind us but didn't join in the conversation. However, I saw him watch Sarah closely as she bent to pick up her suitcase, then stand up and straighten her skirt.

'We'll see you later at Easton village hall for the dance,' she called to him as we stepped on the bus. Then, as we sat down, she said, 'I feel sorry for him. He's a gifted pianist, but so locked up in himself that he doesn't get on with many people.'

I wondered whether she just pitied him or in some way found him attractive. But it was now my chance to tell her my news.

A couple of months earlier, one evening when I was helping in the WVS canteen, I had met David, an RAF rear gunner who was in Southampton on leave, and we were planning to get engaged. In those times, we made decisions quickly, though marriage seemed a serious step to take and I didn't quite feel old enough. After I told Sarah about David, she put her arm around me and gave me a squeeze. We were both laughing as we drove past the common, leaving the bomb-damaged high street behind. The only worry I had was that I'd arranged that David should bring a friend, a sergeant pilot, along to the dance to partner Sarah and now we had Ed as well.

When we arrived at the village hall that evening, I was pleased to find David waiting for us by the door, and he told us his friend was saving seats for us at a table on the far side of the room. The air inside was thick with cigarette smoke and there was a strong smell of beer. Sarah, I noticed, had curled her hair and was wearing sheer nylons which drew attention to her shapely legs. I wondered whether the nylons had been sent to her by her sister in Palestine, but they were probably a present from some admirer. It might have been my imagination, but I thought that many of the men turned to stare at her as, with her usual long stride and looking smart in her uniform, she followed David across to our table.

I'd never known her to drink alcohol but, when we sat down, she accepted a gin-and-lime from David's friend. Then Ed appeared at the table to ask her to dance. I was surprised seeing them slithering and swooping across the small, slippery dance floor. For someone with such a stiff manner, he moved well. Sarah had little choice but to dance close to him in the crush of couples. Afterwards he carried over a chair for himself and joined us, but Sarah was a little distant with him, almost disdainful. I have a memory of her humming along as the band played *I'm a Little on the Lonely*

Side and laughing and flirting with the sergeant pilot as she smoked cigarette after cigarette.

Later I felt anxious for her as I saw the severe look in Ed's eyes as he watched her jitter-bugging with David's friend. She was dancing with abandon, probably having drunk more alcohol than she was used to, her hips swivelling and swinging around him. A touchingly earnest young sailor on the next table couldn't stop staring at her and his much coarser companion ogled her with greedy eyes. As she came back to sit down with us, I saw his thick fingers pinch towards her backside. Luckily, Ed hadn't noticed, and Sarah, her face flushed, just winked at me.

David and his friend were on stand-by so they had to be back in camp by ten and he wanted to give us a lift back to Tanglewood in his much-prized Morris Eight. Ed stood gloomily by the car, his eyes narrowed and his tongue flicking across his lips, saying goodnight to us all. He wasn't at all happy at the outcome of the evening.

When we arrived outside the gate, David and the sergeant pilot both jumped out of the car. As I kissed David goodbye, in a shifting beam of a searchlight I saw his friend grab Sarah round the waist and attempt to kiss her. She was laughing and trying to wriggle free but eventually she gave in.

I understand, after that evening, that Sarah didn't see Edward again for a long time, but he wrote to her frequently and he must have poured out his heart to her. I have just re-read a letter from her later that year. *Poor Ed, he had such an unhappy childhood,* she wrote. *When he was two years old, his father was killed in a railway accident and his mother married again. Her new husband resented him and he was pushed into the background. As a teenager he found solace in religion and ended up a Methodist lay preacher.* She never could resist an appeal for her sympathy, but I can still see those deep-set, slightly disturbed eyes and the straight, unforgiving lips.

It wasn't until the summer of 1943 that I saw Sarah again. For me the spring of that year was a time when everything went wrong. In March, David was reported missing after a raid over Germany and, with the sense I've always had about the important things in my life, I knew that he was dead. I could no longer take pleasure in anything. I had a breakdown of some sort and went back to work at the nursery, though I remained attached to the Land Army.

When I felt better able to cope, I wrote to Sarah to tell her about David. She replied almost immediately, saying that she had a week's leave due and, if I could get away, we should go down to Sandwich to stay with her aunt. She added that we would swim and walk by the sea and it would be good for us both.

I have such comforting memories of that week. One evening, after he'd finished work, Frank, her uncle, drove us in his Humber to visit his favourite bit of the coast at Pegwell Bay; and, in spite of rationing, Kit, her aunt, fed us on pies, pastries, eggs from the few chickens they kept and potatoes and peas from their garden. Boiled pullets' eggs and fresh bread will always be a favourite with me.

I've picked out a photograph to give to Jo of Sarah and me basking in the sun at the harbour swimming pool in Ramsgate which was taken by her aunt. We both look trim and healthy. I remember it as a week full of sunshine and kindness, and I began to feel that life was worth living again. I still think of the cobalt colour of the sea, the briny smell and the sound of the waves.

We borrowed two dilapidated bicycles they kept in the garage and cycled all over the place. We probably grew closer to each other that week than we had ever been. I became conscious, too, that Sarah had acquired a little more elegance, a little more grooming. She also seemed more able than I was to brush aside the unbearable sadness I thought everyone was feeling as the war and the dying went on.

'How strange it is to think that we're looking across to occupied France,' she said on our first walk along the cliffs. She looked so lovely leaning slightly forward against the wind with her hair blown back, but I couldn't help thinking how lucky she was, because for her the war had not become a personal tragedy.

'In spite of that ugly barbed-wire,' she went on, 'we still have all this freedom - space, sunlight. After the war I want a home of my own somewhere like this and a husband and children.'

I guessed that she must be in love, but perhaps she felt she couldn't tell me about it after I'd lost David. 'Do you have anyone in particular in mind?' I asked, hoping to make joke of it.

'Well, it's not Ed,' she said, lighting up a cigarette and inhaling the smoke. 'But he still writes to me - quite poetically for an erstwhile bank clerk – and the biro sketches he makes of Plymouth are really quite good.'

Later in the week she told me that, when he hadn't heard from her for a month, he'd hitched a lift to Norfolk and asked her to marry him. Though she laughed about it, I think she was a little intimidated by his persistence.

Neither of us was used to talking about our feelings, and she didn't say any more as we walked down to Ramsgate harbour. But when we sat on the sea wall to drink hot sweet tea from our flask and watch the boats, she announced, 'You know I'm driving for a Canadian Army doctor now - and I work as a sort of orderly in his office. I wish I'd trained as a nurse like Mabel; I could be so much more useful.' Then she smiled. 'Last week he had me handing out what he called "hygiene packages" to a platoon of soldiers lined up on the parade ground. It was only after I returned to the office he told me they contained French letters. No wonder the boys were grinning.'

At that time I knew little about sex and sensed that Sarah had learnt a great deal more than I had. She'd always liked the company of men.

'His name's Bill,' she went on, 'and we see a lot of each other. He plays jazz with a local group and lends me books and talks to me of T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, whom I'd barely heard of before. But tell me about the nursery, Phyl? Have things changed much?'

So I told her how withdrawn Geoffrey had become and how determined Grace was that Ralph should start to run things. 'Geoffrey needs you, Sarah, to tell him not to let himself be elbowed out,' I said. 'You're far more outspoken than I am. Remember the time you stopped him drowning those blind kittens the nursery cat gave birth to? Eventually you found homes for them all. And I can still see Grace's mouth hanging open when she tried to drive that mangy dog away from the gate by throwing stones at it and you swore at her.'

As we walked back up the cliff path to where we'd left our bicycles, the heat seemed to be dropping down from the sky and bouncing back from the chalky ground. My skin was damp with sweat and I felt tired, but Sarah was much tougher than I was, at least physically, and she was so happy. But I was never entirely sure she was a good judge of men and I wondered what Bill was like.

She went on to tell me that before she met him she'd gone out with a lot of men. Then she laughed and said, 'But somehow I still seem locked into a sort of frozen virtue. Mabel would approve.'

On our last day in Sandwich we went with Kit on the bus to Canterbury. It was another sunny day and the flat countryside we drove through, with its water meadows and grazing cows and sheep, made an idyllic picture. We were going to meet a girl called Elizabeth, and during the hour-long journey Kit explained she'd been her nanny for many years. She was now in the Wrens and had just returned from Egypt.

We caught sight of Elizabeth by the WVS van outside the cathedral and she ran up to us and threw her arms round Kit. I realised, too, that she and Sarah must have met before, but Sarah had never mentioned her to me and didn't seem to know her well.

Her well-cut Wren's uniform contrasted with our simple cotton frocks, though I felt that she must be hot underneath all that serge. But someone so poised and strikingly beautiful probably ignored such discomforts. She had the most winning smile and a perfect peaches and cream complexion to go with her chestnut hair. On the bus I'd imagined she must be an officer but she was an ordinary rating. It struck me as odd that Sarah, who'd left school at fifteen, was about to become a sergeant, and Elizabeth, with all her breeding, had no rank at all. Sarah was right: the war mixed us up in one pot.

We sat at a little wooden table for an hour or so over several cups of tea and home-baked scones and jam tarts, Kit and Elizabeth exchanging little smiles and touching each other affectionately on the arm every now and then. Elizabeth asked me what job I did and I told her about my milk delivery. Then Sarah explained she was working for a Canadian doctor, Bill Grieve. I remember Elizabeth at first said he might be a distant cousin of hers whose wedding her mother had been to in Toronto in 1938, but then she decided it couldn't possibly be the same man.

As we stood up to leave, Elizabeth handed Kit a pink and white box of peppermint creams and then insisted on paying for our tea. As I watched them all, I thought that, though Elizabeth had such polish and assurance, Sarah was equally as lovely.

We walked with her to the station to wave her off on the train to London, then back into town to catch our bus to Sandwich. During the bus ride, Sarah had her nose in a book of D.H. Lawrence short stories, reading out to us bits from a tale about a clippy on the Midland trams. She then began to quiz Kit about her job as a ticket

collector at Clapham Junction in the previous war. 'Were you a fearless young hussy, with skirts up to your knees?' she teased.

'I don't have a photo' Kit said, 'but I was told I looked elegant - and our skirts reached our ankles.'

'What about your inspector? Was he called John Thomas, and did he have a warm, cosy way of cuddling the girls?'

Kit blushed but Sarah wasn't going to let her off the hook. She read out a paragraph or two describing what sounded like a Bacchanalian revel in the waiting room, the girls with wild faces, lusting to kill. Poor John Thomas was left bleeding, with torn clothes.

'Get away with you. Silly girl,' Kit said, laughing. 'It was a happy time for me though.'

Our week's holiday was soon over and Sarah and I travelled together to London, going our separate ways at Victoria. The huge station concourse was booming and echoing with the voices of men and women in uniform but Sarah didn't at all mind the hurry and confusion. I walked out with her to her bus stop and a man shouldering his way through the crowd gave a wolf-whistle, then seemed deliberately to brush against her, grinning broadly. She didn't seem as offended as I would have been. As her bus pulled away, she was happily laughing and waving to me. She was off to meet Bill, I later learnt, and spend a weekend in London.

We didn't write much to each other after that and I didn't see her again for another year. By then she was married to Ed. I still can't work out how he managed to tip the scales in his favour.

By that time, too, I was back at Fernlea, as old Mr. Brinton had died and Granny wanted company. I kept meaning to cycle over to see Mrs. Bride and Mabel but I never seemed to have time. Then one Sunday, early in the summer, I did go over there and it was Sarah who opened the door to me. She was back home, married and expecting a baby. I was surprised she hadn't written to tell me her news, but she quickly apologised and said that, with so much happening and so many people on the move, they'd fitted the wedding in at a week's notice, when they could both obtain a forty-eight hour pass.

When she walked with me to the gate to say goodbye, smoking her inevitable cigarette even though she was pregnant, she suggested we should meet for tea in the Cadena café the next day and catch up properly on our news.

I arrived a little late at the café, and even before I sat down at the table, Sarah started to apologise again for not keeping in touch: she had been unable to keep up with all the changes in her life. As she picked up the menu, she muttered to me that she still couldn't believe she'd become pregnant so quickly. 'Our honeymoon was a night in a hotel near Hyde Park,' she said, 'then we both had to go back to our units. Ed was more certain than I was that the invasion was about to begin. That's one reason why the wedding was rushed.' She shook her head. 'I thought babies and settling down would happen after the war.'

She frowned while she told me that she'd counted and recounted the days from her last period, waited another twenty-four hours, and hoped. 'Men,' she said, 'sometimes I seem to get them muddled together. I certainly don't understand what makes them tick.' Then she laughed. 'But they're lucky; they have so much freedom. And now I have a husband somewhere in France and all he can do is write me lengthy letters, while I get on and have this baby by myself.'

The waitress came over with our pot of tea and pointed to a stand with a few coloured cakes and meringues like spiralled shells.

'Chose one, Phyl,' Sarah said. 'I can't. It'll make me sick.'

I chose a meringue, and we went on to talk about the nursery. Sarah said she would try to drop round to see Geoffrey to tell him her news. I noticed that the shiny, scarlet lipstick didn't suit her and she seemed different from how I remembered her, less sure of herself and more cynical.

Just before we got up to leave, she said, 'I never told you, did I, about Bill, the Canadian, how that ended? He was posted to Scotland not long after our trip to Kent and a couple of times managed to cadge a lift with a pilot friend to come down to see me. Then one day at a party one of the nurses who was always chippy with me said, "You're a fool to expect anything from him. He's married." I didn't believe her; I thought she was jealous. But in the end I wrote to him to ask whether it was true. He

flew down to see me and of course it was true. When I asked him why he hadn't told me, he said, "Because I didn't want to lose you."'

The tears were welling in her eyes and I'm ashamed to recall that I felt embarrassed to think she might start to cry in the crowded restaurant among these carefully dressed, superior looking women. I was relieved when the haughty waitress came over with our bill. As the waitress moved away, Sarah said sharply, 'They still wear the black and white parlour maid's uniform. As if the world hasn't changed. As if there isn't a war on.'

As she picked up her clutch bag to get out her purse, I commented how stylish it was, with its silver torpedo-shaped clasp. 'A present from Bill,' she replied. Then she looked at me with a direct, steady gaze. 'I still have a packet of his letters. Perhaps you'd look after them for me when I go into hospital to have the baby.'

Later in the week when she came round to the nursery she quietly handed me a sealed brown envelope. I kept it until recently, as she never asked for it back, but I burnt the letters when I burnt her notebook. I wondered whether she had forgotten she had given me them.

Of course I shan't tell Jo any of this. I shall tell her about our week in Kent and about Sarah driving lorries and reaching the rank of sergeant. But Sarah's life became complicated after that, and I'm not sure I have a clear picture of it. I might have mixed up one or two events.

I can, however, picture Sarah in the maternity hospital in September, sitting up in bed nursing Jo. She looked beautiful and strange and happy, though her skin was as colourless as ivory. She'd had a difficult delivery as the baby was in a breech position.

'When I get home, Mabel will try to take her from me,' she said, laughing. 'She'll worry that I'll drop her or let her swallow water when I bathe her.'

Then she handed me the baby and I remember this downy, veined, fragile creature, smelling of sick. I could see from Sarah's eyes how proud she was of her. 'Look at that tiny fist clenched like a walnut shell,' she said, 'and that perfect skin.'

I called at Tanglewood a few times after that to see Sarah and the baby. The last time was in April or May, shortly before VE Day, and I went with her for a walk by the river with the pram.

'It's the only way to get Jo-Anne to sleep,' she said. 'She enjoys the jolts over the rough roots.'

She quickly began to describe how the previous week she'd gone by train with the baby up to Leicester to visit her mother-in-law. 'We're supposed to be going there to live with her when Ed comes out of the army, at least until he can find us somewhere to rent,' she said. 'But I'll suffocate in that small house among all that dark furniture and heavy velvet hangings.'

I saw little of Sarah for a while after that. She was busy with the baby and at the nursery we were working round the clock to produce more tomatoes, more vegetables and more fruit with fewer and fewer staff. I thought Ed would soon be back in England and Sarah would be moving up to the Midlands, but nothing happened as quickly as anyone expected it would, and Jo was two years old before he returned from Germany.

Also during those two difficult years after the war I quietly married Geoffrey in the registry office and Grace married Ralph. I can no longer remember whether I was surprised when Geoffrey proposed to me. We were both lonely. Perhaps, illogically, I thought it would help me stay in contact with Sarah. But Granny continued to dominate Geoffrey and bully me, and Grace and Ralph went out of their way to make me feel an outsider. That was when I started my flower painting, spending hours alone in one of the small glasshouses, working on every little detail. Geoffrey framed my water-colour of the blackberry spray, with its simple white blooms and mauve, red and green ripening fruit.

Strangely, in the following year it was I who had a breakdown and needed support and not Sarah. One chilly day, when I was wandering through town, staring at the mannequins in shop windows, I came across her outside the main post office. When she smiled and held out her hands to me, I burst into tears. She ushered me into a nearby café and, over a cup of tea, lectured me, telling me I must stand up for myself. The next day she called round to the nursery and I think she spoke sternly to Geoffrey, for in bed that night he said he thought we should move out and buy a house of our own.

In spite of this promise, I was unwell for some time, and the next clear memory I have of Sarah is at Jo's fifth birthday party. I must have known by then that she and Ed had formally separated. She had come to visit us in our new house the week before, which was when she invited me to the party, saying she would welcome help dishing out blancmange and jelly to a dozen or more bouncy children. I was pleased to be asked.

I remember watching Sarah play the piano for a game of musical chairs, after the children had eaten their tea. She was wearing a pale blue twin-set and looked full of energy. I felt that she'd faced up to the mistake she'd made and was coping well on her own with the child. I was only partly right. Afterwards, while we were clearing up, she surprised me by pointing to the sunset we could see from the kitchen window. 'Look,' she said, 'it seems like a distant, troubling blaze.' The clouds appeared to be grey smoke streaked with orange. I thought that she was just tired after the party, but she suddenly said: 'Oh, Phyl, I married in a moment's mania and now I shall never be free. You can't imagine what it's like being tied to someone so judgmental - and I've come to realise he despises women. She gave a little laugh. 'It was his letters that made me think he was something different, those long, detailed letters, and his clever drawings.

She laughed again, turning her head to one side. 'You know, Mother once or twice reminded me that it was my decision to marry Ed, so understandably he was expecting me to make a home for him. I did take Jo up to stay with him in his mother's house, but when Mother became ill, I came back to Tanglewood to help nurse her. Then Jo caught whooping cough, which developed into pneumonia. Ed was too tied up with his new job to come down to see her, even when she nearly died.'

That would have been the last straw for Sarah, though perhaps she could have tried harder to make something of her marriage. She went on in a bright voice, trying not to sound serious, 'You know yesterday I thought I saw him in the shadow of the barn across the road. When I walked over with the dog, she pricked up her ears and growled, but there was no one there. I'm getting nervy.'

I didn't tell her that one evening just before we moved from the nursery Ed had called to the house to ask whether she had come back to work. I'd gone to the door when I heard the bell jangle to be confronted by his clamped, self-righteous mouth. Fortunately, Geoffrey followed me and quickly got rid of him. However, Jo

wouldn't want to know my opinion of Ed. He was her father, and Sarah would have presented him in the best light.

Sitting here as the light fades outside, I realise how lucky I was to have married someone gentle like Geoffrey, however old-fashioned Sarah might have thought him. She made a huge mistake in marrying Ed, but I always felt he held some strange sexual attraction for her, something I never felt for Geoffrey.

Chapter 9

A second chance

Sitting at my table writing notes has become a habit over the past couple of days. I've moved the standard lamp nearer my chair so that I don't strain my eyes. Just before it grew dark, I was looking out of the window at the leaves on the grass below being spiralled along by gusts of wind. The heavy clouds seem to suggest snow.

This morning I took the bus into town to look for a new winter coat, though I didn't buy anything. Travelling back up the hill past the old nursery grounds always surprises me. Rows of narrow houses have been built on the five acres where the greenhouses once stood and Fernlea has been turned into flats.

In the past hour I've been trying to note down how Sarah's life and mine changed in the 'fifties. At times I think my imagination takes over and fills in the gaps, as by this stage I'd been excluded from her confidence, though I still wanted her friendship. I had hoped to see more of Jo and perhaps even be called 'Aunty Phyl'. I'd once even thought Sarah might ask me to be a godparent. Perhaps I was jealous of Sarah as I longed for a child of my own. I realise now that it can't have been easy bringing up Jo with so little money, and she must have been worried about the future for them both.

On the bus this morning I wondered whether Jo remembered the doll in the yellow dress I gave her in the summer of 1950 when Sarah brought her to the tea party Geoffrey was putting on for the children of the staff. We were by then again growing bananas and other tropical plants in the big hot-house, and just before they left, I took them to see these exotic treasures. In the old days Sarah would have relished the ripe, warm smell in the afternoon heat, but she'd lost her impulsive, easy manner and said only what she felt was politely necessary. She looked tired and her face seemed white and set. I reminded her how we used to talk about visiting the countries these plants came from. Did she remember? I wasn't sure whether she was joking when she replied: 'I'm thirty in a couple of months, Phyl, so my life has settled into its pattern. No more thoughts like that for me'

In early November of that year Sarah's mother died, but Geoffrey and I were unable to attend the funeral as we were up in Elgin staying with friends of his. When towards the end of the following year Sarah got in touch to invite us for a sherry on New Year's Day, I was still feeling guilty about this and about the fact that I had neglected her. I had been finding running our new house to Geoffrey's precise standards demanding, and he liked me to go away with him at weekends on his sight-seeing trips. Now I can't help thinking that we visited the places he used to take Sarah and Ralph to before the war: Bath, country estates in Dorset, Lyme Regis and beyond.

Drinks on New Year's Day had been a tradition with the Brides and Sarah told me that it was the one time that her mother and Mabel would drink alcohol. Perhaps after Janet Bride's death Sarah felt they should repeat the occasion in her honour.

I remembered the party I'd been to there when we worked together, and was pleased that this time, too, there was a pine wreath bound with red ribbon on the front door and a tinsel-draped Christmas tree in the bay window. Mabel had baked shortbread and Sarah had arranged cheese and sausages on sticks. I knew that she was never comfortable at social gatherings and it must have been an effort for her. I couldn't, however, help noticing her shabby, ill-fitting grey-green frock and her worn shoes, as she'd always been fastidious about her clothes, though she never worried about being in fashion. I didn't grasp then how short of money they must have been. I was comfortably off, married to Geoffrey, and none of my worries was about money. I'd assumed that Sarah's mother had had some sort of annuity, but of course it would have ended with her death.

Mabel was handing round the sherry, and I smiled at the very proper linen tray cloth and the delicately engraved glasses. The silver candlesticks on the piano were gleaming. I was later introduced to the third, married sister who mainly lived abroad. I found her rather condescending.

I noticed Jo speaking to Geoffrey. She looked solemn, possibly overawed by the grown-up party. Then Sarah touched me on the hand and I followed her out to the kitchen; or had I suggested that, if she had time, we might have a quiet word? Like Sarah, I was never at all sure how to behave at parties.

The old, black range was still in the kitchen and the pans looked even more battered and worn. I noticed that the draining board had dark-grey patches of damp where the wood was rotting away.

'Have a seat, Phyl,' Sarah said, as she perched on the edge of the deal table.

I remarked that she and Mabel must be missing their mother as she'd been so strong, and I knew that Sarah thought the world of her.

'You know,' she said, 'I owe everything to her. God knows, where I'd have ended up without her.'

She lit a cigarette and gave a small laugh. 'We have two lodgers now. What do you think of that, Phyl? One's an old school friend of my nephew's studying at the university and the other's a middle-aged salesman. I'm no cook, and neither is Mabel, but they seem happy with what we feed them.'

She went on to tell me that she was giving piano lessons on the old Blüttner to a couple of girls from Jo's school and teaching the alphabet to children at a kindergarten. 'I'm better with plants – and dogs and cats,' she said, 'but children aren't bad.'

She gave me an amused smile. 'I've tried one or two other jobs over the past year,' she said, 'including looking after a bric-à-brac shop and driving the van for the owner. I even worked in a fish-and-chip shop one evening a week until Mabel found out.'

From the tone of her voice, it seemed that she took a cheerful pleasure in all these jobs. But the last thing she said to me before we went back into the living room was: 'Do you think I'm a suitable mother, Phyl? I so much want to be. I worry that I might damage Jo just by being myself.'

I hope I said the right thing, but at the back of my mind was the thought that it was foolish of Sarah to be so deliberately experimental with her life, especially with a young daughter. From a couple of rumours I'd heard at the nursery, not only had she been driving a van for the antique dealer, but she'd been seen with him at the cinema and in one or two pubs. Mr. Gilmore, the foreman, also told me he'd caught a glimpse of her at a dance on the pier in the summer on the arm of a bearded man in naval uniform.

Back in the noise of the party, it occurred to me that Sarah hadn't said a word about Ed; but then she would often avoid talking about the things that worried her most. I wondered whether he ever saw Jo.

I walked over to Geoffrey, who was standing by the piano talking to a man with a moustache. 'This is Major Mackenzie, Phyl,' he said. 'He's just returned from Benghazi and is a friend of Sarah's brother-in-law.'

'Adam,' the man said, holding out his hand. 'We've been talking about music and politics; then we got on to the much safer subject of photography, which your husband knows much more about than I do.'

I liked his smile and his strong handshake. The fact that he was a gentleman showed in his manner towards me. He talked knowledgeably about North Africa, where he'd spent two years in a headquarters job; and all the while he rocked backwards and forwards on his heels, an amusing habit, I thought. He explained that his mother lived in a village on the edge of the New Forest and he'd managed to find a flat in a converted lodge nearby for Sarah's sister and brother-in-law to rent during their leave. They'd brought him along to the party. When Sarah joined us she seemed reticent and I noticed her fingers fidgeting with a loose thread in the seam of her frock.

I wondered how such a well-travelled man would feel about this simple party. However, Major Mackenzie appeared to be enjoying himself, and while he was talking to us his eyes were fixed on Sarah's face with a wistful eagerness. Later I overheard him say to her brother-in-law, 'How pale your sister-in-law looks, and how vulnerable.'

As Geoffrey and I were standing in the hallway saying goodbye, I told Sarah how much I'd enjoyed his stories, and she replied, 'A bit too handsome, to be sure;' or at least that's what I remember her saying.

I have written down the date of this party, 1st January 1952. I think Jo might like to be reminded of it, as it was a world very different from the one she lives in now.

The women who worked at the nursery were still gossiping about Sarah being seen so frequently at the Gaumont, each time, it seemed, with a different man. I'd also, a couple of weeks after the party, overhead Grace say to Mr. Gilmore, with a spiteful laugh, that she'd seen Jo in town one day with her mother and couldn't help noticing a likeness to Geoffrey. I therefore decided to write to Sarah, but of course I didn't mention what Grace had said as I know it can't be true. I just felt it my duty to inform her that rumours about her over-full life had reached the nursery.

I should have realised how much she would resent even the mildest criticism. She wrote back straight away telling me how uncharitable and condescending I had become. Why ever had she remained in touch with such a nun-faced prig? I was angry at first and tore the letter up. Then I felt that I'd probably destroyed our friendship and was ill for weeks. I didn't have the courage to tell Geoffrey the reason.

Now eating my supper, cheese on toast, I realise how much is coming back to me as I start to make these notes. I had forgotten our quarrel.

I don't feel tired tonight, and I want to pursue other, happier recollections and bring Sarah into clearer focus. I recall Geoffrey saying that the past never fully goes away but at times, according to how you feel, you remember some things and not others. I must make more notes and try to write down dates.

I saw Sarah again by chance in the early spring of 1952 in Green's newly-built department store on the High Street where she was collecting a panama hat she had ordered for Jo for her summer school uniform. She at first pretended she hadn't seen me but, with my hands shaking, I plucked up the courage to hurry over to her. She had lost weight and seemed a little abstracted, but she smiled as I stood nervously in front of her and then she laughed. 'Let's forget what happened, Phyl,' she said. 'Life's too short.'

We walked back through the town together to the bus station. The reconstruction of the High Street had just been completed and we stopped to admire Mac Fisheries, with its sloping counter of wet fish. I couldn't persuade Sarah to stop for a hot drink at a recently-opened café next-door, as she had to meet Jo from school.

Opposite the bus station was a large bomb site that hadn't yet been built over, a depressing reminder of the war. As we watched the bus pull up, Sarah said quickly, 'Mabel's in hospital. She has breast cancer.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said, knowing that it was an inadequate response. I looked at Sarah's face. Her eyes were brimming with tears but her mouth was pleated in an obstinate line. She wasn't after sympathy and didn't want to say any more.

When a month or so later Mabel died, she didn't let me know, but I read the announcement in the local paper. Then the next day I saw a neighbour of theirs who sometimes bought flowers from the nursery shop and she told me that Sarah was

adamant that Mabel had wanted a quiet, family funeral. I wrote a letter of condolence and, as I remembered that the other sister would still be in England, I felt she would have some support.

What I didn't know then was that Edward was still spying on her. She told me later that, shortly before Mabel was taken ill, she'd applied for a legal separation from him and, through his lawyer, he'd started to raise questions of custody, alleging that she was an unsuitable mother.

I would like to ask Jo one day what she remembers of her father. Over tea the other day she said one or two things about her childhood, joking about the fact that Sarah would organise her into a frenetic round of activities outside school: ballet, tap and ballroom dancing lessons, enrolling her in the Brownies and asking a friend to teach her to ride. But neither of us mentioned her father.

I have found the postcard that Geoffrey and I had from Sarah at the beginning of August that year with a brightly-coloured view of boats tucked beneath the cliffs in Ramsgate harbour. She had taken Jo down there to stay with Kit and Frank. 'The weather is glorious,' she wrote, 'just as it was when we were here during the war.' Jo was staying on for a few weeks as Sarah had to return to work. She was back looking after the 'old junk shop,' as she called it, and helping in the office at the PDSA; and then there was the middle-aged lodger who needed looking after.

I decided I'd call round to see her the following week, thinking she might be home by tea-time, but her neighbour, the one who visited our shop, called over the fence to say that she was out. 'She works too hard,' she said. 'She'll make herself more ill.'

As we stood by the front gate, she told me how when she'd called in the day before, Sarah mentioned that she was having blinding headaches and finding it difficult to sleep. 'She fainted walking down the path with me,' she said, 'and hit her head on a stone in the rockery. When she came to, her main concern was that Jo mustn't know.' Then she shook her head, 'I sometimes feel she's still a child herself.' She paused. 'I've seen a dark-haired man, probably her estranged husband, lurking behind the farm hedge and staring fixedly at the house. He gives me the creeps, but I haven't told her. It'd worry her too much.'

Even though this blowsy woman with thick ankles was a customer of ours, I was aware of her reputation. It was rumoured that when her husband was in North Africa, she hung around with the black American soldiers billeted downtown. There was even talk of a half-caste child that had to be adopted. I didn't want to be seen standing in the road gossiping with her. I said I had to go, but would she tell Sarah I'd called?

I promised myself that I'd come back in a day or two or drop Sarah a note suggesting that we meet, but I did neither of those things. The nursery had by then begun its slow decline and Ralph and Grace were making decisions without consulting Geoffrey, which worried us both. Also I was three months pregnant and then I lost the baby again. I never told Sarah about these miscarriages, and my depression shut me off, especially from Geoffrey.

I didn't see Sarah again until April of 1953 when I was walking by the river, as I did most afternoons when it was fine. Geoffrey had bought me a Red Setter puppy for our anniversary and she needed a lot of exercise. She was running on ahead in her usual way and by the time I caught up with her I found her scampering in circles round a leggy child who was throwing bread into the water for the swans. My first thought was that the dog would make the swans angry and they would attack her or the girl. Then I realised that the child in the red coat was Jo. A little further down the path, sitting on a bench, were Sarah and Major Mackenzie and he had his arm draped along the back of the seat. Sarah shouted something to Jo and she ran over to them, followed by the dog. Then they noticed me.

'Phyl,' Sarah called out. 'How good to see you, and on such a lovely day. Sunshine at last.'

Major Mackenzie was on his feet, holding out his hand. 'We met a couple of years ago. You may not remember me?'

I remembered at the party he said he was stationed up in Yorkshire: a bit chillier than Benghazi, he'd said. But perhaps he was down here on leave.

I wasn't sure whether to join them or to carry on with my walk, but Jo decided it for me. She looked up at Major Mackenzie. 'Come on, Adam, come and play with the dog,' she said. 'She wants us to throw a stick for her.'

I sat down on the bench next to Sarah, who, thoughtful as ever, asked after Geoffrey. She laughed, shaking her head, when I told her that he was becoming even more eccentric: he'd taken to wearing baggy khaki shorts, even in the coldest weather.

We sat watching Major Mackenzie, Jo and the dog, who were all chasing after the stick. I noticed his neatly pressed flannels and Harris-tweed jacket and thought how well he wore his clothes. I began to wonder, had he been married before? For all I knew, he could still be married.

Sarah seemed to catch my thought. 'For a bachelor,' she said, 'he's good with children, isn't he?'

'Is he still stationed up in Yorkshire?' I asked.

'Yes,' she replied, 'but he comes down most weekends to visit his mother. She and I get on well. We both think women would make a better job of running the world.' She hesitated, then went on, 'Next week Adam's driving Jo and me to Kent to stay with Aunt Kit. He's invited me to some sort of military ball in Dover.' There was a frown between her eyes. 'I'm terrified, Phyl, dressing up, having my hair done. As you know, I'm hopeless at formality.' She held out her hands. 'And there's my nails. Gardening and woodwork.'

