The Electric: a novel and critical commentary investigating narrative disruption in sign language, cinemagoing, and trauma

Thesis

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*The Electric: a novel and critical commentary investigating narrative disruption in sign language, cinemagoing, and trauma*

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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**VOLUME 1: A NOVEL**
Abstract

*The Electric* is a multi-protagonist novel charting the radiating effects of a death on three generations of a family in East Sussex. The accompanying critical commentary analyses the impact of interdisciplinary research on the creative process, showing how the novel engages with and reflects narrative disruption – a common theme of research in the fields of British Sign Language, cinemagoing, and remembered trauma.

The novel is comprised of two interwoven time-frames. Through the middle part of the twentieth century, Daisy, unhappy in her marriage to an ambitious policeman, takes solace in cinema, and a correspondence with a former soldier from Canada. In the late 1990s, Linda, Daisy’s daughter, and Lucas, her deaf grandson, are still struggling to reconcile themselves to Daisy’s death, which had occurred a decade before. The two narrative strands circle each other, around the traumatic ‘gap’ caused by Daisy’s death. This structure, with its absences, repetitions, and disconnections, reflects the narrative disjunctures faced by the characters.

Each chapter of the critical commentary deals with a separate element which disrupts the novel’s narrative and characters, namely: the effects on memory of relearning a forgotten language; the impact of cinemagoing history on the shape of the novel; and the attempt to articulate remembered trauma. It describes the search for an apt form for these representational challenges. The commentary is also preoccupied with how interdisciplinary research – in such areas as language loss, psychoanalysis, ethnography, and oral history – can shape the content, form, and methodology of a novel.

The novel’s original contribution lies in its representation of dormant memories awakened by Lucas’ relearning of a manual language, and in its structure – which is based on the ‘rolling programmes’ of the mid-twentieth century picturehouses. As a
whole, the thesis expresses a way of thinking about the relationship between novelistic form and interdisciplinary reading.
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The Electric

A Novel

Edward Hogan
ONE

1997.

The house where Linda grew up is above the cliffs at Saltdean. The pink of the autumn sunset takes hold in the chalk face, in the traffic signs, and in the breast of the seagull which stomps on the roof. She stands across the road, by the wire fence, and looks down on the moonscape of rock pools where she and her mum used to take the bucket when she was a kid. The English Channel hisses like TV static.

Finally, she turns to face her old home. She looks up at the top window. Her sister, Caroline, began to let the place some time ago, but now they must sell it, to pay for the hospice where their father has spent the last eleven years. Today, she has come to sort through what her sister called, ‘the rubbish in the attic.’

She crosses the road, sidles past Caroline’s 4x4, and knocks on the glossy black door. There are two panels of red and blue glass in the door, and the feeling Linda gets, when she sees those colours is like a thump in the gut. Her sister opens up, wearing a long white sweater and yellow rubber gloves, her hair dyed copper.

‘Will you look at this,’ Caroline says, picking up an envelope from the doormat and handing it to Linda. ‘After all this bloody time.’

It is junk mail: a prize draw envelope from Reader’s Digest addressed to Robert Seacombe, their father. ‘Well,’ Linda says. ‘Did he win?’
Caroline gives a grim smile and turns back into the house. She and Linda haven’t spoken much since their mother died. Caroline accused Linda of having no feelings, but a life without feelings would have been a blessed mercy to Linda.

Inside, the house has been stripped to a shell. Caroline scrubs the kitchen surfaces, while a small portable television shows the tea-time soaps. The Australian voices echo in the empty room, and the sisters speak loudly over them, to share their news. Caroline and her family are planning a trip to Orlando. They are thinking about a conservatory.

‘It’s Lucas’ last year of school,’ Linda says.

Caroline tilts her head and winces. ‘Oh. How is Lucas? The poor thing.’

Linda grimaces. ‘There’s nothing poor about him, Caroline. He’s fine.’

‘Has he taken it badly? I mean, you and Mike splitting up.’

‘He’s just fine.’

‘What about Mike?’ Caroline says, wiping the worktop in wide semicircles. ‘Do you see him at all?’

Linda breathes in. Several families have lived in the house since the Seacombes, but Linda imagines she can detect – beneath the tang of bleach – the smell that once made this place home. It is the faint scent of apples, mixed with her mother’s furniture polish. She smiles at Caroline. ‘Can I help you clean?’ she says.

Caroline sighs, as if it’s too late for all that. ‘It’s fine,’ she says.

‘So, it’s in the attic, then? The stuff you want me to go through?’

‘Yes. There’s barely anything left,’ says Caroline. At the sink, she wrings a silty liquid from the sponge. ‘It’s just papers.’

Linda turns to go.
‘I’ve taken the Royal Crown, Linda,’ Caroline calls out.

It sounds like she has assumed an hereditary title.

Walking through the hallway, Linda lets her hand slide along the wall. She looks in on the empty living room. She shuts her eyes, and in her mind sees the button-back sofa, and the horse-bells on the wall, and her mother ironing shirts in front of the Saturday afternoon movie. Blinking, she crosses the room and studies the bright moss that gathers – that always gathered – on the seals of the patio doors. She looks out on the garden. The high fence shudders against the wind rolling down over the fields. The shed seems to return Linda’s gaze, its eye the single darkened window.

As she climbs the narrow stairs, Linda notes with relief that the door to her parents’ room is closed. Over the years, Caroline has dealt with the house singlehandedly. Linda is grateful, because she could never face it. She’s been useless. It was Caroline who had suggested letting the place, and Caroline who had hired builders to strip and re-plaster the back wall of the bedroom, and pull up the floorboards, because blood had soaked through the carpet.

When Linda reaches the landing, she sees the metal ladder hanging down from the open hatch in the ceiling. She goes up.

There is more in the attic than her sister has led her to believe. The bare bulb illuminates a rusting filing cabinet, a plastic jewellery box, and many other items salvaged from her parents’ old room. Finding those things, re-arranged in that half-lit space, makes her heart slam. She almost calls out when she sees her father’s stuffed eagle owl, over by the pink insulation foam. One of the marble eyes has dropped slightly in the face, as though the owl has been sleeping in a draught. Trapped beneath its furry left claw is a stuffed mouse, which may have died years
before the owl, and peacefully. The arrangement was a gift from the force, and her father had insisted that it stay in the corner of the bedroom. Moving closer to the owl, Linda realises that her mother’s body must once have been reflected in those amber eyes. There is a plaque on the mount:

TO ROBERT “SURE-SHOT” SEACOMBE.
WOODEN SPOON, 1962.
FROM BRIGHTON CID SHOOTING CLUB.

Linda turns the owl around, and scrambles back to the other items, snagging her tights on the splintered floorboards. She handles the Royal Doulton figurines, and the prints that her mother bought after she took the art appreciation course at the polytechnic. There is also a group of small, framed family photographs. In one, her parents are young. They stand outside the old skating rink in town. Robert, in his wide-shouldered jacket, looks away from the camera. He holds his young wife by the wrist. Daisy is wearing a polka dot dress and faces the camera, her mouth slightly open, her eyes narrowed, full of mischief. Her expression, her youthfulness, takes Linda’s breath away.

Linda has a sudden, vivid memory of hanging those pictures with her mother. She recalls her mother’s calves clenching as she stretched to adjust a frame. They had stood back together. ‘They make that wall look weirdly big,’ Linda had said. ‘It’s always been big,’ Daisy replied, in her Norma Desmond voice. ‘It’s the pictures that got small.’

Now, in the slanted attic, Linda smiles. All those years of forcing the memories down, and now, in this house, she feels powerless against them. She breathes deeply, and the moment passes.
At first glance, the filing cabinet seems to contain only ledger accounts and folders full of bills and receipts – ‘just paper’, as Caroline said. But under those files, Linda finds a stack of old *Picturegoer* magazines, their page edges green with damp and mould. She takes them out with glee, and sees the actress Tonia Bern, in a bathing suit on a cover. She reads the headlines:

*The Woman Behind Those Marrying Gabors*

*Sophia Loren Wins Her Battle*

*Don’t Call Me Big ‘Ead, says Max Bygraves*

As she puts them back, a folded piece of paper slips out of the pile. Linda opens it. A letter, to Daisy. The paper is shiny and transparent, like the grease-soaked wrapping they give you with your chips on the seafront. Under the bulb, Linda can see the shadows of her fingers through the sheet. The handwriting is hard to decipher, and the ink has faded to faint indigo, but some words rise out of the jumble:

\[ \text{deeper} \quad \text{alarming} \quad \text{must urge you} \]

\[ \text{furioulsy happy} \quad \text{wild with it} \quad \text{awake at this time.} \]

Linda is startled to find such words in her old family home. People here did not talk that way. The handwriting is not her father’s, and the name at the bottom of the letter is *Paul*. The letter came from Winnipeg, Canada.

She fans the pages of the magazines, shaking the issues upside down, so that a fungal smell rises into the air. She finds two more letters, from the same man. They
are folded, without envelopes, and run to several pages of virtually unreadable script. 

She flattens the three letters on the floor, and is struck by the dates: 1949, 1951, 1957. She tries to make the seven in that last date into a two or a one, but he crossed his sevens, so there can be no mistake. To Linda, eight years seems like a very long correspondence with someone her mother never mentioned.

She struggles through a sentence. *Sometimes almost hear your voice lead.* She scans the page. *I can sit in the kitchen curtains drawn, and it's like being back in the picturehouse with you but then mother walks in!*

‘Linda!’ Caroline calls up from below. ‘I’m locking up. Are you done?’

‘Yeah. Yep. Be there in a minute.’

Linda hears her sister’s footsteps receding on the stairs. She gathers the letters and puts them into her handbag. She takes the photograph of her parents, too, and descends.

Caroline is waiting by the television, watching the final moments of a soap.

‘Caro, did Mum ever mention someone called Paul?’

Caroline holds up her finger, for silence. After a minute or so, the credits roll, and Caroline shakes her head with admiration. ‘I would literally die without television,’ she says, unplugging the small set and heaving it onto her chest. ‘What were you saying?’

‘Nothing,’ Linda says.

Outside the house, Caroline loads the TV into the back seat, as though it’s a child, and offers Linda a lift home. Linda examines the Land Rover, its cream seats like coffin liner. ‘No, that’s okay, thanks. Bus stops right outside.’

‘I will call you when we get viewings.’
‘Fine. Thank you, Caro.’

‘I know it’s tough, but it makes sense to sell, now. The market is right.’

‘I would’ve bulldozed the place years ago,’ Linda says.

‘Great. Then how would we have paid for Dad’s care? Someone has to think about reality, Linda.’

‘I know. You’re right.’

Caroline sighs. ‘When was the last time you visited Dad?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You should go more often. And take Lucas. I’m sure Dad misses you.’

‘Well. It’s always so…I’m not sure it goes any good, me being there.’

When their father emerged from a coma, eleven years ago, he was severely brain damaged. He has not spoken since then. Linda thinks of the way the light in the hospice room hits his face, the sheen on his cheek where the nurses shave him. The heat of panic rises to her skin. She looks beyond the house at the smooth green curve of Downland. She smells bonfires. ‘Besides,’ Linda says, ‘you were always his favourite, Caroline.’

‘A mixed blessing,’ Caroline replies.

‘What?’ Linda says.

But Caroline quickly returns to the well-rehearsed family script. ‘You know, Mum was suffering, Linda. It was so hard for them both.’

Linda strangles her own rage. She makes her mind go blank. After so many years, she is very good at it. In a moment, she is able to take a step towards her sister and softly kiss her face.

Caroline flinches, and blinks. ‘You’re a strange one, Linda. Always have been.’
Linda and Lucas live in the suburban village of Ringdean, about five miles inland. It was a good place for Lucas to grow up, Linda thinks. There is a park, and some small wooded areas, but nowhere you could get truly lost. She gets off the bus at the row of shops: a hairdressers, a new take-away pizza place, a newsagents. She walks up the hill, called Downside, and turns onto her cul-de-sac, Bramble Avenue. Opposite their long bungalow, the larch trees are dropping their needles. The street is already half-an-inch thick with them. The rusty scatter reminds Linda of how the sink used to look after her father had shaved off his stubble at the end of a holiday. Amongst the larches is a streetlight. It comes on with a click, in the blue dusk.

Linda goes into her house, and through to the back bedroom, which is now hers alone. She puts her handbag down on the floral bedspread, and begins to take out the letters, but the light in the hallway flicks on and off. Lucas has arrived home. Linda walks to the wall and presses the light switch three times. Hello. I’m here.

There is a reason she didn’t hear him come in. When he was young, Lucas was a noisy slammer of doors and cupboards. He did not know he was doing it. Lucas is deaf – or partially hearing, or hearing-impaired, or hard of hearing – she’s lost track of what the experts call it, these days. In any case, he can hear very little without his hearing aids, and not much more with them. Linda had responded to his door-slamming by re-carpeting the rooms, and putting rubber stoppers on everything. She replaced the drawers with the type that close gradually, no matter how hard you shove them. Even the toilet seat has a slow drop mechanism.
Lucas enters her bedroom, now, with a glass of squash. ‘Hello, Mum,’ he says. His speech has improved slightly, over the years. With his aids, and lip-reading, they converse quite well. He makes a huge effort to enunciate, and she tries hard to listen, and so they get by. Before his Nanna died, they used to sign, but that was a different time. He kisses her, and then sits on the padded stool by the dresser. ‘What’s all this?’ he says, pointing to the letters.

‘Nothing,’ Linda says, swiftly folding them back into her bag. In a way, she would like to show him, would like to talk to him about his Nanna, but she is frightened of triggering his memory. Lucas found her mother’s body. He was just a little boy, and seems not to remember, but Linda has no wish to test him. ‘How was your day, Love?’

‘Fantastic, thanks,’ he says. ‘A great day.’

‘Did you get any appointments for parents evening?’

Lucas frowns. ‘How did you know about that?’

‘Oh. You left the letter on the kitchen table.’

That is a lie. Linda found it in his rucksack, which she roots through periodically. She knows it is wrong, but she can’t help it. She just wants to know him, to know that he’s okay. ‘Right,’ he says, and smiles.

Lucas has his father’s broadness, now. The cuffs of his shirt dig into his forearms. He is dark, like Mike, and has those long eyelashes, but his brow is heavier. He would have the same curls if he didn’t keep them so closely cropped.

‘Your dad is picking you up from school, tomorrow.’

‘Yes.’ He looks thoughtful. ‘Do you want me to give him a message?’

‘No, thanks.’

‘You know, it’s good to talk,’ he says, hopefully.
Linda crosses the room and strokes his hair. The distant whistling feedback from his aids fills the silence. They tried the Widex digital in-ear aids a few years ago, but they broke, and he is back with behind-the-ear analogues, now.

‘Do you think that Dad will come back home, soon?’ Lucas asks.

‘I don’t know, Love.’

‘But it is temporary, isn’t it?’

‘Everything is temporary,’ she says. ‘God, I’m hot.’

‘You’re not fat,’ Lucas says.

‘No, I said hot. I’m hot. I must have left the heating on. Wait, do you think I look fat?’

‘No!’ Lucas says. They both smile at the misunderstanding. ‘You look nice. Always.’

Linda turns and examines herself in the dresser mirror. ‘Is it my clothes, do you think?’ But of course, Lucas can’t read her lips through the back of her head. She twists round, and repeats the question.

‘You could wear some more colours,’ Lucas says. ‘At the moment, it all sort of blends into…beige.’

She is wearing a cream blouse, a chocolate brown skirt, and pale tights. She takes hold of the skirt.

‘I like neutral shades.’

‘You look like a cup of coffee.’

‘Lucas!’

‘I like coffee!’ he says, standing and rubbing her arms until she looks at him. He raises his eyebrows and smiles. ‘I love coffee.’
For eleven years, Linda has been trying to forget. She tried to forget the local newspaper headlines. She tried to forget the colour of her mother’s make-up, spilt on the blue carpet of her bedroom. She tried to forget the words of the coroner, who had talked about an end to pain.

She had failed to return to work after her compassionate leave, and eventually gave up on her career working with young offenders. A year ago, her husband, Mike, moved into a flat in town. There were no affairs, no screaming rows. Mike had expected his wife to get better, and she hadn’t.