Major Mackenzie and Jo were coming back, hand in hand, laughing together. Even when we were young, I don't think Sarah and I ever talked of things like falling in love. We'd both been brought up to believe that we shouldn't discuss our feelings. But I thought that someone so open and relaxed as Adam Mackenzie would be easy to love.

The dog ran up to us, then dashed back to them. Sarah sighed and put her hand on my arm. 'I have to keep reminding myself that I'm still married,' she said. 'Divorce is a hurdle I can't face. Look, come round the Saturday after next? Come and have a coffee and see what changes I've made?'

I did go round on that Saturday. I think it was at Geoffrey's prompting, but I had missed Sarah's company in the past couple of years. I remember that Sarah had placed two rickety wooden chairs beneath the pear tree. As she sat down, she picked up the black and white cat which was rubbing itself against her legs and it settled comfortably in her lap.

'I survived the ball,' Sarah said, stroking the cat. 'Borrowing Kit's pearls helped me feel more well-to-do and glamorous. I wore a green taffeta dress which she copied from *Vogue* and the hairdresser piled my hair on top of my head.' She

held one hand behind her like a pin-up girl and puckered her lips. 'Not at all me, but Adam seemed happy with the effect.'

She pointed to the small vegetable patch at the bottom of the garden and I could just see some asparagus ferns and two rows of lettuces.

'I scrounge cuttings off people,' she said, 'and grow other things from seed, and I have a wonderful compost heap.'

'I'll take you inside later to see the bookcase I've been making,' she went on. 'It doesn't look bad now it's painted. And I've been papering Jo's bedroom and sewing curtains to match.'

She placed the cat down on the grass and went inside to make coffee. From what she'd been saying, it seemed as if she was trying to create security and permanence for herself and Jo. The house was now hers and had become her haven. The lilac by the fence was in full bloom and she'd planted deep mauve tulips in the bed beneath it. Cyclamen and wood anemones were dotted in the border at the edge of the grass. She would find it hard to leave this place if she and Adam got married.

Sarah was indoors for longer than I expected. I wondered whether she was brewing real coffee in the pewter pot Mabel used to favour, but she would probably have considered that a waste of her time. When eventually she came back into the garden balancing two cups and a plate of biscuits, she seemed tense. Her hands were shaking and there was a high colour in her cheeks. As she handed me my cup, a drop of coffee splashed onto her skirt and she gave a bright, nervous laugh. 'Maurice, the lodger, has just come in,' she said. 'He tells me he saw the red-faced man again, sitting in his Vauxhall down the road. I haven't told you, have I? I've asked Edward for a divorce - on grounds of desertion, that I've deserted him. And he wants his pound of flesh. Adam will have to be cited as co-respondent. But Edward wants even more than that: he wants to prove that I'm an unfit mother so he can get custody of Jo.'

I could hear the scraping sound I was making with my spoon as I stirred the sugar in my cup, and I noticed the cat stalking a thrush in the lilac bush. Sarah spoke casually, in the tone she chose when she was talking of something important. Her lips were held tightly together, then she turned her head away. I'd seen her lose her temper before, and I felt that she wanted to rave and rail at Edward now.

Next she put me on the spot. 'When the case comes on, Phyl, would you come to court with me, just to wait outside?' She normally looked me straight in the

eye when we were talking, but she turned away again, almost as if in pain, and said, 'I don't want Adam there. His lawyer says he can swear an affidavit. And Jo must never know about this.'

I said yes quickly, though I was aware I wouldn't be able to tell Geoffrey. He would have forbidden me to have anything to do with a divorce hearing. But Sarah always balanced everything: she'd have her reasons for asking me – and she had never asked me to help her in any way before.

I saw her hands gripping the arms of the chair. She looked dead beat and sad. 'What a nuisance I am,' she said, 'but I feel I've barely got the courage to go through with it. You've met Edward, you know me. It'll make all the difference. The lawyers say the hearing could be as early as next month.'

The hearing took place on a warm day in late October and we met at a café round the corner from the court. I remember it smelt of rancid fat. Sarah was wearing a cherry-red suit, beautifully cut, with velvet trimming on the collar. I wasn't sure it was appropriate. The neat black hat with the eye veil seemed more suitable for a widow, and I was equally surprised at the high-heels.

She may have seen the puzzled look on my face. 'Elizabeth's cousin in Canada used to send Kit clothes to pass on to me,' she said. 'Now she posts them directly to me and I hardly needed to alter this, it fitted so well. A designer suit, Phyl, for a special occasion;' and she gave a wild, mad grin.

Sarah teetered across to the court building on those high heels, and soon we were directed to a hard marble bench outside one of the courtrooms, where we watched black-robed ushers and other glowering men strutted around importantly.

We must have been there for over an hour before her case was called on, Buckley *v*. Buckley. An usher came through the swing door and beckoned her to follow him. I remained on the bench while she slowly stood up and walked towards the courtroom, holding herself upright and tense. In those unsuitable shoes, she couldn't stride out as she normally would.

I saw Edward follow her in, talking to his lawyer. He didn't notice me. The last time I'd seen him was when he came to the nursery to ask about Sarah. I remembered the same self-righteousness, determined look then. After he'd left,

Geoffrey murmured, 'A man whose imagined persecutions are deeply pondered. The sort who writes constant letters of complaint to newspapers.'

As I sat there stiffly hoping I wouldn't see anyone I knew, I wished that I had also worn a hat with a veil I could hide behind. I couldn't imagine what might be happening in the enclosed room: I had never attended any court hearing. But after a long two hours Sarah eventually re-appeared. Her face looked almost grey and she seemed to have aged. Her hands were shaking and she was snatching for breath. 'That's that,' she said, staring straight ahead of her. 'Let's walk in the park.'

As we stepped outside the building, she made a strange noise. I think it was a sob of relief, but it came out like the whimper of a hurt child. Then she half-smiled and linked her arm through mine, and I knew that whatever she'd been through in the court, Edward hadn't been able to take Jo away from her.

Walking along the asphalt path past beds of bright begonias, she said, 'It was having you there, sitting outside the courtroom. I felt I couldn't run away, run past you and show you I was a coward. All that formality, those stony faces, and the look of malicious triumph on Edward's face. You see, he had a letter Bill had written me. He'd posted it to the house in Leicester as he thought I was living there. It was addressed to 'Mrs. Buckley' and Edward's mother opened it. She didn't tell him about it, but much later he found it in a drawer – and he produced it in court. Oh, the foolishness of putting anything on paper.'

Though afterwards she never again spoke of that day, I think those two hours in court scarred her for life; perhaps they even shortened her life. She never quite regained her old confidence in herself. I didn't tell Geoffrey about that day and I wouldn't dream of telling Jo how broken her mother had seemed as she came out of court.

There is another, happier day, which I do not need to record for Jo but it completes my picture of Sarah at this time. Shortly after Jo's ninth birthday, in February of the following year, Adam and Sarah were married quietly in the registry office. Oddly, I think I remember her in the same cherry-red suit. Geoffrey and I were there as witnesses, and Adam's mother came, and Jo brought along her best friend to keep her company. I remember that the two girls wore similar dark-blue coats with small fur collars and, embarrassed by the solemnity, they were trying hard not to giggle.

Afterwards, as we walked along to the Central Hotel where Adam was taking us for lunch, Sarah seemed in a state of shock. I wondered whether she was thinking of what she'd be giving up; or was she worrying what would be expected of her? I saw Adam put his hand on her shoulder in a soothing way, and when she said she felt cold, he massaged her fingers and wrapped his coat around her.

We were shown into a side room in the hotel, and I noticed the squat vase of red and blue anemones on the table. 'My favourite flowers,' Sarah said, 'and so early in the season.' Adam looked at me and smiled. He had asked me what flowers she liked best and Geoffrey had sent the anemones over from the nursery. I had once given Sarah a water-colour I painted for her of bright anemones in a blue-and-white vase and wondered whether she still had it.

In the hotel lobby, when we were saying goodbye, Sarah whispered to me, 'Things happen to me in spite of my dithering. I've never properly decided anything.'

The following day they caught the train up to the Lake District, taking Jo and her friend with them, and we came to the station to wave them good-bye. On the platform, Adam was beaming and holding Sarah tightly against him. They were a good looking couple. I envied them their happiness and had a feeling of being left behind in my narrow life. As we walked back through the ticket barrier, Geoffrey said, 'He's a candid, uncomplicated man and she needs someone to look after her. I hope he can cope.'

Chapter 10

A new life

I'm tired tonight. I spent two hours this afternoon planting wallflowers in the tubs and cutting back the winter jasmine. My neighbours in the other flats seem happy for me to potter in the small communal garden and I cherish my time out of doors in the sunshine. The couple who have moved into the penthouse brought with them two lemon trees in square white containers and they add a touch of glamour to the hallway. When I came back indoors, they made me think of Sarah's first letter from Cyprus when she wrote of Jo's excitement at discovering that lemons and oranges were growing on the other side of the garden fence.

I still have the box of Sarah's letters on the table beside me and the ones from this time are on flimsy blue airmail paper. '*Can you imagine the smell of the leaves, that sharp citrussy smell*?' she wrote. '*And we have a tangerine tree and an almond tree in the garden. And tiny lizards sit on our wall, palpitating in the sun*.'

In the mid-fifties when they started travelling with Adam, Jo must have been old enough to collect her own memories, but it gives me pleasure to piece together their life during those years. I was fixed in my quiet routine with Geoffrey and Sarah was again having adventures far beyond my experience. When she sent me photographs of Roman ruins on the shores of the island and crusader castles way up in the mountains, it was an escape for me.

Sarah wrote to me only occasionally in the first years of her marriage, and I often wondered what it would have been like married to a younger man like Adam, making a home for him, sharing his bed, and in the morning sitting with him over toast and coffee discussing the day ahead. But I think Sarah found travelling with Adam to wherever the army sent him suited her in some ways but not in others. Throughout her life she had something of the exile in her nature and always stood slightly outside any social group. She might have tried to fit in with his life but she would have resented any forced restriction of her freedom.

Their first summer in Yorkshire, she sent me a photograph of Jo and herself sitting arm-in-arm on a tartan rug spread out on the bank of a river. A picnic basket

was open beside them. Adam must have been behind the camera and she was smiling at him. She looked younger and more carefree than when I'd last seen her. The stiffness in her shoulders and her slight frown of determination had disappeared. I knew the area where the picture had been taken. Geoffrey and I had once stayed in a guesthouse in Richmond and had walked along by the shallow, rock-strewn river to a waterfall to take pictures.

The second photograph I have from that time, slightly curled at the edges as I once kept it in a frame, was taken the following Christmas, at a mess dinner. Sarah and Adam are walking up a broad staircase and the photographer would have been waiting at the top. Adam is in his regimental evening dress, a short jacket with broad lapels and skin-tight trousers, and Sarah has on a shiny dress, with a lacy stole over her shoulders. She looks shy and self-effacing holding onto his arm, but her pale gold hair, which she was wearing longer then, would have attracted attention.

Her few letters from that time are mainly about Jo. She was worried that moving her around disturbed her schooling, but she seemed to be coping; and Jo and Adam had become the greatest of friends. People they met often thought she really was his daughter, they'd grown so alike.

Then in just over a year, in the winter of 1956, they had to move again, this time to a town in northern Germany called Lippstadt. '*Another change of school for Jo*,' Sarah wrote shortly after they were told about the posting, '*but travelling should be an education in itself and she's too young to send off to boarding school*.'

Geoffrey and I received a Christmas card from them that year but we didn't hear from Sarah again for several months after that. In the letter she wrote from Germany in May of 1957 she couldn't quite hide her uneasiness. She said that it had taken her a while to settle in, to adjust to living on an army base, in a confined community that had clear-cut ideas about how she should occupy her time. '*They're the sort of intense church ladies I've always run a mile from*,' she wrote.

She wouldn't have gone out of her way to find a welcome. She'd never been that interested in being accepted. She went on to say that she was taking German lessons and teaching music one morning a week in a junior school for service children.

The letter carried on in a jokey way. She said I might not recognise her now she'd been taken in hand by Marcia, the wife of Adam's company commander. She was attempting to mould her into what was expected of an army wife. '*I think today*

though I've reverted,' she wrote, '*and here I am in an old pair of slacks, smoking a cigarette, and at my feet are two misbegotten mongrels that have been handed on to us*.'

'*I do try to play the game*,' her letter went on, '*for Adam's sake, but at times the straight-jacket makes me want to behave outrageously to shock them all. I'm hopeless at the coffee mornings where the women talk of nothing but soup recipés and sewing patterns. Then a couple of months ago at the sailing club, I met a fellow misfit, the mother of one of Jo's school friends. We read the same books, Margaret Kennedy, Storm Jameson, Stella Gibbons, all the good old oldies, and meet up to walk our dogs. Last week we were having lunch in a bierkeller in town, a sort of German pub but more respectable, and Marcia was at another table with a couple of her cronies. The next morning she called on me: did I know that Jane Weeks was a sergeant's wife? I should be aware that to make a friend of her wasn't quite the thing.'*

I tried to imagine what Sarah might have said in reply. She could at times make outrageous statements and then give a little smile. But she was probably polite for Adam's sake. She went on to say that when she saw Adam that night, she was angry with him as well because he was part of the system, but he just laughed. He wasn't ambitious, he said, so she could make friends with whoever she liked. But her new friend was going back to England with her husband in a few weeks, so they wouldn't be seeing much more of each other in any case.

I suspect that Sarah eventually made other friends, even among the intimidating women she described as always wearing the correct hat and gloves when they went out. She had the ability to adapt to her surroundings, at least on the surface.

When in the spring of 1958 they were staying with Adam's mother after their return from Germany, Sarah phoned to invite me round for lunch. 'There'll just be the two of us and Adam's mother,' she said, 'another tough little Scot like Mabel.' Jo was spending Easter in Kent with Kit and Frank and Adam was going out somewhere.

I wasn't sure who had cooked the watery macaroni cheese or decided on the tinned pineapple and evaporated milk for pudding. If it was Adam's mother, perhaps

that's why he never complained about Sarah's cooking. I remember Sarah saying that, in any case, he always smothered his food in tomato ketchup.

After lunch, sitting in Mrs. Mackenzie's pleasantly stuffy little sitting room, with its carved furniture and tasselled lampshades, Sarah looked hard at me, then announced that, as I hadn't commented on her bump, she'd better point out that she was pregnant. 'It's due all too soon,' she went on. She made a wry face at Adam's mother. 'Oh, I was so angry at first. I felt I'd used up all my maternal instincts in bringing up Jo all alone.'

Her no-nonsense little mother-in-law was smiling at Sarah. They were obviously good friends. 'I travelled around the world with four children and a husband who was never there when I needed him. It can be very wearing,' she said. 'I know how Sarah feels.'

'Those unimaginative wives in Germany were congratulating me, congratulating Adam. I had to play the part. But Adam is cock-a-hoop.'

'Oh, men,' both women chorused, then started to laugh.

'You'd probably be happier with a litter of puppies,' Mrs. Mackenzie teased. Then she said to me, smiling, 'You've heard, I expect, that they've brought back two large mongrels, which will probably be left with me when they're out of quarantine?'

When Sarah and I were washing up after lunch, 'You see, Phyl,' she said, 'I am travelling, though not in the free way I once thought I would. In those days I didn't expect to have children and a husband with me. But perhaps I've arrived at where I was supposed to be.'

We heard a car pull up outside and in a couple of minutes Adam was walking into the kitchen, smiling his broad smile. I liked the way his eyes wrinkled up at the corners. He hugged Sarah and gave me a peck on the cheek. He was extraordinarily handsome, more so now, I thought, than when we'd first met. Sarah clearly made him happy. I think perhaps he understood her better than anyone.

'I've just come back from arranging a mortgage,' he said. 'Perhaps Sarah's told you? We're buying a house near here – or at least part of a house. It's an old manor chopped into three separate bits. Sarah likes the garden and the forest all around and being near the sea. Of course we'll have to let it out when we're away.'

I watched Sarah smile, then frown a little. 'It's a huge commitment, and a great deal will change for us with a baby on the way.' She laughed quickly, then went on, 'Remember, Phyl, when Adam and I went down to stay with Kit and Frank, the

time he invited me to the ball in Dover? The next day we took Jo and the neighbour's daughter to a fun-fair on the seafront, Merrie England, they called it. The girls loved it, with the swing boats and the helter-skelter. As we walked past a fortune teller's tent, Gypsy Rose or some such name, Adam said I should have my palm read and Kit encouraged him. It wasn't my sort of thing and I doubted whether the woman with the red scarf tied over her hair was a real gypsy. But she read my hand and told me that one day I'd go and live among trees.' She paused. 'She also told me that I'd have two daughters.'

Adam carried on the story. 'She came out of the tent shaking her head, saying it was all nonsense. The woman must have seen her walking past with the two girls.' He smiled at Sarah. 'Never tempt fate.'

A little later, sitting in Mrs. Mackenzie's comfy chairs, watching her pour tea into gaudy Damask Rose cups, Adam told me how Sarah had persuaded him they should adopt an East German girl of about Jo's age, an orphan in a displaced person's camp, but an aunt had come forward to claim her before the process was complete. 'Sarah's happiest with waifs and strays,' he said. 'I wonder sometimes whether I come into that category.' She grinned at him and I couldn't help thinking how young she still looked.

'Tomorrow we're driving down to Kent to pick Jo up,' Sarah said. 'The day after is the anniversary of Elizabeth's death, eleven years ago now. Kit always has a weep.' She frowned. 'She only recently told me that the doctors thought Elizabeth's heart was damaged during her time as a 'Stargirl', flying high over the Andes in the un-pressurised cabins of the old Lancasters. She keeps a silver-framed picture of her on the sideboard, with a freshly picked vase of flowers beside it. It was taken when Elizabeth was twenty-one, just before she married Gerald. It was their engagement photo and appeared in *Country Life*, pearls and a strapless dress and all that sort of thing.'

I remembered the pretty Wren we'd met in Canterbury during the war and thought 'Stargirl' a good epithet for her and her brief life. Then I looked at my watch. It was ten-past five and I had a bus to catch and an hour's journey ahead.

Sarah and Adam completed the purchase of their house in West End the following month and then, at short notice, Adam was posted to Cyprus. The letting agents found them a tenant, Sarah and Jo went to stay in Kent. Kit would fuss over

her till she had the baby, Sarah said in her note, and then they would travel out to join Adam.

In late July, Sarah telephoned to tell me that she'd had a baby girl, Zoë. Her voice was bright with excitement. I think she'd had doubts about the baby's health as she believed she was getting too old for motherhood, and it wasn't until three or four years later that I learnt how ill she'd been after Zoë was born. This baby again had been in the wrong position and was delivered by Caesarean section, which had left Sarah anaemic and weak.

She wrote to me from Kent a couple of weeks later to tell me that they were due to sail on a troopship to Cyprus in December and would be with Adam for Christmas. She'd always longed to visit her sister and brother-in-law in the Middle East and she might now have the chance. Jo would have a great time, though she kept saying she didn't want to get too excited in case the posting was cancelled at the last minute. I had read the newspaper reports and wasn't at all sure Cyprus would be safe for them. But Sarah had renewed confidence in herself after Zoë was born: it was 1958, she was thirty-nine, and Adam was looking after her.

I was wrong to worry about her. She seemed able to ignore the dangers around her, and from her letters I believe that she and Adam were closer than ever after the birth of this new child. Of all the times in her life, I think this was the happiest.

It was about six months after she arrived in Nicosia, during the following summer, that she wrote to say that, with Jo away at boarding school on the other side of the island and a small baby tying her to the house, she'd found herself becoming idle, except for the enormous amount of reading she was doing, sitting on the balcony in the shade of grape vines. '*I've never enjoyed the battle with dirty floors and dust and endless ironing, and now I have Hermione, a widow dressed in black, who comes in twice a week to cope with that side of things,*' she wrote. She went on to say that she thought she might have a go at writing something of her own and Adam was encouraging her. '*Keep my letters*,' she said. '*They might come in handy.*' I've never seen anything she's written, apart from her letters, but when I glanced through one or two again this afternoon, they reminded me how she had managed to make me feel that I was sharing her experiences, though I've never actually been abroad.

I cut out and kept many of the newspaper reports of the Cyprus terrorist atrocities, but one photograph in particular I have never got out of my mind It was of

a man lying face down on a deserted road in a dark pool of blood which must have been slowly draining out of him. The fighting seemed so pitiless, with neighbours killing neighbours and young British servicemen being shot in the back in busy shopping streets. However, Sarah described other experiences, such as being offered '*coffee, hot and sweet, in tiny cups*,' and young Cypriots promenading in the evenings in the streets: '*I'd love you to see this massive stream of flashing eyes and aggressive masculinity,*' she wrote. '*It's quite a tonic*.'

The killing and the riots I read about didn't seem to dampen Sarah's enthusiasm for exploring the island. She wrote in detail about the chalky grey mountains, the white-washed villages and the long sandy beaches where they swam throughout their lengthy summers. She added in one letter, though, that Adam and the other soldiers had to take sten guns and pistols with them onto the beach. '*They first put up a khaki bivouac to stack the guns in*,' she said, '*then a couple of the men sit outside to guard them until it's their turn to swim*.'

I could picture the journey across the mountains she described, usually, because of security, in a coach with other families. In the early morning they would drive away from the hot city on the plain up into the mountains, then down a curling road to the sea.

Later she wrote of taking Jo to a party at Government House in the back of a ten-ton lorry. Someone's child started to vomit because of the bumpy ride. '*But it reminded me of being back in the ATS*,' she said, '*though we had proper ladders to climb up into the back this time.*'

On another occasion, during Sunday lunch in the mess, a make-shift bomb was thrown at the window. It was so small it did no damage, Sarah said, but she'd pulled Zoë and Jo down onto the floor, lying there with them for five minutes or so. Adam was still in the bar getting them drinks. She and Jo thought it was a great adventure, but she'd been ashamed by the screaming and crying of one or two of the other women.

Re-reading these letters, I realise that Sarah had been more disturbed by what she considered were other, deeper injustices. She wrote about how she would never forget a gang of elderly, black clad women she'd seen on her taxi ride from the boat when she first arrived. '*The village road was being repaired and they were lugging panniers of rocks on their backs, while the men sat outside a café reading newspapers, arguing, gesticulating and gambling*.'

'*And the beccafico*,' she wrote later. '*How could they crunch up those emaciated little birds' bodies while drinking their nasty-smelling ouzo (something not unlike Pernod, Phyl, which you've probably also never heard of). No wonder we rarely hear birdsong*.'

They lived in a square concrete villa with a balcony and high ceilings, but the garden was what Sarah wrote about most. A fig tree had been trained to climb up one wall and a vine grew over a pergola at the back of the house, and she had planted scented geraniums and lavender and rosemary in tubs.

'*Our neighbours are Greek*,' she wrote, '*and, as their children are grown up, they spoil Zoë and Jo with cakes and sticky sweetmeats. Stavros, the husband, keeps a watchful eye out for me so I don't get into too much trouble*.' One day, shortly after they moved in, she had rushed through the gate shouting angrily at a man who was beating a skeletal, heavily laden pony which was stumbling and slipping up the stony path beside the house, and he had turned to wave his stick at her. Stavros had strolled out smiling and managed to calm them both down. It wasn't until she'd handed the man a few *piastres* to buy feed for the animal that she thought to introduce herself to her new neighbour.

For her, the treatment of the animals seemed far more distressing than anything the EOKA terrorists might be planning, and fairly soon she had acquired five stray dogs of various shapes and sizes. She sent me a photograph of Jo standing in the midst of them in the garden. She must at that time have been fourteen, and in her cut-off blue jeans she looked tall and slender and reminded me of Sarah when I first met her.

When the serious killing started again, they were moved from their house in Kavafis Street to an army camp in the north of the island, near the sea. I think Sarah was determined she wasn't going to get drawn into an endless round of wives' coffee parties so, leaving Zoë to be looked after by her new help, she found herself a job one day a week working for an army welfare organisation. She and Gwen, the woman who ran it, seemed to get on well.

'*I was going mad*,' she wrote in one letter, '*cooped up on the military base. But now Gwen takes me with her when she goes to visit families in the more far-flung places.*

'Last week Jemal drove us up into the Troodos mountains. You will be pleased to hear, Phyl, that they're supposed to be crawling with bandits, but perhaps the blue

bead he keeps tied to the front grill of the car to ward off the evil eye drove them away. On the journey up, we stopped in one village so that Gwen could buy a lace shawl. It was only a handful of stone-built houses and the inevitable coffee shop, but the stream running down the gully and the lush green vegetation made it seem like Arcadia.

'"Kopiaste," sit down, share some food, the lace-making woman told us, and we were given artichokes, rice wrapped in vine leaves, slices of cheese and ice-cold Coca Cola.

'When we came back down from visiting the families at the radar station, it was getting dark and just outside the same village the road had been blocked with rocks and branches. As we slowed down, a group of boys standing on the bank above us started hurling stones at the car, shouting "Viva Makarios, Viva Makarios." Jemal's hands were shaking and he flinched each time a stone thumped into his shining paintwork. Then Gwen wound down her window, lent out and waved her fist: "Bugger Makarios," she shouted. The boys clearly misunderstood and, cheering, pulled one or two branches aside so we could squeeze through.'

This is a letter I have re-read many times. I still can't help wondering how Adam felt about the risks Sarah was taking, especially when she had a toddler to take care of. Perhaps the newspaper reports in England over-dramatised the danger. However, last week Jo had a poem with her which she'd found on a scrap of paper in the back of one of Sarah's books on Cyprus: *Sparks, lead tearing flesh. / He falls. On white-washed wall / He reads 'EOKA'.* I think this reveals a fear she didn't want to share with me in her letters.

'*All too soon*,' she wrote in her penultimate letter, '*we'll be leaving this place of goddesses and ancient castles and monasteries, of courteous people with their sleepy good-natured eyes and thoughtful reserve. I'll miss the scent of limes and roses and bruised sage and that heavy, sweet red wine*.'

They flew back together in the late summer of 1960. '*Thank God,'* she said in that same letter, *'we don't have to travel on a hulking grey troop ship again. We're coming back by plane.*'

For me it was the end of an adventure. I had shared that time with her and would miss my armchair travelling. I must carefully squeeze the letters back into the shoe-box in their correct order. I shall read a few more of them again in a day or two.

I want to feel that Sarah is back with me, keeping me company. Through her letters at that time, I seemed almost to inhabit her life, though when she was back in England I had to get to know her all over again.

She rang me not long after they arrived back, distressed that the tenants had left the house in West End in a filthy mess. It sounded as if there'd been some sort of fire, and they'd also dumped piles of rubbish in the garden. I thought of all the scrubbing and mopping Sarah would have to do. I would have been angry and overwhelmed by having to sort it out, but when she put her mind to a task she could be practical and determined.

She invited me to stay for a night in early December and instructed me which bus to catch and the stop to ask for, West End Manor. Their bit of the house was the old east wing and the drive circled round in front of it. They'd called it Forest Corner. As I walked up towards the house, I wasn't impressed. The overgrown shrubs and weed-choked flower beds made it seem shabby. I hardly changed my mind when later Sarah, hand-in-hand with a robust and chatty Zoë, showed me round the house. I remembered that when she was trying to sell her family house, Tanglewood, before she moved to Germany, I'd asked her whether she would miss her old home, and she surprised me by saying, 'The places we live aren't so important.'

In some rooms in Forest Corner there was a musty smell and most of them badly needed decorating. Sarah hardly seemed to notice she was so busy drawing my attention to tapestries, cotton rugs, copper pots and other knick-knacks they'd brought back with them. 'Adam's a great magpie,' she said. 'He likes his baubles.' I thought of Geoffrey's coercive neatness in our house and realised I preferred her pleasant carelessness.

After she'd put Zoë to bed, we sat down with our glasses of sherry before supper in the living room among half-unpacked boxes. I remember noticing how brown and healthy Adam looked, but Sarah had stayed pale, though she'd acquired many more freckles on her face and hands.

Supper wasn't at all bad. She had made some kind of a casserole with cheese and I think it was real home-made custard she served afterwards with the apple pie. I saw Adam looking at her admiringly as she brought in the plates, but when I try to

remember what she was wearing, I think it was an old tartan woollen dress which wasn't especially flattering. But he seemed to like everything about her.

Jo and Sarah behaved almost like sisters. She treated Adam as if he was an older brother and called him 'Adam', never 'Dad'. I wondered at Sarah giving Jo so much liberty, making her independent so soon. Perhaps she found coping with an overactive three-year-old too much for what she'd once called her 'mislaid instinct for motherhood'.

Afterwards we sat by the fire until just before midnight, filling in some of the gaps left by her letters. Often Adam would give a nod or a little murmur to back up what Sarah was telling me. I asked her about the dogs and she said she'd found homes for them all, apart from one, Ruffles, who was being crated back. He was too old; no one wanted him.

Adam laughed. 'I can cope with stray dogs,' he said, 'but once, outside a cinema, she started berating a group of boys for stamping on thunder bugs and nearly started a riot. Every sad-looking mule or donkey that we saw was a catastrophe for her. She would have brought them all home.'

I think that, even in later years, within herself she remained insecure and somewhat lonely. Perhaps that's one reason why she had such a strong empathy for any creature that couldn't control its fate. I wondered then whether she thought me weak and ineffectual, in need of her protection. It's strange because when she was coping with Jo by herself I hoped I might have a steadying influence on her. That's why I wrote the letter that angered her so much. Nun-faced, indeed. I always meant to remind her of what she called me.

She walked up the stairs with me to my bedroom and drew the curtains for me and turned on the bedside light. I was flattered to see hanging on the wall by the fireplace, neatly framed in plain oak, the sketch of Tanglewood I had given her during the war.

'I treasure your pictures, Phyl,' she said, putting an arm round my shoulders. 'You should have made more of your talent. Geoffrey should have encouraged you. But then look at me! I was going to become a concert pianist, a writer, even paint, like you. At least I've travelled a bit and haven't brought up the girls too badly. Perhaps they'll do something worth while.'

Then she pointed out a picture book and some photographs of Cyprus she had placed on my bedside table in case I wanted to look at them, but I was far too tired. I

remember that I fell asleep listening to the strongly ticking clock in the hallway below.

Chapter 11

Family home

Last night I woke in the early hours and drew back the curtain so that I could lie and watch the sky becoming clear. I had been dreaming of Sarah, who was being carried away from me in a carnival crowd. But I have lost the details.

I walked across the road after breakfast to buy a manila envelope and collect the newspaper and felt chilled me to the bone the wind is so icy. The woollen-grey clouds outside are making the sky dark. It is the sort of day I like to spend at home, sitting by the fire with a book or just thinking.

At my desk now, I'm sucking the end of my pencil like a schoolchild, trying to pick up the final threads of Sarah's life after she settled back in England. Then I must decide the picture I shall present to Jo, pruning my notes to make a tidy composition and writing them out afresh in a clear hand. My more complex memories of Sarah belong to me alone.

I saw her only once during the years they were travelling again, as our lives were moving to a different rhythm. But in 1964 Geoffrey and I were invited to Jo's wedding at St. Catherine's church in West End. Jo, Sarah, Zoë and Adam were all staying at his mother's cottage, which must have been a tight squeeze.

Adam and Jo's husband and his friends were wearing tight, blue, high-collared dress uniform, complete with swords and spurs, which looked well in the photographs but on that muggy July day they must have been near to fainting. Sarah wore a plain blue and cream linen dress and she chose not to wear a hat. She never liked them, though I thought they suited her. She seemed nervous and pre-occupied, but then she was always uncomfortable with formality.

'None of this to-do when I married Adam, thank God,' she whispered as the photographs were being taken, 'but the young expect it nowadays.'

Eventually, in the spring of 1969, after living in northern Germany and then again in Yorkshire, she and Adam settled down for good at Forest Corner. Adam had some sort of job at the Ordnance Survey having retired early from the army.

The day I went to visit them, a Saturday in September about six months after they arrived back, was wet and windy. The garden, I noticed, was now in good order and, with its mellow tile-hung gables, their part of the manor seemed welcoming. They had the benefit of the old rhododendron bushes down one side and the forest beyond, and when they'd first bought their sliced-off bit of the house, they'd planted a beech hedge between them and their neighbour which was now a good six feet tall.

To my relief, after only five minutes of being with Sarah it was apparent that we still had a great deal to talk about. There were many gaps and silences from those lost years when she was travelling, and in my head I had an endless number of questions for her, most of which still remain unanswered. For me though the most important thing was that she hadn't changed. She had the same smile and the same white skin and freckles.

As she showed me round, I realised that, to my surprise, she had become clever at arranging the house, painting and wall-papering it herself room by room, with Adam's help at the weekends. She was impatient to get on and finish it, but there didn't seem any need to hurry. The living-room curtains were her triumph. She'd sewn the heavy cotton material herself and I liked the muted pattern of birds and leaves on a moss-coloured background. She told me she was still buying pieces of furniture and other odds and ends at auction sales, for she could never bear to spend much money, and perhaps she and Adam didn't have a great deal. But I liked the result, with nothing too new or shiny.

With its great fireplace, and soft, worn chairs, the living room was especially cosy, but the kitchen, with a second-hand Aga she'd bought from a card in the post office window, was where we sat, around a battered oak table.