In films, death is overcome. Someone dies, and the person left behind is sad and angry, but then they embark on a new relationship, or repair an old one, and they see the beauty in life again. They turn away from death; they grow. That hadn’t happened to Linda. Her mother loved the cinema, and enjoyed a slow movie, but she wouldn’t have watched the film of Linda’s grief. She’d have walked out halfway through. After about five and a half years.

But in the attic of her parents’ house, something inside Linda had changed. Seeing her mother’s face again, in the photograph, she missed her. She really missed her mum.

Now, in her bedroom, she places the photograph on the bed, alongside the letters. She looks at all those words, the phrases jumping out, the sentences rearranging themselves. She picks up the first letter, from 1951, and holds it carefully, in two hands. She begins to read as best she can:

*I discuss the latest pictures with you in my mind. In fact, I have taken to doing so aloud. think that’s crazy? Yes, you and I are for passionately debating the new releases. Nobody here talks like you. believe you are exotic! Sometimes, if I*
really listen, I can hear your voice in my head. afraid that one day, I will forget how you sound.

Linda puts the letter down. Her mind is whirring. It is almost too much to bear. And yet, after a moment, she reads on.

* * *

The next day, Lucas sits next to an empty seat by the classroom window. The late afternoon light falls orange on the desk. English, last period.

In his opinion, Lucas is doing fine. Everyone thinks life is terrible for a deaf teenager, but Lucas isn’t into self-pity. He smiles a lot, he keeps quiet, and the other pupils like him well enough. He has his books. He has his family (yes, his parents are going through a tough patch, but that’s more of a reason to stay strong and happy). Life is actually okay.

Lucas is waiting, now, for his learning support assistant, Terry, a friendly older man. The teachers hoped that Terry’s easy-going manner would help Lucas to blend in. In speech therapy, Terry made Lucas put his hand on his (Terry’s) throat, so that Lucas could feel the vibrations of the vocal chords during correct enunciation. Admittedly, Lucas detected a certain world-ending pointlessness in that activity, but he knows that it’s important to stay upbeat and work hard. They told him, from the start, that – with the right hearing technology and his very, very slight residual hearing – he was a perfect candidate for the mainstream life. Terry had thick, baggy,
clean-shaven, sun-tanned neck-skin, and under the surface, Lucas could feel that the tendons were breakable.

‘Now do it to self,’ Terry would say, gripping his own neck. ‘But don’t take it too far! don’t want to strangle yourself, do you? Ha-ha!’

Today, however, Terry does not arrive. Instead, a young woman comes in. She is in her early twenties, but Lucas almost mistakes her for a sixth-former at first, because of the sky-blue blouse and navy skirt. She looks like one of those head-girl types who sometimes come to sit with him so they have something else to write on their UCAS applications. Which is fine.

There is a ripple of movement in the room when she enters. The boys all turn to each other, to comment, to judge. Lucas stares down at the larch needles caught up in the laces of his shoes. Initially, he does not find her attractive. He is into breasts, at this point – the heavy kind that rest on tables, the ones with nipples like great dark stains. This woman has more of an athletic build. She searches the room, and then smiles at Lucas. She walks over and sits beside him, in Terry’s chair. ‘Hello,’ she says, clearly but without exaggeration. ‘I’m Cassie. Terry is sick. I’m filling in.’

At the front of the class, Duncan Youds turns around in his seat, and calls out, ‘Miss! Miss! I’m deaf, too! deaf, Miss!’ Lucas can see that Youds is making his voice all weird, burying his tongue under his bottom lip.

Cassie ignores him. ‘Do you have everything you need?’ she says to Lucas.

She smells of freshly applied deodorant, even at 2.30pm. You can see a lot of her gums when she opens her mouth, and Lucas finds that unsettling. Her hair is shortish, blonde, and longer on one side than the other. It has a feathery quality, like those Native American earrings. She moves her hands while she talks.

‘Oh,’ Lucas says. ‘I don’t sign.’
‘Okay,’ she says. ‘My brother is deaf and he signs, so I just   ’

She rubs her knuckles together when she says brother. Lucas, alarmed, casts a glance around the room to make sure nobody has noticed.

‘Don’t sign,’ he says, with a tight smile.

Beneath his politeness, during that first lesson, he feels stirrings of irritation. Mostly, he keeps a low profile at school, and he resents the attention she brings, with her powdery hair and red mouth. The other pupils keep turning to examine the distance between them. Cassie studies her blouse, and brushes off a fine pelt of something like dust.

Mrs Finch, meanwhile, is suddenly midway through an explanation of their English GCSE coursework. It is called ‘A Life in the Day’ and is based on the format of a newspaper feature in which famous people use their daily routines as a springboard for discussing core values. Mrs Finch is talking about breakfast. That much is clear.

‘Don’t just   about breakfast,’ she says. ‘Think your breakfast says about you.’

Lucas can feel Cassie shake slightly, next to him. Laughing, it seems. The rest of the pupils suddenly become active, leaning under tables to produce writing equipment. Lucas stares at the whiteboard, and the words ‘Pop Tart.’

Cassie summons his attention by tapping his arm. ‘So, Lucas,’ she says, smiling.

‘If your breakfast could talk, would it say?’

‘It would probably beg for mercy,’ Lucas says.

Her laughter is genuine and carefree. More heads turn.

Lucas has a problem with ‘A Life in the Day’. He does not want to write about home. He feels like he would somehow betray his mother, if he did. But he takes out his pencil case and ring binder. He sees, too late, that someone has Tipp-Exed
‘Hey, what’s all this?’ Cassie says.

‘Nothing. Just a bit of fun.’

Such acts of vandalism are rare, and Lucas ignores them. He won’t be drawn into negativity. He opens the binder quickly, as Mrs Finch approaches. Mrs Finch tends to omit parts of her words when she speaks to Lucas, perhaps trying to mirror his flawed speech. This actually makes lip-reading very difficult.

‘Hi Luca. Do you need some help? You even even pick up you penic,’ she says.

‘I’m fine thanks, Mrs Finch,’ Lucas says.

‘Well, you got Assie.’

‘Yes. Thank you.’

She walks away. Cassie nudges him. She takes out a black notebook and turns to a fresh page of squared paper.

**WHY IS SHE TALKING TO YOU LIKE THAT?** she writes.

God, Lucas thinks. Terry never made challenging remarks about the teachers.

**SHE IS JUST BEING NICE,** he writes.

Cassie gives him a look of comical doubt.

Lucas takes a toilet break. In the brightness of the strip-lit room, he finds that he is sweating. He runs his thick wrists under the tap-water and assures himself that everything will be fine. Soon, Terry will recover and he can slip back under the radar. Back to normal.

He coasts through the rest of the lesson, writing about his breakfast experience. He thinks of the empty chair at the kitchen table, and his mum, her smile stretched to breaking point. He knows he must stay strong for his mother, but sometimes she makes him want to scream with frustration. These thoughts occur to him as he
considers his work, but he writes sentences like: WHILE I PREFER WHITE BREAD, I KNOW THAT BROWN BREAD CONTAINS MORE FIBRE, SO I USUALLY SELECT BROWN.

He does his best to avoid eye-contact with Cassie, and as soon as it's time to go, he nods a quick goodbye, hastily packs away his things and leaves the building.

Duncan Youds shouts to him, ‘Hey, Mario, who’s your bitch?’

They call him Mario after the video game character, because he used to have curly black hair, and a downy moustache. He shaved, and cut his hair, but it stuck. There are worse names – Rhea Nelson, in year ten, is known as Gonorrhoea.

Usually, as he leaves school, he’ll have a brief conversation with his friend Iona. Iona has a deaf cousin, Nicky, who used to attend the Partial Hearing Unit with Lucas at primary school. The three of them used to spend a lot of time together, before Nicky went to the Deaf school just outside town.

Today, however, Iona – thin and pale – only gives him a brief nod as he takes the crowded path towards the school exit. He soon understands why: Cassie is walking beside him. He almost flinches when he realises. She smiles, and they leave the school together.

Outside the gates, she taps his arm, and they stop. ‘I will be here, tomorrow,’ Cassie says. ‘Why don’t we’

Lucas does not see the rest of what she says, because he sees, with panic, that his father is crossing the road towards them. ‘All right, Lukey!’ Mike says, taking him by the shoulder. ‘Have a good day? Did you show them what you’re made of?’

Mike is wearing his work clothes: a grey suit, a white shirt and a red tie. He brushes back his black curls and smiles. ‘It’s good to see you, son.’

‘Hi,’ Lucas says.

Mike turns to Cassie. ‘Hello,’ he says. Mike greets everyone like a cousin he
hasn’t seen for years, like he can’t wait to hear the news.

‘Lucas’ support worker,’ Cassie says.

Mike squints at her. ‘…Terry? Have you done something different with your hair, mate?’

Lucas winces with embarrassment, but Cassie laughs. ‘Terry is going off sick while.’

‘Oh, no,’ Mike says. ‘I hope he’s .’

‘Let’s go, Dad,’ Lucas says, and begins to walk. He turns back and says a quick goodbye to Cassie, and soon they are in the car, and he can see her in the various mirrors of his dad’s Toyota. They pull away, and Lucas exhales.

His dad takes him swimming. Lucas likes to swim, but when the other kids have lessons in the outdoor pool at school, he is pulled out for speech therapy sessions. The changing room tiles in town have a gritty film of water at this time of the day. Mike tears off his tie, unbuttons his shirt, and pushes his trousers down, almost in one vigorous movement. He is like a kid, sometimes. ‘So,’ he says to Lucas. ‘last year of school. What going to do when you leave? at the college? Or a job?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Have you thought about a career?’

‘Rock star,’ Lucas says.

His dad laughs. Lucas doesn’t want to talk to his dad while he’s getting changed. He is disturbed by his father’s powerful body, and by the way his own body is starting to resemble it. The strong, sloping shoulders and the thick legs. Mike has huge calves. When Lucas was small, his father used to say that he’d built the
muscles by running along a beach in Wales one summer holiday. ‘Running on sand, son,’ he’d say. ‘That’s how you do it.’ Lucas never lifts weights, and he can’t think of anything more futile than running on sand, but one day recently, he looked down at his own legs, and the muscles were just there. Sometimes, he stares in the mirror, and it is as though a version of his father’s body is coming to the surface, trying to burst through the skin. Lucas is afraid that he will not be able to resist the likeness for much longer. He loves his dad, but he doesn’t want to be a deaf, less handsome version of Mike Weatherall.

Mike rubs his hands together. ‘Aren’t you getting?’ he says.

‘I’m going in here,’ Lucas says, pointing to a cubicle.

‘Please yourself. I’ve got nothing to hide,’ Mike says.

‘That’s just your opinion,’ Lucas says with a smile.

In the cubicle he removes his hearing aid. In a moment, he will step through the disinfectant footbath, break the surface of the pool, and glide through the airless freedom. After moderating his voice all day, he will push down under the water, silently screaming his heart out.

Later, they sit in Mike’s car outside the bungalow. Bramble Avenue at dusk. Lucas feels the engine buzzing through the seat, through his hands. His father glances briefly at the yellow square of the kitchen window, and blinks his long eyelashes. He turns on the interior light so they can have a conversation.

‘Do you want to come in?’ Lucas says. ‘I’m sure Mum wouldn’t mind.’

‘Nah,’ says his father. ‘Better not. How is she?’

‘Fine. She’s fine,’ Lucas says. That’s not quite true, but Lucas must protect her. It has been almost a year since his dad left, but Lucas has not lost hope. If he can get
his mum to feel better, to do better, he knows there is still a possibility. He watches Mike turn down the car heater. His eyes are a brilliant green, though the whites are rheumy from the chlorine. Lucas suppresses the sudden urge to punch his father in the face.

These are his rules for survival, at school, and at home: you don’t act on instinct; you stay positive; you work hard – if you only understand 20% of what the teacher is saying, read around the subject later; don’t bring attention to yourself, or make life difficult for others; don’t fall in love; don’t shout, or retaliate; never react with reckless emotion. He has developed these rules over many years, and they work.

‘Bye, Dad,’ he says.

‘Hey, see you Lukey!’ Mike says, brightening. ‘You show them what you’re made of, eh?’

They embrace, and Lucas gets out of the car and goes in. Often, on his return, his mother will be sitting in the living room, pretending to watch television, but really just waiting for him to come home. This evening, however, he finds her in the hall, with the telephone receiver cradled against her shoulder, writing something on a pad. A good sign.

In the kitchen, he puts the kettle on, and waits for her to finish the call. Soon, she comes in, and says hello. ‘Everything okay?’ she says. ‘You have a time.’ ‘Not bad,’ he says. ‘Mum, how did you and dad meet?’

His mother is startled by the question. She blinks and looks at the ceiling. ‘I don’t know,’ she says. ‘Suddenly, one day, he was just there.’

‘One day you were walking through a Stone Age settlement and suddenly he was just there?’

He is trying some reverse psychology. Linda laughs. ‘He was very good-looking.
I was, too, back then. But different for men. stays longer.’

‘You’re still handsome, Mum,’ Lucas says. He hands her a mug of instant coffee, and leaves the kitchen.

In his bedroom, he sits on his Michael Jordan beanbag and goes through his rucksack, looking for his copy of *Sandman: Master of Dreams*. He drags out his English binder and tosses it on the floor. It sheds a cloud of hair particles that glint in the lamplight. On the binder, under HOMO, Cassie has written HOMINI LUPUS. The crust has just formed on the Tipp-Ex.

The basic studies room is under the stairs in the maths block. The other kids call it the Basin. It is a large space with comfortable chairs and laminated words on the walls. Lucas sits in front of his book, but looks at some of the younger SEN pupils watering seedlings over by the window. When Cassie comes in, he notices the broadness of her shoulders, and the width of her hips as she sits down across the table from him. She says hello, and consults the notes that have been left for her. She empties Terry’s cards out of an envelope and rolls her eyes. On one of the cards is written ‘bear’, on the other, ‘pear’. Cassie places them face up in front of Lucas.

‘You know to do, I guess?’ she says with a sigh.

He nods, and she begins. ‘Pear, bear, bear, bear, pear…’

Each time she says a word, Lucas points to the corresponding card. The exercise improves his lip-reading, his receptive skills. Lucas, while pointing to the cards pretty much at random, is thinking dangerous thoughts. He is thinking that he may have to revise his devotion to breasts. He recalls Cassie turning to shut the door when she came in, and thinks about her arse and hips. He has never really paid much attention to those areas on girls, before, but in a way that is like *discrimination*. He
doesn’t want to discriminate against arses. Especially not big round arses that throw shadows all over navy blue skirts. He thinks about how she would look from behind, sitting on one of those newly fashionable kitchen stools he sees in Sunday magazines. He imagines how her flesh would spread across the seat.

‘…ridiculous!’ she says, slamming the table with her hand.

Lucas jumps. Has she read his mind?

‘I don’t get the point of sitting here with a kid who actual books in his spare time, doing pear bloody bear.’

Instinctively, as she finishes the sentence, Lucas points to one card and then the other. Cassie throws her head back and laughs.

‘Didn’t you ever sign?’ she asks him.

‘I think I did until I was about five.’

‘Who taught ’ she says. She has learned very quickly to understand his speech.

‘Nanna, I think.’

‘Deaf?’

He shakes his head. ‘No. My parents used to sign, too, but I can’t remember doing it at all. Anyway, the teacher said sign language was holding me back in school.’

Cassie raises her eyebrows. ‘And you’re doing really well, now, ’

‘I’m doing fine!’ he says, sharply.

Shame rises in him. Shame. He has spent years patiently developing a cheerful immunity to that feeling. Its return is unwelcome. He looks away from the table, at her open bag on the floor. He sees her large mobile phone, which sometimes glows green, and he sees a can of deodorant, which is called Intensive Care. Cassie’s hand enters his field of vision. Her fingers have little marks on them, outlines of fingerless gloves. She knocks on the table, trying to get him to look at her. He does. ‘I’m
sorry,’ she says, and rubs the centre of her chest in a circle. He feels something, when she does that. God knows what. But it is a deep, physical feeling.

He takes the English binder out of his bag, and points to the words in Tipp-Ex. ‘What does it mean?’ he says.

He cannot understand her reply. She opens her black notebook. Inside, there are numbers in columns. She turns the page and writes, MAN IS WOLF TO MAN. IT IS LATIN.

Lucas takes the notebook. The cover is rough and glints slightly, like a pavement in summer. WHO SAID IT?

SIGMUND FREUD, she writes, and then she looks up. ‘You know – kiss your mum and kill your dad?’ she says.

‘No thanks,’ Lucas says.

She laughs. ‘Your sense of humour is very hearing.’

Lucas has no intention of relearning to sign, and he cannot remember his grandmother, at all. In fact, he has no memory of the time before he was six. It’s just a black hole. Since his old friend Nicky left for the Deaf school on the outskirts of town, he hasn’t really associated with deaf people. At this late point in his school career, Lucas figures that using sign language would be the equivalent of coming out as a cross-dresser, or the owner of a micro-penis.

But later that afternoon, he sees Cassie emerge from the staff toilets in a turquoise vest and cycle shorts and those shoes with the little cleats on the sole. She is carrying gloves. She doesn’t see him in the corridor, so he is able to watch with impunity as she walks out and past the window, securing her hair with a sweatband, swinging her rucksack onto her back, and climbing onto a green racing bike. He wonders if he
might do anything she says.

At home, he asks his mother about how they learned sign language, and why they stopped, but she doesn’t want to talk about it. ‘You needed to work on your speech, that’s all,’ she says with a shrug. ‘It’s important to fit in.’

He feels her watching him carefully as he goes to his room. He remembers Cassie, rubbing her chest in that circular motion. *Sorry.* In his room, now, he copies the motion, and his body remembers it. Suddenly another face appears in his mind. It arrives spontaneously: the orb of a cheek, an outline, like a daytime moon. At first, he does not recognise the face, and then, slowly, he does.

* * *

It takes Linda two days to read the letters, not because they are long – altogether, there are only twelve pages – but because the handwriting is difficult to make out, and the paper has been damaged by damp and age. Also, she is resistant at first. Who was this man, infiltrating their home? And who is he, now, bringing up the thoughts and feelings that Linda has buried for so long?

But Linda becomes absorbed with the transcription. She approaches the task by slowly copying the words onto an A4 pad at her kitchen table. The process is exhilarating. She doesn’t know what a sentence is going to be until she’s written it, and then there it is: the thoughts of this foreign man from the past, on the bright white page in her own handwriting. She finds peace in being someone else for a while.

In a quiet way, Paul Landry’s letters are beautiful. He wrote about his days in
Winnipeg, the coffee he drank, the songs he heard, the films he watched. And he wrote about what he remembered of Daisy, from when he’d met her during his military posting to Sussex.

At the kitchen table, Linda gets to know him, comes to understand his sense of humour. How long has it been since she has got to know someone? *I am still hoping for another reply*, he wrote. *Maybe these letters are a nuisance to you. Or maybe you really want to write me, but you lost your pencil in 1951.*

By the second day, there is a bright swelling on Linda’s middle finger from where the barrel of her Parker pen digs into the skin. *Another reply.* Linda wonders how often her mother wrote back. Surely he would not have continued, without reply, for six years? Linda cannot recall her mother ever sending letters, and her father certainly would not have allowed such a correspondence. But Linda gets the weird sensation, as she reads and transcribes, that this man may have influenced their family life, somehow. Is that possible? The music he wrote about – Linda Scott, The Flamingos, Connie Stevens – ended up on their record player. Daisy crossed her sevens, and so does Linda.

*I can’t seem to shake you. There are plenty of girls, here. Some of them even speak to me, if it’s unavoidable! But it is not the same. When I told you that I loved you, that day on Chanctonbury I meant it.*

She transcribes the final letter in a sort of trance. She does not want it to end. Twelve pages is not enough. Carefully, she reads back all of the transcriptions. It is the second letter, from 1952, that really gets her.

*Dear Dee,*
A couple of the guys told me I was wasting my life (it's great to have friends). They said, 'Hey Laundry!' (yes, they call me Laundry) ‘All you ever talk about is Inglin and that G-D limey girl! Why don'tcha do something! Go to night school, play hockey, anything. Stop living in the past!’

So I’m taking a class in history at the college.

Actually, it’s part of a bigger plan I’m putting together, which I will tell you about one day. But for now, I go packets for the history. It all sounds like fantasy stories until suddenly the teacher (Mr Lyman) starts talking about the Depression, which I lived through! I could write you about it, if you like, seeing as how you can’t get away, yourself, to study. We could do it together. With your brains and my stationery, we may pass the test.

I just saw ‘Monkey Business’ which was pretty good. You told me once that you liked Ginger Rogers because you could tell she was good in bed!

I was thinking today about how you broke into the wine cellar of the old manor house where the boys were staying. I remember you going through that maze of dusty old bottles and looking over your shoulder at me, shoes in your hand, already mad drunk, and I thought – this girl can do anything. Tony said you were untameable, but I never wanted to tame you, I just wanted to see what you did next!

Being around you, Dee, was like hanging on to the tail of a comet.

That time seems more real to me sometimes than the day I’m living in. I guess there is a part of a person’s life which just burns brighter, somehow. I suppose I should just move on, and take Molly Dalton to The Beacon. She’s cute enough, although she talks about money a lot. I’m sure I’d get used to the noise she makes when she yawns. I guess that’s what people do. Settle. But how do they stand the
greyness of it?! What was it you always said about the movies? ‘What’s so great about real life, anyway?’ I’d rather write to you (and sometimes get a reply, eh?)

Well, I better scram.

Paul

When Linda finishes, the kitchen is all indigo shadows, and the clock on the cooker shows 01:23. She stands up, wipes her eyes and goes down the hallway to her son’s room. He lies across his bed with his arms dangling over the sides. He sleeps like somebody dropped him from a great height.
TWO

1949, Sussex.

It was one of those July nights when the shapes outside the window darken, but the sky never does. Daisy rinsed her hair over the kitchen sink in the station house where she lived with her husband. Robert was out, visiting the licensed premises in the village. The straps of Daisy’s summer dress hung halfway down her arms and she had a towel across her shoulders. From a jug she poured the steaming water down over her black hair and into the basin. She unpeeled her feet from the lino.

When she heard the sound of boots on the path outside the front door, she paused with the jug half-raised in her right hand. She listened to the muffled voices. Even though she could not make out his words, she knew that Robert was using his firm, policeman’s tone. The other voice was younger, and untroubled. Probably drunk, Daisy thought.

The bang on the door made her flinch. Quickly, she scrunched her hair with the towel, shrugged on the straps of her dress, and walked down the hall. When she opened the door, Daisy saw that Robert had cuffed himself to William Jarrod, the youngest son of a local farmer. A troubled family. William was sixteen, but big. With his arms wrenched behind his back, his shoulders looked broad, and gave his body a triangular shape. He smiled at her. His teeth were surprisingly straight and
white in the blue night. A lick of hair hung over his forehead. He was handsome.

‘What’s happened?’ Daisy turned to her husband.

Beneath his helmet, Robert’s face shone with sweat, and he would not meet her eye. ‘Breaking,’ Robert said. ‘Let’s call it that, for now. Him and his brother got into the Watson’s place.’

Daisy looked into the shadows beyond the two figures, but there was nobody else. She knew of the absent brother: a simpleton. She felt the water cooling on her neck.

‘We need to get this one into the cell. Is it ready?’ Robert said.

‘Well, we haven’t used it for so long. There’ll be no bedding.’

‘I’m not sleepy,’ The Jarrod boy said with a grin.

‘Just keep quiet, you,’ Robert said, as they crossed the threshold.

Daisy felt William Jarrod watching her. He looked at the towel in her hand.

‘Would you get the door, Daisy, please?’ Robert said.

Daisy opened up the office at the front of the house, and turned on the light. There were two chairs and a desk, on which sat Daisy’s Corona portable typewriter and two neat piles of paper. In the corner was the village’s only telephone. The room smelled of cigarettes and paper. All three of them crossed the office, and Daisy pulled the bolts on the black wooden door of the old cell. Inside, there was a wooden stool, and a low, bare bed. These days, Daisy used the cell for storage: a coal bin twinkled in the darkness.

Robert detached himself from William Jarrod and pushed him inside. William turned to look at Daisy, but she could not see his face.

‘I’ll have your brother here, soon,’ Robert said. ‘And then a divisional car will be on its way to take you both in.’

‘Tell them not to hurry,’ William said. ‘These quarters are very pleasant.’
Robert slammed the door shut, and ran the three bolts home.

‘He hasn’t a light,’ Daisy whispered.

‘It won’t be for long.’

‘Robert, it’s pitch dark in there.’

Robert nodded. He took off his helmet. His fair hair was sodden at the front, but dry and wispy at the crown. He pulled down the eye-level hatch in the door to reveal a metal grate. Light seeped into the cell. ‘That will have to do, for now.’

Robert went to the telephone and called county headquarters to request the car. He looked at Daisy as he gripped the handset. ‘I know. I will explain, later,’ he said into the mouthpiece, before ending the call.

‘Where is the brother?’ Daisy asked.

‘He is still at Watson’s farmhouse,’ Robert said. He swallowed.

‘Well then, you must go back there and get him,’ Daisy said.

Robert put his hand on Daisy’s bare shoulder, and moved her away from the cell.

He dropped his voice. ‘I don’t want to leave you here. With him.’

‘He’s locked up, Robert. I’ve looked after prisoners, before.’

In the two years since Robert’s first promotion had taken them from the city to this one-man rural beat, they’d housed the occasional local farmer who needed to sleep off the drink. Those men were always so sorry, so polite, at breakfast the next morning.

‘This one’s different,’ Robert said. ‘Perhaps I could stay here, and the divisional car could stop by the farm on the way…’

‘You can’t leave the Watsons holding Thomas Jarrod,’ Daisy said.

‘I know.’

They’d recently had the downstairs wired for electric light, and in that stark
brightness, Robert looked young. He glanced up at the clock. ‘Just lock the office
door and keep to our rooms, Daisy. I will come back as fast as I can.’

He kissed her forehead, gently. William Jarrod sniggered inside the cell, and they
both looked over at the hatch in the door.

‘I will be fine,’ Daisy said.

Robert put on his helmet, and he and Daisy went back into the hallway. As he
opened the door and stepped into the night, Robert turned. ‘Don’t talk to him,’ he
said.

In the kitchen, Daisy boiled the day’s remaining water on the range and dried her
hair. She worked out the distance to Watson’s farm: about half-an-hour, there and
back. The divisional car would take longer. Across the road from their station house
lived George Makeney, an ancient widower, and beyond Makeney’s house it was a
fair walk to the village. Daisy thought of the many thrillers she had watched as a
teenager at the picturehouses back in town. In her film scrapbook, she’d kept a list of
rules for dealing with an intruder in the house. Keep something heavy to hand in the
bedroom. Know your home in the dark. Use of mirrors.

As she took the kettle from the range, she recalled a recent visit to the grocers.
When she’d walked in, she’d heard the women in the queue talking about the older
Jarrod boy, Thomas. They speculated on what was wrong with him. One woman
said that as a child he had fallen into a pit of dead pigs.

‘Is that why he looks the way he does?’ another woman said. ‘I mean his face?’

When they caught sight of the policeman’s wife, the conversation had ceased, as
usual. The women went blank, fanning themselves with their ration books. The
grocer called Daisy forward. ‘Do come to the front, Mrs Seacombe.’
‘No thank you,’ Daisy said. ‘I will queue.’

But the grocer insisted and the other women stepped aside. *It’s just respect*, her husband always said, though it didn’t feel that way to Daisy.

When she left with her tinned meat and dried eggs, Daisy had seen a woman standing rigid by the open window down the side of the shop. It was Emma, mother of the Jarrod boys, and she’d heard everything. Her blonde hair was in a long plait, and although the blue eyes looked young, the rest of her face was weather-beaten. She looked at Daisy, sniffed, and then fled.

Now, in the kitchen, Daisy heard William Jarrod calling from his cell. ‘*Excuse me,*’ he sang. ‘*Excuse me!*’

Daisy had left the office door open, and could hear him quite clearly. She walked back down the hall and stood in the doorway, watching the hatch. ‘Are you all right?’ she called.

‘Oh,’ said William. ‘There you are. It’s very dark in here.’ He spoke well, for a farm boy. He had confidence.

‘I am sorry about that,’ Daisy replied. ‘But it won’t be for long.’

‘There isn’t a toilet, is there?’

Daisy cursed under her breath. They had an earth bucket for prisoners, but that was in the garden shed, now. ‘I’m afraid not. You will have to wait.’

‘Were you bathing?’ he said. ‘Did I interrupt you?’

‘Don’t you worry about that,’ she said, quietly.

‘I need to - ’

There was a clanging noise from inside the cell, and a brief cry of pain.

‘What happened?’ Daisy shouted. ‘Did you fall?’

There was no answer, and the house took on that deep quiet. When they first
moved out of town, two winters ago, Daisy had sometimes woken in the night and
thought she’d lost her senses, so dark and silent was their bedroom. Back home,
there were streetlights and car engines and the white noise of the sea. You couldn’t
hear the sea from this place.

‘I said are you all right?’ she called again.

Nothing. She hesitated, but then crept across the office, and stood before the black
door. Suddenly, William Jarrod’s mouth was at the grate. ‘I need to cut you,’ he
said. ‘I need to cut you until they can’t tell you’re a woman no more.’

Daisy turned away quickly and her hip slammed into the desk. She called out in
pain, and then ran from the office. She closed and locked the door behind her. Her
right leg was dead and she thought she might be sick. After a second, William Jarrod
began to scream – a high-pitched, mocking impersonation of a frightened woman.

Daisy thought about leaving the house, and putting as much distance as she could
between herself and the noise William Jarrod was making. But an image came to her
mind of the road to the village, as it plunged into the tunnel of trees. She had a duty
to her husband, and the force. Jarrod continued to wail. Daisy ran into the kitchen
and pulled a carving knife from the block.

The noise stopped. As much as she had hated his pretend screaming, the silence
that followed was worse. Being near to William Jarrod, knowing where he was,
seemed somehow safer. So with the knife held before her in two hands, Daisy
walked back down the hall.

The bang on the front door made her catch her breath. ‘Who is it?’ she shouted.

‘Robert? Robert is that you?’

‘It’s me, Daisy. Open up!’ Robert said.

At first, when she opened the door, she saw only Thomas Jarrod, the older brother,
his face stretched and almost featureless. One of his ears was malformed, and blood smeared his lips. Daisy tightened her grip on the wooden handle of the knife.

‘Daisy, it’s all right. I’m here.’ Robert emerged from behind his prisoner. ‘I came as quick as I could.’

Thomas Jarrod wore no handcuffs. He said nothing, just tongued the cut on his lip and winced. His age was somewhere between 18 and 25. Daisy thought of what the woman in the grocers had said: *a pit of dead pigs.*

‘The other one?’ asked Robert.

Daisy looked towards the office, but said nothing.

‘I’m sorry, Daisy,’ Robert said, stepping inside and guiding Thomas into the hall. Softly, Robert put his hands over Daisy’s and took the knife away. ‘Why don’t you go upstairs? I can handle this, now.’

‘No,’ she said, sharply. ‘I’m not leaving you.’

Robert nodded.

Thomas Jarrod gave them no trouble as they escorted him into the office. He was huge, and the cuffs of his trousers did not reach his boots. Daisy felt instinctively tender towards him, and the feeling surprised her. He sniffed the air. There was a warm, sulphurous stink in the office, now. All three of them looked at the cell door.

‘Tom, is that you?’ William said. His voice was clear and perfectly calm now.

‘Yes, William,’ replied the older brother.

‘Did they hurt you, Tom. Those Watsons?’

‘Only a little,’ Thomas said, pressing his fingers to his lip.

‘Not surprising. It was a sin, what we did,’ William said.

Robert glanced at Daisy.

William continued. ‘Oh, well. We’ll be home, soon.’
‘Home and dry,’ said Thomas, sadly. ‘What will mother say, William?’

‘I can’t imagine.’

Daisy went to the cupboard, and took out disinfectant and a sheet of cotton wool. She held the items up to show Robert, who nodded. Thomas Jarrod seemed not to see her as she approached him. He just leaned against the desk and stared at the black door.