At some stage, Sarah's niece, Ann, turned up. I knew that as a child she had lived in the Middle-East with her parents and I learnt that she was now lodging with Sarah. Watching her that day, I thought that, for someone in her forties, she seemed remarkably child-like, particularly when she simpered and smiled at Adam. With her pale, ivory skin and sleek dark hair, I found her a strange woman

When later in the day Sarah was showing me her new, fenced-off vegetable garden, I noticed Ann in the greenhouse with Adam picking tomatoes. I saw that she

had her hand on his arm and was staring at him intently. I thought that he was trying to back away. I turned to Sarah, who was at that moment picking up a dead rat on a spade, wondering whether she, too, had seen this. She had, and winked at me and whispered something about Ann's broken marriage and a nervous breakdown.

In early November, Sarah telephoned to ask whether I'd like to come with her to an auction in town the next morning. I remember everything about that day clearly. She picked me up in an old Post Office van they'd bought; it reminded her, she said, of the van she used to drive for the junk dealer after the war.

In the saleroom, she successfully bid for a leather arm-chair for Adam, two huge porcelain vases for the hallway and a pair of mahogany book cases. She had a good eye for the quality of objects, and I think she'd matched up their silver dinner service from house sales. I can still hear the sound of her laughter as we drove out of the car-park. 'Quite a haul, eh?' she said. 'I hope Adam can afford it.'

She had invited me back to Forest Corner for lunch, suggesting that afterwards we'd walk the dogs so she could show me 'her' part of the forest. We ate thick vegetable soup which Sarah had made herself, served with fresh, crusty bread, a favourite of mine. While we were sitting at the table she talked enthusiastically about her plans to put a skylight in the attic and turn it into a comfortable bedroom. She took me up there later so that I could understand what she was describing.

As she opened the door and switched on the light, there was a smell of decaying apples and mice, but Sarah had her vision of how it would look one day, in spite of the fact that it was littered with cardboard boxes and broken furniture. Against one wall was a wood-ribbed trunk that I thought I'd seen before. She noticed me glance at it and said, 'Yes, it was Kit's. Have a look inside.'

She lifted up the top and I saw that it was carefully packed with old clothes folded in sheaths of tissue paper, with mothballs scattered on top.

'Jo used to rummage around in it for games of dressing up when we went to stay with Kit – though she was squeamish about the fox furs,' Sarah said.

She unwrapped a small, stiff, wine-coloured hat. 'Look at this, with its neat veil. Just think, we used to wear objects like that?'

She placed the hat back and pulled out a photograph in a silver frame.

'Isn't she beautiful?' Sarah said, handing me the photograph, which was of Elizabeth. 'This was taken the week before she died.'

It was a soft, sepia photograph with Elizabeth sitting up in bed, a swan's down stole around her shoulders, and she was smiling at whoever was taking it.

Taking the photograph from me and looking at it again, Sarah said, 'Kit was never happy about Gerald, the man Elizabeth married, but their wedding was a grand affair for those times, 1947. He took her off to Istanbul where he had a job with BOAC, and six months later she was back in Canterbury, with only a few weeks to live.'

I followed her back downstairs and into the kitchen so she could make tea, and we carried our cups into the living room. I noticed the Rich Tea biscuits on the plate and recalled they had been a favourite of hers when we worked together at the nursery. We grinned at each other as we each took one and began to dunk it in our cup.

We sat for a while, looking out at the garden, and I asked her the name of one of the large trees, some kind of maple. It had shed most of its leaves, so it looked a bit ragged but it was still a good shape. I thought that one day I should like to come back and sketch parts of the garden, but I haven't done so yet.

Sarah went over to the fire and gave it a good poke, sending sparks flying up the chimney. She then sat back down in a Victorian spoon-backed chair facing me. She smiled. 'This is Bitter-Sweet,' she said. 'Kit's chair. She told me it had a myriad of memories for her. Now it's back where it came from.'

I knew that Kit had died not long after Jo's wedding, at about the same time as Adam's mother. Sarah had written about her funeral in one of her letters.

'This plain little work-table was hers, too,' she said, running her fingers over the top. She tilted back her head and raised her eyebrows, half-smiling as she looked at me. 'You didn't know, Phyl, I never told you, and now it doesn't matter, at least for her. She was my real mother. It's a long story. Poor old Frank's now living with his sister, and I don't think I'm welcome there. He asked me whether I'd like anything of Kit's, and I chose these two pieces and the trunk.'

I wanted to say one thing and then another, but I remained silent. I thought of how just a minute ago one blow of the poker had destroyed the appearance of solidity of the burning log. I glanced down at my cup on the table beside me and saw that a petal had dropped from the small vase of roses onto the polished surface.

Sarah had spoken in such a matter-of-fact way. I pressed my hands hard down on the chair. I was not composed enough and afraid of saying the wrong thing. I wondered when she had learnt about this. I took responsibility for the fact that she'd never confided in me before. I thought with embarrassment about how earlier in the auction room I'd complained to her of the laxity of morals nowadays and the fact that unmarried mothers no longer seemed to feel shame. Doors were opening and shutting in my mind. Perhaps long ago I had suspected what Sarah was telling me. What age was she when her mother gave her up? And had she ever known her father?

Sarah carried on reminiscing, partly for herself, I believe, and I prefer to think of the story in her own words. I wonder now, was it the only time she'd ever told anyone about Kit, apart from Adam?

I watched her as she lifted the top of the work-table and picked out an ivory-inlaid box. 'Kit's memory box,' she said, holding up a pair of tiny white socks. 'My socks. And here's a twist of hair from the mane of Elizabeth's first pony. I came to the manor once or twice as a child when she worked here as Elizabeth's nanny. I envied Elizabeth her pony, and the manor was very grand compared to our house.

'When I told Kit that Adam had bought us a house which was part of West End manor, she wouldn't come to visit us. It was probably one of her West Country superstitions. Perhaps I share some of them. I certainly won't bring May blossoms indoors.'

I think that's all Sarah said, I wonder now how much I've edited or embroidered. But I can see her sitting there and remember how numb I felt as I listened to her. I was certain the covering up must have gone on all her life. During the war when we were staying with Kit, it crossed my mind that she and Sarah seemed to have an almost sisterly affection for each other and they shared a quick sense of humour. Had Sarah known all along that Kit was her mother? As I sat there twisting my wedding ring, it also occurred to me that Zoë, now she was growing up and with her red hair, reminded me of Kit, though she had Sarah's long legs.

I thought of Kit as I saw her when she came to Jo's wedding, fashionably dressed in a plum-coloured suit. She was still upright and straight-backed, and, I would have guessed, neatly corseted, something few of us would bother with nowadays.

Sarah was getting to her feet. I thought of *Goblin Market*, 'White and golden Lizzie stood,' or was it Laura? Sarah's hair was still wheat coloured; mine had turned a solid grey. I jumped up and gave her a hug. A friend should be as good as a sister.

Smiling, Sarah linked her arm through mine and we went into the kitchen to put on the kettle again. We came back with a couple of slices of a Victoria sponge she'd made and we never got round to walking the dogs that day.

It was getting dark and the rooks were calling stridently as they settled in the fir trees. We heard car doors banging and a man's voice calling to the dogs to be quiet as they were barking at the front-door. The light was on outside and we could see the red VW Beetle and Adam walking towards the house with his arm round Zoë. Sarah said that, whenever he could, he picked her up from school on his way home from work.

As he came into the living room, Sarah stood up to give him a hug, saying he must persuade me to stay for the night. I was pleased about that. She then telephoned Geoffrey to ask whether he'd mind if they kept me till tomorrow, and returned to announce that he wished us all a good evening. I knew that he was content at home, reading his books and playing his music.

For supper we had a spicy Indian curry which Adam had cooked the day before. He was teasing Sarah, saying that he hadn't yet grown used to the transformation, but she'd actually started to enjoy cooking and was feeding him some excellent casseroles and roasts and chops. 'Her pastry's always been the very best though,' he added. I caught Sarah's eye and we smiled at each other. I was thinking of the disgusting spam fritters she'd cooked for me one lunch-time when Jo was a child. Perhaps Adam still saw her through rose-coloured spectacles.

Her niece, Ann, was with us for supper. Sarah was trying to include her in our conversation across the table, explaining to me that she was working as an agony aunt for the local paper, but she merely smiled and nodded, never losing the sulky expression around her mouth. Then she turned to listen to Adam and Zoë who were discussing a fox with a damaged paw Sarah had bedded down in the garage. Adam was saying that Sarah was feeding it with boiled tripe. 'Yuk,' Zoë said, screwing up her nose.

I watched Ann play with her food, keeping her small blue eyes cast downwards much of the time. She smelt of face powder and a cloying, musty

perfume. She occasionally glanced up at Adam, and twice she topped up his glass of red wine before it was even half empty. I wondered why Sarah put up with her.

The following morning, Adam gave me a lift back to Southampton and, after we'd dropped Zoë off at school, he told me that he was worried about Sarah. She seemed to be tired so often: perhaps she was doing too much. I listened without saying much, as I felt he was imagining things. Sarah always threw herself wholeheartedly into whatever she was doing, even if it was only the daily round of chores, and had never been as strong as she thought she was.

After that visit, I met Sarah once or twice for a tea when she was in town, but I didn't go to Forest Corner again for a couple of years. They had so many visitors that she had little time to spare and they were also busy doing up the house. Then, in 1972, to celebrate Geoffrey's eightieth birthday, she invited us to come for Sunday lunch, saying that Adam would drive over to pick us up.

Even though the sky was hazing over by the time we arrived at Forest Corner, it was warm enough to sit in the garden to drink the fruit punch that Adam had prepared. The dogs were spread out at our feet, enjoying the May sunshine, and the garden was in full bloom. I remember the air being heavy with the scent of the azaleas and rhododendrons.

Eleven of us in total sat down to lunch at the kitchen table, including some relatives of Adam's, the next-door neighbours and two of Zoë's friends; but Ann was no longer with them, Adam said, when I asked about her. I saw Sarah flash him a warning look, but then she carried on chatting to Geoffrey and the others, helping them to her casserole and the new potatoes.

Adam was now on the parish council, Sarah's idea, he told me me. 'She feels I should be engaged in good works,' he said, smiling at her. They still seemed physically aware of each other, even though they'd been married for twenty years.

He raised his glass and we wished Geoffrey a happy birthday. Then he looked down the table at Sarah. 'And we must drink to Sarah,' he said. 'She's the one who has gathered us here and is taking care of us.' She blushed and then smiled, as I expected her to.

By the time we'd finished lunch, it had started to rain. It still felt warm indoors, but I noticed, as she was clearing the table, that Sarah's hands were blue with cold. Adam went upstairs to fetch her a cardigan. She really did look tired and seemed relieved when Adam's relatives left to carry on driving down to Devon. Zoë and the two girls had already gone upstairs to her bedroom to play music and the neighbours and Geoffrey were sitting in the living room.

I said I'd help wash up and Sarah sent Adam off to look after Geoffrey, who we both knew wouldn't be comfortable talking to people he didn't know. I watched her as she opened the door of her new dish-washer. Adam insisted they should have one, she said, and then laughed. She needed time to accept new gadgets or anything else she considered extravagant.

'He thinks I'm doing too much, that I get upset too easily. It's probably the medicine I'm on,' she said. 'It seems to have made me edgy - and sometimes wildly outspoken. Last year when Jo and Richard were staying, I shocked my son-in-law at breakfast by saying how pleased I was that Jo had such nice breasts. He coughed noisily and everyone else ignored me. How prudish the young are.'

I had just about taken in what she had said, that she'd been prescribed some unknown medicine. I looked at her closely but she turned away and continued stacking the dish washer.

'What medicine?' I asked.

'Prednisolone or some such thing,' she said shrugging her shoulders.

I didn't pursue it, as she would only ever explain what she chose to explain. The old, half-blind lurcher who was lying with his head against the table leg began to snore loudly. We both looked down at him and laughed, but I was still thinking about the medicine.

Sarah quickly changed the subject. 'Let me tell you about my niece Ann,' she said, giving me the story in snatches as we washed up the glasses and the silver and put things away in cupboards: 'Poor Adam, he's still embarrassed. Years ago when he was stationed in Benghazi and knew my sister and her husband, Ann had a teenage crush on him. She wasn't pleased when she learnt he was marrying me.'

She laughed, carrying on with the washing up and not looking at me. 'Ann's "a romancer" and can't resist stirring up trouble. She even once told Adam she was certain I'd had an affair with her father. Luckily, we were able to laugh about it.'

'A few weeks ago I had a word with her about parading around in the morning in skimpy undies. But the last straw came the next day when Adam carried her up a cup of tea. He found her lying on the bed sobbing and whining that he must take her away as I'd always hated her. The door was open and I heard every word. That's when I lost my temper and said it was high time she left.'

Sarah was speaking in her flat voice, as if none of this concerned her. 'She's staying with her daughter in Manchester,' she added. 'Later I might apologise, as I called her some colourful names. A lying, hysterical bitch was the least offensive. But I've always felt sorry for her: she had an impossible struggle to meet my sister's narrow Presbyterian standards – well, as you now know, my adopted sister.'

After we'd put everything back in its place, we joined the others in the living room. Adam was showing the neighbours photographs of the manor as it once was, while Geoffrey was explaining that his father had supplied the standard roses for the garden in those days.

Later in the evening, after Adam had driven us home, Geoffrey came in from recording the temperature in the garden, a routine that never varied, and remarked that he was pleased to see Sarah looking so happy, though, he added, he didn't like her hair cut so short.

When I rang the next day to thank her for lunch, I asked how she was feeling, but she managed not to answer. I probably hadn't expected her to tell me any more. But I kept thinking how, once or twice during the meal, I had noticed Adam watching her anxiously.

The next time that I saw Sarah was at Forest Corner in early October when she invited me over for the Saturday night. I travelled over by bus, so I had the opportunity, as I walked down the drive, to study the house. Now the beech hedge had matured, their one-third of the manor looked complete in itself and rather beautiful. But when Sarah opened the door to me I was shocked at her appearance. Her face was puffy and the veins stood out on her hands.

'Don't look too closely at me,' she said. 'I've aged. It's the drugs.'

'Nonsense,' I replied. I knew I was speaking too loudly, though I was trying not to overreact and upset her.

'Adam's always telling me to take things easy, but I pay no attention. Life must be enjoyed and kept in order.'

'She's been working for hours in the garden,' Adam said, 'weeding, pruning back bushes, getting it all ready for the winter.' He was standing just behind her, his arm around her shoulders. She smiled at us both, now looking more like her old self.

For lunch she cooked a mushroom omelette, and she described how she and Adam had picked the mushrooms early that morning. As I took the first mouthful, I must have looked apprehensive, as she laughed at me. 'Trust me,' she said. I've been picking fungi since I was a child.'

After we had cleared up, Sarah went to lie down for twenty minutes or so and Adam took me out to show me what they had been doing in the garden. As I hadn't had the opportunity to ask Sarah what the doctors had said, I didn't feel it right to ask him behind her back.

A little later we went upstairs to see Zoë's room, which they had just finished decorating. I was pleased to see my small water-colour of the anemones hanging above her bed. Sarah must have heard our voices on the landing because she called out, 'As it's such a lovely day, we should take Phyl for a walk to the pond to view the Mandarin ducks;' and within a couple of minutes, she was with us.

The ducks had flown, but we spotted a group of fallow deer on the edge of one thicket; then we looked up to see a pair of buzzards which were mewing to each other as they hovered over the trees. Sarah was talking about Zoë, who was away staying with a friend. Adam was proud of her, she said: she was playing the flute in the school orchestra and had done well in some exams. She added, though, that she could be a wilful little madam.

'I don't know which one of us she takes after,' Adam said, laughing.

Sarah seemed so relaxed, so determined that we should enjoy ourselves. She wanted to talk of the nursery, of Geoffrey, of our trip to the Chelsea flower show all those years ago.

I didn't sleep well that night. The house seemed to be full of noise. There were mice or rats scuttling about in the attic, which Sarah hadn't yet got round to turning into a

bedroom. The dogs were barking intermittently at something outside: badgers, Adam told me the next day, or foxes.

I remember Sarah coming into my bedroom in the morning in a blue dressing-gown. In my half-asleep state I thought she looked young again.

'Let me pull back the curtains, Phyl, let the daylight in. I'll even open the window so we can smell the rose climbing up the wall. Just think, Kit probably smelt this very same rose.'

There was a nervous sensitivity about her, but as I watched her sit down on the end of my bed, I kept telling myself that she wasn't really ill. From the way she was speaking, she seemed to have confidence that she would soon be feeling better, and she intended making improvements to the house for a long time yet.

There was a knock on the door and Adam came in with two cups of tea. He put the tray down on the pine desk in the corner.

When he left us alone again, Sarah told me about the Kit bringing her to the house when it belonged to the Markhams. 'I even recall what I had for lunch, cottage pie and apple crumble. I was on my best behaviour sitting up at the highly polished table and didn't dare utter a word.'

Adam and Zoë went out with the dogs and left Sarah and me to take our time over breakfast. I noticed how she barely managed to eat a slice of toast, though she took pleasure in pouring out our coffee, inhaling the rich aroma of the steam. She smiled when I praised her home-made marmalade.

It was a week later that Adam rang to say that she'd fainted and been taken into hospital. I telephoned him every other day. Then, two weeks later, he told me that, following a blood transfusion, she was beginning to feel better. In a couple of days I might like to visit her.

On the bus to the general hospital, I thought of when I had last visited Sarah there, just after Jo was born. She had looked then like the image of young Madonna.

I managed to find my way to the ward that Adam told me Sarah was in, though I hardly recognised her when I first saw her. She was propped up on pillows in a bed by the window and the screens had been half-pulled around her.

'What a nuisance I am,' she said, as I bent to kiss her, 'but the doctors have told Adam they can do wonders nowadays, so I'm sure I'll be home soon.' She smiled at me in a way that cheered me up. But I realised from the tightness in her cheeks that it was make-believe. I remembered, too, that she told me Kit had died of

leukaemia, and in great pain. She must have been frightened about the pain and about losing control.

She asked me to pass her the plastic beaker of water by her bedside, and I could see that her lips were dry and cracked.

'"Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden." Remember *Goblin Market*, Phyl?' she said. 'You've come to be my Lizzie and I shall awake as from a dream.'

But as I held her hand her skin was burning, though I went along with the pretence that she'd get better.

She was worried about Zoë, 'So young still,' and about how Adam would cope. 'But I'm fortunate,' she said. 'Both girls are clever and independent. They'll have good lives.'

After a long silence, when I thought she must be asleep, she said, 'You know, Phyl, I feel I've had a happy life. I've been lucky, always able to make the best of whatever happened. I think you're like that, too.' Then she rested her head back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

I almost tiptoed out, but she said, 'I'm still here. Still awake.' When finally I left, she sat up straighter and raised her hand in a small wave.

Sarah died early one morning at the beginning of November, and Adam and Jo, just back from America, were by her bedside.

I like to think of 'Sarah's sky', the last photograph that Geoffrey took, as a symbol. I remember the sky Sarah and I looked out at from the kitchen window on Jo's fifth birthday, a troubled sky, like grey smoke. The sky that November afternoon was glowing and bright. The photograph also reminds me of how cold it was as we came out of the crematorium, cold and clear.

Geoffrey died the following month, just before Christmas. It wasn't unexpected. His heart failure was the reason why the previous year we'd moved to this small flat.

I was especially grateful, therefore, when Jo called to see me in the new year. I'm not sure which of us suggested first that I might help her piece together a picture of Sarah's life, but I remember Jo smiling and saying, 'It'll be a hard job. She was

difficult to fathom.' I wonder, too, whether she thought it would be good for me to have something to do.

I told her then that for me she wasn't the dying woman in the hospital I visited a few months before. She was more the Sarah I saw the first day I met her, matter of fact, making her own space, her own laws. Each of us will remember her in our own way. She was not as simple as I would have her be to meet my needs and I can't help wondering why she chose me as a friend.

I hope Jo will call to see me again before she leaves for America. When I noticed the uncertain, questioning expression on her face last week, she reminded me of her. I want to give her one or two of Geoffrey's early photographs of Sarah to take with Sarah. I also need to explain that I should prefer to write to her setting out my memories, my picture, of Sarah.

As I get ready for bed now, I can hear my small carriage clock ticking on the mantelpiece. I like the sound. It makes me feel less lonely.

Part 3 - *Jo*

Chapter 12

Going back

Somewhere over the Atlantic, about an hour into the flight, the plane starts to judder and the hard seat feels even harder. Flying in a military aircraft, facing away from the engine, is part of being, as the army terms it, 'a dependant'. Jo grabs the plastic cup sliding sideways on the tray in front of her and takes a gulp of lukewarm coffee. She often feels uneasy when she's travelling. For her, it is dislocation, leaving the familiar behind and moving towards heaven knows what.

She notices the woman sitting next to her, especially the carefully manicured hands and the scent, Chanel, probably *Allure*. She examines her own nails. Before she left, she gave the furniture at Forest Corner a polish and broke a couple of them. The woman's prosperous gloss reminds her of Eleanor.

Jo watches her lean forward and pull a silver hip flask from a bag under the seat. 'Try some of this in the coffee,' she says, unscrewing the top. 'It might improve the flavour.'

She breaths in the malty smell of the whisky and smiles at the woman. The coffee had been disgusting.

The woman tells Jo she is flying on from Dulles to the West Coast, to Seattle, to join her husband, a civilian working with the Ministry of Defence.

A French accent, Jo thinks, which explains the stylish dove-grey cardigan draped over her shoulders. Waiting in the terminal at RAF Brize Norton, Jo imagined the fake fur jacket she'd bought in Fenwick's and the tight black jeans must look chic compared to the other service wives in their comfortable woollen coats. Surveying her neighbour, she's less confident about the effect.

'I'm just going as far as Washington where my husband's stationed,' Jo offers the woman in return. 'I've been back in England for a few months.' She doesn't want to talk about Sarah's death. She still cries at unexpected moments when she thinks she'll never hear her voice again.

The two women finish their coffee and don't say much after that. Perhaps the Frenchwoman is as anxious as she is about what lies ahead.

The turbulence stops and she pulls out her book again, *The Garrick Year*, a good exploration of the complexities of marriage. What she's going back to is just as bewildering as the relationships in the novel. She stares out of the window at the clouds, unable to read, remembering how good it was to see Gavin yesterday.

She conjures up the measuring, amused look he gave her when she arrived twenty minutes late at the Chelsea wine bar, flustered and trying not to show it. His nearness always disturbed her. Then he grinned and gave her a hug. She caught a whiff of his after-shave. Had he worn it for her? He and Richard used to joke about the ubiquitous Old Spice which Richard's mother used to send him from England. Gavin was thinner than ever and looked dishevelled in his old sports jacket, which was worn through on both elbows. She liked him best when he looked a mess.

It was freezing outside but cosy in the dimly lit bar. The Eggs Benedict were the best she'd ever had, and they drank the bottle of chilled hock like lemonade. She recalled him saying at a lunch party in his Washington flat, 'What I like about Jo is that she can match my drinking and doesn't show any sign of it.' It was a dubious compliment.

Stretched back in his chair, Gavin was smoking and coughing and glancing around the room, his face impassive, as he listened to her describe Sarah's funeral, the music, the flowers, the priest, Adam and Zoë. She was talking too much about her family, whom he'd never met. She looked at the clock above the bar: it was two o'clock and soon she had to catch a train to Oxford.

He began to tell her about the training with the airline and how good he felt now he'd left the RAF. She listened. She was the perfect audience. He was living with his mother in Twickenham for a while and she was spoiling him. He then moved on to embassy gossip and reminiscences.

When she said she must go, she saw his fine, bony hands dithering and fumbling as he picked up a package wrapped in newspaper down by his feet. Her eyes lingered on the crisp light-brown hair on the nape of his neck. However, her expectation of being given a leaving present was soon trashed.

'Would you take this back to that rogue Roman?' he said, holding out the parcel. 'He wants an eagle for his office – a reminder of his Serbian roots.'

It looked heavy and awkward to carry. She remembered how she'd gone with him to explore a barn full of junk near Middleburg and he'd come away with an enormous box of treasures.

'Okay,' she mumbled, nodding.

'Here's a plastic bag,' he said, pulling something crumpled out of his pocket. 'To carry it on the plane.'

She watched his lean, animated face as he unwrapped the newspaper to show her the eagle. Wherever had he found the clumsy oak carving? In a church? The hooked beak and predatory glance reminded her of Roman, Eleanor's husband.

She gave a small laugh, more at herself than at Gavin. 'Thanks a bunch,' she said. She'd somehow manage to carry the parcel, as well as her hold-all and the heavy suitcase.

He smiled. She was, as usual, disarmed by the curious sweetness of his smile. Then he helped her on with the faux fur, looking at it closely. He smoothed down the collar and told her it suited her. She seemed like an American now, he said, more polished and self-assured.

He picked up her suitcase and stepped back to hold the door open for her. His long head was strangely out of proportion to his shorter, fine-boned body. She wondered for the umpteenth time why she found him so attractive. Was it the insouciance masking the little-boy-lost underneath; and did all women have these confused feelings about certain men?

As she stepped outside, she almost tripped over the shapeless bundle of a woman slumped on the steps of the bric-à-brac shop next-door, swigging what looked like the dregs of a bottle of cider. A piece of string was tied round the waist of her coat to hold it together, and her swollen and mottled legs bridged the gap between her coat hem and the grey socks. When Gavin felt around in his pocket for a few coins and dropped them into her lap, she waved the bottle at him, calling out, 'Want some, love?'

Turning back to Jo he said, 'You'll want a taxi?' and then he tucked his hand under her arm, telling her he'd come to Paddington to wave her goodbye.

She recalled that he loathed the Underground, so replied, 'Yes, of course.'

The first taxi to come along stopped and they settled themselves in the seat shoulder to shoulder. Was he as aware of her body as she was of his? He started to say something but, as an ambulance was screeching past, she didn't catch it. She thought it was about Richard's old boss at the embassy who'd been posted back to England last year. She'd been taken aback to read in *The Times* before Christmas a report of his death, but Adam and Zoë and Forest Corner had been all she could concentrate on at the time. She must write to Hugh's wife, Annie, but what should she say? He'd taken a shotgun into the woods behind their house, poked the barrel in his mouth and 'blown his head off' the report said. She had thought of him as a happy-go-lucky man. But she recalled the night Richard had hurried over to her after dancing with Annie at a party. 'Protect me,' he'd said, laughing. 'I've never before had my right buttock caressed so vigorously.'

Gavin half-turned towards her in the taxi. She had an urge to put up her hand and trace the shadows of his face. Knowing now what she did about Richard and Eleanor, she regretted her relationship with him had been so chaste. She wasn't sure how much he knew about Richard's affair. Men could be surprisingly unaware of what went on around them. But Gavin was now telling her that he'd never seen the services as a career, like Richard, who'd be a general yet.

On the platform he gave her a quick hug and a peck on the cheek and she stepped onto the train as briskly as she could, struggling with the awkward package, her hold-all and her suitcase. She'd miss him, even though today he'd been more distant than usual. She told herself to stop being foolish. They were friends, not lovers.

While they are eating their meal, a tepid, chewy piece of chicken, Jo and the Frenchwoman begin to talk again, and then Jo falls asleep, probably due to the second slug of whisky she poured in her coffee. The next thing she is aware of is the announcement, 'Fasten your seat belts. We shall be landing in 20 minutes.' She opens her eyes with a sense of panic, her heart pounding. Where is she? Then she remembers that Richard will be waiting for her at the airport, his tall, energetic figure standing out in the crowd. Once she would have been looking forward to the dazzling smile and the feel of his arms firmly around her.

The plane's engine emits a buzzing noise which makes her head spin. She is hot and sticky and her bra strap keeps slipping off her shoulder. Perhaps it was a mistake to stay away for so long, but she needed to be with Adam and Zoë; she was the best person to sort out Sarah's clothes and go through her carefully arranged bureau. She also needed a break from Richard and Washington.

She begins to think of earlier times, before they were married, when Richard was always coming and going and there was a new excitement in each meeting. Memories were hoarded up and treasured. Now she's been away for three months, when she sees him at Dulles she might know straight away whether she's going to stay.

The lights go out in the cabin and the engines are cut back. Jo finds herself thinking of Forest Corner. Without Sarah, at first it seemed like a museum, full of dead and meaningless objects, vases, framed pictures, carefully selected bits of china, all of which had to be dusted and cared for. Then once or twice in the past month she caught herself wanting to stay there to try to fill her place. It was her home, much more so than the four-roomed cottage in Dorset she and Richard owned and rented out. But Adam seemed to be coping all right, or at least pretending to. Then, two weeks ago, while they were walking the dogs, he said that Richard must be missing her and she realised she had to go back, at least for the time being.

'Can you manage without me?' she asked, half hoping Adam would say no.

'I'll miss you,' he said, putting his arm round her shoulders and giving her hug. 'But Richard needs you with him. It's that sort of job, apart from anything else.'

Adam was a kind, simple man. She remembers that as a teenager she'd found him embarrassing as he could laugh so easily and cry so easily.

She was tempted to tell him about Eleanor that day, but she'd never before asked his advice about anything. Instead, they went on to talk about the fact that Zoë still seemed in denial about Sarah's death. She was too wrapped up in her school friends.

Sorting through Sarah's wardrobe had been the most painful task Jo had had to tackle. It upset her to handle clothes Sarah had been wearing so recently. Her old olive green twin-set and a couple of buttery-coloured blouses were with her now in the over-full suitcase. Perhaps they were odd things to take away, but they seemed to keep a part of Sarah alive, travelling on with her.

At the back of one shelf she found two gaudy framed and glazed pictures she and Sarah had pieced together shortly after her fifth birthday. One was of a girl in a pink crinoline dress and the other a Little-Boy-Blue figure. Over the weeks they'd collected tin-foil from chocolate and cigarette packets, smoothed it out and cut it into shapes to fit the figures Sarah had stencilled on pieces of cardboard. When Jo showed the pictures to Adam, he said he was sure she'd like to have them, and they, too, were in the suitcase

Finding the pictures reminded her of how, throughout her childhood, Sarah had seemed like a playmate, quite different from the housewifely mothers of her friends. She wants to remember her as she was then, beautiful and slightly wild. Later, after she married Adam, Sarah had tried, not very successfully, to be conventional.

As a teenager, Jo had wanted a conventional mother, someone who wore the right clothes and said the things mothers were expected to say, and Sarah never quite managed that. She envied her friends whose mothers taught them to cook and who could sew fashionable dresses for them. Sarah preferred to be tending her rescued animals or going on long walks, often in the coldest weather.

Sarah and Richard right from the start got on well. He was capable of charming Sarah even when he was a teenager, and after a while he made it clear to her that he'd set his heart on marrying Jo. She wonders now how Sarah had been persuaded to let her marry when she was only twenty. Had she still been alive, Jo would have found it hard to tell her, just eight years later, that she was thinking of leaving Richard.

Looking briefly at Sarah's bureau, opening the little drawers she loved to play with as a child, made her aware of the confusing possibilities of what she might find. Sarah had been hard to pin down about certain things. But it was too soon to invade the privacy she had carefully guarded, and Adam certainly couldn't face going through her papers. For the moment, everything could be left as it was, though, with his permission, Jo took with her a photo album she'd found in the bottom drawer.

Jo stretches down in the cramped space between the seats and slides the Drabble novel back in her hold-all. Could Drabble be considered a feminist? Sarah was

certainly in favour of women's lib. She remembers when she was about seven, back in the ration-book world of the 'fifties, bursting into the kitchen one morning to find the noisy next-door neighbour sobbing at the table. She'd been transfixed by the green and blue bruises on the woman's cheek and neck. Sarah quickly ushered her out of the door on some imaginary errand, but not before she'd heard her say to the woman, 'Try neat gin and a boiling bath – and stand up for yourself. For a start, lock him out of the bedroom.'

Men and sex. She thinks of the Saturday evening in September when Richard was in New York and Gavin took her to the same quiet bistro where, she now knows, Richard frequently met Eleanor. As it was hot, Gavin had taken off his jacket and his shirt was damp between his shoulder blades, making his body more visible. She remembers feeling both anxious and elated at being out to supper alone with him. They ate lobster bisque and brochettes of scallops and talked of little other than people and politics. She very much wanted his good opinion. Weeks later she could still recall every word he'd uttered and every compliment he'd paid her. After that their meetings took on a regularity, visiting exhibitions at the Smithsonian and often going for a drink afterwards.

The plane's undercarriage noisily clunks into place. Jo opens her handbag and takes out her powder compact to check her lipstick. Her eyes look tired but she'll do. Phyl had remarked, when she called on her for tea, how like her mother she now looked. Glancing in the mirror, she tries but fails to see the likeness.

As they taxi along the runway, she thinks of the first time she arrived in Washington, two years ago, when Richard and Gavin were both there to meet her. Gavin was standing perfectly still in the background, watching them. Richard's recently acquired Chevrolet wouldn't start, so he had given him a lift, he told her. She'd been impressed by Gavin's old school, lean and polished face, but on that occasion his smile seemed almost grudging. Later he told her that Richard had talked so much about her that he couldn't wait to meet her, but, when he did, he thought that she looked too capable and self-possessed for a woman he could get on with. She never told him that on that first meeting, with his half smug, half priestly detachment, she'd wondered whether he was gay.

Dulles is beautiful, she thinks, which airports rarely are. There is glass everywhere, and trees, fountains and transparent elevators; light, air, space and all the modern things she likes about the States.

All around her husbands are meeting wives and children from the flight and couples are arriving together and looking lost. The Frenchwoman has gone in another direction to catch an onward flight. Jo looks around for Richard, then hears his voice behind her, clear and loud, 'Jo, over here.'