‘I will clean that cut for you, if you like,’ Daisy said.

Thomas did not reply. With his large, dirty fingers, he rolled down his bottom lip to reveal a shining red gash. Daisy removed the lid from the disinfectant, covered the opening with cotton wool, and tipped the bottle. Quickly and firmly, she pressed the cotton wool into the cut. Big as he was, Thomas flinched. A tear formed, and he blinked it down his cheek.

‘Good. Well done,’ Daisy whispered.

Robert took off his jacket, arranged his braces and rolled up the sleeves on his white shirt. He looked at the clock, and then the window. A blue eye appeared at the hatch in the door. Daisy felt an urge to press her fingers through the grate.

‘Tom…are you not handcuffed?’ William said.

‘No, William. The policeman said I wouldn’t need the handcuffs if I was a good lad.’

‘So, you’re free to go, then,’ William said.

‘He most certainly is not free to go,’ Robert said.

‘Constable, look at the size of him! Do you really think you could stop him, if he wanted to leave? Your wife would have more chance.’

‘Be quiet.’

‘Thomas?’ said William.
‘Yes.’

‘You can go whenever you want,’ said William.

‘That’s enough!’ Robert shouted.

Daisy remained standing before Thomas, who was a good head taller than her husband. She held in her hand a damp, flattened piece of cotton wool, soaked with his blood. In Thomas’ tired eyes, and the long, fair lashes, she saw something of his mother. He sat on the edge of the desk, frowning. He never looked away from the cell door. Daisy didn’t know whether the stench from the cell had faded, or she’d just got used to it.

‘Tom?’ said William.

‘I said shut up!’ Robert shouted. ‘Nobody is going anywhere until the county car arrives.’

William laughed. ‘And when will that be, Constable?’

‘Soon.’

‘You know, I had a lovely talk with your wife, while you were out.’

Robert glanced at Daisy, and then gestured towards the hall, but she couldn’t leave, now. That was what William wanted.

‘We had a lovely chat, didn’t we, Daisy?’ William said.

Daisy could see that Robert was struggling to control his temper.

‘Didn’t you tell her to lock the office door?’ William said. ‘You were quite clear about that, as I remember. Don’t talk to him. That’s what you said.’

‘I’m warning you,’ said Robert.

‘She disobeyed you, Constable. A bad sign, that. She came right up to this door. Very concerned, she was. Very concerned for my health.’

Robert strode across the room towards the door. Thomas stood up from the desk.
Daisy took her husband by the wrist, and he stopped. Robert turned to her. His eyes were wide, and his right fist was clenched. Daisy gently rubbed the soft tangle of veins and ligaments on the underside of his wrist. Robert looked away from her.

‘You keep your mouth shut,’ he said to the cell door. ‘Do you hear?’

‘All right. I will,’ said William.

A few minutes passed. Daisy let her shoulders drop. Then came the shush of feet on the stone floor of the cell, followed by a thump against the door. After a brief silence, William charged the door again. Then again. Nobody spoke. Robert didn’t even tell him to stop. After the first few slams, the old oak frame began to judder, and a little dust came off the bare bricks above.

‘Robert?’ Daisy said.

‘There’s no way,’ Robert said. ‘Not in a million years. That door’s been there since the 1850s.’

Daisy knew all about the age of the place. The house was riddled with a damp that turned the wallpaper to mush. In the winters, a white mould formed on the back of the sofa, and woodworm had wrecked half of the cupboards. Things fell apart, here.

As William continued his rhythmic ramming of the door, Thomas Jarrod scratched the back of his neck. His breathing became ragged. Daisy couldn’t tell if he was excited or upset. A small split was now visible in the doorframe. Bread coloured wood showed through the old black paint. Daisy turned to Robert and saw that his hands were clasped behind his back, holding the carving knife she had taken from the kitchen.

The door creaked on the next thump, and then the headlights of the divisional car raked across the window. ‘They’re here!’ Daisy said. She rushed out of the office and dragged open the front door. Two officers stepped out of the small squad car and
walked up the drive. They slowed when they saw Daisy standing in the light of the
doorway, and from their expressions, she guessed that she must have looked wild.

Daisy stood aside while Robert and the two officers took the Jarrod boys – both in
cuffs, now – out of the house. William Jarrod stared at her as he passed, but Robert
reached out from behind, grasped him by the jaw, and turned his head away. They
loaded the brothers into the back of the car. Daisy leaned against the doorframe, and
parried away the furry moths, which were soft against her fingers.

After watching the rear lights of the squad car disappear, Robert came back to the
house and closed the door behind him. He held Daisy so tight that she could hardly
breathe against his damp shirt. ‘I’m so sorry, Daisy,’ he said. ‘I’m so sorry you had
to see all of that.’

‘I’m fine, Robert. It’s nothing.’

‘I should never have left you here with him. Damn the police. Damn the
Watsons.’

‘No. You had to go. What did they steal from the Watsons’ house?’

‘Nothing,’ Robert said. ‘They didn’t steal anything. It was some sort of. Oh, I
shan’t talk about it. Nobody was harmed, physically.’

Something seemed to occur to him. He went into the office, took up his lamp and
shone it into the dark cell. He swore, which was unlike him.

‘What is it?’ Daisy called, from the office doorway.

‘Don’t come in,’ Robert replied. He walked through the hall and the kitchen, and
went out the back door to the shed. He came back with a garden spade and a metal
pail filled with water from the container.

‘Daisy, where do you keep the soaps and such?’
'Do you need me to clean something?'

'No, you shouldn’t have to.’

‘I’ve dealt with plenty.’

‘I’m going to do it,’ he said.

Robert rolled up his sleeves, and Daisy talked him through the ratios of water to bleach, and he told her to go upstairs to bed.

When he joined her, Robert brought tea – the good stuff sent over in the food packages from America. They kept the candles burning. Robert’s hands were red and cold from the water. They tried to talk about other things, but it was no use. ‘I think of their mother,’ Daisy said.

‘God only knows what goes on in that house,’ Robert said.

‘The big one, Thomas. It must be hard, growing up with William for a brother. It’s enough to make you feel sorry for him.’

‘Well, don’t,’ Robert said.

He turned to her, half of his face in shadow. ‘Daisy, was it true, what William said?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He said that you went to the cell door, while I was gone.’

‘He made out that he’d hurt himself, Robert. I didn’t know what to do. Any other prisoner, I’d have gone in there to help him.’

Robert winced at the thought of it. ‘What did he say to you?’

Daisy thought of William Jarrod’s mouth at the grate. She turned to her husband, and saw a man who suffered with nerves. A man who woke in the night, crying out, and could supply no reason for it.
‘He just said he was going to escape, that’s all. He said the cell was old, and it couldn’t hold him, and he’d get away across the fields.’

They were silent for a moment. Robert looked at her carefully. The temperature had dropped, and the house was cooling, tightening around them. The wood and the plaster ticked and creaked. Daisy found it difficult to believe that William Jarrod was gone from the place.

‘Are you angry with me?’ Daisy said.

‘Of course not,’ Robert said. ‘You did everything properly, just like always. I wouldn’t have got through it without you. But a woman shouldn’t have to hear what you heard tonight. You shouldn’t have to meet people like him.’

‘But I’m all right.’

‘People like him can leave a mark on a woman. They can ruin her.’

‘What?’ Daisy said.

But Robert just shook his head, and stared at the wall.

* * *

Daisy had met Robert in Brighton, just after the war, at the dance hall above the Astoria cinema. He was lean and wiry, his shoulders like a pole through his jacket. His father had been a bricklayer before he left the family, and Robert clearly felt nervous with the daughter of an accountant in his arms. Daisy enjoyed his twitchiness, and his unpredictability. He was joining the force, and a policeman was a decent catch – a stable wage at an uncertain time. Robert told her he liked her black curls, the almost violet shade of her lips, and her slightly crooked front teeth.
He loved her whole mouth, he said, although he sometimes felt powerless to stop the words coming out of it.

She insisted that he take her to the new Gaiety cinema, on the edge of town. The building itself was like something from science-fiction – a drum-shaped art-deco space station, with a neon letter of its name on each of the vertical concrete fins at the front. In the lobby, there were fountains, caged birds, and a black ceiling studded with lights.

‘I’d rather dance,’ Robert said, as they walked into the auditorium. ‘All this American pap: it’s just fantasy.’

‘But you have to find a way to get your girl on her own in the dark, I suppose.’

She loved it when he blushed. The film was a noir thriller. They came in halfway through, watched the ending first, and then waited for the programme to start again. During the news broadcast, it became clear that there was a cat in the cinema. It scrambled under the seats and bounded across the bottom of the screen, to hoots of laughter. ‘The moggy did it!’ someone shouted, when the film restarted. But Robert was not amused. He was jumpy and distracted.

‘What’s wrong?’ Daisy asked.

‘Nothing,’ he said, sharply.

‘Are you afraid of cats?’

He kissed her, then, squeezing her arm so hard that the red marks of his fingers remained on her pale skin the next day. So, she thought, he must have seen some movies.

‘I’m afraid,’ he said, between kisses, ‘that I might not be good enough for you.’

But she thought he was.
Officially, the five-year marriage ban for new police recruits had been lifted, but Robert was advised to live in the section house at Preston Circus. Daisy listened to his complaints about missing her, but secretly she found something exciting about the separation. It gave their meetings – at dances, on seafront walks, at the ice rink – a charged tension. Their desire opened up the city – they sought the cover of alleyways and the overgrown gorse in the squares. Later, she thought of the length of his forearms, and inhaled the spicy scent of his sweat from the fabric of her dresses.

Eventually, an inspector visited Daisy at her family home, in Kemp Town. He was a tall old man with a notebook and a raw shaving rash on his neck. Daisy followed him through the rooms, as he silently examined the bookshelves and the cooking range and the cupboard where her mother kept the towels. In the hallway, he pinched his trousers and lowered himself to a squat. He put on a pair of soft, white gloves and ran his fingers along the top of the skirting board. He examined the glove tips and then stood.

‘You have known Constable Seacombe for two years, is that correct?’

For a moment, Daisy did not recognise his name. ‘It feels like much longer,’ she said.

‘It is not. You work…’ the inspector consulted his notebook, ‘…as a telephonist at the exchange. That is good. The force welcomes competent women.’

‘But I would have to leave the job, if I married Robert, wouldn’t I?’

The inspector paused, and frowned. ‘You would not be idle,’ he said.

He left his notebook on the kitchen table when he went to examine the outhouse. Daisy carefully lifted the cover of the notebook and glanced at the section headings on the first page: FAMILY OCCUPATIONS, ADDRESS, COMPORTMENT. At the bottom
of the page, the inspector had written three question marks, as though he was reaching for another category.

Shortly after they married, Robert was given the single-beat in the countryside. Daisy was proud of him, although the chemical closet they were promised never arrived, and after two years they were still drawing their water from a well fifty yards from the house. Daisy dealt with correspondence, typed reports, cleaned and cooked, and manned the only telephone for five miles. She worked hard, and for no pay, but she didn’t mind because she and Robert did it together.

After the affair with the Jarrod boys, she received a brief letter from the chief constable, praising her ‘dutiful actions’. But the encounter knocked Daisy off balance. She found herself unable to sleep.

Robert had his own night troubles. Once, towards the end of summer, Daisy heard him trying to scream in his sleep. He scrambled to his feet, and opened his mouth, but his cries were trapped in his throat, and came out as a distant animal moan. Daisy reached over to comfort him, but he shrank from her touch. ‘Robert?’

‘Where is he?’ Robert said, and then he woke.

‘Who, Robert? You were having a dream.’

He looked at her, through the grey light of the early hours, and then he climbed back into bed and slept, without a word. She knew it wasn’t the Jarrods he was dreaming of – it was something older, and deeper.

They never saw the Jarrod boys again. ‘Have you heard anything?’ she asked Robert one evening, towards the end of summer.

‘It’s out of my hands, Daisy. William is too young for gaol, and I don’t know what
they’ll do about the other one. There’s a rumour the whole family will move North. In any event, I can’t see those boys coming home.’

A few days later, Daisy took Robert’s bicycle and cycled into the village with the outgoing mail. Either side of the lane, the wheat rose high, and the pollen made her lungs rattle.

The Post Office desk was in a corner of the grocers. Two women finished their conversation, and fell silent, as Daisy walked in. She went to the desk, took the mail from a satchel and handed it to Mr Graham.

‘Ah, yes, Mrs Seacombe,’ he said. He reached beneath the desk. ‘This came for you, care of the office. *Airmail.*’

Mr Graham raised his eyebrows. One of the women behind Daisy tutted. Daisy quickly shifted the letter into the empty satchel, and left the post office, waiting for a moment until the conversation within started up again.

Nearing home, she began to notice a rich green smell in the air. Its earthy power grew as she cycled closer to the garden of her neighbour, George Makeney. The scent filled Daisy with an odd hunger, and she got off the bike and propped it against Makeney’s hedge. She had eaten poorly for years, now, and so it took her a while to recognise the smell of fresh tomatoes. She could almost feel the stiff vine between her fingers, and taste the sour flesh. She didn’t know what was wrong with her, and had to stop herself from running as she followed the scent. Over Makeney’s gate, she saw the greenhouse behind his cottage, and the tangle of vines and bright fruit pressing against the glass. How had old Makeney managed such a thing? It seemed to Daisy like a miracle.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the odour until she could no longer smell it. Perhaps Robert would be able to get a pound of tomatoes from their neighbour.
There had to be some benefits to the job. Shaking herself from the trance, Daisy walked back to retrieve the bicycle. When she turned, a woman was standing in the middle of the dry country road. It was Emma Jarrod, mother of the boys. Emma remained motionless long enough for Daisy to note the changes in her appearance. Her hair was cropped unevenly short, now, and her eyes were red-ringed. There was a gash on her shin, and her sandaled feet were white with chalk dust. She had come from the direction of the police house, and stood now between Daisy and home.

‘Hello,’ said Daisy.

Emma Jarrod walked slowly by, giving one bitter glance in Daisy’s direction. The skin on her nose was peeling, and her blue eyes looked stark against the sunburn. She said nothing.

When she was gone, Daisy cycled home quickly, her mind racing with wild ideas about what she might find. But her husband was back from his beat, cheerfully clipping the edges of the front lawn. He smiled and she went to him. She could smell the meaty sweat on his body, the soil on his hands. Everything seemed too close, today, too real.

‘Did anyone visit?’ she asked.

‘No. Is something wrong?’

‘I feel strange.’

He put his hand on her back. ‘You are, my love,’ he said.

She went to bed early that evening, and woke at dawn, feeling sick. Downstairs in the kitchen, she tried not to wake Robert as she vomited into a bucket. Only when she had finished did she remember the letter.

The satchel was in the office. She took out the airmail envelope, and opened it at
the table. The envelope contained another, addressed simply to Daisy Birch – her maiden name – and written in a different hand. Inside, the letter was written on paper with a faint blue tinge. The return address was St. Claude, Manitoba, Canada.

Dear Daisy,

Guess who! First three don’t count. It is me, your good friend Paul Landry, formerly of The Princess Pat’s, and the Electric Theatre Picturehouse. Also formerly of every cheap ‘pub’ in the city of Brighton. How are you, Dee? I hope you remember me.

I know this letter, if you even get it, comes out of the blue. A lot of time has passed since we knew each other, but I can’t seem to forget you. I also remember every name of the 1932 Olympic-winning Winnipeg hockey team, but I don’t have the same feelings for those fellows. Not really.

I have left the city, and moved back out to the family farm for a while, because my mother is sick. The weather is scalding now, but this winter it was 28 below. My village is a little dull. It is famous for a gaol museum and for having the world’s second largest smoking pipe. No, honestly, this pipe is as big as a house! You can find a picture of it in a book called ‘Big Things in Manitoba’ available from your local public library. I wish you were a Big Thing in Manitoba.

How are you? You said you planned to go to night school. Did you? Do you see any of those other gals? Have you seen any good pictures, lately? Did you catch ‘I Was a Male War Bride’??? I wish I could go see a picture with you, again.

Maybe you’re wondering why I’m writing this, well the last thing you said to me in 43 was “send me a letter, Paulie!” I am a slow worker, but a man of my word. I
would sure love to hear from you and hope we can correspond. I better call this good, for now.

Paul Landry

Daisy sat blinking in the office. She did remember him, of course, but her memories of the war were like some old film she’d seen. She had been wild, back then. Paul Landry. Billeted in Brighton and Uckfield. She remembered his dark hair. He was a good ice-skater, and called his skates ‘tubes’. Cigarettes he called ‘smoke poles’. His real name was Jean-Paul, and his father, who died when Paul was young, was French. His mother was of English descent, or maybe Irish or Scottish. Daisy had kissed him once. Many of her telephonist friends had taken the Transatlantic boat to Canada in 1946, some with children.

Robert came into the office in a vest and blue pyjama trousers. His hair, still clumped with yesterday’s pomade, stuck out at the sides. ‘Working already, darling?’

‘What? Oh, no. Not really.’

‘You look a bit pale. Did we get some bad news?’ He nodded to the letter.

‘No,’ she said, putting the missive back into the envelope. ‘A pal from the war. In fact, I might have some good news…’

Robert’s eyes widened with excitement. ‘Are they coming to install the toilet?’

Daisy stood. ‘I think I may be pregnant, Robert.’

‘What?’ Robert jumped towards her, and was about to pick her up, but he pulled his hands away at the last moment. ‘Oh God! I must be careful with you!’
‘We can still touch,’ she said. ‘Anyway, I don’t know for sure.’

He held her, gently, and they danced in the office. As they slowly spun, she saw the black cell door, and then the front window, the gaps between the frame and the brick where the putty had come away. She saw the letter on the table.

‘We have to celebrate!’ Robert said. ‘What shall we do, tonight, when I get home?’

Daisy thought for a moment. ‘I miss the pictures,’ she said. ‘Can we go into town? To the cinema?’

Robert looked taken aback for a moment, but then he smiled. ‘Anything you want,’ he said.

It took Daisy a week to reply to Paul Landry’s first letter. She toyed with the idea of not responding, at all. Her feelings about her war-time life, her war-time self, were complicated. In 1939, she’d been 16 years old. A child. The war was fun until it wasn’t. She had hardly touched a drink since VE Day. To write to Paul was to remember her own drunkenness. It meant remembering the house of her cinema-going friend Maureen Williams, which seemed to have somehow collapsed under the ground, after the raid of May, 1943. The ARP men had dug down into the rubble, looking for Mo’s body, while her bed had stood on top of the pile, the red blanket neatly folded, exposed to the fields of Rottingdean in the middle of the afternoon.

But it was proper to write back, and she thought she could do it in a way which would put a stop to the correspondence.

Dear Paul,
How nice to receive your very funny letter. Of course I remember. It has been a long time, and much has happened here. I am married, now, to Robert, who I met after the war. I am Mrs Seacombe, now. You will probably laugh and make remarks, but my husband is a police constable. We work hard, so no time for night school.

If you see Stephane or Tony, please say “hi”. I hope your mother gets well soon, and I wish you health and happiness for the future.

Yours sincerely,

Daisy Seacombe.

That was the end of it, she thought.

* * *

In the winter of 1950, six months after Daisy gave birth to Caroline, Robert announced the move back to town. He paced the front room as he explained his decision, waving in his hand one of his daughter’s toys: a wooden staff with coloured rings. ‘I feel like I’m missing opportunities, out here,’ he said. ‘And I don’t know if this is a good sort of place for a child to grow up.’

Daisy could see that her husband was still thinking of the Jarrod boys, although their house was now empty – smashed-up and left to rot.
‘Might it not be unsettling to move?’ Daisy asked, bouncing Caroline on her knee.

‘When I was doing the training, up in London, I met this fellow, Ray. He told me about the CID. It’s different to normal policing. You just disappear off, do as you please. You’ve got to have nous. You’ve got to be tough up here.’ He tapped the side of his head.

Daisy smiled. She stood from her chair and kissed her husband. Caroline reached out for the coloured wooden rings.

‘You’re not so tough,’ she said, teasing him.

‘Well, maybe you could teach me,’ he said.

‘Watch it!’ she said.

She looked around the damp room and found little to cling to. She saw the caved-in plaster, from when Robert had punched the wall after losing his notebook. The window had frozen over, and her baby’s hands were blue and orange with cold. Last month, she had gone down into the cellar and found the bloodied sheets from her ferocious labour, which Robert had discarded there. The sheets had frozen solid, and stood free, so that she mistook them for a creature at first. A fox, maybe.

It might be good to move back to town.

She received three more airmail letters before they left the rural beat. They were addressed care of the post office in the village. She opened the first one on the bridleway, two miles from home.

Dear Dee,
I was so pleased to get your letter. You write just how you speak. It was like hearing your voice again! So...thank you.

So, you married your arresting officer! No surprises, there. We all knew they'd get you in the end. I guess there is a chance that he is reading this, in which case, “Hello sir, you are a lucky, lucky guy.”

I know your letter did not ask for a reply, so I don’t know why I am writing this. All I can say is that I feel happy when I am writing to you, and I hold out hopes of being pen pals. Chances are slim, I know, but I have to try.

Let me tell you about things, here. As you may know, the Red River burst its banks this year, and it turned the city into a puddle...

And off he went, describing the train trip from Winnipeg to the little prairie outpost where his mother and older brother lived. He said that when you looked out of the carriage window, you got the feeling that the fellow painting the scenery had fallen asleep.

She skipped over his declarations and flirts. Mostly, she liked to read about the details of his daily life. He said he could send Nescafe, if they needed it, and Eveready batteries. He could make up a package at Eaton’s department store in Winnipeg. Her childhood hero, the actress Deanna Durbin, was from Winnipeg.

Checking the envelope again, she saw that he had addressed it to ‘Daisy’. No surname. He didn’t seem the sort of man to make trouble, but he must have known the damage such a letter could do.

But her husband never found the missives, Daisy never wrote back, and now they were moving house. That, she thought, was that.
The local studies library is on the top floor of the museum. Linda walks past the Ancient Egyptians and the mods and rockers, up the stairs, and along the green-tiled hallway. On the door, there is a broken sign which reads LOCAL STUDS and Linda almost laughs when she enters and finds several elderly men snoozing at desks. Studs they ain’t, she thinks, in her mother’s voice. In the centre of the ceiling is a domed skylight, and the rain crackles against it.

Linda unpacks her bag, putting the transcripts of the letters and her notebook on a table near the window. The noises of the city rise up from below: the clanging of beer barrels, high heels clipping through the wet street.

She approaches the help desk with the transcripts in her hand. Behind the desk, a man stands on a raised platform. He has closely cropped, receding red hair and round spectacles that catch the light. He wears a pale green, short-sleeved shirt, and has forearms like a butcher. He spreads his hands on the desk and leans forward as Linda nears. The badge on his shirt says, ALEX LAMB.

‘Can I help?’ he says, in a deep, quiet voice.

Linda hesitates. She has almost forgotten how to interact with people. ‘I want to
find out about. It’s to do with. Do you know anything about Canadians?’

She blinks slowly, with embarrassment.

Alex Lamb raises his eyebrows. ‘All of them, or a particular one?’

‘I have these letters. It’s about my mother, really. I’m trying to find out about my mother.’

‘Would you like to research your family tree?’

‘I’d like to edit it.’

Alex Lamb laughs, waking one of the old men in the library. ‘I wouldn’t mind taking a hacksaw to a few branches of mine.’

Linda relaxes a little.

Alex picks up a leaflet entitled WHO AM I? RESEARCHING FAMILY HISTORY. ‘The place to start is your living relatives. You can get so much information that way. Talk to your parents and siblings. See what they remember.’

He does not know, of course, that her father is mute in a hospice, her mother is dead and she hardly speaks to her sister. ‘That’s not so easy,’ Linda says.

Alex nods. ‘I see.’

Linda thinks about leaving, but instead she sighs. ‘Look, my mother died. I found letters from some man in Canada who had been stationed here during the war. I don’t know. You look back, and you think, God, I hardly knew my mum. I don’t know why I’m telling you this – I…She wasn’t even sixty when she died.’

‘I’m sorry,’ says Alex.

‘Thank you. It’s probably stupid, but I figure if I can find out about this man, then somehow….I don’t know.’ She holds up the transcripts, and Alex Lamb looks at them curiously. Linda instinctively hides the papers. She does not want those private feelings to be exposed.
‘Well, you can’t access the military records, because you’re not kin, but you could try the Canadian Veterans Association,’ says Alex Lamb. ‘There’ll be a branch based over here. They’ll have records.’

‘Do you have a number I can call?’

‘Yes, and a phone.’

‘Oh, that’s fine, I’ll call from home…’

But Alex opens a wooden gate at the side of the desk and beckons her through. She follows him past the stacks – deep aisles lined with boxes and files. A woman with a perm turns the wheel, and the stacks shift. Linda smells old paper. They reach a small, windowless office, full of the herby smell of strong tea. Alex goes through his index file, and pulls out a card. He arranges a notepad and a pencil by the phone. ‘Just close the door when you’re done.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Oh – and. Well, I don’t know how to put this,’ he says as he leaves. ‘You know there’s a chance he may have passed away…’

Linda nods and picks up the phone. She hasn’t considered the possibility that Paul Landry is alive.

The woman from Canadian Veterans of Britain has a Liverpool accent and a smoker’s cough. ‘Half a million Canadians came over, and 40,000 married British girls.’

‘What? That’s nearly ten percent!’

‘Did you work that out with an abacus?’ the woman says. Linda laughs.

‘A lot of those girls took the boat to Canada. Half of them didn’t know what they
were getting themselves into. Freezing cold homesteads with no running water. Plenty of them were happy though. Thing is, you can’t tell much about a soldier’s prospects. They all look good in uniform, if you see what I mean.’

‘I don’t have many details,’ Linda says. She gives the woman Paul’s name, address, and some areas of Sussex that he mentioned in the letters. The woman says she will check the records, and send any information that looks like a match.

‘They seemed very exotic,’ the woman says. There is the muffled sound of a man’s voice in the background. ‘Some of them still do.’

When Linda returns to the main part of the library, the help desk is occupied by the woman with the perm, and Alex Lamb is nowhere to be seen. She goes back to the table where she left her bag, and finds a book. *The Maple Leaf Army in the English South*. On a sticky note, Alex Lamb has written: BACKGROUND READING.

When she gets home, she can hear the thumping of her son’s music. He listens to rap and hip-hop, because of the heavy basslines and the comparative lack of melody in the vocals. She walks down the hall, opens the door to his room, and watches him. The speakers of his hi-fi sit on his desk, and Lucas grips the edges of the table, to feel the vibrations, while he studies the lyrics. He nods his head on the off-beat.

Soon, he senses her presence and spins quickly. ‘Oh hi! What’s up? Is it too loud?’

Linda shakes her head. She goes over to the stereo, and turns up the volume. The green level-lights ripple and jump. She drops her shoulder and begins to dance. She two-steps, with her hands up high, like she’s seen them doing on the Saturday morning chart show. Lucas lets out a long, growling laugh. He turns his fingers into pistols and points them at her. The man on the stereo calls out:
Accept no substitutes

I bring truth to the youth, tear the roof off the school

Linda gets down low. She is laughing, now, too. She hasn’t danced for a long time, and her thigh muscles burn. The music stops, and she straightens.

‘Not bad for an old-timer,’ Lucas says.

‘If you don’t finish your homework, I will come in and do that during year eleven assembly,’ she says.

‘Didn’t know you liked Tupac, Mum.’

‘They’re great. But Lucas?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘Don’t tear the roof off the school, okay?’

Lucas looks down at the lyrics on the inlay card. ‘What if it’s got…asbestos?’

‘Let the professionals deal with it.’

‘What if the lessons are really boring?’

Linda pretends to think. ‘Then it’s okay.’

* * *

The first year of Lucas’ life was hard. He was Linda’s only child, and she didn’t know what she was doing wrong. Initially, he seemed unusually calm – the only sleeping link in a chain of waking babies on the ward. But at home, at night, her voice couldn’t soothe him. He only settled when she turned on the light. He wasn’t diagnosed until he was eight months old.

It was her mother who suggested they learn sign language. She said it on the drive back from the audiologists. ‘You’ll have to communicate with him, Lind.’
‘But the man said that if he signs, he might never speak,’ Linda said, cradling her baby on the backseat.

‘Rubbish. If he’d’ve been born French, you’d have learned French, wouldn’t you?’ Daisy said.

‘Born French, Mum?’

‘Bien sur. Tell you what: I’ll learn, and then I’ll teach you all.’

Daisy soon realised that weekly sessions with a hearing teacher at the polytechnic were not going to be enough. She found a deaf woman, Gita, cooking in a café on the coast road, and she employed her to come to the house four times a week, and teach them. Eventually, Lucas was able to take part in the lessons. The language took root in their home. To Linda’s surprise, Mike was brilliant at it. His expressive face and physical competence made it easy for him. By the time Lucas was four, he had almost age appropriate language skills in sign, and was fast outstripping his parents. His speech was coming along, too.

Linda recalls flashes of that brief period of happiness. She remembers seeing him do the sign for ‘pig’ for the first time, his fat fist twisting in front of his nose. She remembers how her mum used to whisper involuntarily, as she signed her little stories to him.

After Daisy died, Lucas stayed off school for a while. Linda watched him, waiting for signs of distress. He was six years old, and there was nothing much to see. At breakfast, he waited for his Coco-Pops to bleed into his milk. He shook the carton of Five-Alive. Just like always.

When he went back to school, he didn’t do so well. The teacher for the deaf said Lucas was no longer progressing with his speech, and they should stop signing at home. It was sign language, apparently – not grief, or trauma, or the fact that he
couldn’t hear – which was holding back his speech development. Linda wasn’t in her right mind, back then. She didn’t have the energy to argue. So, without her mum there, they stopped signing.

Now, ten years later, she is in the car with Mike, on her way to parents evening. The interior smells of Mike, smells of the garages he visits, the lubricants and steel. There is the scent of new aftershave, too. He must now buy his own. Mike used to be a car mechanic, but he was so good with people that he soon found himself working as a business-to-business salesman, pitching tools and equipment to garages. His fingers still have grease and dirt in the lines by the end of the day, no matter how sharp he otherwise looks.

‘How is the flat?’ she asks him.

‘It’s basic, you know. The walls are a bit bare. I’m thinking of framing a couple of take-away menus. The Ying-Wah has a lovely one in red and green,’ he says, laughing.

‘If you like, I could give you some pictures of Lucas,’ Linda says.

Mike is silent for a moment. ‘That would be nice,’ he says, eventually.

He parks the car, and they get out. The fog is cold on Linda’s skin. In winter, the coastal town is like a bottle full of smoke. They look over at the glass corridor, the parents filing through in bright clothes, under bright lights. Linda feels like a different species.

Mike takes a big breath. ‘Jesus, I’ll be glad to see the back of this bleeding place.’

‘Not long, now,’ Linda replies. ‘This is the last one. Mike, do you think Lucas has been acting strange, lately?’

‘God, Linda, if we had to have a conversation every time Lucas acted strange, we’d
be talking all the time.’

Linda grins to herself. Mike spends time with Lucas, and he still pays part of his salary into the joint account. He is a decent man, attractive and kind, but he is not the sort to notice when he’s inadvertently given a damning indictment of his own marriage.

For the most part, the parents’ evening is the usual affair: the teachers remain perplexed or anxious. Some of them drift into generalisations, referring to deaf people as ‘they’. ‘They sometimes learn better through private study, don’t they?’

There are murmurs of a slight improvement in Lucas’ social skills, and the maths teacher puts this down to his new support worker. ‘He doesn’t have her in my class, unfortunately, but she’s just lovely. And very good.’

The form tutor is last. ‘Señor’ Potts, a Spanish teacher, is a funny-looking man from Essex with drink sweats and a suit he once bought for special occasions. ‘Ah, buenas noches!’ he says, as he emerges into the corridor to collect them.

By this time, Linda is exhausted and bewildered. Even Mike has lost his fizz. He looks at Linda and frowns, perplexed.

‘It means: good evening,’ says Mr Potts, but Linda knows that Mike had in fact been thinking, who’s this twat?