As she walks towards him, she sees his face soften and open up. 'You don't know how I've missed you,' he says. His arms are strong as he wraps them around her. She remembers the feel of that hug from before they were married, when he would often turn up unexpectedly in his old Vauxhall.

He picks up her case and the hold-all and the plastic bag containing the carved eagle wrapped in newspaper. She'll explain later. He is saying something about a drinks party at the embassy for an association of American Air Force wives whose husbands have been shot down over Vietnam. He is the liaison officer, so he has to go. He looks at her questioningly: 'You don't mind, darling? There's time for us to go home so that you can change.'

She half laughs and shakes her head. She is the wife expected to entertain, to go to an endless number of functions, look the part, say the right things. Once, after a long day taking affidavits in a divorce case, she'd rushed straight to an embassy drinks party wearing what she thought was a smart enough chocolate brown suit, her best work suit. Eleanor and Roman were there, too, as guests of the medical officer and Eleanor looked as sleek as a seal in a close-fitting green dress. Richard said to Jo afterwards that it was obvious she'd come straight from work and hadn't made an effort to dress for the occasion and he'd been embarrassed. It's a comment she finds hard to forgive.

It seems pitch black outside the well-lit foyer and there is a drizzling sleet. She sees the outline of the grey Chevrolet, parked, probably illegally, just across the road. Richard happily ignores rules.

Feeling damp and dishevelled, she sinks into the soft gentleness of the car seat and half-closes her eyes. She sighs: 'time yet for a hundred indecisions.' Eliot, Gavin's favourite poet. Getting back to work is another challenge she'll have to face. The week before she left, she'd been offered a partnership in the court reporting firm she works for. It's tempting but would mean even more work.

She watches Richard's neat ears and the muscles in his neck flexing as he talks away, bringing her up to date on the news.

'I've been hunting every Saturday, trying to keep both horses fit,' he says. Then he glances at Jo and laughs. 'Last week, Georgie created one of her scenes. She drove her horse box to the meet at Gunston Hall wearing only a canvas riding mac. I believe it was Eleanor who went back home with her and called her shrink.'

So Eleanor is still hunting, Jo thinks, but she can't help smiling at Richard's story. Georgie, Eleanor's cousin, had probably chosen the wrong man again, but she never seemed to be without male company, in spite of her enormous size. Within ten minutes of Eleanor introducing Jo to Georgie, in a great hurry of words she revealed the most intimate details about her relationship with her latest man, a Swedish architect. In the way of women who have ample money and not enough to occupy their minds, she was continually suffering from minor ailments and swallowing quantities of sleeping pills, anti-depressants and tranquillisers. But Jo laughs when she thinks of the enormous backside naked under the raincoat.

'Bridge freezes before road,' the sign looms out of the dark. Like 'Walk' and 'Don't walk.' On the surface, such a straight-forward country. She now knows better and has begun to realise that she knows nothing about anyone here: what they are, what they think, how they look upon her. They probably find her far too simple. She is back for a second time, and it is probably a mistake.

The week after she first arrived two years ago, Gavin gave a supper party in his bijou flat and that's when they met Eleanor and Roman. They seemed such clever, well-informed people.

'My friend Roman – from the Serbian mafia,' Gavin said, winking. 'He's a heart specialist in his spare time.' Later she learnt that Washington is full of doctors and lawyers; a new group comes in with each administration.

She liked Eleanor instantly but wasn't sure what to make of Roman. He was interestingly ugly, as Sarah might have said, but as he looked her over she sensed he was slightly contemptuous of women. However, she was flattered when he listened to her opinions on all sorts of things from the theatre to a horse he was buying for Eleanor.

Roman quickly drew them into his extended family. His convivial, authoritative manner appealed to them both, and she still thinks of him as an amiable rogue. They were grateful when he found them the right lawyer to get her a work

permit. She also believed everything Eleanor told her about their idyllic marriage, even after she noticed they hardly spoke to each other in company.

As they turn off the main highway towards McLean, an enormous sign announces 'Virginia is for lovers'. They drive past the filling station where the young man who washes her windscreen often tells her, 'You and your husband are such a good-looking, happy couple, Mrs. Caswell, it makes my day.' It means no more than the 'Have a good day' sung out at the supermarket check-out, but it helps life along.

Under the looming sky, the bland roads bordered by trees remind her of the alienating suburbs of a Hollywood film set just before the murder takes place. As they pull into the drive, she thinks again that their low, red-brick house, No. 5 Warbler Place, has little to distinguish it from the others in the cul-de-sac.

Richard walks ahead of her and unlocks the door. As she steps inside she can smell wax polish and the sweet scent of hyacinths. When she was a child, every November Sarah planted three bulbs in a pot and placed them on the kitchen window sill. The buds would be bursting just in time for Christmas.

'Estephania has cleaned the place from top to bottom and polished everything,' Richard says, 'getting it ready for you to come back to.'

She sees the bowl of pink hyacinths on the windowsill on the half-landing which divides the house in two: downstairs to the shaggy-carpeted family room and their bedroom, upstairs to a formal sitting room with pale blue carpets, cream walls and cream silk curtains. The old furniture, the rugs and the etchings they've brought over from England don't suit this modern house, but she wanted to have their familiar things with them. They even brought over a few books and records but most were too heavy to transport.

Their American friends seem to like coming for meals, even though their houses are grander, and Richard plays the connoisseur about the wines he serves. She jokes in her letters to Trish, her ex- flatmate, about the image he's built up for himself. Being at the embassy and hunting, their friends assume a county background in England. He never mentions his parents' semi in Leatherhead or the fact that his father works as an insurance salesman.

Jo follows Richard down to the bedroom, throws her coat on the bed and steps out of her jeans and the rest of her clothes. A shower will get rid of the grubby and tired feeling. She can hear him in the bathroom noisily spitting gargle into the sink. She notices, as she turns on the shower, that she has goose pimples on her arms and legs in spite of the warmth from the radiators.

When she goes back into the bedroom, Richard is standing by the dressing table knotting his tie. The dark, well-cut suit emphasises his tall, slim body. He watches her as she fastens her bra and puts cream on her face.

'You look far too good to be true,' he says. 'I love the way, when you look at yourself in the mirror, you raise your eyebrows and purse your lips.' He stands behind her and runs his fingers down her spine.

'Wear that wine-coloured dress with the low neck and slit up the side,' he says.

Jo draws down the corners of her mouth without speaking. She would have chosen something less flamboyant.

She moves away from Richard and slides open the wardrobe door. He's behaving as if the past year never happened. She isn't sure she can join in the game.

She bought the dress at the Watergate boutique the first time Eleanor took her there. 'How good to see you again so soon, Mrs. Davidov,' the manageress said with a big smile. She seemed to know Eleanor well. Was it there, Jo now wonders, that Eleanor bought the satin underclothes and silk eau-de-nil nightdress she wore when she met Richard at the hotel by Dupont Circle?

The day after she'd found out about Richard and Eleanor, one by one, she'd thrown the Rosenthal coffee cups his parents had given them as a wedding present at his head. In the intervals of calm, when she wasn't slamming doors and throwing things, Richard had told her, piling detail on detail, how the affair had started. This was an experience he was sharing with her, he seemed to be implying, a new story he was entertaining her with. It was his gift to her, his peace offering. At times she wanted to believe him.

As she searches for the flimsy dress among her other clothes, she remembers that she'd been impressed by the new underclothes bit. Eleanor, with her enigmatic smile, certainly knew about men. Any man would have been flattered to be told that her underclothes had been bought especially to wear when she was with him: her husband would never be allowed to see them.

Jo takes the dress off its coat-hanger. It feels soft and silky, like pansy petals. Even into her teens, Sarah used to buy her flannelette pyjamas and cotton knickers. Did Sarah, she wonders, ever wear silk underclothes for Adam?

She looks at her reflection in the mirror as she slides the dress over her head. She doesn't think it suits her, even though it's Richard's favourite dress. Perhaps she understands little about men. She'd taken Adam, as a stepfather, for granted. He was solid, kind Adam. She'd been astonished when on the train back to London after a weekend at Forest Corner, Trish had confided, 'Adam's gorgeous. He reminds me of Clark Gable. It made my weekend when he brought us up breakfast in bed.' Trish at the time was having an affair with a colleague at work, a fellow copywriter, who must have been in his mid-forties, about the same age as Adam at that time.

Jo opens the drawer under her dressing-table mirror and takes out a pair of pearl earrings encircled in gold. She also sees two plain gold bangles Eleanor gave her as a birthday present. She was overwhelmed by such an expensive gift. Now she wonders whether Eleanor was already sleeping with Richard when she bought them for her. She mustn't think about it. Eleanor has such good taste.

Richard is standing behind her zipping up her dress. He presses his mouth to her collarbone and she sees their reflection in the mirror, a flattering American mirror which softens the image: 'proglated', broken up with minute ridges, he once told her. Her light brown, naturally curly hair is at least one asset. We're still together, she thinks, and playing for time, but what is he really feeling?

Outside in the cold Jo is almost light-headed with tiredness. As they sit in the car and Richard starts the engine, she half imagines that Gavin is in the back seat travelling to the party with them.

She remembers when the three of them drove down to Lexington, to the Virginia Military Academy, where an army polo team from England was playing in a tournament. On the Saturday night there was a dinner party in the cavernous refectory and she was sitting at the top table on the dais between Gavin and Richard. She felt exposed and faintly ridiculous. Half-way through the meal, Gavin muttered, 'No bloody alcohol. I can't make a speech without a drink.'

She caught the eye of the waiter who was clearing away plates. Her voice sank to a whisper: 'Flight Lieutenant Walsh needs a Scotch, a large one.' He nodded; and she smiled at him when he returned with a tumbler-full of what smelt like neat whisky. That was when she first felt that Gavin needed looking after. She never thought that about Richard.

She turns to look at Richard as the car slows down and pulls into the embassy car park. They half-smile at each other. She is about to step into another room full of people, most of them strangers, and this is her first night back. Richard knows she'll cope. He has often told her she is good at taking a charming and convincing interest in other people. It is her way of giving herself some shape, some substance, because often she feels she doesn't fit anywhere.

She braces herself to meet these women whose husbands have been in prison in Vietnam for four years or more. They might never see them again or, if they do return, they'll be total strangers. She isn't sure that a party with drinks and little things to eat, and people circulating with their names pinned to their lapels, will be of any comfort to these women.

Chapter 13

Picking up the pieces

Jo swings her legs to the floor and slips her arms into her dressing-gown sleeves. It's a quarter-to-seven, but almost lunchtime in England. She's wide awake. She doesn't want to wake Richard, who's lying on his back, taking up more than his fair share of the bed. His body is warm and the sheets smell pleasantly musty. She glances at his shirt and underpants thrown over her petticoat, which she's neatly folded on the chair. Perhaps she likes order too much.

Pulling back the silk drapes from the glass doors onto the patio, she notices a light covering of snow has fallen on the veranda overnight. She yawns. It's a relief not to have to drive at daybreak to the farm at Great Falls to feed the horses and muck out the stables, but it's an expensive luxury. While she was away, Richard moved them to a livery yard. For someone not born to money, he certainly knows how to spend it. He never worries about being overdrawn, but it makes her feel insecure. Last week, while she was going through Sarah's chest of drawers, she heard a comedienne telling jokes on the radio about how money and sex were the twin rocks on which a marriage foundered.

Richard grunts and turns over on his side. When they came back from the embassy reception last night, they were a little tipsy. They made love unhesitatingly, as in the old days, both of them falling soundly asleep afterwards. Gavin, for once, wasn't in her mind.

She steps into the bathroom, leaving the door open, and begins to brush her teeth. Peering at herself in the mirror through half closed eyes she pushes her hair back, hoping to look less pale and bedraggled. No one is at their best first thing in the morning, probably not even Eleanor, in spite of the tawny glow of her skin and her perfectly white and even teeth. Oh, but she still likes Eleanor. She can't help liking her, though she's woken up feeling angry with them all. To make herself feel better, she recalls with uncommendable relish what Roman told her the day Eleanor disappeared. Thinking about Eleanor as less than perfect helps to ease her mind.

They were sitting in the room next-door, the family room, Roman with tears running down his cheeks. 'Don't be fooled by my wife,' he said. 'That smooth charm's a cover for a hysterical temper.' Jo enjoyed hearing that, but carried on pointing out he was overreacting: Eleanor wasn't going to kill herself. But he kept insisting that no one knew his wife as he did.

Richard is snoring in the bedroom. Jo pictures him lying there, solid and relaxed. Since she's been back the bitterness she was hoarding is starting to slip away. In a few months she'll be thirty and they've come a long way together. He isn't such a bad chap. She shakes her head and begins to smile at herself in the mirror. Perhaps jealousy has made her see him in a different light. Oddly, he seems more attractive.

She hears the bed creak. He must be waking up. She slips quietly through the bedroom and goes upstairs to prepare breakfast. He'll be surprised as he's usually the first one up. She surfaces groggily and will never wake early if she can avoid it.

The kitchen seems small and cluttered. It is one of the many things about the charmless suburban house that irritates her. Three different sorts of plastic-wrapped loaves are piled up by the toaster. Richard never shops meanly. She unwraps the packet marked 'Granary bread' and puts four slices in the toaster, then spoons three measures of coffee into the percolator.

She notices that Richard has hung the 1973 calendar with the prints of the Potomac by the 'phone. She bought it in the autumn because it showed the river and its settlements when it was still a wild, untamed torrent. She wanders over for a closer look. For February there is a picture of Harper's Ferry and a quote from an eighteenth-century English visitor: 'This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic.'

Eleanor and Roman drove them out to Harper's Ferry their first summer. She remembers the steep street with its well-preserved old shops. 'Part of the American history tour,' Roman said. 'Eleanor's an expert guide.' It was the first time she noticed how prettily Eleanor's lips shaped into a curve when she laughed, and she recalls how animated Richard became telling her whatever it was that made her laugh.

She turns over the page to the picture for March, Oatlands Plantation. Richard has marked up some dates: on the first Friday the Indian defence attaché is giving a drinks party, there's lunch at General Payne's on the Sunday, and a reception at Annapolis the following weekend. She'll ring Don after breakfast to see what court cases he has lined up for her and add any confirmed dates to the calendar. She must

keep reminding herself not to take on too much work; she mustn't get so tired again. Getting through the next weeks will need stamina and a cool detachment.

As she pours orange juice into the two glasses, she sees that her hand is shaking. She might relax more when Richard has gone to work and she has the house to herself. She needs to wander around, pat cushions into shape, straighten pictures, sort out what she's brought back.

She takes a quick look at the living room. The green velour on the spoon-backed chair is looking even more threadbare. Eleanor once gave her the 'phone number of an upholsterer. She'll ring him later. She runs her fingers over the roses carved into the mahogany frame. It was Kit's chair, passed on to Sarah and then to her. Sarah would smile about it: 'Kit nicknamed it "Bittersweet" it had so many memories for her.' Behind the chair she's hung the tapestry of the Italian cardinal, another treasure inherited from Kit.

She wishes she knew more about Kit's lover, the man who was her grandfather, though she can picture him better now, having read the letters Kit wrote to Elizabeth; the neatly tied packet of letters that Mrs Markham, Elizabeth's mother, unexpectedly posted to her a couple of weeks after Kit's funeral. The voices of the dead whispering from the past: Elizabeth herself had been dead for many years. Mrs. Markham had explained in her brief note with the packet: '*Gerald, her husband, passed onto me these letters from Nanny after Elizabeth had died. I haven't read them. It would have been an intrusion*.'

The coffee in the percolator is gurgling noisily and smelling comforting, but there's another more acrid smell. The toast is burnt. She must have twisted the switch round too far. As she picks the charred bits out of the toaster, she hears something heavy flop onto the front-door mat on the landing. Their neighbours must still be picking-up the *Washington Post* for them. They probably felt sorry for Richard being left by himself and must have been curious why his wife had stayed away for so long. She grins, thinking of how their curtains twitch when various friends draw up in the driveway. She'll call in to see them and take them one of the books on the New Forest she's brought back. She needs to feel she is doing the right thing in spite of their nosiness.

Eleanor, too, is good at doing the right thing. Jo knows that's why she is staying with Roman for the time being - until she and Richard return to England. Eleanor promised Roman that for the boys' sake she would try to make their marriage work, but Jo doesn't think for one minute this fooled him. He knows as well as any of them that a scandal would ruin Richard's career, bound as he is by the rigid construct of embassy protocol: a military attaché, however junior, having an affair with the wife of an ex-Communist wouldn't be easy, even for Richard, to explain away.

Eleanor said as much to her the last time she saw her in early November, when they lunched together at The Belle Epoque. Jo can't remember whose idea it was they should meet. It had probably been Richard's. The meeting made her realise that she can never be as cross with Eleanor as she thinks she should be. When they saw each other, they laughed about the fact that they were both wearing plum-coloured jackets, a good choice for a cold day; but afterwards they both felt awkward and succeeded only in being distantly polite.

This was the time that Eleanor told her, with her wry smile, what a bastard Roman had been throughout their marriage and she'd wanted to leave him many times. Jo affected ignorance about this, but Roman's bullying was one of Richard's excuses poured out to her in his haemorrhage of information. She hadn't been aware of Eleanor's next bit of information though, that Roman had been having a long-term affair with the wife of his partner in the clinic. 'And probably,' Eleanor added, 'screwing his nurse at the same time. But he's getting too old to carry on in that way with any enthusiasm. It's now just an ego trip.'

Richard comes into the kitchen smiling. He tells her the coffee smells good. Jo is biting her lip, still thinking how odd it is that the three of them, Eleanor, Richard and herself, began to unite against Roman.

'You look upset, darling,' Richard says. 'It's only burnt toast.'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking of the toast,' she replies. 'I'm immune to burnt toast. When Mum burnt the toast, she'd scrape off the burnt bits and I'd be expected to eat what was left.'

He comes over and puts his arm round her shoulders. She likes the smell of his hair. It's so familiar.

'Remember,' he says, 'when Sarah suggested we should elope and save the trouble and expense of a wedding? Said she'd give us the money to spend on whatever else we wanted.'

She notices, as he speaks, how his neck rises strongly out of the collar of his shirt like a column. He looks impossibly smart now he's shaved and dressed. No wonder Eleanor fell in love with him. Jo turns her head away. They grew up together and often lately she's been feeling that one problem is that she thinks of him more like a brother.

As they sit eating their breakfast, she sees that he's been chewing the skin at the side of his thumb, an old habit she thought he'd stopped a couple of years ago. He is saying that, if she wants to go to see the horses today, he'll come home at lunchtime and they can go together. Perhaps tomorrow, she says. Today she wants to sort a few things out at home.

Aware of his eyes anxiously watching her, she can't help wondering if this is all play acting: the happy couple at breakfast? Richard is good at half-truths. Will he announce at the end of the year, 'Look, darling, it hasn't worked. Eleanor's leaving Roman, and perhaps you and I would be happier if we split up.'?

He's stopped talking. He must realise that she isn't concentrating on what he's saying. He smiles at her. 'I love you, Jo, I really do,' he says as he stands up and bends to kiss her on the forehead. She twists her face into a smile. She'll try to believe him. 'Take care,' she says. 'The roads will be icy.'

Half an hour later, she is dressed in her favourite brown corduroy trousers and a baggy cowl-neck jumper. Comfort clothes, she thinks, but she is feeling more positive. In real life, the days go on as usual.

Once she's cleared away the plates, she sits at the kitchen table to ring Don, who welcomes her back with enthusiasm. He is in the middle of a long transcript from a corruption trial and is way behind with it. Can she take over from him tomorrow in the district court in Alexandria? He doesn't know what the case is exactly but he's been warned that the lawyers might want a transcript by the end of the week. 'Of course,' she says without thinking. After she puts the phone down, she

is angry with herself. She'll probably be up half the night dictating tapes. It isn't a good start.

She picks up the newspaper and starts to flick through it. The war in Vietnam is still in the headlines, but Nixon is saying it will soon be over. American newspapers are bland; she misses the English papers.

She is pouring herself a third mug of coffee when the 'phone rings and she hears Georgie's light, girlish twang at the other end. She's throwing a party on Sunday and wants Jo and Richard to meet a couple of her step-children who are visiting her. She very much hopes they'll come as she hasn't seen Jo for ages.

'I'm not sure what Richard's got planned,' Jo lies in her most distant, polished tones, 'but if we're free we'd love to come.' Observing the niceties: Sarah would have been proud of her.

Eleanor and Roman are probably also invited as Georgie will be curious to observe how they react together. The thought of Georgie's vulgar curiosity about other people's sex lives repels her. Jo recalls her sidelong glances, even when she seems to be looking directly at you. She then wonders whether Georgie remembers her half-naked drive to the meet. In any case, she thinks, she's more than capable of laughing off any embarrassment.

Jo can't imagine anyone less likely to attract Richard, but Georgie, from the moment they were introduced, flirted with him, flashing her eyes, simpering and exclaiming at his stories. When Richard seemed to be revealing every last detail of his affair with Eleanor, he mentioned that Georgie had given him the key to her flat so he could meet Eleanor there when she was on one of her trips to Boston. Strangely, that was one of the more galling bits of information, learning that their betrayal of her was assisted by Georgie. She'd been wildly angry that night, storming out of the house and wandering along the road in the dark for an hour or so. Now she tries to laugh about Georgie's love by proxy.

She must stop brooding about Richard and Eleanor. None of this can help now. Her suitcase is still waiting to be unpacked. She needs to sort out what should be hung and what must be washed and see whether the jar of Fortnum's stilton she bought for Richard is still intact.

She goes down to the bedroom and hangs up a couple of skirts and re-folds a pullover into the drawer. Next she unwraps the pictures of Little Boy Blue and his pink, tinsel companion from the protection of Sarah's green twin-set and carries them

into the bathroom. They'll add interest to the cream walls. She pulls out Sarah's album, but she doesn't want to look at it now, so she slides it into a bottom drawer with the twin-set. As she straightens up, she notices a framed photograph on the bookcase in the corner which wasn't there before. Richard must have placed it there while she was away. She remembers it being taken on the first day they went out with the hunt, the Boxing Day meet at Gunston Hall two years ago. She and Richard are riding two unclipped polo ponies lent to them by Hugh Walsh; Eleanor, slightly in the background, is on a sleek, well turned out bay. Jo felt embarrassed to be riding such a scruffy pony, but when he jumped all the fences without hesitation, she was proud of him; and it had been a joy to be out for the first time in the undulating, wooded Virginia countryside.

Towards the end of the day, she and Eleanor had ridden side by side at the back of the field and had had time to chat. They quickly established they'd both recently visited the Freer for the Whistler exhibition on *Symphony in Grey*, and she'd warmed to Eleanor's knowledge and her droopy eyed, slightly cynical smile.

'Come and have supper with us tonight?' Eleanor suggested, as they said goodbye. 'Roman's been asking me to invite you over since we met at Gavin's party.'

The day's hunting had been exhilarating, and Jo drank far too much that evening. She remembers Roman placing on the table two bottles of what he and Richard agreed was an excellent Burgundy to go with the venison steaks, and beforehand she'd quickly downed two strong Martinis. Eleanor made them laugh while they were eating, describing how when she was introduced to Roman she'd misheard his name, which was in fact 'Jovan'. 'He now agrees with me it sounds exactly right for Washington,' she'd said.

Near the end of the meal Jo had an animated argument with Roman about the effectiveness of American overseas aid. But didn't she know, he said, that humanitarian undertakings had political strings attached? She liked his clipped, decisive way of speaking, and is sure she must have agreed with him. She'd been harmlessly flirting with him, she now acknowledges.

After supper, as they went into the sitting-room, Roman put an arm around her and Eleanor, like an elder brother. He began to talk about the hotel they were going to in a couple of weeks, The Homestead, up in the mountains of West Virginia. They visited it two or three times a year as it was easily the most comfortable hotel on the

East Coast. Then he led Richard off to his study to show him his old maps of Virginia, which confirmed the opinion she'd formed when they first met - that he didn't have much time for women, though he liked to have them around like flowers or a bowl of fruit. He'd paid her and Eleanor their quota of attention and that was enough. As she watched him take Richard by the arm, it also dawned on her that everything Roman did was done with an air of intrigue, of seeming to hold his cards close to his chest. It probably came from growing up under a Communist regime.

Half an hour later, when she and Richard were driving home, he put his hand on her arm and said, 'When we were talking in his study Roman suggested we join them for their weekend at the spa hotel. They booked two rooms as they were going to take the boys, but while they were away in California last month the little sods chipped the fireplace surround from the wall, wedging it back in place each night so the *au pair* wouldn't notice, and they're being left behind as a punishment. Apparently there's skiing up there and horses for hire, and he says Eleanor would like to have your company.'

Remembering all this, Jo realises that that weekend away was the turning point. After that Richard was a little moody, a little less confiding. She walks over to the French windows and looks out at the snow. It isn't much of a garden: a long stone-flagged terrace next to the house, then a bit of grass, with azalea bushes and pine trees beyond; easy to maintain - and soulless. How different the grounds of The Homestead were, with its lake and the banks of white and pink camellias just beginning to flower. She can't now recall whether Roman's invitation pleased her. Perhaps they were both flattered that such a cosmopolitan and wealthy couple liked their company.

She still loves The Homestead with its old-fashioned charm, and can picture the deep, glazed veranda overlooking the gardens and the huge, soft sofas and potted palms. Waiters in starched white jackets were instantly at your elbow when you even thought about ordering a drink, and a string quartet on a small stage near the dining room played at teatime and throughout breakfast.

The first day there Eleanor booked treatments for herself and Jo in the spa, starting with a sauna, in which they lay side by side on slatted, scorchingly hot

benches. She noticed Eleanor's tanned, unblemished skin and had become conscious of her own pale limbs. They were next taken off to soak in baths of trickling green mineral water in a cavernous, dimly-lit room, before being wrapped in warm towels and led to cubicles for their massage. 'I've asked for a male masseur for us both,' Eleanor told her. 'Women's arms aren't strong enough for a deep tissue massage.'

Sauna-ed and soaked and pummelled, she felt she was gaining the smooth American polish she so admired in Eleanor. Meanwhile Richard and Roman had been harshly hosed down with icy jets of water that bruised the skin. 'Men will be men,' Eleanor said.

Jo remembers thinking that she and Richard should go back there together, just the two of them, but since that weekend they had rarely gone anywhere alone. Shaking her head, angry with her own naivety, she snatches up the suitcase from the bed and takes it to the utility room. Perhaps the two of us should go next month, she thinks, to lay to rest these memories.

She looks around the barn-like room, with the washing machine, an extra deep-freeze, wine racks and garden tools down the far end. It smells of clean washing and polish and leather. She pushes the case underneath wracks of saddles, skis, tennis rackets and boxes of old court notebooks. What a lot we need to bolster our lives, she thinks.

Overhead are lines of dried washing which Estephania must have hung up a couple of days ago. Jo starts pulling down sheets, towels and a couple of Richard's shirts, folding them neatly into the linen basket. Estephania must have taken her filthy gardening jeans which were hanging behind the door and washed them, too.

She half-smiles, recalling something Roman said at The Homestead. They were about to set off for a walk and the three of them were sitting on the veranda waiting for Eleanor. She finally appeared wearing a heather-coloured check woollen jacket over a matching skirt. Jo complimented her, half jokingly, on looking like a perfect *Country Life* duchess, while she herself was wearing humble jeans and an anorak. Roman said, glancing at Jo's jeans, 'Oh, Eleanor never wears pants,' and she had this image of Eleanor being coy whenever she sat down or bent to pick something up. What an idiot she'd been, so confident in her bond with Richard: in their hotel room later she laughed with him about the expression and he said, 'One of those differences in the American language like "Keep your pecker up."'

As she folds the jeans, she sees that they are threadbare. They've almost disintegrated in the wash and aren't worth keeping. Of course, Eleanor would never wear plain blue-jeans, even to garden in. She reminds herself of something else Roman told her on the day Eleanor disappeared: that the public Eleanor, so effortlessly elegant, was a mirage. She needed constant reassurance and, like her mother, drank heavily. Even now Jo isn't sure that she believes all he says.

She begins to iron Richard's shirts. What a puzzle men are. Both Richard and Roman seemed to blur fact into fiction in the stories they told, while she tried to be too scrupulously honest. One of Roman's stories sticks in her mind. The four of them, Georgie, Richard, Roman and herself, were sunning themselves on the long, low canvas beds around the Davidov's pool, drying off after a swim. The pool area was a perfect sun trap, set into a terrace below the house and sheltered by carefully planted shrubs. The Philadelphus, the rock roses and the lavender on the slope were all in bloom that day. Eleanor appeared while they lay there, balancing a dish of strawberries in one hand and a tray with a bowl of sugar, a bottle of champagne and several glasses in the other. It was Roman's birthday, she called out, and they must celebrate.

They drowsily moved over to the wooden table under the sun-shade to drink a toast to Roman and eat the strawberries, picking them up by their husks and dipping them into little heaps of sugar in the way Eleanor was showing them. 'Fruit tastes so much better eaten with your fingers,' she said, smiling her far-away smile, 'and Roman loves strawberries.'

Roman began telling them about his thirteenth birthday, in 1943, in his village near Belgrade. The Germans had come that day and herded everyone they could find into the village square. They'd thrust their gleaming rifles at four teenage boys and ordered them to shoot the dozen or so men lined up in front of the church; the alternative was that they themselves would be shot. Jo thinks of the blank look in Roman's eyes and the flatness of his voice while he was speaking. The Serbian flag was flying over the town hall like a white eagle, he said, but he didn't say whether he was one of the teenage boys, or she can't remember that he did. Neither did he describe the scene afterwards, but somehow she can picture it.

She hangs up the second shirt and unplugs the iron. She finds herself humming 'K-k-k-Katy', wondering whether Kit's narrow life with Frank had at times seemed like some kind of hell. She suddenly feels tired and wants to weep. How she'd wept at Kit's funeral five years ago, which was her first close experience of death. The day was bleak and chilly, like today. Frank had seemed a distant stranger, carefully guarded by his domineering sister. She can't remember Sarah shedding one tear, but with her careful self-control it was never easy to fathom what she was feeling. The same could be said of Kit's old employer, Mrs. Markham, who with her meticulous enunciation of an earlier generation had remained distantly polite.

There is a faint smell of Richard's aftershave on the shirt she has placed on the coat-hanger. Something more expensive than the Old Spice he once wore. A pain rises from her throat and hits her behind the eyes. The teenage, Old Spice days were the good times: self-assured, good-looking Richard, who made her feel more grown-up than she was; than she feels now.

She pushes a strand of hair from her cheek. It's damp with tears. She can't drift aimlessly all morning.

She opens the back door and breathes in the icy air. She'll make another coffee, then drive out to see the horses. Perhaps she'll feel better when she's away from the confinement of the house, with its chilly blue carpets.

Chapter 14

Remembering

Jo is reminded how striking the drive along the parkway from McLean to Alexandria is. The sight of the Lincoln memorial, the slender spire of the monument across the Potomac, and the dome of the Capitol rising up behind can't fail to impress. It's the first trip she takes visitors on, stopping for coffee at the Gadsby Tavern, then going on to Mount Vernon. The distant view across the river adds charm: the buildings gleam white and beautiful in the sunshine. But not even Roman goes downtown on foot, and he locks his car door if he drives through after dark.

She parks the car in the big lot down by the river and walks up the narrow streets of Alexandria to the courthouse, listening to the clacking sound her heels make on the cobbles. The morning air feels icy but the sun is warm on her face. Thinking of work makes her feel more purposeful. She recalls what Roman said last September when the four of them were on holiday together. They were on their way back from a Serbian restaurant outside Phoenix and, down a rough track at around midnight, the Cadillac blew a tire. She held the torch while the men fumbled about changing the wheel. 'You'd make a good nurse, Jo. You're calm in a crisis,' he'd said. She took it as a compliment, but Eleanor, who'd overhead, told him he was, as usual, being patronising: she would make an equally good doctor. Climbing up the steps to the courthouse, Jo smiles to herself: at least she has potential for something, if not marriage.

She does not expect to find Don in his office. He'll be working at home. She edges her way round the papers heaped on the floor to the coffee machine and pours herself a cup. As she sits down at Don's desk to drink it, she sees his note on top of some grey folders: 'For you, Jo. Welcome back! Witness statements in the Doyle case.' She must remember to take them home. The lawyers will, as usual, expect her to instantly conjure a transcript out of thin air.

The round clock on the wall says it is twenty-to ten. She has to be in court in fifteen minutes. She shakes her head. She's remembering how wiped out she felt when Richard's mother was with them their first summer, before the Eleanor

revelations. What an idiot: on her second day back, she's taken on this unknown workload.

Dear Mutti, who from the start had treated her as a daughter. What had she really felt about the girl Richard had met at a summer teenage party and instantly drawn into his family? Perhaps she was used to his enthusiasms. Like her, Mutti probably shared them and indulged him. Jo herself had appropriated the cosy diminutive for her mother-in-law when they were living in Germany. It felt good to say and sounded endearing.

She rests her chin on her hands, thinking of Mutti. She should have looked after her better when she came to Washington. As a teenager, she'd felt closer to her than to Sarah. She was fun in just the right way at a time when Sarah had seemed remote and critical. She remembers the shimmering turquoise satin dress from the Montgomery Ward catalogue Mutti copied for her for a Sandhurst ball. Sarah thought it was too clinging.