Potts takes them through to an untidy office where a young woman sits on a plastic chair to the side of a desk. She is upright, fit, with fine blonde hair. Her face is plain. ‘Hello, again!’ Mike says to her, and everyone shakes hands. Linda doesn’t catch the young woman’s name, and they sit down to listen to Potts’ hazy improvisations. ‘Lucas is so enigmatic, isn’t he?’

The support worker shrugs in a mortified way, and Linda warms to her.
‘He has these flashes of insight,’ Potts continues. ‘It’s as though there’s a little wizard in his head, who occasionally wakes, but otherwise lies dormant.’

Potts is clearly pleased with this, but Mike has had his fill of feeble nonsense this evening. ‘A wizard?’ he says with a strained smile.

‘Not literally,’ says Potts.

‘I just don’t get you blokes, sometimes,’ Mike says. ‘You teachers. You’re always talking about Luke as if he’s some character out of science fiction.’

‘Mike…’ Linda says.

‘No, Lind. It’s got to be said. If you could come to our house…I mean, if you could see him, of an evening. This is a kid who reads for two hours a night to catch up with the stuff he misses when you lot are facing the opposite way. He memorises the plots of TV shows in the Radio Times, just so he’s got something to talk about at school. Him and his mother,’ Mike points to Linda, now, ‘have spent probably ten years mouthing babble at each other, teaching him to speak, and I’ve seen him using white spirits to clean the graffiti off his rucksack.’

‘Mr Weatherall, I was only – ’ says Potts.

‘Now if he can be arsed to get up in the morning and come to this dump, then you ought to be able to see him as a real person. He’s not a puzzle, or a riddle or some wizard or angel or bloody sprite or something. He’s a real, actual kid.’

Linda looks away, because she feels like she might cry if she makes eye-contact with Mike. She sees, with surprise, that the support worker is also moved by Mike’s speech. Her eyes water, and her long throat ripples.

‘I’m very sorry,’ Potts says with a sigh. He’s clearly had a long night, himself. ‘I didn’t mean anything by it.’

‘It’s all right, mate,’ Mike says, and his face brightens again. ‘It’s all right. Just.
No more wizards, eh?’

They both smile.

Potts loses his nerve after this exchange, and the support worker takes over. ‘I think Lucas has a lot of repressed rage,’ she says. ‘He’s always saying everything is fine, but he’s angry.’

‘I’m not sure I agree,’ Linda says.

‘He’s talking more, now, but he’s so used to bottling it all up,’ says the support worker. ‘That’s Mario for you. Oh shit. I mean…Lucas. God, I’m so sorry.’

The support worker puts her hand over her mouth. Linda knows about the nickname, although she’s never discussed it with Lucas. She’s seen it written on his exercise books, and not in his handwriting. She suspects it is meant unkindly. For a long moment, the room is silent.

Finally, Mike smiles, his tension relieved after his rant. ‘That’s Super Mario to you, ha-ha!’

Everyone laughs, except Linda.

As Mike’s car flashes down the dual carriageway towards home, she remembers how, in the years after they stopped signing, she’d sometimes hear little Lucas vocalizing in the night. Making those noises. She’d go into his room (flowers on the wallpaper, back then, Thundercats on the sheets), and see his fingers moving in his sleep. Sometimes he’d sign at the ceiling, sometimes at the wall. She couldn’t understand his signs, in that light. She’d forgotten the language quickly.

He never did it during waking hours, but once, when he was about eight, she went into his room, and felt sure he was signing about his Nanna. He was doing the impersonation he did when reporting her signs: making himself narrow, shrugging
his shoulders. It was devastating. Linda thought about trying to stop him. She could have taken hold of his wrists, and he would not have woken. The woman from the school had told her to be strict. In the end, she couldn’t do it. She figured it would pass soon enough.

She was right. By the time he was nine, she’d step into his bedroom and find that his arms had dropped by his sides, like he’d been knocked unconscious and was unable to break his fall.

Mike pulls the car up, now, outside the bungalow. ‘Well,’ he says, with a sigh that deflates his big body. ‘That was fun.’

‘Yes, wonderful,’ Linda says. ‘Let’s never, ever do it again. Listen, wait here a minute.’

She goes into the house, through to the bedroom, and takes out the photo albums. She hasn’t looked at them for years. She flips through an album from 1986. Through the pages, she sees her boy growing, and her mother becoming ill. She takes out two of Lucas with his dad. One in which they are play-fighting with sticks, and another in which they seem to be having a conversation in sign. She runs back out to the car, and hands them to Mike through the driver side window. ‘Something for the walls,’ she says. ‘Better than take-away menus, I think.’

Mike studies the photographs, one in each hand. He twists them, to utilize the streetlight. ‘Thanks, Linda,’ he says. ‘That’s thoughtful.’

When he looks at her, he’s almost crying.

* * *

74
‘Your mum’s a babe,’ Cassie says.

They are in the Basin, working on ‘idioms’ in preparation for the English mock exam. Lucas is good on idioms, because he reads so much. He once sneaked a look at his SEN report, which said ‘Lucas uses reading as a form of social withdrawal’.

You can’t win.

‘your dad’s good-looking, too. odd couple,’ Cassie continues.

‘They’re separated.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry.’

‘I don’t think it will last. I’m not sure dad will manage on his own.’

‘And your mum?’

‘She wasn’t managing, anyway,’ Lucas says, feeling a flush of guilt.

‘What about you?’ she asks. ‘How do you feel about it?’

‘Oh, you know. It’s much worse for them. I have to be there for Mum. I’m fine.’

‘Fine, eh?’ Cassie says. ‘Seems to me fine about a lot of things.’

Lucas looks out of the window at the chlorinated mist drifting over the pine trees that surround the outdoor swimming pool. Some younger kids walk by. One of them stops and makes a face at him – that big, yawning mouth. It doesn’t happen often. Lucas quickly turns away.

‘Okay,’ Cassie says, brightly. ‘going to do a TV interview. It will help you with ‘A Life in the Day’.’

‘Please, no. No interviews.’

Cassie picks up an oversized Basin pencil with the rubber grip and turns it upside down for a microphone. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to the show. I’m here with Mario Weatherall, freestyle dance champion. Mario, you feel about being deaf?’
She has started calling him Mario. He doesn’t know what to think about that. ‘I’m not doing this,’ he says. ‘It’s not really an issue.’

‘Humour me. I’m trying to get inside your head. How do you feel about your hearing?’

He glances down at his worksheet on idioms. ‘I take it on the chin,’ he says.

‘You take your hearing on the chin? You may have discovered the problem, medically speaking.’

His cheery exterior cracks. ‘I’m sick of talking about it,’ he says. ‘I’d like to read a book about a deaf person where they don’t talk about deafness. I’d like to watch a film that’s not about how terrible everything is when you’re hard of hearing. It’s not terrible. It’s absolutely fine!’

‘School’s fine? Home’s fine?’

‘Yes! And I’m tired of people asking ‘how deaf’ I am, or trying to explain what things sound like. I’m tired of people explaining sound. I know all about sound! I’ve been having hearing tests since I was a baby. I’ve seen so many diagrams. I know exactly what’s going on inside my head. I could draw you a fucking picture!’

The other kids in the Basin look at him, alarmed, unaccustomed to an outburst from the quiet deaf boy. He calms down, knowing that this is exactly the sort of behaviour that will mark him out.

Cassie puts a finger to an imaginary earpiece. ‘I will remind you, Mario, that we are live on air. Logies to our younger viewers for the language.’

Lucas shakes his head.

‘You do know, don’t you,’ she says, ‘that we can do speech therapy for the next hundred years, and you’ll never pass for hearing. You’re not hard of hearing. You’re not hard of anything. You’re deaf. You’ll never be like them.’
‘Sometimes you’re not very nice,’ Lucas says.

‘Why would you want to pass for hearing?’

‘So I don’t have to sit in here with all the other spackers!’ he says, and then immediately puts his hand over his mouth. There is a Down Syndrome boy in the corner, and two kids with ADHD working on their maths.

‘Let’s talk about bullying,’ Cassie says, raising her pencil/microphone again.

‘I’m sorry,’ Lucas says. ‘I didn’t mean that. It’s not like me…’

‘When these dickheads at school fun of you, and say nasty things, what do you say to them?’

‘I say “pardon?”’

It takes Cassie a while to get it, and then she laughs, revealing all that gum. ‘Very good, Lucas. Very good.’

He looks back down at the idioms. ‘It goes in one eye, and out the other.’

‘Ha!’ she says. ‘There’s a sign for that!’

She teaches him some others: an itching sign, to show that you dislike someone, a putting down of the ears, as a cuss. ‘This one,’ she says, performing the sign, ‘means, “my hands are sealed.”’

He laughs, and tries to copy her. She takes hold of his fingers, to help him. That’s how he starts to learn. No agreement, no contract. Her hands on his.

‘Now this,’ she says, bearing her teeth and claws, ‘is the sign for “angry”. I strongly suggest that you use it.’

That evening, he goes out walking around Ringdean, as he often does. Late autumn smoke rises from the village as he descends Downside. He ends up across the road from the hairdressers. Cassie’s mother runs The Cut, and they live above the shop.
Cassie helps out sometimes. It wasn’t Lucas’ intention to come here, but in the thick blue night, the bright shopfront and the barberpole are irresistible. The pole turns, creating the illusion that the candy-stripes are travelling upwards. Images come to Lucas’ mind: boiled sweets, fairgrounds, hazard tape, blood on ceilings.

Through the plate glass shopfront, he sees Cassie’s mum shifting her weight from one cowboy boot to the other. She discards bits of tin foil, and drops scissors and clipper teeth into the tube of blue disinfectant. The light of The Cut is so strong, it seems like a hole ripped in a black cloud, and Lucas knows he is hidden from view, in the outer dark.

Cassie comes from the back of the shop with a rubber-bristled brush. She sweeps up swatches of hair, which make the place look like the site of a bird kill. In black jumper and jeans, she leans on the staff of the brush to stretch. Both women move towards the back door, and suddenly, the light goes off. By the time Lucas’ eyes have adjusted, he realises that he is now completely exposed to them, standing across the road in the streetlight, looking in. He doesn’t dare to wave, or even move.

Cassie seems to look in his direction, but he can’t tell if she has seen him, or recognises him. She turns and retreats into the hidden part of the building. Lucas is left there, waiting for his own reflection to become faintly visible in the glass – a great ghoul, the broad ghost of his living father.

At home, he takes his shoes off in the hallway and has a long scratch of his back before he realises his mother is standing a metre away, watching. ‘Jesus!’ he says, startled. ‘Can’t you ever just - ’ he stops himself. He closes his eyes. He smiles. ‘Hi,’ he says.

‘How was the walk?’ his mother asks.

‘Fine,’ he catches himself saying.
The next day, he buys a can of Intensive Care women’s deodorant and buries it in the polystyrene balls inside his Jordan beanbag.

* * *

It’s not like the language comes back to him in a matter of minutes. It takes a long time. Months. At first he can hardly get his fingers to come together to spell the alphabet. It’s like trying to talk when your lips are numb with cold.

People say signing is like mime, but throughout autumn and winter, Cassie shows him that’s not true. Yes, there are the obvious signs, like those for ‘drink’ and ‘hammer’. But the sign for ‘why’ is the right index finger striking the left shoulder. ‘If it all obvious,’ Cassie says, ‘what would be the point of learning the damn?’

It doesn’t feel like he is relearning it, but after a month or so, he finds that he can almost understand some of what she signs. As long as he doesn’t try too hard, a blurry message appears in his mind. At first, however, he cannot respond. His thoughts seem to run towards his hands quite naturally, but they get stuck somewhere around the elbow. He feels bottled, and has the sense that – behind the stopper – a great pressure is building.

One day, in late November, he signs the question what did you do yesterday, and as his finger flicks at his shoulder, he feels this tremendous surge through his body. It is as if his arm is simply remembering what to do. He does not have to translate the thought. It flows through his muscles, and he watches the tendons do their work. It feels as though the language is coming from a place inside him. Like a door has opened in some dank chamber. And there’s more than just language in there. There
are memories, images.

At first, this physical sensation of remembering is very rare. He is soon back to
trembling fingers, and basic responses forced out in English sentence order.

In the early days, he tries to watch her hands. *Look at me*, she signs. *Look at me.*
*If you keep looking at my hands, you’ll fall off your chair.*

She’s right: so much of the language comes from the face. Before, when he’d been
lip-reading, he had stared endlessly at mouths. Teeth and tongues and chapped lips
and beard hair and food debris had filled his vision. But now, he looks at Cassie’s
entire face. It is a revelation, to see what a face can contain: anxiety in the jaw
muscles, the moisture of cold weather between the lashes, and his own reflected
silhouette, there in her pupils. Lucas can’t remember ever having looked at someone
so freely.

And then there is the other face, which eventually returns.

Lucas’ first proper memory of his grandmother comes in the moments after waking
one December morning. He sees her so clearly. Nanna. She has grey and black
hair, pulled back tight behind her head. She is wearing a green blouse, and smiling at
her forgetfulness. She looks around a room (Lucas does not recognise it), and makes
the sign for spectacles: two ‘V’s’ going up to her cheeks. Then she makes the sign
for ‘where’. Lucas can see two pale dots on her skin, from where she applied the
pressure for the first sign. He sees those marks fading back to colour.

He sits up slowly in his bed. It wasn’t like a normal memory. He is shocked by its
vividness. He can hardly believe that something so clear could have been inside him,
all this time, hiding.

Lucas does not tell his mum about the memory, because he doesn’t want to upset
her. Instead, he tells Cassie, later that day. He tells her about the skin changing
colour on his grandmother’s face, the trace of the sign. ‘What do you think it
means?’ she says.

‘She had bad circulation,’ he says.

Cassie laughs. ‘You know, you’re very funny.’

‘Must be why everyone’s always laughing at me,’ he says, surprising himself.

At the front of the class, Señor Potts discusses el clubs y societies from which Lucas
is naturally excluded. Cassie takes out her notebook.

MY BROTHER RUNS A DEAF PUB NIGHT IN TOWN. YOU SHOULD COME. THE NEXT
ONE IS IN JANUARY.

Lucas is not sure. His pen hovers over the paper.

* I’m going, Cassie signs.*

SOUNDS GOOD, Lucas writes.
Thirty houses stood on the police estate, each dwelling reflecting the rank of its
inhabitants. It was known as ‘The Colony’. Divisional HQ and the operational
buildings were visible from the windows of most of the homes. There was a
clubhouse and a recreational area. The town was only a short walk away, but from
her kitchen window, Daisy could see neither the shops nor the English Channel.

They first arrived late at night. Half of the lights on the terraced row still glowed.

‘Why are they all awake?’ Daisy asked, clutching Caroline to her shoulder.

‘Night shifts, I suppose,’ said Robert. He put a hand on the small of her back.

‘Wives waiting up. It’ll be good for you to know there’s people next door in the
same boat.’

That first week, Robert told her she should go to the wives’ sports social. There
was a crown green bowls tournament.

‘Oh no,’ Daisy said. ‘I wouldn’t know what to wear.’

‘You look lovely. Go as you are.’

She was wearing a homemade pleated navy skirt and a navy waistcoat over a white
short-sleeved sweater.

‘I’d be nervous,’ Daisy said. ‘I don’t think it’s for me.’

‘It is for you.’ Robert smiled and nudged her. ‘It’s for me, too. Important you get
along with the other wives. Good for a man’s career.’

‘I see.’

‘You’ve been out in the sticks too long, that’s all. You’ll get back into the swing
Daisy looked around their new home. The rooms were small and the ceilings low, but they had indoor plumbing and the wallpaper, with its burgundy stripes, stayed fixed to the wall. She heard a chair scraping across the kitchen floor next door.

‘What about the baby?’ she said.

‘Napping,’ Robert said. ‘I’ll look after it.’

Walking to the bowling green, Daisy saw women, in groups of two and three, converging from the grid of streets. In the east, the sun was glowering, but there were storm-clouds in the west. As a result, the facades of the houses had an unreal glow, as though they were under a giant roof.

Most of the women wore jackets.

Daisy told herself she was from here. This was her town. And she had been sociable once. She strode across the bowling green to a group of women standing at the clubhouse end. ‘Good morning,’ she said. ‘I’m Daisy.’

The group looked deferentially to a woman in white-rimmed glasses and a grey suit. She had on white disk earrings that matched her flat shoes. ‘Go on…’ she said.

‘I’m here for the bowls.’

‘Who is your husband?’ said the woman.


The woman in the white-rimmed glasses winced. ‘Police Constable Seacombe, I have to assume?’ she said. There was a sigh of laughter. ‘I am Mrs Clore,’ said the woman. Mrs Clore identified the other women in the group, but this was information, not introduction.

‘I fear we shall have to re-instigate the badges,’ she said. ‘Mrs Seacombe, your
shoes are inappropriate. And there are no shoes appropriate to the act of walking across a bowling green, whilst not in play.’

Daisy reddened with shame, and it seemed that Mrs Clore took pity on her. ‘You’ll discover refreshments in the clubhouse,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’

‘When you find the tray, Mrs Seacombe, bring it out.’

The clubhouse smelled of meat paste and orange squash. The women in there looked different. She heard the difference in their voices. For the most part, they spoke like Mrs Clore might have if she’d fallen down the stairs. There was the odd flash of eyes in Daisy’s direction. Pricing her up.

‘Hello, I’m Mrs Gaye,’ said a woman with a cheap permanent. ‘Peggy. Your neighbour. I’m afraid we all saw you talking to the brass, out there.’

‘I didn’t mean anything by it,’ Daisy said.

‘Well, if you thought that was the way to a quick promotion, God help you.’

‘I wasn’t even thinking about - ’

‘Rule number four: all anyone talks about is promotion.’

‘I don’t understand. Rule number four…?’


‘I’m supposed to take a tray of refreshments out to them.’

Peggy Gaye smiled. ‘Not to them, love. You don’t get to serve them for a long time. You’re to serve us. Now, I think our husbands share a beat. Robert, is it?’

Another woman, young and with a body that had not yet borne a child, called out: ‘Mrs Clore would like us to wear the badges. To avoid any gaffes.’
The badge had a pin, which had pierced both her waistcoat and her sweater.

POLICE CONSTABLE. ‘I see that I’m yet to move up the ranks,’ said Robert, with a grin, when she arrived home that afternoon.

‘I hate this place,’ Daisy said.

‘I think it’s all right,’ Robert said. He sat in the armchair in the front room. Caroline slept in a basket by his feet. She could hear the muffled voice of the wireless announcer from next door.

‘It’s stuffy. Everyone walks around in fear of saying something wrong.’

‘You’ll get used to it. You need to get out there, and make some friends.’

‘Stop telling me what I need to do,’ Daisy said.

She expected Robert to stand out of his chair, for his jaw muscles to tighten in threat. But he just shrugged. ‘Whatever you say.’ He nodded to her badge. ‘You’re the ranking officer.’

Daisy pulled out the pin, and ripped a hole in her sweater. ‘For God’s sake,’ she shouted.

‘Daisy, keep your voice down,’ Robert said. ‘We don’t live in the country anymore. We have neighbours.’

‘Well, it’s our business. Not theirs.’

Robert shook his head. ‘Not really,’ he said.

He did stand up, now. Caroline began to whimper. Robert took Daisy by the wrist. He looked at the flap torn from her sweater, the flesh of her breast swelling over silk.

‘I’m sorry you had a bad day, but it’s important that we help each other.’

She looked down at his hand, clamped around her wrist. His wedding ring glinted in the low light. ‘Let go a minute,’ she said. ‘The baby needs changing.’
Robert smiled. ‘We all need to change,’ he said.

The letters stopped coming. Of course they did. She had not notified him of her change of address. What did she expect? And yet, secretly, she missed them. She imagined, too, how he might feel to have his letters returned to him, undelivered.

He had written about ideas. Aside from the odd film, Daisy’s life didn’t contain much engagement with deeper thoughts. He’d written about history and education, and how you might live your life. She found herself rehearsing conversations with him about such topics. She didn’t even realise she was talking aloud until she felt the clothes pegs moving in her mouth.

What kind of man, she thought, writes to a married woman on another continent, whom he barely knows? It wasn’t so outrageous to Daisy, of course. In his obsession, she recognised an element of her own character. When he’d written that he wondered what she was doing every minute of the day, that he designed whole evenings with her, whole holidays, well, hadn’t she had the same fantasies about certain film stars? As a girl, Daisy had never thought it ridiculous to imagine herself going around with Deanna Durbin or Bing Crosby. They were human, like her – they just had more make-up. Love was a new thing – it came from Hollywood, and nobody could teach her to settle for less.

Paul Landry had mentioned that he found the writing of the letters to be a release, better than a diary. And besides, he liked to imagine her hand on the paper. Oh Lord! Why didn’t he find some woman in Canada? Well, maybe he had, now.

* * *

86
'Did you have anyone before Neville?' Daisy asked Peggy.

‘No. Not many after, either,’ said Peggy.

They were sitting on stools outside their front doors, each with a glass of stout and a cigarette. They often did this, during their husbands’ night shifts, chatting until neighbours with men on earlies called out of the windows for peace. Peggy had guided Daisy through the first year on the estate. She told her what dresses to wear at which dances, and which women to avoid. She made sure Daisy sat at the right table during the Wives’ Club meetings.

‘Neville wants to be CID, too, you know,’ Peggy said.

‘No night shifts, I suppose,’ Daisy said.

Neville Gaye looked up to Robert, even though he was older. His ears stuck out, and his hair was so wiry that Peggy said he’d given up on Brylcreem and now slopped on shaving foam. Robert, though, only hung around with Ray Hammond. It was Hammond who came over on off-days, and never with his wife.

And it was Hammond who brought Robert home, that night. Unusually, they arrived outside in a squad car. The headlamps made Daisy and Peggy squint. Hammond and Robert got out of the car. In summer, the Brighton bobbies wore white custodian helmets, but Robert carried his in his hands. Red smudges marked the rim.

‘Robert?’ Daisy said. ‘Is everything okay?’

Robert just grinned at Hammond over the roof of the car.

‘Go inside, and we’ll tell you,’ said Hammond.

Daisy had disliked Ray Hammond from the moment she’d seen him. He was
slimmer and shorter than Robert, but sharper. His teeth were like oldscrabble tiles, and he wore a thin moustache. Whenever she came into the kitchen while he and Robert were talking, Hammond would tap twice on the table, and fall silent, his face becoming empty, polite, deceitful.

Peggy nodded goodnight, now, and took her stool inside. The crimson tip of her cigarette glowed in the shadows.

Inside, Daisy watched Robert unbutton his jacket. His shirt was soaked and pink, stiff where the liquid had started to dry.

‘What’s this?’ Daisy said.

‘Blood and water,’ Robert said. He took off the shirt and let it drop to the checkerboard lino of the kitchen.

‘Girl tried to kill herself. Slit her wrists,’ Ray Hammond said.

‘Jesus, Robert,’ said Daisy. ‘Are you okay?’

‘He’s better than her,’ Hammond said.

Daisy scowled at Hammond.

‘S’all right,’ Robert said, turning to look at his wife, at last. He smiled weakly.

‘She’s going to be okay. The girl.’

Daisy got hold of herself. ‘Right. What can I do? I’ll get a bath going.’

Ray Hammond laughed loudly. ‘God, anything but that.’

‘It’s fine, Daisy,’ Robert said. ‘I’ll wash at the sink.’

Robert rinsed the pinkish soap off his forearms. The water ran cold. Daisy looked down at the shirt, balled at her husband’s feet. Eventually, she picked it up, trying as she did so to stop her fingers from trembling. She did not want Ray Hammond to see that she was upset.

‘I’m sure a bath would be better,’ Daisy said.
'For God’s sake, enough, woman! Enough! Just shut up!' Robert screamed. She froze, recognising the change in his voice, its move into that higher pitch. She never thought of his rage as part of his personality. It was more like a seizure, or one of his night terrors. She pitied him for the loss of control. Sometimes, if she kept very still, and avoided eye-contact, it would pass.

Like now.

Robert’s shoulders sank. ‘I’m sorry. The girl was in the bath, Daisy,’ Robert said. ‘When we found her. That’s all. That’s all it is.’

Even days later, he didn’t want to talk about it. Daisy had to read about the incident in the newspaper. Rita Freeman was sixteen, and due to make a full recovery. Robert received a commendation for the speed of his response, and his efforts to staunch the bleeding. There was a picture of him, smiling. The photograph was a few years old, and Daisy found herself shocked by the changes in his appearance.

One night she woke to find him straddling her, bunches of her nightie in his fists. She cried his name, but his eyes were dead in the grey dawn. It was only when she turned on the bedside light that he released his grip.

‘It’s you,’ he said.

‘Yes, Robert. Yes. It’s me. What happened?’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

Later, over breakfast, she asked him again what he was dreaming of. ‘Oh,’ he said, chewing cold toast, ‘I thought you were my mother.’

She looked at him for a long time. He laughed once, and then muttered more apologies.
‘Why don’t you ever have Neville Gaye over,’ Daisy said one night, after Ray Hammond had left his teacup in the centre of the table.

‘Neville’s all right,’ Robert said. He was polishing his boots.

‘Why don’t you make a pal of him? Me and Peg are friends, and you both want to be in the CID.’

‘Gaye will never make CID.’

‘Why not?’

The powdery black polish clung to the brush ends in clots. Daisy liked the smell of the stuff. ‘He doesn’t drink, for a start,’ Robert said.

‘Oh come on, that’s no reason.’

‘It’s plenty of reason. And he’s got no hair on his face. Doesn’t even shave. He gets teased by the lads. When he eats his dinner, he has this habit of moving his plate very close to the edge of the table.’

‘I hope you don’t tease him, Robert.’

‘He moves it closer and closer to the edge. Half the time, he spills it on his lap.’

‘He does not.’

‘The fellas take bets on it. He’s odd.’

‘Those CID chaps are odd. Ray Hammond is odd.’

‘Neville’s a nervous case.’

‘You get nervous, sometimes.’

The shushing of the brush halted.

‘I will overcome that,’ he said, sternly.

‘You could jack it in, you know,’ Daisy said. ‘The job, I mean.’
‘What, and end up as some security guard at the Co-op while we all starve to
death? Besides, the job is not the problem.’

‘We could move back to the countryside. A one-man beat. Something more
relaxed. It wasn’t so miserable all the time. We worked together. It felt like we
could help people. You remember the carnival they had? Just sitting out on the
bales all night with a drink.’

‘I don’t want to think about that. About what I was like then. The sort of man I
was.’

‘You were happy,’ she said.

‘I was weak,’ he replied.

He blew on the toecap of his left boot and slid it off his hand.

‘I’m just worried about this Divisional Dance,’ she said. ‘Peggy calls it the
Kneepad Ball. I don’t want to let you down.’

Robert smiled. ‘We’ll be fine,’ he said. He looked her up and down, and tightened
his jaw. ‘You’ve got a lot going for you, Daisy.’

She only remembered that she lived by the sea when she found mussel shells in the
flowerbed. When they first arrived, she would walk around the estate with the pram,
trying to get Caroline to nap. She could never seem to find the edges of the place.
So she was happy to go to the doctor’s, even if the surgery was only a couple of
streets from the colony.

The waiting room smelled of old sweat and damp wool. Somehow, people seemed
to know who she was, and where she was from. A woman with bandages on her
shins, under sheer tights, talked to her friend across the room. ‘It makes you sick,’
she said.
A pale child drew carefully on an old newspaper, and when they called his name, he threw the paper down in front of her. She tilted her head to see what he had written.

PIG.

That evening, she sat outside her open door with Peggy. ‘You’re quiet, tonight, Daisy.’

‘Oh, I’m fine,’ she said. She nodded at the upstairs window, through which they could hear Caroline murmuring in her sleep. ‘Me and Robert are hoping for another.’

‘Thought as much,’ Peggy said.

‘How come?’

‘We could hear you hoping all night, last week.’

Daisy smiled, and let smoke escape from her lips.

Neville came hustling through the dark, his shift finished. ‘Hello, darling,’ he said to Peggy. He leaned down to kiss her, and she tugged on his large left ear.

‘Evening, Mrs Seacombe,’ he said. ‘How’s you?’

In the streetlight, although she didn’t want to, Daisy noticed the hazy fuzz around Neville’s chin.

‘Did Robert not walk back with you?’ Peggy asked her husband.

‘Oh. Robert isn’t on lates, this week,’ Neville said, brightly.

Peggy stiffened, and glanced at Daisy. ‘He’s probably doing one of those training exercises or something,’ she said.

Daisy put out her hand to halt Peggy’s offer of possible explanations.

In bed that night, she remembered seeing Casablanca for the first time, at the
Electric Theatre. It might have been 1942. Certainly, it was before her friend Maureen died. They’d planned to see it together, but Mo had to work.

Daisy’s timing had been off. She took her seat with ten minutes of the film left to run, and watched the ending first. Daisy’s friends had told her it was wonderful, which set her up to dislike it. The conclusion of the film, with all its complications and too-slick dialogue, passed her by. She could hear some weeping – quite a lot, actually – but she didn’t put much faith in audience reactions, even at The Electric.

The film finished, and the rolling programme restarted with its news items and two-reelers. When the main feature began again, Daisy heard a persistent whispering, three rows in front. She was used to the noise and conversation of the auditorium: you couldn’t get a thousand people to be absolutely silent. But this regular mumbling disturbed her concentration. The whispers seemed to follow each line spoken by the actors. Dialogue, whisper, dialogue, whisper.

Ten minutes into the film, Daisy had had enough of the noise. By squinting she could make out two men on the end of the fifth row. The film, with its weird structure, had drawn her in, and she’d be damned if these men were going to destroy it with their muffled commentary. She stood, and made her way down the aisle steps.

‘Excuse me,’ she said. ‘Would you please be quiet? You may well be trying to whisper, but it is not working, and the whole thing is very distracting.’

The two men, whom she could see were soldiers, looked up at her with something like fear. One was slim with an uneven haircut and a big moustache. The other was short, dark, and sort of pretty. A real comedy duo.

The slim one spoke. ‘Qu’est-ce qu’elle dit? Ah, elle a dit qu’elle est offensée par votre odeur? Ça la fait malade.’
‘Non, le problème sont vos oreilles. Quand il ya trois acteurs sur l’écran, elle peut voir seulement celui qui est au milieu. Elle est belle, non?’

‘Ouvrière d’usine. British Steel.’

Canadians, Daisy realised. They were staying somewhere near the College. The little boys followed them around, hoping they’d drop the warplane cards from their cigarette packs. ‘I beg your pardon,’ she said. ‘Do either of you speak English?’

‘I’m sorry, ma’am. I do. Picard speaks a little, but…’

‘In that case, how dare you use French to talk about me while I’m standing here. That’s incredibly rude.’

‘Sit down, girl!’ someone shouted. ‘I can’t see Ingrid’s legs.’

‘You sit down. You don’t know anything about it!’ said Daisy.

‘Mon Dieu,’ said Picard.

‘I apologise,’ said the short one. ‘I promised to take Picard to the movies. He’s young and he misses home and I wanted to take his mind off everything.’

‘Qu’est-ce que vous avez dit?’ asked Picard.

‘The dialogue is too fast for him,’ said the short one. ‘I’m translating. You know, I think I’ve seen you.’

‘I’ve heard you,’ said Daisy, ‘And I’d rather not. I’d be grateful if you could do your interpreting more quietly.’

She went back to her seat and there was a little laughter, a small round of applause from the surrounding patrons. ‘For Queen and country!’ someone said.

The whispering continued, but at acceptable levels, and Daisy’s feelings softened. She had known the first batch of French-Canadians billeted in Sussex. The two-hundred Fusiliers Mont-Royal had looked fine to her, marching through town to ‘The Jockey of York’. But they’d crossed the Channel to Dieppe, where half of them were
killed. She knew better than to get involved.

The ending caught up with her halfway through the film. The deepest part of her mind must have made the connection between the events unfolding on screen, and the conclusion she’d seen over an hour earlier. It hit her with force, and she began to cry, quietly. She tried to hold onto her emotions, and realised this was partly because of the Canadians in front. She didn’t want them to know she was crying. The pauses between the whispers grew.