Richard had tried to discourage his mother from coming to Washington that first summer. To begin with, Jo believed he was thinking of her: she was tired and tense after the miscarriage. But from a few things he'd said, she began to understand how important it was to him to cultivate the county background their American friends took for granted. She now thinks how sad this is, though at times in the past she almost despised him for it. At the airport, waiting for Mutti, she remembers teasing him that Americans thought most Englishmen who rode horses had large estates.

There is a tap on the office door and Jo pushes her chair back and searches in her handbag for her notebook. In the doorway she sees Jim, the policeman from Court 1, standing with his gun in his belt, smiling. He's a gentle, small featured man, with fluffy hair, which doesn't go with the uniform and the gun.

'Good to see you back, Jo,' he says, perching on the edge of the desk. 'Judge Morris has a beaut of a case this morning – the drugs cop Gene Hackman played in *The French Connection*. They gave him a new ID but someone must have snitched. A guy took a pot shot at him when he was riding in the back of a cab through

midtown Manhattan. He's blaming the Justice Department and the local police, so the lawyers want the hearing down here.'

They laugh together at the absurdity of the legal shenanigans as she picks up her notebook and walks with him to the courtroom. Cloistered from the real world, the room seems womb-like. She's comfortable among the cherry-wood panelling and the windows set high in the walls. She can settle into her official role. The judge's bench is raised up so that he has a good view of everyone, as in an English court, but she still finds it odd that Norm, Judge Morris, wears no wig. She pictures him in the top hat he wears out hunting, where she's better acquainted with him. He's a wild, erratic rider, flapping his arms and legs like a windmill as he urges his heavy chestnut mare up to a fence.

From the table below his bench she watches people wander into court, trying to work out which one is the famous cop, Jimmy Doyle. When he gets to his feet to take the oath, she's surprised to see he is the small, plump man in an electric blue suit who doesn't seem at all sure of himself. Neither does he look anything like Gene Hackman.

She has to concentrate. She hasn't written a shorthand note for over four months. After Jimmy Doyle's brief, flatly delivered statement, she hears him say *sotto voce*, 'Like I've been set up again.' No one else appears to have heard and the lawyers quickly launch into convoluted legal argument. She is thankful when, at lunch-time, the hearing is adjourned to the following week for other witnesses to be called. There will be pressure enough getting the transcript dictated, typed up and checked in two days, plus tracking down citations from previous cases.

There is just under an hour for lunch. She wanders down to the river to buy a sandwich in the covered Warehouse mall and sits at a table outside the Firehook Bakery reading over her notes. A cold wind is whipping through the barn-like space and her fingers are turning blue. She doesn't stay long, but on the way out calls at the fish stall to buy a couple of Dover soles for supper, then walks briskly back up the hill to get warm.

In the afternoon a jury is being chosen for a murder trial and she has to sit and listen. Usually nothing needs to be noted, though she recalls Norm telling her that this can be the most crucial part of a case: the sort of people the defence lawyers manage to get on the panel can swing a verdict.

As Jo sits down at her desk, Jim whispers to her that, if her stomach is up to it, she should look at the photos. The murdered man was stabbed twenty-seven times. It happened late at night in the big parking lot near the river where she normally leaves her car. She makes up her mind that she won't park there again. At this time of the year, by late afternoon it will be almost empty and getting dark.

The lawyers are taking it in turns to ask each potential juror a string of questions about their beliefs, work, neighbourhood, what various members of their family do and what they think about a woman living alone taking in lodgers. She finds herself doodling in her notebook, sketching the profile of one of the lawyers who, with his long head and wiry hair, reminds her of Gavin. Before he questions each man or woman he pauses, looking down at his desk for dramatic effect.

A man and a woman are being tried together. He is accused of the stabbing and she of putting him up to it. Jo notices the woman's pale pink lipstick and her smart grey suit with its yellow braiding. She looks a little over forty and, from flipping through the witness statements, Jo discovers she's the mother of five children. The accused man, who was her lodger, is younger but plump with large, pale, protuberant eyes. He is staring in front of him and seems not to be aware of the woman. He doesn't look strong enough to stab another man twenty-seven times. The victim, it is stated, was the woman's ex-lover and the two men had never met before the attack.

Jo glances at the first photo in the buff folder in front of her. It is of the murdered man as he was found in his car. She quickly turns it over. She hadn't realised that a body could bleed so much. What could anyone possibly have done to attract such violence?

She looks over again at the couple. What passion there must have been behind such a frenzied attack, yet they seem so ordinary. She'd been wildly furious with Richard over Eleanor but that had passed, perhaps because she knew how close she'd been to jumping into bed with Gavin. She thinks how painful it must be to have to lay out any relationship for public censure, but then a man has been murdered and probably only these two know why. What lies will each tell when they take the witness stand? What will they conceal?

The woman's round, plump face and neat, dark, permed hair, remind her of Mutti. Life is full of small ironies. Is the female defendant a good home-maker, too, and a good cook?

Jo can't keep her eyes open. The stale air in the courtroom is sending her to sleep. As she's part of the furniture, no one will notice if she wedges herself upright against the back of the chair. Her head nods forward, her eyes close. Instead of the accused woman, she sees the image of Mutti the morning after she came to stay placing in front of her a plate of moist scrambled egg on toast. 'I enjoy doing this, dear,' she is saying. 'I miss my stove.'

That same morning, as Jo remembers it, when she grabbed her jacket to dash off to work, Mutti kissed her on the cheek and said, 'It must be nice to get out and earn a little pin money, dear.' Richard caught Jo's eye and winked. As he helped her on with her jacket, she promised herself that before Mutti went home she'd explain that she earned serious money now, in fact more than her beloved son, even though it might disturb her view of the order of things.

Richard that first summer hadn't told many of their friends that Mutti was coming to stay but he had let Eleanor know, and Jo had invited her over for soup and sandwiches on the Saturday after she arrived. As they were introduced to each other, Jo noticed Richard visibly wince as Mutti said in her Midlands accent, 'Nice to meet you, dear.' She almost smiled at his silly embarrassment, then she realised how Eleanor, with her natural poise and confidence, could adjust herself to any company when she immediately turned on the charm.

In the afternoon, just as she was saying goodbye, Eleanor suggested that the next day they bring Mutti along to a lunch party she was organising for the Colonial Dames of America, or some such thing, but Richard said he'd planned a drive up to the Blue Ridge Parkway. Jo was disappointed. She would have been amused to get Mutti's reaction to Roman.

After Eleanor left, Mutti said to Jo, 'She looks after herself well, dear - and I liked her purple trousers.' Jo half-smiles, thinking how tenderly Eleanor had cared for her body at The Homestead, smearing on perfumed and pastel-tinted creams. She now wonders whether Mutti had sensed the threat Eleanor posed.

When Mutti had been with them a week, Richard suggested that in a couple of days he would drive them up to Toronto. In the 1950s a cousin of Mutti's had gone to live there and she might like to call to see her for a day. It would fit in with the route

he was planning. It was typical of him that, though it was a spur-of-the-moment decision, the week worked well.

On the first day, at the end of the four-hour drive to New York, he'd called over his shoulder to his mother, 'How about the Waldorf Astoria?' Sitting next to him and picking up his mood, Jo realised he meant it and succeeded in map-reading him through the grid-locked five o'clock traffic to Park Avenue. Mutti, burbling happily about how the streets reminded her of Eleanor Powell in *Broadway Melody* in the 'forties, didn't seem aware of the danger of their car veering sharply across the five-deep traffic lanes and screeching round corners. Richard was a reckless and unpredictable driver at the best of times.

When they pulled up outside the hotel, with his usual panache, Richard handed the car keys of the old Chevrolet to the doorman and wandered in to the reception desk. 'We have only the Astor suite available, sir,' Jo heard the clerk say to him, 'but if it's just for a night you can have it for the price of two double rooms.' It was a good start to the trip.

The following day though, when late in the afternoon they reached Mystic and managed to find two rooms in a motel overlooking the seaport, Jo was feeling more tired and tense than she had done for weeks. She suggested Richard should take Mutti on one of the steamboats. She'd have a rest as she had a slight headache.

She remembers slumping down in a deckchair on the veranda outside the room, watching them walk off to the harbour. She was feeling swamped with self-pity and found herself shaking and shuddering in spite of the heat. Perhaps it was some sort of hormonal imbalance that hadn't yet settled.

She must have fallen asleep and woke up with a start when she heard the boards creak. They'd come back sooner than she'd expected. As she stood up, Mutti put an arm around her waist. 'We're back, dear,' she said softly. 'The sea was lovely and calm.' Jo was still drowsy but sufficiently awake to realise from Mutti's tone that Richard must have told her about the miscarriage. She remembers the tears coming into her eyes, but she'd stiffened her face and looked away.

It wasn't until the next day, when Richard decided they should stop for the night at Ogunquit, that she decided to tell Mutti the story herself. She'd never been good at pretending to ignore things that were on her mind. She was better when she could talk to someone. Dear Mutti, the day they were married she'd said to her, 'I'm

looking forward to my first grandchild. Perhaps it will be a girl.' Nine years on it hadn't yet happened.

In the late afternoon Richard had gone for a last dip, leaving them sitting on the sun-drenched beach. She'd stretched out on her back on the warm sand and watched him swim strongly towards a small raft. Here was her opportunity.

'I'm not sure how much Richard's told you,' she said, not knowing where to begin. Mutti patted her hand and said, 'Go on, dear. You tell me.'

Jo remembers that she tried to keep her voice even and distinct and drew her eyes away from Mutti to look out to sea. 'Two months ago we went with Eleanor, Roman and their boys on a weekend canoe trip on the Shenandoah. We stayed for two nights in a wooden hut a friend lent us. Richard on our first evening was like a small boy at camp cooking the barbeque, dancing around the flames, flipping steaks and chops and sausages on and off the grid.

'On the Sunday we planned to picnic down river below the rapids. The hire company told us we could easily paddle through them in their aluminium canoes. We took Thomas, who'd just turned five, in our canoe, plus the picnic hamper.

'We let the current carry us along at first. Then we rounded a bend and saw a churning mass of water ahead, with rocks poking up everywhere. Thomas squealed in delight and I liked the thrill of the gathering speed. But Roman's canoe hit a boulder and overturned and we crashed into it behind him. When we scrambled to our feet we were waist-deep in water and had to fight to stay upright. We were okay though, only a few cuts and bruises. In true British style, afterwards we sat on the bank and ate soggy sandwiches.'

Mutti by then had put her arm around her shoulder and drawn her tightly against her. It was one of the many things Jo loved about her: she was a spontaneous hugger, something Sarah never had been.

Jo remembers hesitating, then going on in a flat voice, 'Three days later, I lost the baby. I was only just over two months' pregnant, so it could have been worse.'

'I had two miscarriages between Richard and Clive, darling,' Mutti said. 'It's not the end of the world. There'll be another chance.'

She was tearful again as she sat closely by Mutti watching Richard, wet and gleaming, stride towards them.

Jo hears Norm give a low, sharp cough and becomes aware that she's about to topple sideways from her chair. She tries to concentrate on the lawyer who is asking questions of a plump woman in a fur-collared coat. He peremptorily turns her down for the jury panel. Jo watches a fly crawl across her notebook but decides she will draw attention to herself if she swats it. A heavily made-up red-head in a tight woollen dress is questioned briefly before being directed towards the jury box. She's obviously passed the test. As the girl sits down, Jo notices the man next to her smoothing down his hair with one hand and picking his nose with the other. She looks away.

She glances up at the clock. It is only three o'clock. She must try not to doze off. She starts doodling in her notebook: a canoe, a small square hut, a little stick man dancing around flames. The hot courtroom makes her think of how it felt to wake up sweating and giddy the third night after they arrived back at Warbler Place. Richard had been curled up with his back to her in a deep sleep and she tried not to disturb him, even though her stomach was starting to heave. Flailing around in the rapids hauling Thomas to the bank had not been sensible.

When she tried to swing her legs out of bed, she found she had cramp in her right calf. She reasoned that if she stood up she might feel less nauseous, but once her feet touched the ground she had to run for the bathroom. She didn't make it as far as the sink. Clutching at the bathroom door, she cried out, then toppled forward, knocking over a vase, which shattered. When she came to, she had a sharp pain in her hand and there seemed to be blood everywhere.

The next clear memory she has is of sitting on the loo drinking a mug of hot tea Richard must have made for her. The tea took away the bitter taste of vomit and the warmth of the mug was comforting. Richard was dabbing the cut on her hand. He wanted to call a doctor but she insisted he didn't. She knew she'd lost the baby and there didn't seem much point. She'd gone over the scene in her mind many times, but it was only after she told Mutti about the canoeing accident that she began to question whether that was the sole cause of the miscarriage.

Opening their mail late on the Sunday night after they'd driven home from the Shenandoah she'd had a row with Richard. She wished she hadn't seen the letter from their bank in England just then: their joint account was £5,000 overdrawn and the manager was asking what they intended to do about it.

'There must be a mistake,' she'd started to say, passing the letter to Richard.

He'd replied without hesitating, 'Well, we run two cars, and there's the horses. The tennis club doesn't cost much but my University Club fees are quite a bit more than I expected. Then, we've had more than enough visitors this year.'

'But we can't pay back £5,000 if I stop work in a few months.' She could hear her voice rising. Two years ago they'd bought their cottage in Dorset for £9,000, borrowing the £1,000 deposit from Adam: to be £5,000 in debt made her feel ashamed of their lifestyle.

'Oh, you worry too much,' Richard had said with a lift of his eyebrows, a gesture that caused her to snap and call him, among other things, a self-indulgent shit. She couldn't remember what she'd said after that, but she ripped the letter into pieces and threw the pieces in his face before stumbling downstairs in tears. She'd lain in bed that night rigid with anger but determined not to say a word more to him.

She finds herself staring impassively at the animated lawyers who are still asking their endless questions. Then she looks at the stolid defendants. What games people play, she thinks, revealing only what will make life easiest for them.

She must have sighed out loud. She's thinking again of Richard and Eleanor, wondering where you cross the line between jealous rage and murder. The accused woman sitting by her lawyer has stopped whispering in his ear and is watching her. She studiedly looks down at her notebook and begins to doodle a lacy design for a skimpy pair of knickers.

Now she isn't sure what she resents most: the money Richard lavished on Eleanor or the long nights she spent alone waiting for his return. Insomnia meant watching repeats of films on television. She's seen *Catch-22* four times and *The Godfather* and *MASH* three times each; all that overdone masculinity and blood. She never wants to see a single scene from any of them again.

Jealousy apart, she doesn't entirely blame Eleanor for the affair, especially after their strange lunchtime get together when Eleanor confided that, from the start of their marriage, Roman took it for granted that she would condone his infidelities.

Besides, she stupidly thought it would be good for Richard to have a friend like Eleanor who was worldly and charming: as he'd grown up in the male world of a boys' school and the army, it would teach him more about women.

Five minutes later the woman is still looking across at her with her impassive gaze and the lawyers' voices drone on and on. Jo can feel a nerve jumping in the lid of her right eye. She determinedly looks down at her notebook, trying not to catch the woman's gaze. She puts her hand to her cheek and feels that the skin is burning. She is angry with herself for being naive enough to have accepted Richard's excuses that he was working late or playing squash at the club with Roman. He's shown himself to be such an accomplished liar that she'll find it difficult ever to believe anything he now tells her.

She remembers watching him dance with Eleanor to the tune of 'Miss Otis Regrets' the first time Roman took them to F. Scott's. He had seemed stiff and awkward, even though he was a good dancer. Eleanor, she felt, would teach him a few graces.

'Let me order you Chivas Regal,' Roman had said, paying no attention to the dance floor and looking at her closely, 'much better for the stomach than those bubbly cocktails.'

'Okay,' she'd replied, watching in the mirror behind him as the tail-coated waiter sashayed towards their corner table.

'Don't you love this place?' Roman had said. 'It's in a 1930s' time-warp, with its shiny black and chrome and the mirrors. It reminds me of bars in Belgrade I visited as a student in the fifties, though they were shabbier. When I watched American movies, places like this seemed to me the peak of New World sophistication. I'm a romantic at heart, Jo. I went to see *Traviata* at the Belgrade national opera thirty times. I was infatuated with the soprano who sang Violetta.'

According to Richard, it was on their second visit to F Scott's that Eleanor had told him she remained living with Roman only for the sake of the boys. When the music, whatever it was, stopped, Eleanor had left her arms around Richard's neck and whispered, 'You know, I think I'm in love with you.' He said he'd been confused and pleased and embarrassed all at once. Jo believed him. It was the sort of thing, in the

back of her mind, she imagined herself saying to Gavin. Perhaps she should have tried neat Chivas Regal to loosen her inhibitions.

She wonders now though, had Eleanor really made all the running?

Jo squints across at the woman defendant. She is still whispering to her lawyer. In the days that follow she will be accused by the prosecution of being ruthlessly manipulative, yet sitting there she looks decidedly frail and in need of protection. She realises how little she learnt from Sarah about feminine guile. She can't imagine that Sarah twisted Adam round her little finger. In the margin of her notebook, she sketches the outline of a curvaceous doll in a black basque and fishnet stockings, smiling to herself as she tries to picture Sarah as a *fêmme fatale*.

There is a shuffling noise from the raised wooden bench behind her. Norm must be getting to his feet. Twelve members of the jury have finally, tediously been sworn in and it is almost five o'clock. They can all go home. The trial will probably last a couple of weeks and she'll learn more from Don, she thinks, as she watches the police officers lead the couple away.

She has forgotten how slowly the rush-hour traffic crawls along and by the time she arrives home she feels brain-dead. The first priority is to go downstairs to light the fire. It will make the large room, with its angular sofas in the bright shade of blue she dislikes and the nasty varnished bookshelves, seem cosier. Filled with people though the room cheered up. She sets light to the paper under the logs and remembers how it looked the previous winter when they'd invited a dozen or so friends, including Eleanor, to come back for hot punch after a day's hunting. Richard had been standing with his back to the fire, relating how the four of them who'd stayed on with the Master had cleared a four-foot-six fence and then jumped a vast hedge into woodland. She'd smiled to herself: she had been there, too, and the fence had been barely three-feet high and the hedge even smaller.

She goes up to the kitchen to peel potatoes and mix a salad, telling herself that most people would admire Richard's knack of re-ordering facts to make a good story. Roman too used to say that the truth was relative. Perhaps Eleanor felt the same: she'd been happy to put herself forward as the loving wife of a devoted husband knowing full well Roman was having an affair with his partner's wife. Jo shakes her

head. She wants something more from marriage. She couldn't put on an act of bright, superficial cheeriness and do the domestic bit as a substitute for happiness. She'd prefer to live alone.

By the time Richard arrives home, the table is laid with candles and the meal is almost ready: the rituals of the ordinary. It isn't a bad way to pass an evening, eating grilled sole and drinking cheap and cheerful Gallo wine, listening to Richard telling her about his day. He's a good listener, too, and she tells him what happened in court. She enjoys his laughter. It's not bad being back, especially if she doesn't think too much about last year.

It is midnight before she goes to bed as she needed to spend a couple of hours dictating tapes. Richard has fallen asleep in bed watching television, and he's rolled over on his side, taking the sheets and blankets with him. She pulls at the bedclothes and slides in next to him. Curling up behind him with her hands tucked between her knees, she tells herself she shouldn't have worked so late. Her thoughts are chasing each other around in a meaningless whirl. She feels like the small girl who rode on the back of Sarah's sit-up-and-beg bicycle, her arms clutched tightly round her waist, being pedalled up hill to her convent school. Perhaps the school was to blame for her stupidity now. They were taught a lot about leprosy and the importance of being modest but very little about men.

As she falls asleep, she thinks of Sarah's fair hair blowing in her face while she clings on behind her, hearing her breathing grow more laboured as the hill becomes steeper. Now Sarah has turned into the honey-coloured monkey high up on the rope bridge across the tree canopy in Borneo. Jo is willing herself to walk along the slats as the walkway swings violently from side to side with each step forward. She stops, rigid with fear, then she notices the monkey perched on the side rope watching her. She is charmed by its slender arms and huge eyes. She wants to put out a hand to stroke its delicate fingers and the long blonde hairs on its arm and she knows it wants to touch her, too. Her fear vanishes.

From somewhere in the crescent a dog barks and disturbs her dream. She comes to feeling bereft. She thinks of how luminous Sarah's skin was the night she died and remembers the little golden hairs on her arms. Richard's snoring reminds

her of the rattle in her throat as she lay dying. She had breathed in rasps, and then the noise had stopped.

Tears are running down her cheeks. She should have laughed off Sarah's inability to conform and her desire at times to shock. If only they could have talked frankly. But was it all her fault? She thinks of the flip, cynical comments Sarah used to make. She remembers when she was a teenager hearing her say to her friend, Phyl, 'Oh, men and sex. Sometimes I think it's no more to them than scratching an itch.' She was shocked and feared that Phyl would be shocked, too.

Richard turns over and places his hand across her thigh. For once she finds it comforting.

Chapter 15

A new outlook

1

Jo is only just awake. She turns on her side to see Richard standing naked at the bathroom door, towelling his hair. Watching him reminds her of the weekends he came to stay at the flat she shared with Trish in Primrose Hill. On Sunday mornings she'd lie stretched out among rumpled bedclothes, her hair spread across the pillow. He took pleasure in her long hair and had been disappointed when she had it expensively cut after they arrived in the States. He liked to believe in her apparent fragility and long hair played a part in the image.

She sees him saunter over to the wardrobe. His back is well muscled; he is confident of his body. Many women would find him more attractive than Gavin, she realises. She wonders whether Gavin wears pyjamas, or does he sleep naked like Richard?

The carved eagle Gavin dumped on her for Roman is still in the plastic bag under her dressing table. Somehow she must deliver it. Should she phone Eleanor and suggest lunch so she can hand over the bird? She isn't certain she wants to see her. Back home in England she almost began to believe what Richard had told her: whatever he felt for Eleanor was in the past. But what about Eleanor? If she split up from Roman, what would she have left? She thinks of their awkward lunch in November and Eleanor saying with a tight smile, 'Of course, a woman without a man in this city is a nobody.'

Richard is now sitting on the end of the bed, his back bent forward pulling on his socks. It frightens her to realise she's known him half her life. She even remembers the dress she was wearing when they first met: silver-green, with a scooped neck and a flared skirt. She sighs into the pillow; from the start she and Richard had the illusion they were made for each other.

She thinks how motley memory is. She'd almost forgotten how trapped she'd felt during the first months of their marriage in the sparsely furnished flat in a remote German village. She would sweep and polish under some terrible compulsion,

reacting against the disarray she'd been living in with Trish in London. With their mutual dislike of housework, the third-floor flat in the grimy Victorian terrace looked like a junk shop, with bits and pieces they'd acquired from Sarah and various friends.

Jo fumbles around on the bedside table for the alarm clock. It is just after eight. Drifting back into sleep, she isn't aware that Richard has come round to her side of the bed and is watching her as he buttons his shirt.

'No, I haven't gone back to sleep,' she says, smiling up at him. 'I just wanted these last precious minutes in bed.'

She reaches out to lift her dressing gown from the chair. She'll go upstairs and prepare breakfast. As she bends down to plump up the pillows, she notices his face, freshly shaven and shiny, reflected in the dressing-table mirror. He is frowning as he looks at himself.

'Can I help?' she says, watching his fingers pick at a fluke in his tie.

He sighs.

'Anything the matter?' she asks.

'No, no.' He says, blinking, looking confused. 'No, nothing.'

After he's left for work and she's cleared away the debris of breakfast, she leafs through the magazines which have piled up on the kitchen bookshelf. Most of them can be probably be dumped. As she moves the heavy pile to the table, an orange Kodak envelope slides to the floor. She picks it up. These are probably the photographs Richard took on their trip last October to the West Coast. Perhaps these, too, should be thrown away.

She hadn't been that enthusiastic when, at Eleanor's birthday party at the end of September, Roman suggested they should join him at his conference in Las Vegas: he could write off the cost of their flight against expenses, he said. They would travel on to the Grand Canyon, Phoenix, Palm Springs, Monument Valley and San Francisco. They'd do it in style and hire a Cadillac coupé. Eleanor chipped in, saying that it would be good to have her company while Roman was at his meetings. Afterwards, on the way home, Richard told her a holiday would do her good; she'd been working too hard.

Jo pours herself another coffee and sits down at the kitchen table, slipping the photographs out of their envelope. The first one was taken inside the gaudy airport lounge at Las Vegas. When she'd stepped outside, she'd recoiled at the bright lights and cheap, garish decoration. In the cab to their hotel she sat between Roman and Richard, and as it cruised along streets lined with electric advertisements she'd pointed out how Roman's profile was shining green, then red and blue.

When he was at his meetings in the day-time, the three of them would lie on sun-beds by a turquoise pool ringed with palm trees in a confluence of sweat and skin lotion; and this was where Richard had taken the first photos. She flicks through them and comes to one of Eleanor diving into the pool perfectly, professionally, neatly. In the next one she and Eleanor propped up on their elbows reading their books. She recalls she was reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and had remarked to Richard in bed that night how Eleanor's careful little attentions were very Clarissa Dalloway. A few days later she'd lent her the novel, wondering whether she would see the similarities.

She looks at the photograph again and sees that Richard has focused on Eleanor's neat bum encased in the tight black swimsuit. There was no suggestion of cellulite on her thighs and probably never would be. She remembers the matching black robe with the orange and red motifs swirling around it. It looked Mexican but would have been by some expensive designer like Cardin.

After Roman joined them for lunch that day, he took the next photograph of Richard standing between herself and Eleanor, an arm tightly circling the waist of each of them. Was he by then claiming both of them for his harem?

There are quite a few shots of the Grand Canyon and she quickly glances through them. But she herself took the photo a day or so later on the terrace of the Phoenix Sheraton. The three others are sitting nursing their *pina coladas*. It reminds her how sick she'd grown by then of hotel food and the quantities of alcohol they were swilling down. She had a strong awareness of excess, probably inherited from Sarah.

The final few are of Eleanor's aunt's house, an elaborate *hacienda* in thirty-acres of orange grove in Rancho Sante Fe, their final stopping place. In every photograph Richard has taken, Eleanor is smiling like a contented cat. As her aunt was away travelling in Europe, she was presiding as mistress of the house and authority had passed to her.

There is not one of the last evening, but Jo has replayed that evening in her mind many times. To wash down the hot, creamy *chile rellenos* Eleanor had prepared, they'd drunk three bottles of a rich Claret from her aunt's cellar and ended up in that happy state of being elated but not incoherent. Then Eleanor suggested a walk up the hill to her favourite viewpoint across the valley and out over the sea.

When later they'd strolled back past the other cream and terracotta villas, they'd linked arms and danced in step together. Eleanor then made them halt while she pointed to the garden where, as a child, she'd found the remains of her Siamese cat. A coyote had eaten every scrap apart from its head and tail.

Afterwards Jo had walked on ahead with Roman. He'd wanted her undivided attention as, for once, Eleanor had been doing all the talking. When they reached the house, he'd unlocked the front-door and turned towards her to take her elbow to steer her into the hallway. She recalls how, as they glanced back at the outline of Eleanor and Richard walking down the drive, his body had stiffened.

'Goodnight,' Eleanor had said, giving her a hug. Then Richard had taken her hand and they'd walked away from the other two, down the long corridor to their twin-bedded room in the east wing.

Jo drinks down the dregs of her coffee and stares into the bottom of her mug. It seems extraordinary now that she wasn't aware of the tension on the tedious journey back, though she did remark to Richard that Eleanor and Roman hadn't said a word to each other during the long flight.

On the Monday, the first day back after the trip, the telephone had rung while she was getting dressed for work and it was Roman: 'Your husband's suitcase is being delivered to my office shortly after nine. Tell him to come to pick it up.'

'Okay, thanks,' she'd said drowsily, still half-dazed after the flight. Richard was in the loo reading the newspaper, and she'd called out to tell him that his suitcase, mislaid when they changed planes at LA, had turned up. She added that Roman sounded curt, but perhaps she'd imagined it.

Roman telephoned a second time, just after nine when she was rushing out of the house to drive to court. She'd said quickly, 'Sorry. Richard's left.'

'I wanted to speak to you, Jo,' Roman said. His accent was more clipped than usual. 'Your husband's been having an affair with my wife. After our walk that night, when I turned back to look at them, I saw him kissing her.' She almost laughed: he sounded so much like a stereotype Slav. None of this was real. A bad, disconnected dream.

'You must have made a mistake,' she replied.

'No mistake.' He paused. She thought she heard another voice in the background. 'Your husband's here. I have to see him.'

Ridiculously, all she was able to think of was that she now barely had time to drive to Alexandria for the sitting at ten, so she'd grabbed her jacket and rushed out of the door.

She remembers that it was a tedious day in court and when she arrived home she had to get ready to go out again. They were expected at yet another party, this time for the opening of the Washington horse show. Richard was already in his dinner jacket waiting for her. She rapidly changed into a black skirt and lacy top, telling herself it would have to do.

Once in the car, she made a straggling attempt at small talk with Richard, then asked abruptly, 'Well, how did it go with Roman?' She glanced at his face, but his expression gave nothing away.

He answered matter-of-factly, 'Roman's being silly. An overwrought imagination.'

She left it there. She asks herself now, was this out of cowardice?

She can't remember much about the dinner that night. The evening, like the day's note-taking, passed as if she was in a dream. She wanted to believe Richard; she'd always believed him before.

They'd arrived home around eleven and, as she was sitting on the edge of the bed taking off her stockings, the phone had rung again. She couldn't think who would ring them at that time of night. Perhaps it was something urgent for Richard. But it was Roman at the other end of the line, who said: 'Jo, Eleanor's gone. I was maybe too hard.'

She'd wanted to crawl into bed and hide from what was going on. His voice sounded hoarse, as if he'd been crying. She steadied her own voice, trying to sound more sympathetic than she actually felt: 'Let me get Richard. I'll have to put the receiver down.'

Richard was upstairs in the kitchen pouring himself a whisky. He didn't want to speak to Roman. He knocked back what was in his glass, then muttered, tight lipped, 'I know where she might be. Tell him I'll drive over and speak to her.'

She remembers thinking, what have they done, these two men, to this woman? And of course it involved her, though she still felt strangely detached from what was happening, as if she was reporting a case in court.

The days that followed ran into each other now. At one moment she'd be shouting at Richard, throwing things and sobbing uncontrollably. At another she felt coldly logical. She smiles as she thinks of the heavy soapstone ashtray still on the table in the hallway that she flung at him. It didn't break and he carefully put it back on the table. But she felt much better afterwards.

When did Richard tell her it was at Georgie's flat that he'd found Eleanor sprawled on the sofa with three bottles of codeine lined up on the coffee table? She can't remember, but she thinks it was shortly after that that she began to let herself be talked round. Bizarrely, over the weeks that followed she was slowly drawn into a conspiracy with Richard and Eleanor to shield Richard from Roman, who in their eyes had become the villain of the piece. And this was in spite of the rows she was still having with Richard.

As she puts the photographs back in the Kodak envelope, she realises that half an hour has gone by, and in such a useless way, raking over the same memories. To what end? At least it's made her aware that she's no longer fixed in resentment and hostility towards Richard. At the moment she's looking back on these months more with curiosity than pain.

Downstairs, sitting at the dressing table to put on her lipstick, she runs her fingers over the repoussé cherubs on the hand glass, a wedding gift from Kit. She picks up the silver mirror and looks closely at the lines of tiredness around her mouth. But Kit used to say that you never see yourself properly in a mirror: so much depends on the mood you're in.

She's smiling now, remembering the day Richard's parents came to Forest Corner for lunch. From one of the many recipés Kit used to cut out and send Sarah,

they had whipped up a salmon mousse. As Jo picked up the laboriously garnished dish to set it on the table, the doorbell had rung. The dogs rushed past her, nearly tripping her up, and she'd dropped it. She'd hurried to the door to let Richard and his parents in, while Sarah said a prayer and scooped it off the floor and back into the mould, before turning it out again.

She is still sitting in front of the mirror, remembering how no one was any the wiser, apart from Adam, who said afterwards that he'd nearly choked on some dog hairs, when the phone rings. She stretches over to the bedside table to pick it up.

'Hi,' she says, thinking it's Dee, her typist, letting her know she'll be late collecting the tapes. It's just gone nine-thirty.

'Who am I speaking to?' a woman's voice says. Jo doesn't recognise the voice.

'Jo, Jo Caswell. Perhaps you have the wrong number?'

'It was Richard Caswell I was trying to get hold of. Roman said I might catch him at home before ten. Ask him to give me a ring? Barbara Halpern - he knows my number.'

The door bell is now ringing. 'I'll tell him,' Jo says.

2

Twenty minutes later, when Dee has left with the tapes, Jo sits down in front of her IBM in her office - the spare bedroom - to transcribe the final section of her notes.

The shorthand is shaky as she'd been huddled with the lawyers below the judge's bench trying to catch their whispered discussion. She needs to put the woman's phone call to the back of her mind and decipher her notes, but she's feeling fidgety.

She fetches yet another coffee to help her concentrate, but still sits there staring at her notepad. The woman's phone call brings back memories of those weeks in October and November, that time of limbo, or was it purgatory? She confuses the two; you were stuck in one but could move on from the other.

At times she'd felt as if serpents were writhing inside her. Mood swings had become the norm. Once she'd even told herself she shouldn't be jealous of Eleanor: she'd lost interest in making love to Richard, so why shouldn't he have looked

elsewhere? She's still bothered by the thought that their other friends had known of Richard's affair, perhaps even found it amusing.

During those two months of revelations, Richard had put himself out to be solicitous, buying her flowers and taking her out to lunch and trying all the time to explain how the affair with Eleanor had come about, as if he was sharing it with her. She'd learnt a lot about men at that time and perhaps about herself, too.

She reads a few lines of her shorthand, then puts her notepad down again. She's dithering and not getting anywhere with making sense of the transcript. Too many thoughts are churning around in her head. She picks up the phone. She wants to hear from Richard's lips who the hell this woman is.

'Hello, darling.' He sounds as if he is speaking from a far-off planet. 'I have a meeting in five minutes. Make it quick.' That well-tailored confidence, but the sound of his voice soothes her. It usually does.

'A woman rang,' she says. 'A Barbara Halpern.'

There is silence at the other end of the line. Richard isn't usually lost for words.

'Look, darling, I'll be home for lunch,' he says hurriedly, before going on to ask, 'Roman hasn't rung you, has he?'

'Should he have? I can't believe he wants to keep in touch,' she replies a little too loudly.

Richard's tone is bright. 'Perhaps it's best if I come back now. The meeting isn't that important.'

She puts down the phone and stares out of the window. It is still frosty but she needs some fresh air.

Downstairs she finds her anorak hanging on the back of the bedroom door where she left it three months ago. She slides open the glass panel onto the patio and the cold air blasts in, making her catch her breath.

Outside the garden is quite dead. There isn't a bud to be seen on the clumps of azaleas and rhododendrons which last spring were vibrating with oranges, purples and pinks. In England, she thinks, the snowdrops are out now and the witch-hazel.

Whatever story Richard is going to construct for her, she'll have trouble believing him. She's lost a great many illusions about him. All at once she finds herself clenching her fists in a wild, furious rage. She can't face more carefully arranged half-truths.

The neighbour's ginger cat spots her standing on the terrace and jumps down from the wall. When it starts to push its head against her legs, purring, she bends down to scratch it behind the ears. She feels less agitated stroking its fur, but soon it stalks off, arrogant and content.

She decides that she won't wait for Richard. Whatever he has to say he can say later. She'll take the Volkswagen and drive to Great Falls. She wants to walk along the river to the platform by the cataract. What were quiet, calm pools in the summer will be roaring, thundering torrents, smashing satisfyingly past the rocks.

As she turns to go back inside to pick up the car keys, she sees Richard in the bedroom, standing by the glass door watching her. He must have broken all the speed limits to get here so quickly.

'I was coming to look for you,' he says, stepping outside and taking her cold hands. He holds them to his chest and smiles placatingly. He looks anxious, almost defeated, not at all like the Richard she thinks she knows.

'I should have told you,' he says, 'but it was over long ago.' He is giving her that sincere look that comes so easily to him.

He leads her back inside and she finds she is shivering. She's feeling shut off from him and cold and ungenerous.

'I'll pour us a drink,' he says.

He keeps hold of her right hand as they walk upstairs. She notices, looking down at the hand imprisoning hers, that he's been chewing the skin at the side of his thumb again. Pinpricks of blood have formed on the raw flesh.

He lets go of her hand to lift two glasses from the cupboard and open the bottle of wine. She sees the rich gold colour of the liquid sway from side to side in the glasses as he carries them into the living room. He's opened the bottle of the Sonoma reserve, a present for his birthday from Roman and Eleanor.

As she slumps back into the deep chair and he places her glass on the table beside her, she doesn't look at him. Nor when he moves to the other side of the room and crouches down to put a match to the fire. How very cosy, she is thinking. He is taking charge, preparing his campaign. She watches him carefully now, half amused. It is like being back in court or at the theatre.

'It's all quite ridiculous,' he says as he sits down opposite her, studying the wine in his glass. 'It was part of Roman's labyrinthine plotting. Barbara was an old girlfriend he was trying to shelve off.'

He sounds almost angry, Jo thinks. She raises her eyebrows and continues to watch him: 'the women come and go;' *Prufrock*, Gavin's favourite poem. She imagines she's sitting in the stalls and Richard's on stage. His last couple of sentences have spun a good line. She almost claps.

'When I realised what I'd got myself into, I tried to break if off. Barbara's a journalist. Glamorous and tough, and I was flattered she found me attractive. Roman rang me in the office one day to suggest we should meet at F. Scott's for a drink on my way home. It was the summer Zoë and her friend were staying with us and you were hardly ever at home, driving them around to see everything you felt they should see. When I arrived at the bar, Barbara was with Roman, and after half an hour or so he said he had a patient to see urgently and left us together.'

Perhaps that was when the long nights of waiting for him to come home had started. It was probably as long ago as that, but she hadn't noticed at first. She remembers that Richard had practically ignored Zoë and her friend, which was upsetting as Zoë idolised him. She'd tried to make it up to her. They hadn't met anyone of their own age, so Jo was delighted when, on the girls' last Saturday, Norm's sixteen-year-old daughter had asked them to a party. She'd been an idiot about that, too. When she'd picked them up at ten o'clock, they'd been bursting with the news that everyone was smoking pot. If Sarah had ever found out about that, she'd have been horrified.

Jo glances across at Richard. He is watching her closely, trying to gauge her reaction. 'The following night,' he is saying, 'Barbara and I met for a drink after work, by ourselves. She invited me back to her flat and we finished up in bed.' He smiles wryly. 'I never knew it could be so easy.'

He seems to be trying to draw her into a conspiracy. Audience participation, she thinks. What is the impression he's trying to convey: that Barbara was an easy lay; that over here everyone leaps into bed with everyone else?

'Just like that,' she hears herself say. 'It started and it was over. So why did she ring today?'

He blushes. When he was younger, he blushed easily. She reaches for her glass of wine and takes a good swallow. The taste is excellent, full and dry. How is he going to get himself out of this one, she is thinking?

'I told you about the night at F. Scott's that summer when Eleanor was tipsy and confessed how miserable she was with Roman. That was the month after Roman

had introduced me to Barbara. I hardly knew Barbara, and Eleanor was, well, different.'

She is listening but it still feels like watching some remote piece of theatre. She is almost holding her breath, waiting for what comes next.

'We had so many visitors that summer I only ever had half your attention. Remember the SAS chap from Seattle who stepped off the plane clutching a salmon wrapped in layers of newspaper? I was jealous watching you dance with him at Hugh's party. He held you so tightly and didn't seem to want to let you go.'

He carries on talking. Richard is good at talking. Here are some missing bits of the jigsaw puzzle, she tells herself. Was it in October that he started sleeping with Eleanor, or before that? How could she, for over a year, not even have suspected they were having an affair?

Jo remembers the Friday morning in early September he'd come back after dropping off yet another visitor at Dulles *en route* to Honduras or some such place. He'd abruptly announced he couldn't face more guests and needed a weekend away by himself. Almost inaudibly he added that he planned to drive to Kentucky to see the thoroughbred races. She'd been too astonished to say anything, especially as their next visitor was Trish, arriving the following morning for just one night *en route* to Florida where her husband was on a photo-shoot.

She recalls the bleak bewilderment she'd felt. Before, Richard would have wanted her company in whatever he was doing, but the way he put it there was no room for argument. He even said he'd take the VW and leave her the Chevrolet to chauffeur Trish around. He seemed to imply that it was her fault: Trish was one guest too many.

She'd taken Trish to Georgetown for lunch on the Saturday and on the Sunday they'd driven to Mount Vernon. She'd joined in Trish's gossip about various old friends and laughed at the poly-photos of her naked breast she'd shown her. Her husband intended to use them for a Kodak advertisement. But Jo had felt relieved when on the Sunday night she'd dropped her back at Dulles, even though Trish hadn't questioned her lame excuse about Richard being in Kentucky helping a friend buy a

gelding. But she just hadn't been able to stop turning over in her mind what Richard had said before he left. It felt as if he'd slapped her hard across the face.

Driving back from Dulles, she was thinking that she'd probably find Richard already back home. When he wasn't there, she'd waited up for him, turning on the television to watch 'Madigan', another late-night thriller she never wants to see again. Around one o'clock, when it finished, she made herself a cup of tea, thinking who she could telephone. Then she told herself not to be silly and she changed into her nightdress. But she was still awake at five o'clock, that cold unforgiving time of the morning, when the phone rang.

'It's me, darling,' the voice at the other end said. 'There's been an accident. I'm okay. You mustn't worry. Unfortunately, the car's a write-off.' He was at a police station 200 miles from DC and had been allowed a quick call to let her know what had happened. Could she ring the office after nine to tell them he wouldn't be in till lunchtime?

After she put the phone down, she thought of the questions she should have asked. Then she just wanted was to see him to confirm that he was all right. She set the alarm for nine, hoping to get some sleep, but in the end she decided to get up and try to finish the transcript she was working on. Just before midday she dozed off, exhausted, on the sofa, and when Richard arrived home half an hour later he'd woken her.

Full of relief to have him home and in one piece, she'd jumped up and thrown her arms around his neck. She remembers how comforting it had been to feel his hand weighing in the small of her back. Then she happened to glance out of the window behind him and caught sight of the Volkswagen in the driveway, also in one piece.

'I thought the car was a write-off,' she said, puzzled, edging away from him.

'Oh, I hired a car,' he replied. 'I decided the VW wasn't up to the journey.' He'd made it sound so logical.

Listening to Richard now, she guesses they probably took Barbara's car, or perhaps he hired something flashy. Would his plans have stretched to a Cadillac, or would it have been something sporty but cheaper like a Mustang? Whatever it was, he'd have

driven. Like many men, he was convinced he could handle a souped-up car better than a woman.

She is trying to concentrate on what he is saying. He must be coming to the dramatic bit, the bit he left out before.

'You know the car flipped over and bounced on its roof.' There is a pause here. 'Later, at the hospital, a doctor told Barbara she'd ruptured a cervical disc and was lucky to be alive.'

Jo watches him as he comes over to sit on the arm of her chair, half lounging behind her. Her mind is numb. She's about to hear another of his stories excusing himself.

'My purpose in taking her away that weekend,' he goes on, 'was to tell her I couldn't carry on seeing her, but after the accident that wasn't an option. I asked Roman for his advice, which was stupid of me, but I couldn't think what else to do. He knew her better than I did, and he knew a good orthopaedic consultant.'

Jo wonders to herself, what frightful things men say to other men about women at such times? She half smiles: 'the women come and go.' Little did Roman know that Richard at that time was about to sleep with his wife, which was why he was trying to get rid of Barbara.

She looks at him sitting solidly opposite her, trying to make his story sound simple. The room is too hot. She can barely breathe. She picks up her glass, swigs back what is left of the wine and puts it back down on the table with a clunk. 'I'm getting the picture,' she says. 'Off with the old, on with the new.'

'It wasn't like that,' he says almost moodily. 'I never intended to get involved with Barbara.'

'What about Eleanor?' she asks, forcing a smile.

She suspects that he is tailoring the story with half-truths for her benefit and almost feels sorry for him. He seems perturbed and it is a moment before he carries on, as though he doesn't know how to express what he's about to say. 'But I haven't reached the end of the story. Roman rang me on Tuesday, the day before you arrived back. Barbara had called to tell him she was loosing the feeling in her right hand possibly due to a trapped nerve in her neck. The specialist puts it down to the crash eighteen months ago.'

'I'll go and make some sandwiches and you can pour me another drink,' Jo says with a nervous sharpness. She assumes Barbara's call was about more claims on

Richard's insurance. As she stands up, she lowers her gaze, not wanting to catch his eye. She doesn't feel hungry but can no longer sit there listening to him.

He follows her into the kitchen. She sighs as she watches him pour more wine. She has this fatal gift of seeing both sides of an argument. Perhaps for once Richard really does need her. As she spreads the butter on the bread, she asks him one more question: 'Does Eleanor even know Barbara exists?' It's one thing being a deceived wife, quite another a deceived mistress.

'No,' he says, giving her a sheepish look.

She laughs awkwardly, then says, weighing her words: 'Don't you think Roman will tell her now, if he hasn't already?'

'Yes, I think he probably will,' he says as he hands her her glass. 'I have made a balls up, Jo. I'm sorry.'

She still feels as if none of this is happening to her. She recalls a throw-away remark of Sarah's the day she married Richard: 'Don't expect too much of men. Don't cling too tightly.'

Chapter 16

Where does it end?

Standing by the window next morning, watching Richard drive away, Jo shrugs her shoulders and smiles. How absurd life is. Yesterday was a mess and she'd gone to bed detached from any feelings that could connect her to him. But today, out of habit, they picked up their old routine. They were up at six to drive to the stables and ride together. Richard's manner, for once humble and helpless, made her feel unexpectedly warm, even benevolent, towards him. He'd made her smile, too, reminding her of Norm's tale of how, as a young advocate defending a burglar, he'd pulled the man's pet Chihuahua from inside his jacket like a magician and handed it around the jury to soften their opinion. In spite of this, the client was convicted, but a woman juror put in an application to keep the dog. Jo remembers that Sarah used to rate a sense of humour above all else. It seems she listened.

After supper last night, Dee had delivered her part of the transcript, which Jo had had to check and index. She hadn't slept well after that as her mind was racing. Now, tidying up the kitchen, she feels tired, but she's amused by what she remembers of her last dream: she was in the chorus line at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, naked except for a G-string. Then she was alone on the stage. The night club crowd was roaring and she was expected to dance on and on. She's still smiling as she walks downstairs to shower and change out of her riding breeches.

When she's dressed again a glance at the wardrobe mirror reveals a trim woman in a satisfactory grey suit, but there is little colour in her face. She splashes on some scent and carefully applies her make-up, putting on her war paint, as Adam would say, before driving to the lawyer's office in DC to deliver the transcript.

Outside the Pennsylvania Avenue offices a uniformed parking attendant barks out a crisp, 'Yes, Ma'am,' as she hands over the car keys. On the twelfth floor the lift door slides open into the foyer, revealing windows from floor to ceiling and huge potted

palms in black glassy containers. Surrounded by all this grandeur, Jo feels confident and calm as she hands the transcript to the receptionist. The girl smiles and says, 'Do you have a minute, Mrs. Caswell?' Then she escorts her to the office of a woman lawyer she knows and coffee is brought in. Can Jo do a private job for them in a couple of weeks, affidavits in a high-profile divorce hearing? She's flattered to be offered the work.

This comforting feeling of belonging stays with her as she drives back home. She thinks that the name of the woman in the divorce case is familiar. Then she remembers she owns an art gallery in Georgetown. She went there with Gavin a year ago to look at a couple of Samuel Palmer etchings. By then it had become their routine to meet once or twice a month for little art excursions, followed by pastrami on rye and a jug of Sangria in a favourite bar.

Where did innocence leave off and guilt begin? She thinks of the sweltering day last July when Gavin drove her in his Mercedes to Annapolis to look at a rug he was thinking of buying. He was wearing a pair of purple jeans and a paler shirt, open at the neck. She had on a sleeveless sea-green dress and high-heeled shoes. She remembers, too, that she'd decided to wear her new black lace bra and matching knickers. What had she been expecting?

They found the barn the dealer traded from on the outskirts of town and were pleased to discover that the carpet was a faded but valuable Samarkand. The price was good, though Gavin, with a small smile playing around his lips, talked it down further. Afterwards they both laughed at the theatricality of the red-faced man's final surrender, when he sighed and threw up his arms. She pictures the slender silver pen Gavin pulled out of his top pocket to sign the cheque. Was it a present from someone?

They drove on to a small inn near the shore for lunch. As they sat down by a window, she smiled contentedly at Gavin and felt they were blending into the colours and shadows of the beamed room. She remembers how they leaned towards each other studying the menu. Then he grinned at her as they both noticed the couple at the next table holding hands and staring intently at each other.

Soon they were eating delicious mouthfuls of roast duck and drinking a light Californian wine, and she was enjoying the sensation of Gavin's eyes resting on her across the table. It was hot and airless in the inn. His sleeves were rolled up to the

elbow and he smelt warm and pleasantly sweaty. As she crossed and uncrossed her legs, they were slippery with sweat.

Afterwards they strolled to the shore, his hand lightly round her waist. Soon he pressed her close to him and she steadied herself against him. They stopped when they came to the sea wall and he lit two cigarettes, placing one between her lips. There they remained for several minutes looking out to sea, absorbed in nothing in particular. She started to wonder, as she had done many times, whether he could possibly be leading a celibate life.

On the journey home she was full of restlessness and indecision. Then just before the turning for his flat, he suggested she might like to come back with him for a drink; he'd bought a Billy Holiday record she'd enjoy. She loved his tiny flat on the Maryland side of the river, with the well-tended garden behind a high wall. It was on the ground floor of a nineteenth-century villa owned by Gertrude Stein's nephew. She hesitated, but how near she was to saying yes, and inevitably they would have made love. As always, he understood her instinctively and said quickly, of course she wouldn't have time; Richard would be home by now and waiting for her. She sensed he was aware that she wasn't trained in duplicity. It would cost her too dearly. They exchanged a quick smile and he put his hand on her knee as they drove on.

Jo is hardly conscious of having turned off the Beltway at the McLean exit and is pulling into the drive.

She remembers that over breakfast Richard had suggested coming home and taking her to lunch, but she hadn't wanted him to. It would have been too reminiscent of the pattern in the autumn when he was making an effort to smooth over his affair with Eleanor. Later, in the evening, they're expected at a duty party where they'll sit around little tables with people they don't know making polite conversation. Before that she'll soak in the bath, paint her nails and try to make herself feel more elegant, but just now she needs to be alone.

Once inside the house, she sighs thinking of Gavin back in England. No longer will he be at the tedious parties standing close to her, all gaiety and good breeding. She could sense when he came into a room, and he'd half turn his head and lightly wink at her.

As she pours a coffee, she glances around the dreary kitchen. The shock of Richard's latest muddled revelation is back in her thoughts. She wonders how he plans to get himself out of this mess, with or without her.

She walks downstairs to the bedroom, humming 'K-k-k-Katy' again. She carefully takes off her suit and steps into her jeans. Then the phone rings. She is holding her breath as she picks it up. She won't be able to stop herself being extremely rude if it's Barbara again. But instead it's Georgie; she hasn't given up. Would Jo care to meet up for coffee tomorrow? She and Eleanor are getting together at the tennis club.

Yes, Jo says too readily, with the idea that she'll hand over the eagle. It will be one thing tidied away. But when she puts down the phone and pictures Georgie with her little sideways smile, head leaning to one side, making eyes at Richard, she's as angry with her as she would have been with Barbara. Georgie, as usual, won't be able to resist talking loudly and instructively about herself.

She starts to pace up and down by the French windows. Tonight she will have to make an effort with strangers. And tomorrow she'll be meeting Georgie and Eleanor - what complicities, she wonders, are there between them? Perhaps they speculate about whether Gavin was her lover - and how much detail has Eleanor confided in Georgie about Richard? But Eleanor, like Sarah, has the ability to remain emphatically silent about certain things. She'll try to copy Eleanor and remain inscrutable.

She stops by the bow-fronted chest of drawers and runs her fingers over its soft, shiny surface. The surface of things, that's what's important. Estephania's polishing has brought out a deep mahogany gleam. She sits down on the still rumpled bed, opens the bottom drawer and pulls out the envelope containing Sarah's crimson album. No wonder her suitcase was so heavy. She has no hopes of the album revealing any long hidden secrets, but perhaps there's some small clue to help her see Sarah, and therefore herself, more clearly.

Like most teenagers, Jo had fought her mother steadily and relentlessly for some undefined freedom. The slender, bright Sarah she'd adored in her childhood hasn't come properly into focus for many years. And she can't bear to think of the shadow of Sarah in the hospital bed.

She opens the album slowly. How odd: on the first page Sarah has pasted a large sepia picture of West End Manor in the twenties, a professional photograph,

probably taken by estate agents when the Markhams put it up for sale. It was a beautiful house when it was still in one piece. Had Sarah visited it then, or had Kit given her the photograph so she could see what it once looked like? She must ask Adam one day what made them decide to buy their bit of the manor when it was divided into three.

On the following page is an equally large photograph of Elizabeth in a stable yard holding the bridle of her pony. This too must have come from Kit, but it seems strange that Sarah would have wanted to keep it. From Jo's memories of the house Sarah grew up in, her childhood couldn't have been remotely like Elizabeth's.

They may all be Kit's photographs and not Sarah's. Even in the act of putting together her album, Sarah has managed to be as elusive as ever. Jo remembers Kit showing her the next photograph, and she examines it closely. Sarah is standing self-consciously by a flower display with a rosette propped up in front of it. How young she is, Jo thinks, and how gauche.

The fourth photograph is familiar too, Sarah having placed a framed copy on the sideboard at Forest Corner. It shows Adam, Sarah and herself standing ankle deep in snow in front of some pine trees in Cyprus. She recalls the name of the nearby village, Platres, in the Troodos mountains.

Next, Sarah has stuck in a photograph of a chubby, grinning Zoë, a tuft of red hair sticking up like cock's comb, being bathed in the sink at Forest Corner. She remembers afterwards enfolding her slippery body in a fluffy towel. Zoë would hate any of her friends to see that photograph

She flicks through other photos of her sister and an array of Forest Corner animals; then there are blank sheets until the last few pages, where Sarah has pasted in three or four poems. The first one, 'Crossing the Bar', she can recite almost by heart. Sarah had asked her to read it at Kit's funeral. Perhaps she or Zoë should have read it at Sarah's funeral, too? No great ceremony, no regrets for me, Sarah would have said.

As Jo reads the final rhyme, copied out like the rest in Sarah's generously-looped, carefully formed writing and stuck inside the back cover, she finds herself wiping away the tears running down her cheeks:

'I close the book;
But the past slides out of its leaves to haunt me
And it seems, wherever I look,
Phantoms of irreclaimable happiness taunt me.'

Is this from the same period as the wartime verses Sarah copied onto scraps of paper, several of which she'd found tucked into the books she'd leafed through at Forest Corner?

She shuts the album and places it down on the untidy bed. Other people's lives are never fully comprehensible and each one of us has a different version of the truth. She half-smiles. Richard probably has several according to his audience. A chaotic sequence of pictures and words races through her head as the tears continue to roll down her cheeks. She remembers the smell of Sarah's skin, the warm, clean smell that seems to go with fair hair. Then she finds herself shaking her head and laughing.

As a child she'd been conscientiously concerned to make the right choices. She still agonises about the smallest decision, and look where it has landed her: slowly drowning in this swamp with Richard as each new revelation knocks her off balance.

The repeater carriage clock on the chest-of-drawers strikes the half hour. It is one-thirty. Two hours have gone by searching for the irretrievable, and she hasn't even made the bed. Looking for a key to Sarah is, as Kit would say, as useless as trying to knit fog.

Climbing the stairs to the kitchen, she feels she's stepping back into the present, but the sense of alienation from her surroundings won't leave her. This is what she let herself in for by marrying Richard: always on the move, living in places where she doesn't belong, in strangers' houses. Last night sitting at her desk in the spare room she remembered the night noises she found comforting at Forest Corner: the owls hooting, the cry of the vixen, the creek of the shifting rafters. The unseen presences, Kit would have called them; the spirits of those gone before who have come back to look after us.

She chops up and eats an apple and a piece of cheese before wandering back downstairs to make the bed. Does she really know where she stands with Richard? There's no Kit and no Sarah to give her advice – which she probably wouldn't have asked for in any case. But if she was back in England she might have phoned Trish for a heart-to-heart. Trish would have had something worldly-wise to say. It may not have been much use, but it would have given her something to think about. She can almost hear Trish laughing and saying, 'No more "Saint Richard", as I once called him.'

She resented it slightly that Trish hadn't come to Sarah's funeral, as she'd known Sarah for many years. During the school holidays, the first time she'd invited Trish home, she and Sarah had taken an instant liking to each other. They were both free spirits who didn't try to conform. Even though she was busy with her new baby, she could have made an effort.

It's after six-thirty in England. Gavin will be home by now. She wouldn't normally pick up the phone and ring him without a reason, but she could thank him for lunch last week and ask his advice about writing to Annie - though what can she possibly say to a woman whose husband has recently shot himself, and a woman she doesn't much like in any case?

Above all, she needs to hear a friendly voice, Gavin's voice. She smoothes down the duvet, placing Sarah's album back on the cover, perches on the edge of the bed and dials the number.

'Jo?' He sounds surprised.

'Just ringing to say thank you for the lunch,' she says too hurriedly.

'It was good to see you,' he says, but his tone lacks enthusiasm.

'I've been thinking about Annie. I should have written to her,' she blurts out, embarrassed now to have rung him. She waits for him to say something. Perhaps there's a break in the signal?

'Jo, I meant to tell you when we had lunch. Hugh and Annie were in the middle of a divorce when he died.'

The line seems to go dead again, but she carries on speaking, thinking aloud, 'But they hung on till they got back to England.' She is wondering whether this will happen with Richard and herself.

'Look, Jo, I also meant to tell you this. Once her children come to terms with what happened to Hugh, Annie and I are going to get married.'

Her mouth feels dry. She isn't taking in what he is saying, and she can't ask him to repeat it. 'Aren't people's lives ridiculous?' she hears herself say flatly.

'I wanted to explain to you about Annie and me.' She can hardly hear him. He seems to be gabbling now.

'I'm pleased for you and Annie,' is all she manages to say in a false, high voice.

'Thanks, Jo,' he replies, and she puts down the receiver slowly. She feels clumsy with incomprehension and stares at the phone. No wonder they never saw each other when she was back in England.

Her pulse is racing and her hand is shaking. 'In the room the women come and go.' Her hand brushes against the album lying on the bed. She forces herself to stand up. She has lost so many of the props she took for granted. Her life is collapsing, past, present and future. It is her fault. She is weak, stupid, worthless.

Her cheeks are burning. This sterile, charmless house wedged into its small garden is stifling. Has anyone, Sarah included, ever felt any real affection for her?

She smoothes over the duvet where she has been sitting, then changes into her corduroy jeans, hanging her suit up in the wardrobe. It is important to leave everything tidy. She pulls on a sweater and finds her red anorak and an old felt hat. She moves in slow motion with the languor of a swimmer pushing through water. Today she won't be deterred: she'll drive to the park and walk along to the river. It is a beautiful day, crisp and cold, with bright sunshine.

There are no other vehicles in the car park among the pines. She is pleased. She doesn't want anyone telling her it's unsafe to be walking here alone. She doesn't look at the trail map on the board as she knows her way. She's often ridden along the broad path parallel to the river, though it would have been risky to take a horse up the steep track to the cataract. It's a twenty-foot drop to the Potomac below.

Her hands and feet begin to ache with the cold, even though she's walking at a steady pace. If Richard were with her, he would pull off each glove in turn and chaff her white fingers to get the circulation going.

It is only ten minutes to the flat rock where they liked to picnic in the summer. The river had been low the last time they'd been there and she'd pointed out to Richard that the pools between the boulders looked like black glass with the sun reflecting on the surface. He'd talked of trying to swim across a clear stretch of the water to the Maryland side, but she'd persuaded him against it as the current was said to be strong.

She remembers something Kit said to her just before she married Richard: 'You're fortunate to be marrying the man you love. You know, I was never in love with Frank.' They were travelling on a bus together on the way back from lunch with Mrs. Markham and she can even picture the teal-coloured coat Kit was wearing. She'd said it so simply, matter-of-factly. After that she understood that Kit had hoped for little more than security and respectability when she married Frank. Were women of her generation more practical? Strangely, she finds herself thinking that Eleanor reminds her of Kit, with her clear, soft voice and apparent serenity.

What, Jo wonders, had Sarah hoped for from her marriage? She very much wants to believe she'd been happy with Adam. The night before she died in that bleak hospital, she'd whispered to her, 'Don't look so troubled darling. I've had a happy life. All of it has been worth while.' Had she said that just to comfort her? It would have been typical of Sarah.

She is angry with herself now. It was Sarah who once said something about the folly of desire. Neither Richard nor Gavin is what she built them up to be. She's lived with Richard for ten years, eaten with him, shared the same bed and the same bath, but for all she really knows about him, he might as well be a total stranger. And evidently she doesn't know a single thing about Gavin.

Perhaps she'd loved Gavin so easily because there was no commitment involved. She imagined he was high-minded, conscientious, trustworthy. He also understood her, or so she thought. A great deal of what she believed she knew about men has come from books written mostly by men, which might account for her fantasies about Gavin. But he'd encouraged her, paying her a great deal of attention.

She is almost at the river and the air is heavy and sweet with the smell of rotting vegetation. Nature's erasure. As she turns onto the path up to the cataract, she can hear the crashing of the confined water. Her arm brushes against the interwoven tree roots on the steep bank and she shudders as if some ghost has touched her. She is breathing unevenly and stops to blow her nose. Scrambling further up past the scrubby trees, her feet slip on fallen pine needles and her head hits a willow branch which, sheds dry flakes of snow onto her shoulders.

By the time she reaches the overhanging platform, tears are streaming down her face and she is shivering. She glances down at the angry water rushing over the rocks. At any other time she would have found the view across the boulder-strewn torrent sublime. She could do with a whiskey. It would warm her up and give her

courage. If only she carried a hip flask, like the Frenchwoman. Strangely, it is illegal to drink alcohol in a national park, but what about jumping in the river?

She stands motionless, looking down at the rocks. Between her and the river there is nothing but thin air. She notices a fallen tree trunk caught on a sharp boulder near the water. For a moment she sees it as a macerated body, perhaps even hers encased in her red anorak, draped like a veil over the rocks below. The body is a fragile construction. The limbs are easily detached. The river would wash it away bit by bit as the water rose and fell, until nothing was left.

The surface glistens greenly now as the sun catches it. As she watches the current rushing over roots of trees and pushing against the frozen bank, she is overcome by the feeling that she is different from everyone she knows, rejected, not good at living.

A crow flaps noisily from a pine tree further up the path. She looks up and sees a woman scrambling down the track towards her. A black Labrador is following her and for one instant she thinks the woman is Sarah. But of course it isn't Sarah. Sarah is dead. The woman has similar corn-coloured hair, but she is younger and is wearing an expensive Loden jacket.

'Hi,' Jo calls out. 'Cold day.'

The woman smiles back but says nothing as she continues picking her way down the path. Jo stares after her until she disappears between a rock and a bush still bright with berries.

Beyond the rock, further down the slope, the sun splinters through a filigree of spruce branches, and the dappled light on the trunk of a solitary silver birch catches her eye. The Queen of the Forest, Kit used to call the birch.

She throws her head back and looks up at the sombre splendour of the taller trees beyond, their branches sharply black against the sky. She feels small in this forest.

The icy day is almost over. For the first time, she is aware of a symphony of bird song. The thundering of the river can't quite drown out their singing. She doesn't know the names of these American birds but they can certainly make a huge noise.

She is sobbing uncontrollably now. The crumbs of life, that is what she's been left with. Sarah would tell her she must accept what she has and get on with it. But does she have the will to do so? Life is a lonely business.

She thinks of last night, when Richard shifted and turned on his back so she could lie against him, her hand on his shoulder. Perhaps he had found himself out of his depth with Eleanor and with Barbara. Perhaps he was led astray by Roman; perhaps not. Sarah once said something about real life being about accommodations, mistakes, foolishness. Is a patch of sunlight on the trunk of a birch tree all that is needed to make someone happy?

She watches the February sun move coldly across the brown flood-water. A pair of large birds wheels and drops towards the ravine. Harriers or perhaps even eagles. She thinks of the wooden eagle Gavin asked her to carry over. An ugly thing, but she might keep it for herself and send him the money.

The sky on the Maryland side is turning the colour of damp slate. She is drained of energy and freezing. She'll see what she can make of the next year with Richard but, after that, she does not know. Surviving the past couple of days has been her achievement for now.

the women come and go

Critical Commentary

Introduction

Prologue: Women at the Museum

In The Geffrye Museum of the Home, visitors are invited to walk through a corridor of room sets, taking them through the history of the English middle-class. The plush formality of the Victorian drawing-room gives little hint of the simpler, more utilitarian, labour-saving, blond-wood 1930s living-room that follows. Here, among the other visitors, middle-class women come and go, imagining how their mothers, grandmothers and other ancestors might once have lived and what they have left behind. More comings and goings are recreated in the London Transport Museum; here you can peer through a railway carriage window into a 'Ladies Only' compartment at two fashionable women of the 1920s dressed in cloche hats and swagger coats and carrying white gloves and clutch handbags, or brush against a mannequin wearing the long, thick, dark serge skirt suit, black tie and wide-brimmed hat of a female ticket collector in the First World War.

These scenes and set-pieces will be familiar to fans of the middlebrow novel, a genre pithily described by Nicola Humble as containing 'an enjoyable feminine "trivia" of clothes, food, family, manners, romance, and so on, with an element of wry self-consciousness.'[1] There is perhaps a wry self-consciousness in Humble's inventory, too, unsure whether to salute or apologise for the literature she describes.

The scenes were both familiar and haunting for me, as I looked back to examine how vastly the expectations of and pressures on young women had changed since I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, when the austerity following the Second World War still controlled our lives. Rationing remained in force at the time of the Coronation in 1953. The majority of us were still expected to marry in our early twenties and a career for a woman was considered of secondary importance. As I was

[1] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*, 2001 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.5.

growing up, I was, nevertheless, aware that my generation had more choices than my mother's. She and her friends were expected to return to the home and domestication after having held responsible jobs and enjoyed much greater independence during the war. However, her life had been less constrained than that of her mother, who was still subject to the moral and social codes carried over from the Victorian era. These generations became the adjacent living-rooms of The Geffrye Museum: in sequence and yet utterly unalike.

The one thing missing from those painstaking recreations of the home were voices to animate the figures and to resound through the camphor, taffeta and formica. Writing fiction can be defined as a search for a voice, 'a voice which will engage the reader, a voice which will express various aspects of the writer's perceptions … and which will encourage the reader to participate in those perceptions.'[2] Could the voice of a novel I wrote bring together these different generations, and animate those middle-class rooms? If my lived experience and inherited family history and creative imagination were not enough to fill those echoing spaces, could the pages of women's fiction help me ventriloquise the past? Could the women's fiction I read, like the mannequin in the London Transport Museum, be a historical resource?

Since Humble published *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* in 2001, and found in such novels 'a means to represent women's changing historical circumstances;' a fictive world 'concerned with the domestic and the personal;' a genre dealing with 'new class and gender identities,' 'class markers and manners' and 'the shifting fortunes and identities of the middle class,'[3] there has been growing critical reclamation of the middlebrow novel in literary and academic circles.[4]

This renaissance has made itself felt in the literary marketplace, too, in sometimes surprising ways: in the past ten to twenty-five years there has been a reclamation of this women's writing by best-selling British male novelists. Here is a generation who grew up reading the newly-published Virago editions of writers such as Rosamund

[2] Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-196*8 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.22.
[3] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism*, 2001 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 27, 3, 5 and 12.
[4] For instance, through the establishment by Professor Faye Hammill of Strathclyde University of the Middlebrow Network.

Lehmann, Rose Macaulay and Muriel Spark, perhaps reading women's fiction as curio, relic, or alternative tradition. In *Atonement* (2001), Ian McEwan has stamped his name, in a playful way, on this tradition of women's writing. He highlights his novel's immersion in the middlebrow fiction of the inter-war years in, for instance, the letter of rejection for his heroine's novella from Cyril Connolly, with its inclusion of comments from Elizabeth Bowen on the need for 'greater economy' of writing and for the 'underlying pull of simple narrative,' though she does concede that there are 'redeeming shades of' Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*. Briony, McEwan's heroine, may have wanted to be the next Virginia Woolf, but she is advised to settle for being Elizabeth Taylor.[5]

As a more direct response, Jonathan Coe in *The Rain Before It Falls* (2007)[6] has written what one critic describes as a 'story of mothers and daughters, of pain passed on through generations, and of deep and abiding loneliness,'[7] a work both directly and indirectly informed by Lehmann and her spiritualism. Here is a distinctly female tradition, absorbed and reworked. As a woman writer, I am not approaching the purpose and construction of my fiction in the same way as the male writers who are appropriating this legacy. I wanted instead, by making connections with a selection of texts that I felt closest to, to explore the unprecedented changes in the lives of women in the middle part of this century. I have created my characters and story in response to these, frequently middlebrow, texts, to gossip passed down to me by family and friends and to my own observation of other women's lives. Each of my characters in her era is living through shifting class and gender identities which offer them new opportunities and also challenge them in various ways, and I am narrating their lives through the personal and particular.

Forward into the years

In 'Forward into the Past', Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss twentieth-century women's fiction as writing that functions quasi-critically and refers to or revises female pre-texts; and writing that also implicitly critiques and explicitly pays a tribute

[5] Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, 2001 (London: Vintage, 2007), pp. 313-14.
[6] Jonathan Coe, *The Rain Before It Falls* (London: Penguin, 2007)
[7] Patrick Ness, 'Only the lonely', *Guardian*, 8 September 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/sept08/fiction.joanthancoe> [accessed 19 October 2012]

to its precursors. My project develops this idea yet further, exploring the relationship between how women see themselves and the reworking of certain ideas in women's fiction: 'the cultural myths' that 'traditional fictional genres' embody.[8] Adrienne Rich notes, 'We need to know the writing of the past and to know it differently … not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.'[9] Stories can be liberating but may also form part of a cultural trap, and the stories women tell themselves need to break out of the latter and embrace the former.

One particular text articulates both the 'cultural trap' that women's stories might fall into, and provides the 'female pre-text' for my own work, Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1936).[10] The novel, Woolf's own take on the historical genre, was her best-selling work in her own lifetime, and the one she found most difficult to revise and rewrite. It is organised via a series of chapters headed, starkly, by a year. These facts are telling, as the modernist experimenter grappled with Victorian realism and its middle-brow legacy, and this took its own toll on her later years. The original essay part of her novel was to be an, 'explicit comment on the implicit social, economic, and sexual forces controlling the lives of the fictional characters in any given period of history.'[11] Was the reason her novel-essay became a novel that the original endeavour was impossible, or could a historical story about generations of upper-middle-class women not provide the social scope needed for this project? Reading the novels that I have selected to respond to not only helped me develop a clearer understanding of the lives of women at these times. They also interested me for their structure and use of language; and many women's novels examine ways of remembering.

For this project my interest was in rediscovering the private, subjective lives of women moulded by the expectations and attitudes of the times in which they lived, and also bearing in mind certain questions about a woman's ability to accept or challenge the mores of her time and what the outcome might be for herself and for

[8] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land*: *The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 208.
[9] Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' (1971), *Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 21, as quoted in Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood, Second Edition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.8- 9.
[10] Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, 1936 (St. Albans: Granada Publishing Limited, 1982)
[11] Charles G. Hoffmann, 'Virginia Woolf's Manuscript Revisions of "The Years", PMLA, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Jan., 1969), pp. 79-89, < http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261159> [accessed 26 October 2012]

subsequent generations. Reading a selection of these, 'inherited scripts through which our perceptions of ourselves and the world are structured,'[12] and responding by creating fiction that resonates with them, allows the writer (and subsequently the reader) to inhabit unfamiliar times and places and to re-imagine them; to see the world through the eyes of an invented character who is a voice speaking out of her time; and to form a new perspective.

My novel also plays with the idea of how disparate voices, separated through time, might or might not speak to each other; and even though it aims for contextual unity in this way, it is nevertheless presented in three parts. Each of the characters is trying to commune with the past, to excavate female experience and to find the continuities and differences through this process. Through my reading and writing, I am doing something similar in attempting to find a voice and to define it against the women novelists who have tracked female experience during what Maslen, in her text on British women's fiction between 1928 and 1968, describes as 'four troubled, complex and confusing decades.'[13]

The novel's structure is further fragmented by the way in which the story of each of my characters is told, as I do not believe that there is any such thing as a complete picture of anyone's life or of any event. In the three periods, 1921-1937, 1937-1972 and 1973, my novel asks questions about a woman's concepts of sin and virtue, rights and duties and sacrifice and conscience, and considers whether, and, if so, how, these have changed. The final part, in 1973, covers just a few days in order to show the extent to which the perceptions of the main character, Jo, are changing and to highlight how the past continues to play its part in the present. She is at the end trying to recapture what she knows about the lives of her mother and grandmother and to define herself against them. However, the problems facing her are markedly different from those of the two earlier generations of women. By this time, as Viola Klein notes, 'the idea of marriage as a partnership of two fully developed individuals in their

[12] Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood, Second Edition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 8.
[13] Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-196*8 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.1.

own right,' was more generally accepted, though 'subconsciously we [were] still full of old resentments and emotional habits.'[14]

As each character's story responds in its structure and style of writing to certain key novels of the time, each part of my fiction progressively alters and enhances the meaning of the previous one as it tracks the threads and continuities which run through each life. The prologue is intended to emphasise this and further to draw the stories together. The background assumption is that the granddaughter, Jo, will be the author of her grandmother's broken-up history with which the novel begins. I have chosen the title, *the women come and go*, to highlight this fragmentation and also as an ironic reference to a poem written very much from a man's point of view. It is a phrase repeated twice in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (whose original title was *Prufrock Among the Women*), in which, for T.S. Eliot, the women seem merely background noise.[15] It is interesting to note that another contemporary novel centred on female experience through the generations, *The Still Point* (2010) by Amy Sackville,[16] also uses as its title a quotation from an Eliot poem.[17]

Margaret Drabble's heroine in *The Realms of Gold* (1975) asks: 'What is it for, the past, one's own or the world's? To what end question it so closely?'[18] My fiction narrates the lives of these three women from the 1920s to the 1970s in response to the novels I have selected in order to help me to understand period sensibilities and behaviour and explore the connections of the past to the present and its significance for us now. Virginia Woolf was the original influence for the interwar years, Christa Wolf and Irène Némirovsky for the Second World War and afterwards, and Margaret Atwood, Drabble, Nina Bawden and Margaret Laurence for the early 'seventies.

[14] Viola Klein, *The Feminine Character: History of an ideology, 2nd Edition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 158-9.
[15] T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1980), *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, pp. 13-17, *ll. 13 and 14*.
[16] Amy Sackville, *The Still Point* (London: Portobello Books Ltd., 2010)
[17] T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1980), *Four Quartets: Burnt Norton*, p. 191, *II, l. 16*.
[18] Margaret Drabble, *The Realms of Gold*, 1975 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 124.

And back to today

A writer in the early twenty-first century will inevitably perceive the pressures on and behaviour of fictional characters in these five decades, from the 1920s to the 1970s, in a way quite different from women novelists writing at the time. This was my purpose: to understand the lives of women in these decades in a slightly different way and perhaps find new resonances with life today. Inevitably, 'Any literary convention – plots, narrative sequences, characters in bit parts - as an instrument that claims to depict experience, also interprets it.'[19] My novel re-interprets these periods in the tradition of reworking but also expanding ideas in the fictional texts I have chosen.

In creating fiction, a writer must have in mind a potential reader. Teaching on the Creative Writing MA and working with students in their twenties made me much more aware of the thoughts and expectations of the current young reader, who will bring to my fiction his or her own cultural experience and perhaps read my attempt to show the ways in which women's lives have changed as a 'historical' novel. As Maslen notes, 'while the writer interprets issues of their time within every text, so of necessity does the reader, and this act of interpretation may differ in different eras with different priorities.'[20]

In discussing in more detail the three parts of my fiction, I shall present them in reverse order, beginning with 1973, a period I am familiar with, to explain what helped to form Jo's story; and arriving finally, with Kit's story, in the more distant past in order to draw in some history of women's writing, including my selected fiction texts from the 1930s, and to consider what this has brought to my novel in terms of historical understanding.

[19] R. B. DuPlessis, *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p.74, as quoted in Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-196*8 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.5.
[20] Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.5.

Part 3: Jo's story (1973)

From everyday life to fiction

My own observations have helped me to write about this period of fast-changing expectations of and by women, combining traits from people I have seen around me to create my characters and weaving my experience in to how I am responding to my chosen novels. For research into the everyday life of an earlier era for the stories of Kate and Sarah, Storm Jameson's *Love in Winter* was a useful novel to read, and in her foreword, Jennifer Birkett notes that Jameson drew on personal experiences, 'intensified, condensed, and transformed into new forms.'[21] This was my aim in carrying on this middlebrow tradition for the 1970s. I worked as a court reporter in the States in the mid-1970s and, having read Bawden's *Afternoon of a Good Woman* (1979), I chose to present a slice of life that I was familiar with to help anchor Jo's story in the reality of that era in America.[22] Like Bawden's heroine, Penelope, while Jo observes the defendants, she finds resonances with her own life which bring into focus the difficulties of her marriage.

All three of my characters are intended to be women who embody certain female dilemmas of their time. In conformity with the realism, as Maslen notes, in women's novels of the 1960s, Jo's story is structured to, 'show the effects on women of the kind of social code which promotes rigid definitions of virtue (meaning chastity for women), marital duty (as applied to women only), and the pressures which can lead to breakdown.'[23] Even though the idea of a wholly dependent, supportive wife lingered on beyond this time in the military, male-oriented society in which Jo lived, the seventies was the decade when women generally were redefining themselves and questioning a purely domestic, 'wifely' role. This is one factor in forming her story. Another is her feeling, coming from a simpler, more sheltered background, of not belonging in fast, smart Washington society which at times she sees as a hostile world. With everything that is going on around her, in order to help her discover a stronger sense of self and to find stability within her own turbulent emotions, she

[21]Jennifer Birkett, 'Foreword', Storm Jameson, *Love in Winter* (1935) (London: Capuchin Classics, 2009), p. 10.
[22] Nina Bawden, *Afternoon of a Good Woman*, 1976 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979)
[23] Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 52-3.

follows the well-trodden female path, in fiction and in reality, of thinking 'back through our mothers.'[24] She begins to look back with greater interest than she has shown previously at the lives of her mother and grandmother.

Even though for this section I was drawing on my own experiences, re-invented and re-organised, because from today's perspective it would be easy to distort what I thought I remembered, it was necessary to check details of the landscape of Washington DC in the mid-seventies. Two books of photographs of the Potomac and the coastline which I owned then, *Northern Virginia Heritage*[25] and *The Virginia Way*,[26] were a prompt to help me re-imagine the surroundings and the atmosphere: 'The sight of the Lincoln memorial, the slender spire of the monument across the Potomac and the dome of the Capital rising up behind them can't fail to impress … the buildings gleam white and beautiful in the sunshine.'[27]

Finding a voice

I was in my thirties in the 1970s, like Drabble and Margaret Atwood, whose novels I read at the time, and my aim was to tell Jo's story through the reflexive uncertainties of a typical heroine from that period. In order to reinforce my narrative voice and rediscover resonances with these texts in the early twenty-first century, at least thirty years later, my next resource was to re-examine the period through the fiction of these writers. Though published over a decade after Jo's story, Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1989) was the novel I first read as an example of fiction which narrates memory, self-restoration and the continuities that run through generations. The influence of this novel has permeated not only my story of Jo but also of her mother, Sarah, which together cover a similar period, from 1937 to 1973. The attitude of Elaine Risley, Atwood's heroine, to her mother is but one example: 'My mother doesn't linger over housework, she'd rather be outside raking up leaves … pulling weeds.'[28] Jo, on several occasions, recalls her mother's lack of interest in domesticity and regrets that

[24] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929 (London: Panther Books, 1985), pp.72-73.
[25] Eleanor Lee Templeman and Nan Netherton, *Northern Virginia Heritage* (New York: Avenel Books, 1966)
[26] Guy Friddell, *The Virginia Way* (Offenburg: BURDA GmbH, 1973)
[27] Chapter 14, p.1.
[28] Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, 1989 (London: Virago, 1991), p. 121.

she was so critical of her: 'She should have laughed off Sarah's inability to conform and her desire, at times, to shock.'[29]

There are many other resonances with Atwood in my fiction, such as her structure, with gaps left for the reader to fill in, through themes such as marriage breakdown and fear of destitution. I was also attracted, especially for Jo's story, to her use of open endings, with their promise of new possibilities. *Cat's Eye*, in addition, made me aware when writing my own middlebrow novel of how useful clothing can be in capturing not only character but time and place: 'Jo imagined the fake fur jacket she'd bought in Fenwick's and the tight black jeans must look chic compared to the other service wives in their comfortable woollen coats.'[30]

Drabble's *The Garrick Year* (1964) was the second text which helped me to find a voice for this period. Her self-deprecatory heroine, Emma, muses, 'I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror … an unattractive, dark-skinned, spiky misfit, who would never have married.'[31] I wanted to develop this self-conscious, slightly ironic voice: Jo peers 'at herself in the mirror … she pushes her hair back, hoping to look less pale and bedraggled. No one is at their best first thing in the morning.'[32]

Drabble is also good at capturing the complex, ambivalent nature of marriage: 'The handsomest man there was my husband. This discovery did not fill me with pride, but with a fearful restlessness. I did not want to think so ill of human nature, to think that David was the best there was.'[33] Jo's attitude to her husband in the circumstances of their marriage is equally ambivalent: '[Richard's] back is well muscled; he is confident of his body. Many women would find him more attractive than Gavin.'[34] The sense of displacement of Drabble's heroine, trying to set up home for her family in an unprepossessing house in Hereford for a year, also brought back memories of my earlier life as an army daughter and later an army wife, moving from Cyprus, to Germany, to Malaysia and then to the United States, and transitting in the meantime in various places in England, rarely settling anywhere for more than a couple of years.

[29] Chapter 14, p. 12.
[30] Chapter 12, p. 1.
[31] Margaret Drabble, *The Garrick Year*, 1964 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 146.
[32] Chapter 13, p. 1.
[33] Margaret Drabble, *The Garrick Year*, 1964 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 48.
[34] Chapter 15, p.1.

Maslen notes that *The Garrick Year* 'concentrates on the dreariness of domesticity, with the wife … in revolt at being "packaged" for the husband's career … What Drabble shows, despite the wife's transient love affair, is a very conservative acceptance of marriage, even while the woman is shown straining at the bonds, and constantly stressing how unsatisfactory marriage is.'[35] This sums up the situation of many married women at that time, certainly within the society I have portrayed for Jo, who is 'the wife expected to entertain, to go to an endless number of functions, look the part, say the right things.'[36] When I re-read *The Garrick Year*, I was struck by the many ways in which the circumstances of Drabble's heroine, Emma, resonated with the ideas that I had for Jo, who is questioning her marriage, attracted to another man and attempting to identify and place herself in a temporary and uncertain environment. I found a further connection with how I pictured Jo in the very 1970s' attitude of Drabble's heroine to her husband's mistress: 'Sophy had always been around, but it had not been me she had wanted, it had been David… I had had no suspicions at all … and I do not think I am credulous or gullible.'[37] But she still could not help liking Sophy. Jo 'wonders whether Eleanor was already sleeping with Richard when she bought [the bracelets] for her. She mustn't think about it. Eleanor has such good taste.'[38]

Bawden is the third novelist I turned to in order to find a voice for the 1970s. Though, like Drabble, she was writing at the time of the second wave of feminism, she does not draw any overt influences into her fiction, which I believe makes it more balanced and grounded in the real everyday world. In addition, her rich writing, focusing on interiority, seems an echo of Woolf in a more modern voice. As an example, I saw Jo as not unlike her chaotically brought-up heroine, Penelope, in *Afternoon of a Good Woman*, who muses: 'I always need to feel "in the right", and that is a weakness.'[39] Jo 'is good at taking a charming and convincing interest in other people. It is her way of giving herself some … substance, because often she

[35] Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 178.
[36] Chapter 12, p .8.
[37] Margaret Drabble, *The Garrick Year*, 1964 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 145.
[38] Chapter 12, p. 12.
[39] Nina Bawden, *Afternoon of a Good Woman*, 1976 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 125.

feels she doesn't fit anywhere.'[40] Bawden's well-observed slices of domestic life are an excellent example for any writer to research. Her use of present tense narration also interested me as it seemed to provide a more direct link to her heroine's mind.

The fourth writer who helped me form the background to Jo's story is Margaret Laurence and, in particular, her complex, character-based novel *The Diviners* (1974), with its focus on ancestral memory and family mythologies. Early on her heroine states: 'A popular misconception is that we can't change the past – everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it.'[41] This phrase seemed to highlight my theme, as a thread running through my three stories is how each character in her time will negotiate her fast-changing social circumstances, through adaptation, memories and a re-visioning of her past. Of particular relevance to Jo's story was Laurence's underlying premise that her heroine must unravel her own truths.

Laurence's technique in *The Diviners* of using letters, poems, lists, reminiscences etc. to tell the story, the most innovative being the 'snapshots' and the 'memory bank movies' played through the mind of her heroine, Morag, inspired me in my much simpler narrative to use Sarah's album and Richard's holiday photographs as a lead-in, and to add texture, to Jo's memories. For instance, Jo is looking at the West Coast holiday snapshots and reinterpreting them through her knowledge that Richard was having an affair with Eleanor: 'In every photograph Richard has taken, Eleanor is smiling like a contented cat.'[42]

Her descriptions of the sharply altering seasons also helped me re-focus on a North American setting: 'The maples were turning to a million shades of russet, crimson, scarlet, pale red.'[43] At the end of my novel I wanted to capture a Virginia winter scene to sharpen the image of Jo's alienation from her life in Washington: 'the sun splinters through a filigree of spruce branches, and the dappled light on the trunk of a solitary silver birch catches her eye.'[44]

[40] Chapter 12, p. 13.
[41] Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners*, 1974 (London: Virago, 1999), p. 49.
[42] Chapter 15, p. 4.
[43] Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners*, 1974 (London: Virago, 1999), p. 331.
[44] Chapter 16, p. 10.

I also found inspiration from another book in Laurence's Manawaka series, *A Bird in the House*, in which she examines her heroine's development at certain times in a fragmentary way, focusing on important moments. This is how I have tried to structure my entire novel.

I have not selected Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) as a text from this period to respond to as, much as I admire Lessing's writing both before and after it, when I read it only a few years after its publication I did not relate to this experimental and assertive novel. On re-reading it now, I still find it too polemical and rambling.[45] Also I am writing a novel of manners, a middlebrow novel, approaching the twentieth-century history of women in a different way from the feminist writers of the 1960s and 1970s, such as, for instance, Marilyn French in *The Women's Room* (1978).[46]

Rounding the circle

In all three parts of my novel my intention has been for each story to come close to a realistic narration of a character in her time in order to examine how each woman's social position and the constraints of the society in which she lived might have shaped her life. I also wanted to explore the link between imagination and memory and memory and forgetting. Jo is trying to understand the past in order better to cope with the present, which echoes my argument that by re-visioning the past from today and coming to terms with it, we are better able to understand the present. I am, in addition, trying to show through Jo how the ever-evolving present changes the significance of the past, the second strand in my argument. In the final chapter, Jo is trying to rediscover memories of her mother in order to help establish her own identity: 'The slender, bright Sarah of her childhood whom she'd adored hasn't come properly into focus for many years.'[47] However, the woman who walks past her by the river when she is willing herself to jump could almost be a ghost of Sarah, perhaps bringing a message.

[45] Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 1962 (London: Grafton Books, 1987)
[46] Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*, 1978 (London: Sphere Books, 1981)
[47] Chapter 16, p. 4.

Gayle Greene notes in her essay on feminist fiction and memory: 'Memory is especially important to anyone who cares about change, for forgetting dooms us to repetition.'[48] This is pertinent to my reason for writing this thesis and is also a theme that I have tried to bring out in my fiction. To take one example, Sarah has perhaps repeated her mother, Kit's, mistake and had a child by her lover; and both Sarah and Kit try to protect Jo from this danger, even though birth control is by this time more effective, by encouraging her to marry at a young age.

In Paul Connerton's essay 'Seven types of forgetting', his category of 'forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity' interested me when constructing all three of my stories and weaving in the memories that my characters draw on to find a way forward in their lives.[49] In the final chapter, Jo is revising her own recent past in the hope of being able to carry on with her marriage: 'She thinks of last night, when Richard shifted and turned on his back so she could lie against him … Perhaps he had found himself out of his depth with Eleanor and with Barbara.'[50]

In this part of my novel, I have tried to bring out more clearly the influences of one generation of women on the next in order to draw the three parts together. To form a pattern in my tripartite novel, the final scene in Jo's story in 1973 is a repetition, but with revision, of Kit's attempted suicide in 1919, with the difference between them, and all that has happened in the meantime, providing the measure of change. Jo 'notices a fallen tree trunk caught on a sharp boulder near the water. For a moment she sees it as a macerated body, perhaps even hers … The river would wash it away bit by bit.'[51] For Jo it is a more wild and unpredictable river on a more modern continent. But after her own thoughts of suicide, for less compelling reasons, she might have greater insight when she comes to write her grandmother's story. However, she lives in a different era and knows that she may not make the right assumptions about women's lives at that time: 'Kit had hoped for little more than

[48] Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), pp. 290-321. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174512> [accessed 11 April 2011] (p. 291)
[49] Paul Connerton, 'Seven types of forgetting', *Memory Studies*, pp. 59-71 (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications 2008). ISSN 1750-6980, Vol 1(1). <www.sagepublications.com> [accessed 8 February 2011] (pp. 59 and 63)
[50] Chapter 16, p. 10.
[51] Chapter 16, p. 9.

security and respectability when she married Frank. Were women of her generation more practical?'[52]

Part 2: Sarah's story (1937-1972)

One foot in the past

In the first chapter of Sarah's story there is a quotation from *Goblin Market*, a poem which captured my childhood imagination and with which teenage girls of Sarah's time would also be familiar.[53] I intended there to be echoes of the poem in the sexual awakening of Sarah and the more submissive femininity of Phyl. Phyl, the narrator, at times sees herself as the puritanical Lizzie and hopes to be Sarah's redeemer. She becomes critical of her behaviour, especially during the war, and is never sure what she knows or does not know about Sarah's lovers and her pregnancy.

For this middle section of my novel I still have some knowledge of the period, but to refresh my memory and develop a more thorough understanding of life then, in addition to turning again to fiction, I read memoirs, watched films from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and continued to read books on twentieth-century history, bearing in mind of course that memoirs and history are never written without bias and fiction may often come nearer to the truth.[54] Even though, for instance, I can remember the continuing frugality of life in England in the early 1950s, to get a clearer picture of the social history following the disruption of war, I read Claire Langhamer's 'Meanings of Home in Post-war Britain' in which she discusses 'the home-centred society [in] the central years of the twentieth century' and 'the tense domesticity and anxious conformity of the fifties'.[55] Women were encouraged by government propaganda after the war to return to a domestic role, partly to free up jobs for men. I reflect this attitude in Chapter 9 in order to place my story in the period and carry the narrative

[52] Chapter 16, p. 8.
[53] Jan Marsh, ed., *Poems and Prose: Christina Rossetti*, 1994 (London and Vermont: Everyman, 2001), pp. 162-176.
[54] These texts included: Robert Graves and Alan Hodges, *The Long Week-end: A Social History of Great Britain* 1918-1939, 1940 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994); Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation, 1919-1939* (London: Allen Lane, 2009)
[55] Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 'Domestic Dreamworlds: Notions of Home in Post-1945 Europe' (Apr., 2005), pp. 341-362 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036327> [accessed 8 January 2010], pp. 361 and 341.

forward: '"I've been papering Jo's bedroom and sewing curtains to match," [Sarah said] … I felt that she was trying to create security and permanence for herself and Jo. The house … had become her haven.'[56]

As one of my aims in Sarah's story was to reflect the greater freedom women had during and after the Second World War to make their own choices, right or wrong, and the possible consequences of having to live with their choices, a more thorough knowledge of social history was my starting point. For example, Eric Hobsbawn writes of, 'divorce, illegitimate births and the rise of the single-parent (i.e. overwhelmingly the single-mother) household [indicating] a crisis in the relation between the sexes,' post-1945.[57] My narrator, in turn, comments on Sarah's difficulties as a single parent in the 1950s: 'Sarah looked tired and her face seemed white and set … I realise now that she was putting everything into bringing up the child, which can't have been easy with so little money.'[58]

Memoirs were another useful source to help imagine a background for my narrative. For instance, even though for Chapter 10 I drew on my recollections of Cyprus in the 1950s, of 'chalky grey mountains, the white-washed villages and the long sandy beaches,'[59] in order to bring my memories into sharper focus, I re-read *Bitter Lemons* (1957), which describes Lawrence Durrell's life on the island in the mid-1950s. He also comments on the beauty of Cyprus: 'The Kyrenia range … running along the sea-line, its … foothills … rich with running streams and green villages … studded with crusader castles … Orange and mulberry, carob and cypress.'[60] Durrell's descriptions later in the book also helped to remind me of the fragility of life in Cyprus then as a consequence of EOKA terrorism: 'the nights were busy with the crash of broken glass and the spiteful detonation of small grenades.'[61] As a teenager, I had not been much concerned about this danger and I try to reflect this attitude, and also to emphasise

[56] Chapter 9, p. 9.
[57] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p.323.
[58] Chapter 9, p. 1.
[59] Chapter 10, p. 7.
[60] Lawrence Durrell, *Bitter Lemons*, 1957 (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 31
[61] Ibid., p. 201.

Sarah's character, in Phyl's statement that, 'Sarah had been more disturbed by seeing a gang of elderly, black-clad women … *lugging panniers of rocks on their backs.*'[62]

Although it could be argued that the cinema is not a reliable historical research tool, I found two films that I watched for a second time immensely evocative of the period. The first was *A Taste of Honey*, which reminded me of the kitchen-sink realism of many films and plays of the 1960s, perhaps demonstrating the increasing interest in people whose lives were very much on the margins of society. The film is a graphic depiction of hardship in post-war England and a reminder of the dangers for women on the edge of respectability if they had affairs with unsuitable men, especially with the added complication of an unwanted pregnancy.[63] When writing about Sarah and her daughter in a similar period, I bore in mind the difficult choices the film's seventeen-year-old protagonist had to make.

The Gentle Sex is a very different film, produced during the Second World War. It is a slightly didactic and stereotyped portrayal of seven young English women from widely varying backgrounds, showing how their training in the Auxiliary Territorial Service developed their characters.[64] However, I greatly enjoyed the period sensibilities of the film, particularly as I wanted to narrate how the war might have shaped Sarah's life. On a visit to the Imperial War Museum, an ATS recruitment poster of a young blonde woman in uniform also reinforced my image of Sarah. When Sarah returns home on leave, Phyl observes, 'She was even wearing lipstick … and … I thought I could smell scent;' and a few pages later, 'I became conscious … that Sarah had acquired a little more elegance, a little more grooming.'[65]

History from fiction

My main resource, however, was once again my reading of fiction. As Sarah's story is intended to be a contrast to Kit's domesticity, it was encouraging to find that, in discussing, among other novels, *The Constant Nymph* (1924),[66] Humble notes that one

[62] Chapter 10, p. 8.
[63] *A Taste of Honey*. Dir. Tony Richardson. Great Britain: British Lion Films. 1961.
[64] *The Gentle Sex*. Dir. Leslie Howard. Great Britain: General Film Distributors. 1943.
[65] Chapter 8, pp. 2 and 5.
[66] Margaret Kennedy, *The Constant Nymph*, 1924 (London: Virago Modern Classics, 1983)

feature of the middlebrow novel was that, 'Bohemianism, casualness, and an expressed disregard for the conventions are allowed to displace – but not altogether *re*place – the more traditional elements of propriety, emotional restraint and class-consciousness.'[67] In this description I see many aspects of the character of Sarah.

Another novel which I found useful, in this instance to gain a better historical understanding of the period in England, was Mary Hocking's, *Indifferent Heroes* (1986), set in the late-1930s/1940s. Hocking's style is detailed and linear and she is adept at capturing a woman's thoughts in any period; for instance, her heroine, Louise, muses about her sister who has joined the WRNS: 'where did beauty ever get a woman save into trouble? This was a good-natured face … the face of someone with whom men would feel comfortable.'[68] I particularly enjoyed this as I envisaged my narrator, Phyl, as a plain woman, and therefore drawn to the more attractive Sarah but also at times jealous of her.

A more important novel to me for its theme of lost times and a woman looking back on her life was Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights* (1972). A further attraction was that it is structured through vignettes and recollections and presented almost as a scrapbook of memories and letters: '1954: Dearest M.: Here I am in Boston … looking out on a snowstorm … settled in this handsome house. Flowered curtains made to measure.'[69] I was also drawn to what I felt were echoes of Woolf in her work, which perhaps are to be found in many women's novels of the later twentieth-century. Hardwick's lush, lyrical and opulent use of words combines cleverly with her minimalist style of narration: 'Louisa spends the entire day in a blue, limpid boredom. The caressing sting of it appears to be, for her, like the pleasure of lemon, or the coldness of salt water.'[70] In order to show Sarah's character directly and to tell parts of the story in her own voice, I have experimented with quoting from her letters from Cyprus, trying to use a richer prose than for Phyl's narration, for example: '*It*

[67] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*, (2001) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 148.
[68] Mary Hocking, *Indifferent Heroes* (London: Abacus, 1986), p. 9.
[69] Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*, 1972 (London: Virago, 1992), p. 4.
[70] Ibid., p. 88.

was only a handful of stone-built houses … but the stream running down the gully and the lush green vegetation made it seem like Arcadia.'[71]

However, my intention was to tell Sarah's story through the recollections of an observing narrator, another woman who had lived in the same era, to find out what this could bring to my fiction. Humble notes that in the middlebrow tradition that I have been trying to reflect: 'A key technique used by a number of novels to create an ironic distance … is the employment … of a partial outsider to focalize the family … This partial outsider is the reader's representative.'[72] Rosamund Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927)[73] and Margaret Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* (1924)[74] are two slightly earlier examples; but the text that I was most drawn to for this technique was Christa Wolf's *Christa T.* (1968), as throughout she is writing about self-realisation and is making connections between her character's story and social developments (though in the German Democratic Republic). I am aware that, as an East German, Wolf is outside the English middlebrow tradition, and also I am not intending to write a political commentary; but *Christa T.* narrates the same period, during and after the Second World War, as in Sarah's story, a period in which people's lives were shaped by the disruption of war and the continuing erosion of traditions and moral certainties. Not only was this novel interesting for the voice of its observing narrator, but I found many resonances with Wolf's fictional character in how I saw Sarah, a woman with an independent, rootless character but who, apart from this, had nothing extraordinary in her life.

I was also inspired by the fact that in *Christa T.* the narrator's attempt to recapture her friend's life seems almost like a mystical quest: 'The quest for her: in the thought of her. And of *the attempt to be oneself*. She speaks of this … between the lines of those letters of hers that are known to me.'[75] This style of narration made me think about what we know or don't know about another person's life because of what they choose to communicate or what they conceal. While writing Sarah's story I attended a seminar on Alice Munro's collected short stories, during which we discussed the

[71] Chapter 10, p. 9.
[72] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*, (2001) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 158.
[73] Rosamund Lehmann, *Dusty Answer*, 1927 (London: Virago, 2000)
[74] Margaret Kennedy, *The Constant Nymph*, 1924 (London: Virago Modern Classics, 1983)
[75] Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.*, 1968 (New York: Dell Publishing, 1970), p. 3.

gaps left in between episodes in her narratives for the reader to fill in.[76] 'Material', for example, reminded me that what a fictional narrator does not know about someone can be interesting and form a point of discussion: 'I know so much but can't tell you what happened. I don't know why she did that.'[77] Wolf frequently also uses a similar caveat, and I have tried to shape my story with this in mind. My narrator, Phyl, from time to time questions what she thinks she remembers: 'At times I think my imagination takes over and fills in the gaps.'[78] I wanted, especially in this middle section, to explore the link between imagination and memory and memory and forgetting in shaping women's lives. Telling a story through an observing narrator has its limitations in that Phyl is not present for many of the events in Sarah's life, though I found it interesting and challenging, with the narrator trying to set down her memories with the help of letters and photographs. In this way, the story is, of necessity, told by an unreliable narrator, in that Phyl is aware only of certain aspects of Sarah's character and is also interpreting what she knows from her narrow experience of life. Phyl states: 'There were many aspects of [Sarah's] life then that even now I'm not sure about.'[79]

Using an observing narrator also of course makes the story a subjective relation of events. The episodes Phyl remembers and how she recalls them are influenced by her own moods and the impact that her friend's life has had on her own life at certain times. In the early 1950s, for example, Phyl is married and financially better off than Sarah, and this, together with her disapproval of her as a single mother, colours her view of her friend's life. 'I couldn't … help noticing [Sarah's] shabby, ill-fitting grey-green frock and her worn shoes.'[80]

An important phrase early on in *Christa T.* is: 'Memory puts a deceptive color on things.'[81] Another question I wanted to consider was, how real is any one person's perception of reality? Can we, at a later period, recreate someone and recapture their life with any accuracy? Wolf's narrator questions, 'what one knows with certainty [about another person], and since when; what she herself revealed, and what others

[76] Aamer Hussein, The Art and Craft of Fiction 2, 22 April 2010.
[77] Alice Munro, *Selected Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1996), pp. 81-95.
[78] Chapter 9, p. 1.
[79] draft Chapter 8, p. 10.
[80] Chapter 9, p. 2.
[81] Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.*, 1968 (New York: Dell Publishing, 1970), p. 3.

revealed; what her writings add and what they hide.'[82] My narrator, Phyl, from her narrow experience and perhaps her desire to present Sarah in the best light to her daughter, Jo, is building up a limited, slightly rosy picture of her. She admits at the end, 'She was not as simple as I would have her be to meet my needs.'[83]

Having chosen *Christa T.*, a German novel, as a key text to respond to in this section, I decided to look further afield for a comparison with what I was writing. A novel from this era that interested me as a candid examination of the female psyche was *The Crooked Line* (1944) by the Indian/Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai, which follows the development of the narrator from childhood to the point where she takes charge of her own existence.[84] It also deals with illicit love and illegitimacy. The pragmatic approach of Chughtai's heroine, Shamman, to her far from ideal life was very much how I saw Sarah's character developing.

Part 1: Kit's story (1921-1937)

Stepping further back

Historical research was important for this part of my novel, the furthest back in time, and The London Transport Museum's focus on social history, as well as transport, was my first resource. Its old railway and bus carriages and the costumed mannequins vividly evoked this period, as did the photographs of the Thames and of London streets. My initial interest was women working on the railways between the wars, and the LTM has a wealth of material on this in its archives. Details of dress and behaviour from texts such as *Britain's Railways in World War I* were a useful reminder of life then: 'the enormous long skirt of the ticket collector was considered daring as it revealed the ankles.'[85] The women ticket collectors were ogled and often challenged by drunks and were considered by their male colleagues as the weak, fragile, delicate, gentler fair sex.[86] However, D.H. Lawrence in 'Tickets, Please'

[82] Ibid., p. 23.
[83] Chapter 11, p. 14.
[84] Ismat Chughtai, *The Crooked Line*, 1944 (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995)
[85] J.A.B. Hamilton, *Britain's Railways in World War I* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 105.
[86] Rosa Matheson, *The fair sex: women and the Great Western Railway* (Stroud: Tempus, 2007), p. 14.

paints a very different picture of the clippies on the Midlands trams.[87] Sarah in the 1940s, having read Lawrence's story, teases the now matronly Kit, 'Were you a fearless young hussy, with skirts up to your knees?'[88]

This is one example of the conflicting impressions that different sources of research to capture the past can give. Lawrence portrays a full-blooded, perhaps even dangerous, woman for the purposes of his story, whereas some of the more formal records I read at the LTM give details of more conventional women working within a well-regulated organisation. However, the unpublished Metropolitan Railway Staff Records show a more lively wartime workplace, with reports of women's disciplinary offences such as, 'gossiping with the guard,' 'making improper remarks to the Station Inspector when spoken to,' 'using an insulting expression to a lady passenger,' and 'overslept: purposely detained by lover.'[89] These ledgers helped me picture the character of the young Kit, who first spoke to her lover when she was, 'having trouble with a drunken passenger who didn't have a ticket … Later [Charlie] told her … he'd been admiring her neat ankles which he could just see beneath the long serge … skirt.'[90] In spite of becoming aware from these records that women on the railways were not as constrained by their sex as I might at first have imagined, I still saw Kit as a strictly brought-up country girl who almost ruined her life in the more free and easy wartime world. In another museum, The Imperial War Museum, the photographs, recruitment posters and paintings that I looked at helped me focus less on the excitement, and more on the horror and hardship, of war. One of the most moving reminders of the soldiers' suffering was John Singer Sargent's 'Gassed, 1919'.

In addition, to help me think through Kit's West Country background, I visited Honiton museum, where the curator has built up an eclectic assembly of photographs, books, recorded interviews and newspaper reports on local history. Among them is 'Wife for Sale at Honiton Fair' relating how, in 1828, twenty-five year-old Mrs. Broom was sold by her husband to the barber for a pound, the bidding having started

[87] D.H. Lawrence, 'Tickets, Please,' *England, my England*, 1922 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), pp. 41-54.
[88] Chapter 8, p. 8.
[89] Metropolitan Railway, *Female staff: volumes 1 and 2* (two bound manuscript registers) unpublished c. 1915-1920.
[90] Chapter 2, pp. 2-3.

at seven shillings and six-pence.[91] Kit refers to this story during her walk with Charlie. This wife-selling also reminded me of the opening chapter of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, though as Thomas Hardy's novel was written in 1886, almost forty years later, the price for a wife at auction had increased to five guineas.[92]

Travel writing from the inter-war years was another useful historical resource. H.V. Morton, in *The Nights of London* (1926), poignantly describes the suicide station under Waterloo Bridge, and this was an inspiration for the back story in Kit's narrative.[93] The Thames as the setting for thoughts of suicide was also a trope I found in novels from this period; as Deborah Parsons notes in discussing Woolf's character Rose in *The Years*, 'The iconographical images of the river as a site for … the tears of the fallen woman.'[94]

Morton enabled me to visualise the atmosphere of London at that time with far greater colour than I could find from reading, for instance, Hobsbawm and Richard Overy. One passage in particular helped me focus on Kit's plight: 'Of all the agonies suffered by London in the night I would place first those waking nightmares of the hospital ward when a man or a woman lost to companionship waits miserably for the first grey streak of dawn. "Sister, speak to me, say *something* to me…" Is there a more pathetic cry in the night of London?'[95] Through reading vividly described scenes like this, I was able to feel my way into Kit's life, with her bleak memories of waking up in a London hospital in 1919 after nearly drowning.

For later chapters, Morton's black-and-white photographs of the West Country in the 1920s in *In Search of England* (1927) helped me picture the simple austerity of the time, as did his succinct descriptions: 'Lights shine in windows, there is the sound of steps on the road, some one laughs loudly, night falls.'[96] Kit is in bed in her sister's cottage in Beer: 'The gas lamps from the street outside … were throwing shadows on

[91] From a miscellaneous collection of documents in Honiton museum, photocopied on 20 October 2009.
[92] Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 1886 (London: Wordsworth, 1994)
[93] H. V. Morton, *The Nights of London*, 1926 (London: Methuen, 1934), pp. 21-25.
[94] Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 120.
[95] H.V. Morton, *The Nights of London*, 1926 (London: Methuen, 1934), p. 39.
[96] H.V. Morton, *In Search of England*, 1927 (London: Methuen, 1933), p. 36.

the wall. Kit could hear a dog barking in the distance.'[97] Morton also writes of, 'a real Devon field, the colour of red ochre;' and 'a great jug of brown Devonshire cream, several pounds of bright gold butter.'[98]

Novelists are often willing to share their sources of historical research, and John Fowles states that for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) he found Royston Pike's *Human Documents* of great assistance.[99] I therefore read as background for this period the last in the series, *the Lloyd George Era,* which is a compilation of articles, statistics, letters, official documents, direct interviews and cartoons, including sections on the Poor Law and 'indoor' relief in the workhouse. It is a direct, detailed reminder of how difficult life was in the early twentieth century for people lower down the social scale. As a stark example, 'Outdoor' relief was prohibited for 'any person who may have given birth to an illegitimate child,'[100] so when in my first chapter Kit sees the 'vast redbrick hospital' as she crosses to Hythe on the ferry, she is only too aware of what might lie ahead for herself and for Sarah.[101]

Texts on local history are another useful resource; and, having several years ago studied the social history of Southampton, for Chapter 1 I re-read *Southampton in the 'Twenties*, which draws on the recollections of people who were alive at that time. The section on dock labour mentions the near-starvation for men or women without work, and Eric Gadd describes how, 'Early every morning a multitude of silent, grim-face men gathered at the Dock gate … many a dispirited man would trudge home, mooch about the house … sit on a park bench with some comrade in misfortune …and return to sit in his cheerless home until bed-time.'[102]

Pevsner, in addition, is a good starting point to build up a picture of any location in England and, as from Kit's near-destitution in Southampton, I wanted to show her crossing the water as a symbol of beginning a new life, his description in *Hampshire*

[97] Chapter 2, p. 9.
[98] H.V. Morton, *In Search of England*, 1927 (London: Methuen, 1933), pp. 104 and 119.
[99] John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, 1969 (London: Triad/Panther Books, 1984), 'Acknowledgements'.
[100] E. Royston Pike, *Human Documents of the Lloyd George Era* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), p.87.
[101] Chapter 1, p. 3.
[102] Eric Wyeth Gadd, *Southampton in the 'Twenties* (Southampton: Paul Cave Publications Ltd., 1979), pp. 30-31.

and the Isle of Wight of Dibden, near Hythe, the New Forest ferry port, gave me my setting: 'Fields and woods across the water form the precious, still rural backcloth to Southampton's central quays and waterfront … The houses … are few and scattered and melt into the rolling park-like landscape.'[103]

Finally, I again watched films for period details and attitudes, including *Brief Encounter*, which I have enjoyed many times in the past.[104] As I intended the railways, an important part of life in England in the mid-twentieth century, to be part of Kit's story, the poignantly brief meetings in the film at a railway station in the 1940s, a slightly later date, helped form my ideas for the occasion when Kit, during her pregnancy, meets her lover in a station buffet: 'when he … kissed her on the forehead, the whole room had begun to spin … She managed to smile, then told him that she felt like an elephant … In the next few hours they drank several cups of strong tea.'[105] *Brief Encounter* also has scenes in a suburban middle-class house in the 1940s which gave me a greater sense of the period for later chapters than the static room sets in The Geffrye Museum. The film was pertinent to Kit's story in other ways, too, in that it emphasises the security of a married life and the dangers of falling in love outside marriage.

From Woolf to Middlebrow

In *The Years* (1936) Woolf describes the drift of thought and feeling in each of her chosen years, from 1880 to 1937, and the point of view of a certain class. Echoing this episodic and disjunctive structure for Kit's story, my narrative focuses on incidents that shaped her life in four different years, 1921, 1926, 1930 and 1937. In addition, it is my intention that Jo will have written her grandmother, Kit's, narrative in order to round the circle of my exploration of story, memory and women's lives. However, though that is hinted at in the Prologue, it is not essential for the reader to know this at the beginning, as Jo will research and write her grandmother's story after the end of her own narrated story. She will use Kit's letters and her own recollections to help her re-imagine her life, presenting the story in vignettes, with each scene

[103] Nikolaus Pevsner and David Lloyd, *The Buildings of England: Hampshire and the Isle of Wight*, 1967 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), p. 190-191.
[104] *Brief Encounter*. Dir. David Lean. Great Britain: Eagle-Lion Distributors (1945 Theatrical). 1945.
[105] Chapter 3, p. 1.

almost as an episode in a letter that has come to life, in order to reflect how she was piecing the narrative together.

The Years follows an upper-middle-class family's progress, or regress, in a changing world, charting the conventions of English life and the ways in which the forces of society affect the individual, and Woolf tellingly sets down many of the attitudes of the time: '[Martin] hated talking to servants; it always made him feel insincere;' '[Peggy] had the non-committal look which well brought up children have when they listen to the talk of their elders.'[106] I am looking through the eyes of a woman in Woolf's servant class at the manners, social customs and traditions of a different section of English society, though I have tried to reflect in the Markhams, Kit's employers, some of the class superiority of the Pargiters: 'My daughter chose the last nurse-maid, Miss White. She drank. We don't want yet another change. It disturbs the child.'[107]

Woolf's narrative progresses through the small, private details of life, which is also a technique of many middlebrow writers and which I have adopted in telling Kit's story. In the final chapter, when Kit is coming to terms with her decision to marry Frank: 'She slipped her arms into her bibbed apron. She'd put her heart into playing all the roles required of her.'[108] Each of Woolf's chapters also begins with a description of the season to set the tone and to anchor the story: 'It was a summer evening; the sun was setting; the sky was blue still, but tinged with gold.'[109] I echo this, as perhaps many middlebrow writers have done, for instance, at the beginning of Chapter 4: 'The rhododendron leaves looked twisted and stiff with the frost and the north wind had blasted the life out of the cherry buds.'[110] Woolf also uses objects which recur again and again as a link throughout her chosen years, such as the Italianate gilt chair. This is a useful technique when writing within an episodic framework to emphasise both continuity and change, and I have responded by weaving in items that Kit has acquired from Mrs. Markham and passed on to Sarah and Jo. The Victorian spoon-back chair from West End Manor which Kit nicknamed

[106] Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, 1936 (St. Albans: Granada Publishing, 1982), pp. 171 and 155.
[107] Chapter 1, p. 8.
[108] Chapter 6, p. 9.
[109] Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, 1936 (St. Albans: Granada Publishing Limited, 1982), p.234.
[110] Chapter 4, p. 1.

'Bittersweet' is taken by Jo to the States, as is the tapestry of the 'cardinal' designed by Mrs. Markham as an ironic reference to her husband.

My second key text when thinking through both Kit's story and that of Sarah was Irène Némirovsky's *All Our Worldy Goods* (1947), which helped me gain a more far-reaching understanding of the devastating effects of the two world wars on people's lives. Némirovsky's writing also narrates the influence of family in developing a person's character while it follows the personal destinies of three generations of an insignificant bourgeois family in France, from before the First World War to the end of the Second. The narrator stands back and takes a long view of the tragedy of war. For instance, Chapter 7 opens with the sentence: 'It was the very beginning of the war when the heart bleeds for everyone who dies, when tears are shed for each man sent to fight.'[111] I wanted to reflect this all-pervading anguish for the people who lived through these times, and in my Chapter 3, Kit is standing in the churchyard with her father by a new stone cross when he asks her: '"Did you know … that of the 290 young men from the town who volunteered, 48 were killed and many more wounded?" He sounded uncertain, as if he could barely believe what he was saying. "I knew most of those named here," he went on.'[112]

For this period I also wanted to make connections with a more distant past and, as I was particularly attracted to the idea of a house as a means of continuity, I re-read E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910).[113] West End Manor, where Kit goes to work as a nursemaid, is my response. The house re-appears in Sarah's story in the 1960s and 1970s, when it has been split into three units, and in Part 3 it is revisited by Jo.

Even further back, but very much a novel in the tradition of women's writing, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) was another influence for this part of my story, as it describes a similar social background to what I had envisaged for Kit, though a century earlier and in the north of England. Gaskell's descriptions of the countryside by the sea also reminded me of Devon, where I intended Kit to have been born: 'There was comparative fertility and luxuriance down below in the rare green

[111] Irène Némirovsky, *All Our Worldly Goods*, 1947 (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 55.
[112] Chapter 2, p. 9.
[113] E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910) (London: Penguin, 1989)

dales. The narrow meadows stretching along the brookside seemed as though the cows could really satisfy their hunger in the deep rich grass.'[114] I was particularly inspired by Gaskell's depiction of the lives of ordinary men and women and of the impact of war on divided families. Her heroine, Sylvia's, more mature persona, as a fortress of reserve, outwardly muted by suffering but inwardly longing for her lost love, was how I envisaged the older Kit; and Gaskell's character of Philip had an influence on my ideas for Frank, Kit's husband.

The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969) also has as a backdrop a similar disruption of people's lives in the nineteenth century as a result of war. This displacement and migration as a result of the wars of the twentieth century was a factor in reshaping the lives of Kit and of Sarah. I also had Fowles in mind when in Chapter 3 Kit and Charlie are walking along the cliffs from Beer. This scene not only reflects the location of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* but I also wanted to show Kit's growing awareness of her social inferiority and her need to master her feelings in order not to lose what little she has, partly as an echo of the enigmatic behaviour of Sarah Woodruff, a woman in a not dissimilar position.

However, passages from Woolf's writing kept coming back to me when I was thinking about this inter-war period; and a statement by Amitav Ghosh at a reading at Southampton University, that the modern novel is mainly concerned with states of consciousness, also stayed in my mind.[115] I therefore re-read a passage in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) to look again at Woolf's use of free indirect discourse: '[Clarissa Dalloway] looked at Peter Walsh; her look, passing through all that time and that emotion … settled on him tearfully … as a bird touches a branch and rises and flutters away. Quite simply she wiped her eyes.'[116] This captures so well a woman's reaction to meeting a lost love and imagining what might have been, and it helped me to enter into Kit's thoughts. In Chapter 2, she muses, 'what could she and Charlie have to say to each other? For a long time she hadn't allowed herself to recall anything too

[114] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) (London: Everyman's Library, 1967), p.3.
[115] Amitav Ghosh, University of Southampton, 26 March 2010.
[116] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1925), p. 64.

clearly about him, but now, lying next to Sarah … she could still remember how it felt to have her head resting on his chest.'[117]

Clarissa Dalloway also influenced my picture of Mrs. Markham, and Woolf's novel overall gave me a clearer understanding of class divisions in the late 1920s/early 1930s, especially as I wanted to write about the beginning of a rapport between Kit and her employer which could only have developed into a friendship several years later, when social conventions were changing. After Kit's admission that she has an illegitimate daughter, Mrs. Markham, surprisingly, is sympathetic: 'I'll pour us a sherry – then you must tell me about your daughter.'[118] Later, in 1937 when circumstances have brought them more closely together, she is able to say to Kit: 'You can't possibly marry a man with ferrety little eyes and brylcreemed hair … Most men want a mother-wife. I've never been good at that.'[119] I have, in addition, played with the idea of Mrs. Markham's possible sexual attraction to Kit, as Woolf puts it, 'this falling in love with women.'[120]

Shifting Fortunes

Nicola Beauman, in discussing the woman's novel of the inter-war period, uses many phrases which I found resonated with my intentions in telling Kit's story to reflect how the social circumstances of someone from her background might be changing: 'the drama of the undramatic;' 'lives in which there is little action, less histrionics;' 'English fiction is steeped in the ups and downs of social rank;'[121] 'Each generation thinks it is unique but they are treading a well-worn path.'[122] For all three generations of my characters, I am tracing this 'well-worn' path through their undramatic lives. Each of them goes through certain 'ups and downs of social rank'. Kit, after working as a nurse-maid in an upper-middle-class household, is uncomfortable with the manners of her new in-laws who are in trade; Sarah remains more interested in being herself than conforming to what is expected of an army officer's wife; and Jo is

[117] Chapter 2, p. 12.
[118] Chapter 4, p. 9.
[119] Chapter 5, pp. 10-11.
[120] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1925), p. 48.
[121] Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 6.
[122] Ibid., p. 72.

initially impressed by cosmopolitan Washington society. The social status of all three, however, remains dependent on the men they marry.

Humble also notes of the middlebrow novel, that in its changing structures and preoccupations, it offers a map, 'of the shifting fortunes and identities of the middle classes throughout the period from the 1920s to the 1950s.'[123] I see the development of the friendship between Kit and her employer, Mrs. Markham, towards the end of this section of my novel as part of these shifting identities. Through writing my own middlebrow novel, I wanted to take a fresh look at the life of a domestic servant, but one who has a strong sense of her own individuality, in order to re-examine identities in this period. I see Kit as a keen reader, not only of poetry but of the novels current at the time. It is interesting that Humble also notes: 'the "feminine middlebrow" [novel] in this period was a powerful force in establishing and consolidating, but also in resisting, new class and gender identities.'[124] Kit's life has moved along with the changing circumstances of the era and she has matured into a woman who can make certain choices, but ultimately she is simply exchanging one dependent role for another.

Considering further how my critical and fictional reading has helped shape my story, Maslen notes: 'Those who are pregnant outside marriage … are some examples of [women in fiction] who in their time have been thrust to the margins.'[125] This is Kit's situation and her life will, as a consequence of giving birth to an illegitimate child, hover on the edge of destitution. However, I also sought to compare her status with that of a woman who might have even lower expectations than she has, and, using Chapter 4's setting of the New Forest, I have contrasted the lives of upper-middle-class Elizabeth, to whom Kit is a nursemaid, the less fortunate Sarah and a gypsy child born into extreme deprivation. Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004), and the story within a story of Jack Boughton's illegitimate child who lived, and died, in a dirt poor family, was one prompt for this, as was a family tale of a great-aunt coming

[123] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (2001) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 12.
[124] Ibid., p. 3.
[125] Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 100.

across a gypsy woman in labour and staying with her until her baby was born.[126] I therefore re-read *An informal history of the New Forest Gypsies* to understand more clearly the lives of the gypsies at that time.[127]

In addition, in order to reflect people's changing fortunes in the inter-war years and the frequency with which many moved house, after Kit's comfortable life in Hampshire working for the Markhams, I have set Chapter 5 in a cottage in Kent, in which, as a result of bankruptcy and divorce, Kit and Mrs. Markham are living together in straitened circumstances: 'they were getting further and further behind paying even the smallest bills.'[128]

By re-telling Kit's life through the lens of today, I hoped to portray a much more developed character in the lower-middle class than, for instance, Woolf's Mrs. Dempster in *Mrs. Dalloway*: 'For … what with eating, drinking, and mating, the bad days and good, life had been no mere matter of roses.'[129] Although her depiction of members of the servant class is very much of its time, it now seems extraordinarily sketchy and stereotyped. One example is Crosby, the parlour maid in *The Years*, whose 'legs pained her'.[130] I intended to make Kit a fully rounded character, with her own informed ideas and tastes. On her wedding night she muses to herself, 'She'd be forty-one in a few months' time and there were one or two fine wrinkles at the corner of her eyes … She was married, and to Frank. Never before had she come first with anyone, but now with him she always would come first; and he must come first with her.'[131]

In the opening chapter of Kit's story, she is aware that in order to begin to establish a new life and be accepted back into society, in however lowly a position, 'she would have to hide her past thoroughly and bury her memories.'[132] Forgetting or reshaping the past has been a way for many women to re-establish a better life and it is a trope

[126] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), pp. 158-9.
[127] Len Smith, *Romany Nevi-Welsh: An informal history of the New Forest Gypsies* (Lyndhurst: Nova Foresta Publishing, 2004), pp. 115-126.
[128] Chapter 5, p. 9.
[129] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1925), p .40.
[130] Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, 1937 (St. Albans: Granada Publishing Limited, 1982), p. 232.
[131] Chapter 6, p .8.
[132] Chapter 1, p. 10.

found in many middlebrow novels. It is also one that I have reflected for each of my characters: as Connerton notes, 'the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one's current identity and ongoing purposes.'[133]

Conclusion

How women see themselves

In *Reading and Writing Women's Lives*, Brothers notes, 'the ideology that informs [the novel of manners] is the romantic belief in the power and potential of the individual that challenges birth and class as determiners of worth and value.'[134] I intended to examine in my fiction how a woman's view of herself, of her priorities and her potential, is affected by the social conditions in which she lives, but also to show that common sense and adaptability and the toughness of the female psyche can pass from one generation to the next.

I wanted, particularly with Kit and Mrs. Markham, to question certain social stereotypes; for example, as portrayed by Woolf. Kit, in 1921, hovering on the edge of destitution through trying to provide for herself and her daughter, realises that she has no chance of an independent life and a very limited number of possibilities. Later, having long ago given Sarah up for adoption, it was for her still a personal and economic necessity that a husband be found. Throughout the story she accepts the prevailing social standards and class distinctions, and her mature character displays the Victorian virtues of restraint, sympathy and unselfishness. However, she is also able to respond to the small cultural changes that she observes; for instance, in her relationship with Mrs. Markham.

The story moves into Sarah's life in 1937, just before the Second World War and at a time of weakening patriarchal authority. My intention was to show that, because of Sarah's upbringing in an all-female household, she was unconventional and self-

[133] Paul Connerton, 'Seven types of forgetting', *Memory Studies*, pp. 59-71 (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications 2008). ISSN 1750-6980, Vol 1(1): 59-71 <www.sagepublications.com> [accessed 8 February 2011] (pp. 59 and 63)

[134] Barbara Brothers, 'The Novels of Barbara Pym', Bege K. Bowers and Barbara Brothers, eds., *Reading and Writing Women's Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), p. 156-7.

reliant, hoping, without any great expectations, to make her own way in life. She often finds herself in conflict with established social standards. Perhaps due to the insecurity of being given away by her mother as a baby and her uncertainty about her background, she finds it hard to fit in to any society. However, there are more possibilities for her to shape her life than there were for her mother; although, as Maslen notes, 'the position of women by the end of the fifties had in many ways failed to advance as far as the suffragettes might have hoped … many of the old prejudices affecting women were still in place, not only among men, but reflected in the view women had of themselves.'[135]

For Jo in 1973 there are many more possibilities for autonomy and self-fulfilment. Marriage is no longer an economic or social necessity, though she is very aware of herself in relation to the social structure around her and to society's sexual double standards. Brothers notes, 'the ideal of love and marriage … is bound up with our conceptions of self, particularly a woman's sense of personhood.' Jo, in reaction to her less conventional mother, is perhaps too conscious of the values of society, 'values the individual internalizes and through which he or she passes judgment upon the self.'[136]

Informed by my personal knowledge and historical research and by the fiction that I have read for each period, my purpose has been to explore how Kit, Sarah and Jo have negotiated the rapidly changing social structures and ideologies of each period, and also to show, through the tales passed down from one generation to the next, what part memory, story and family background might play. However, ultimately I must ask myself whether what I have written is a satisfying, enjoyable work of fiction, drawing the reader in to the world of my text and prompting him or her to re-examine their views of the past.

My fiction is character-based: I have tried to get my characters to make the plot and allowed them to behave and develop in ways which I feel are true to their inner

[135] Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 203.
[136] Barbara Brothers, 'The Novels of Barbara Pym', in Bege K. Bowers and Barbara Brothers, eds., *Reading and Writing Women's Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), p. 159.

natures, a technique which is apparent in many middlebrow novels and which Beauman calls a post-Woolfian stream-of-consciousness approach, allowing a character's consciousness to unfold, with the role of the novelist being as much receptive as manipulative.[137] I have used a single character as my focalizer for each of the three periods, looking at the changing class and moral constraints and expectations of and by women. Humble writes of 'the changing politics of femininity and the domestics' in the 1920s to the 1950s, which again makes this period so worth while to explore.[138] My characters are also intended to embody certain female dilemmas of their time and the narrative to show how each character changed, grew and developed in the course of her story. My novel is as much a study of character as of society, though with my characters firmly embedded within the 'actualities of the social world'.[139]

Re-visioning our lives

Greene notes in her article on feminist fiction and memory, 'Textual feminists … suggest a view of the past not as fixed and finished but as so vitally connected to the present that it takes on new meaning in response to present questions and needs.'[140] This has been my aim in writing this novel. Having been on a journey with my characters from the perspective of today, I hoped that I might have discovered and communicated to the reader a slightly different view of the past. My first simple intention was to address the contemporary reader and enable him or her, through reading my fiction, to consider the way in which life for a Western woman has changed. I wanted to explore and share the experiences of women from an earlier generation, also asking, how different are we now from the past; and how might the stories women share in published form and within the family have a bearing on the way we see ourselves? Greene discusses, 'writing as the means of revising the past.'[141] Through writing my story in response to my reading, to stories from family

[137] Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), p.156.
[138] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (2001) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5.
[139] Ibid., p. 3.
[140] Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), pp. 290-321. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174512> [accessed 11/April 2011] (p. 305)
[141] Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), pp. 290-321< http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174512> [accessed 11 April 2011], p. 293.

and friends and to my own experience, I have been re-visiting and testing the mid-twentieth century literary past and trying to restore and revise it for myself and others.

As I came to the end of my novel and was considering again how I would situate my characters, I thought of a sentence I had noted in Deborah Parsons' *Streetwalking the Metropolis*: 'Flânerie can … be interpreted as an attempt to identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity, what Dorothy Richardson has termed "pilgrimage".'[142] I see my three women as veering between the female *flâneur* and the rag picker, but more towards the former, with the fear in the back of the mind of each of them of destitution. For Kit, there is still the threat of the workhouse for women like her; Sarah manages to survive as a single mother, albeit an impoverished one, thanks to the help of her sister; and Jo retains the image of, 'the old woman … outside Foxtrot-Oscar slumped on the steps of the bric-à-brac shop. How had she ended up as a shapeless bundle swigging what looked like the dregs of a bottle of cider?'[143]

In the past I have had a greater interest in biographies and histories than in plot-driven stories, but I have become aware that the novels of women writers such as Storm Jameson, Christa Wolf and Margaret Atwood have something more profound to say about the individual in a certain period in history. Therefore, the context I place myself within is that of a woman writing about women's lives; what was known from an earlier period as middlebrow fiction. I have not attempted to write a 'propaganda' novel or a sociological one, and perhaps therefore my fiction also falls into the broad category of a novel of manners.[144] Three of the writers who have influenced me in shaping my novel, Doris Lessing (whose work I have not included in this commentary but whose character, Frances, in *The Sweetest Dream* (2001) was an early inspiration for Sarah),[145] Drabble and Laurence, also, as Greene notes, take a 'view of the past as

[142] Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 41.
[143] Chapter 13, p. 10.
[144] Bege K. Bowers and Barbara Brothers, *Reading and Writing Women's Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), p. 11.
[145] Doris Lessing, *The Sweetest Dream* (London: Flamingo, 2001)

ever-changing and open to revision.'[146] My novel is part of this revision in order to achieve a slightly different understanding.

I must also acknowledge that 'instinct and luck' have played a part in shaping my fiction.[147] However, I have throughout remained conscious of logging the steps in my creative process in order to remind myself of my original purpose, and I believe that the discipline of writing within the framework I have chosen for my thesis has brought about a worthwhile dialogue with this 'instinct and luck.' My middlebrow novel has, in its fragmented structure, charted the lives of three generations of women, from the 1920s to the 1970s, to follow how they have adapted to 'new class and gender identities' and coped with their shifting fortunes.[148] These stories have developed mainly from a 'writerly' reading of the novels I have selected from the three periods, and, as I have approached them with a view to borrowing, adapting and sharing, their influence has seeped into all I have written,

My fiction looks at the personal and individual. There is no 'heavy social commentary' or 'message';[149] there is no 'great revelation', only, I hope, small 'illuminations'.[150] An early influence for my writing was Woolf's *The Years*. As a woman writer, my novel inevitably follows the path of thinking 'back through our mothers' but I am fortunate in the early twenty-first century to have a great deal of women's writing to respond to.[151]

Different readers, at different times, will read my fiction in a different way: 'you can only tell [people] particular stories of particular people and experiences, from which each according to his own immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own

[146] Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), pp. 290-321< http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174512> [accessed 11 April 2011], p. 305.
[147] Allan Massie, 'When the puppets escape', *Spectator*, 21 May 2011, p. 45: 'Novels are made more by instinct and luck than by taking thought.'
[148] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*, 2001 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.5.
[149] Margaret Atwood, *Second Words*, pp. 396-7, in Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 7.
[150] Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), pp. 290-321 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174512> [accessed 11 April 2011], p. 312.
[151] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929 (London: Panther Books, 1985), pp.72-73.

conclusions.'[152] I agree also with W.H. Auden's statement: that 'books often say something different from what they set out to say … in any book there is a part that is the author's and a part that is a collective and anonymous work.'[153] I am a writer in the early twenty-first century, influenced by the political and social world in which I live, and from this position I am interpreting the experiences I have imagined for my characters at an earlier time. I have aimed not to write 'an historical novel' but a novel embedded in the middlebrow tradition of women's writing in order to revisit 'the reality' of those times. Through responding to my selected novels, I hope that I have re-examined certain concepts of the past for myself and for the reader in order to reach slightly different conclusions and to begin to understand the past in a new way.

[152] Italo Calvino, 'Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature', *The Uses of Literature*, trans. P. Creagh (Orland: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 89-100 (99) in Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 5.
[153] W. H. Auden, 'Psychology and Art Today' [1935], repr. in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), pp. 332-42 (341) in Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 14.

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