Daisy did not need to watch the finale again, and she left early. The short one followed her out into the foyer.

‘I hope you’re not leaving because of us,’ he said. Daisy recalled a special opening night showing of North-West Mounted Police at the Odeon in 1940, the ushers dressed as Mounties, the usherettes as squaws. This guy was cute enough, but no Gary Cooper.

‘No,’ she said, sniffling.

‘It was a killer. The film,’ he said.

‘I thought it was…manipulative,’ she said. It was a word she’d read in Picturegoer. ‘Hard to translate, I’ll bet.’

‘Darn near impossible. It was way too fast. And then, after all that effort, I turned to Picard, and the poor little baby was asleep! God knows how long he’d been out.’

Daisy allowed herself a smile.

‘My name is Paul,’ he said. ‘Actually, Picard was wondering where we might go for a drink and some warmth, later.’

‘Wondering in his sleep, was he?’ Daisy said.

Her memory was broken, now, by the noise of the back door slamming. Her husband came up the stairs, and she listened to his breathing settle as he moved into
the room. ‘Where have you been?’ she whispered.

‘What? Work,’ he said.

In 1951, they held the divisional dance at the Aquarium. Outside, the lights rippled along the pier, and the seafront Teds combed their hair with dirty fingers. They swore quietly at the police, but there was envy in their faces, too.

Daisy had made herself a gown in blue-green. She and Robert descended into the underground aquarium with the Hammonds. Ray Hammond’s first wife was from Sardinia. Not even Ray could pronounce her name, and everyone called her Mickey. She had tight, bottle blonde curls and a gap between her front teeth. ‘I’m nervous,’ Daisy told her, as they passed the green glowing jellyfish, and turtles as big as cars.

Mickey snorted. ‘You should be. Everyone here is staring at you.’

Daisy saw a few heads turn in her direction. They entered the dank, yellow-bricked passageways towards the dance hall. The band limbered up, strings screeching and echoing. ‘That’s not a very nice thing to say,’ Daisy muttered.

‘The men. I mean the men are looking,’ said Mickey.

‘At you, perhaps.’

‘Oh, God, has nobody ever told you?’ Mickey said, allowing her gaze to drop down Daisy’s side. She took a drink from a tray. A clear liquid in a cocktail glass.

‘Here, drink this.’

Daisy’s fingers stuck to the glass. Against her instincts, she knocked the drink back as they emerged into the hall. There must have been two thousand people there. The programme advertised modern and traditional dancing. On one side of the hall a
glass tank threw out a green light. Within, Daisy saw tangles of thick eels.

That night, Robert introduced her to so many men; she could not keep track of their names and ranks. She noticed that her husband spent the evening leaving his half-finished drinks discretely on tables. For her part, she swallowed three more of the clear cocktails.

As she danced with one old man, she saw Mrs Clore among the women at the edges of the dancefloor. The limp ropes of her arms were visible through a shawl. She watched Daisy intently, but the drink had deadened Daisy’s wits. She could not understand Mrs Clore’s expression.

‘That’s it,’ said Daisy’s dance partner, reeling her in. His face smelled of pepper. ‘That’s it. Nice and tight.’

She struggled away, but he pinched her, hard, above the hip-bone.

‘No!’ she said.

He said something back. It could’ve been, ‘Bloody cow’ or ‘You’ll find out.’

Daisy didn’t stop to clarify. She pushed through the bodies. At the dance hall doorway, she turned and searched for Robert. He was staring at her, over his glass. She left, but he did not follow.

Outside, at ground level, she could smell sewage and frying fat. The nearest cinema was the Electric Theatre, and she began to walk westward, but heard a voice behind her.

‘Mrs Seacombe? Daisy?’

Neville Gaye was climbing the aquarium steps, squinting through his own smoke.

‘Care for a cigarette?’ he asked. He made a terrible mess of the word ‘cigarette’.

‘I thought you didn’t drink,’ Daisy said, turning back.

‘Well, there were still a couple of sips of alcohol left in the building when you’d
finished and I didn’t like to waste it.’

Daisy closed her eyes and realised that she should not do so again.

‘I will have a smoke, thank you,’ she said.

They stood against the light blue rails above the beach, and talked for a while. It wasn’t really a conversation. They just took turns performing monologues. When Neville finished, Daisy began, her eyes following the pure white and bright red lights of the cars racing down King’s Road. ‘Me and Robert used to work together, Neville. Out in the countryside. Now he never tells me anything. Nobody does. If I hadn’t had those lett –’

‘You wouldn’t want him to tell you everything, would you? I try to keep Peg away from my work. I don’t come home and say, “There was this boy, half his face burned off and not six years old”. I want to protect her. She’d get hard if I told her all that.’

‘I wish I was hard,’ Daisy said.

‘We have to talk to…ladies of the night, obviously. Part of the job. But try telling Peg. Anytime we quarrel, she says, “Why don’t you just run off with one of your whores?” You know, the inference being a sexual liaison.’

Daisy laughed.

‘It’s like your Robert and that tart: some of the things she’d been through. You wouldn’t want to know…’

‘What tart? What are you talking about?’

‘The one he dragged out of the bath. The suicide attempt. His commendation.’

‘She was a prostitute?’

Neville tried to focus. He tried to tune in to the distant but approaching voice of his sober self.
‘Neville!’ There was a hand on his shoulder, and then Ray Hammond’s thin face was beside him, clear and fresh in the moonlight. Daisy saw her husband a few yards away, arm-in-arm with Mickey.

‘You look smart, tonight, Nev,’ Hammond said. ‘Really smart. And your wife is radiant, as always. Spoke to her not a moment ago, as it happens. She is always so charming.’

‘She’s looking for you, Neville,’ called Robert.

Ray Hammond sighed. ‘Oh, she most certainly is,’ he said.

‘Right,’ said Neville. He made an odd bow, and Daisy saw the residue of dried shaving foam in his parting. He walked stiffly away.

‘Idiot,’ mumbled Robert.

On the bus back to the colony, Ray Hammond feigned concern for Neville. ‘I hope Peggy’s not too firm with him.’

‘Maybe they’ll get divorced,’ said Mickey, looking out of the window.

‘No,’ said Robert. ‘You can’t get divorced in the police. It’s career suicide.’

When the babysitter had been paid, Daisy watched her husband make himself tea in the kitchen. She could not shake the cold.

‘I saw what you did to Clore,’ he said.

‘Who?’

‘Chief Constable Clore.’

She hadn’t realised who her dance partner was. The room fell silent until Robert tossed the teaspoon into the sink. ‘You didn’t see what he did to me, though did you? His filthy hands all over me,’ she said.

Robert turned to face her. ‘I saw him dancing with you.’
‘You saw? Weren’t you jealous?’

‘I thought it was going well,’ he said.

‘I wish you were jealous,’ Daisy mumbled.

‘You’re drunk. But don’t worry,’ said Robert. ‘I spoke to old Clore. He didn’t mind. He likes a woman with a spirited mouth.’

Daisy exhaled.

‘But I’m not sure I do,’ said Robert. He took a sip of his tea and then left it on the kitchen counter and walked past her.

‘You didn’t tell me Rita Freeman was a whore, Robert,’ Daisy said.

Robert stopped in the hallway. Daisy watched the silhouette of his shoulders rise and fall, his shirt tugging across his back. His voice came out of the darkness. ‘Did you not hear what I just said?’
The envelope from Canadian Veterans of Britain arrives in January. Lucas hands it to Linda, as he’s getting ready for school. Enclosed are two limp photocopied documents and a covering letter thanking her for her interest and hoping she will consider a small donation.

The letter says that Private Paul Douglas Landry served in England and Scotland until April 1946, including a posting in West Sussex. He returned to Canada, and changed address several times, on each occasion notifying the Veterans. The documents are proof of such, and she finds the name, in a row marked with pink highlighter pen. She goes back to the letter:

*Unfortunately, the CVB is unable to provide personal addresses to those who are neither kin, nor official recordkeeping agencies. We regret to inform you that Paul Landry died in Vancouver, in 1963, of heart failure.*

Linda spreads the documents on the kitchen table. She feels a burning sensation
behind her eyes. In her mind, she has an image of Paul Landry, a composite of the photographs in the book that Alex Lamb lent her: the slicked-back hair and big grin. It upsets her that the man who wrote the letters to her mother is reduced to these meagre administrative papers. There is more documentation on Mike’s Toyota.

‘You okay, Mum?’ Lucas asks.

‘Yes,’ she says. She turns on the smile of positivity. ‘I’m fine, thank you, Lucas. Great! You have a good day, now.’

Lucas stares at her. ‘Is it something to do with Dad?’

‘It’s nothing, honestly.’

‘Mum, I’m going out on Friday night, okay?’

‘Anywhere special?’

‘No. Just a school thing.’

He is lying, she can feel it. She thinks about the can of deodorant she found in his beanbag. When she was working with young offenders, she saw many boys wrecked by solvents. She worries about bad influences. ‘Are you going out with a girl?’ she says, and can’t keep the sternness out of her voice.

‘No. Maybe,’ he says.

‘Well. Just be careful. Don’t do things you’re not comfortable with, just to impress people.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just. I don’t want you taken advantage of.’

‘Chance would be a fine thing,’ he says, grinning.

‘Lucas!’

But he’s gone. The gate, which is loose on its hinges, clangs.
When I dream of you, I am happy for the whole day, Paul Landry wrote. I go to the factory, and I’ll be smiling, and I forget why, and then I remember. People behave in crazy ways for love. They murder and fight, they betray their friends, they cross deserts. You’ve seen the movies. But I think love is more quiet. I dream, and I am happy. That won’t break box office records, but it is enough for me.

The hospice is a single storey, red-brick building, dwarfed by the white Regency houses of Hove. Inside, the receptionist gives Linda a quizzical look. ‘His other daughter,’ Linda explains.

The long corridor has rubberised flooring and paintings of foxhunting on the walls. Her shoes squeak as she walks. She looks through the square of glass in the door and then enters. Her father, as always, is motionless on the chair-bed by the big window, but Dean Martin wails from the portable CD player on the chest of drawers. Caroline always plays him the music of the rat-pack – it is a passion she and Robert shared. Linda picks up Caroline’s purse from the leather-look chair and sits down opposite her father.

It has rained that morning, but now the sun is so bright that Linda can see the weave in the cotton of the curtains. The light falls on Robert’s expressionless face: there is a dark stain near his left eye, and the cheekbone on that side is flat. He is dressed in a yellow shirt and grey cardigan – clothes he never would have chosen. The muscles of his legs have wasted, and his trousers look like washing hung out to dry.

‘Hello, Dad,’ Linda says. ‘It’s been a while.’

She pauses. Outside, the gutter drips. A tabby cat stalks along the wall that
surrounds the hospice grounds. Her father had a lifetime fear of cats, and Linda wonders if fears dissolve, along with everything else. She could bang the window, to scare the cat away, but she doesn’t.

Her father has been in this exact same spot since she last visited. He was next to this window when she went shopping last week, and when she went for a walk on the seafront, and every time she fell asleep. Locked inside him is the memory of what he saw. But it’s different now she’s read Paul Landry’s letters. Now, Linda knows something her father doesn’t, and that makes her feel something for him. Pity.

She ought to talk to him. Caroline always chats to Robert about home improvements, or his old friends from the force, or something she saw on television, but Linda finds it hard. ‘So, Lucas is doing his GCSEs, this year,’ she says. ‘We’re very proud of him.’

Her voice sounds false to her, and now she begins to experience the symptoms she gets every time she visits. Her pores prickle, and her hands start to sweat. Her feet feel cold, and she struggles for breath. She tries to inhale deeply, but everything tightens, like her whole body is squeezing itself shut.

*Don’t you know, little fool, you can never win*, sings Dean Martin.

Her father looks down and to the side. His expression does not change in reaction to her distress. Fearing she will collapse, Linda stands and rushes into the corridor, where she is met by her sister, who is holding a blue plastic file.

‘You’re not leaving already?’ Caroline says.

Linda leans against the wall and bends double, sucking in air.

‘God, Linda,’ Caroline says. ‘Every time.’

An elderly man in a raincoat approaches them carefully, rain-thickened strands of hair swept to the side. The expression on his face tells Linda all she needs to know
about her appearance. He stares at her as if she’s already dead.

The man turns to Caroline. ‘How’s he doing?’ he says, with the trace of an accent.

‘Oh, hi. You know, I think he’s better this week,’ Caroline says. ‘What are you reading, today?’

‘Muriel Spark,’ the man says, looking down at the book in his hand.

Caroline shrugs.

The man goes into Robert’s room. A blast of big-band crescendo roars for a second, before the door swings closed.

‘Who’s that?’ Linda says.

‘He’s from a charity. He comes on Tuesdays to read to the blind and the people who can’t hold a book. Here: these are for you.’

Caroline passes Linda the plastic folder, which contains a wedge of documents.

‘It’s for the house sale,’ she says. ‘I just need you to sign and date.’

Linda uses the wall to slowly straighten herself up.

‘What’s actually wrong with you, sis?’ Caroline asks.

‘I think it’s…the music,’ Linda says.

Caroline tugs on the collar of her camel-coloured coat and smiles. ‘Oh, sure. Why don’t you bring your Leonard Cohen records into the hospice, then? That’d free up some beds.’

‘I’m sorry, Caro,’ Linda says. ‘The answer is, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I know it’s bad. You’re here practically every day, and I wish I could do the same. I wish I could sit with him for hours, but I can’t. I guess I’m still…’

‘Still what?’

‘I don’t know.’

They are quiet for a moment, peering at their father through the window in the
door. The man who reads books sits beside the chair-bed, his head bent low over

_The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie_, his borrowed words inaudible to them.

‘Caroline, did Mum ever mention someone called Paul Landry? Have you ever heard that name?’

‘No.’

‘I found some letters from him, when I was clearing out the attic.’

‘You hardly _cleared out the attic_, Linda.’

‘He’s dead, now, this Paul. The letters are lovely. Funny, charming. They’re love letters, I suppose.’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake. After all this time. Can’t you let it go?’

‘What?’

‘You’re always trying to dig up dirt, Linda. You’re always trying to make out Daddy didn’t love Mum.’

‘Caroline, come on.’

‘No! I asked you, at the time, if you wanted to do the radio interviews about euthanasia, I invited you to the ten year vigil, and I never said anything when you didn’t come. Why can’t you accept it? Dad loved Mum. He loved her. What he did was _proof_ of that. She was suffering. They were both _suffering_. He shot himself, for crying out loud. What more do you need?’

Linda closes her eyes, but Caroline continues, struggling to time her pauses for breath. ‘Your heart is twisted, Linda. I’m sorry that your marriage is over and that you’ve got a special needs son – ’

‘I do not have a _special needs son_,’ Linda says, suddenly stepping towards her sister.

‘You see?’ Caroline says. ‘You’re in denial. Just because you feel guilty, don’t try
to ruin other people’s memories.’

‘Guilty?’

‘Because you were late!’

They fall silent. The reader comes out of the room, and sees that Linda and Caroline are in the midst of an argument. ‘He fell asleep, I think,’ he says.

‘Never mind,’ Caroline says. ‘Thank you.’

The man nods, and limps away. His bookmark falls to the floor. Slowly, Linda bends to retrieve it. The card is white, and has a purple thistle painted on it. Linda looks up, but the man is gone.

‘Now he’s lost his place,’ Caroline says.

In the local studies library, Alex Lamb is showing an old man in a fisherman’s jumper the plans for some allotments in Bevendean, circa 1923. While she waits, Linda goes on the microfiche machine, and trawls through the reports of mercy killings.

One man, from Belfast, smothered his wife to death with a pillow after she’d taken 82 paracetamol. It was her sixth suicide attempt, and the husband intervened when it looked like she’d survive. Another man slit the throat of his 79 year-old wife after they’d visited a prospective nursing home. He then cut his wrists, and died beside her. His wife had been suffering from chronic arthritis and senile dementia. The reports carry quotes by coroners and relatives that use the same language. ‘Tragic’, ‘overwhelmed’, ‘life-long love.’ The very same words Linda read about her father, eleven years ago.

She scrolls through the old papers, looking for a mercy-killing carried out by the wife. But only men, it seems, are merciful.
Alex taps her on the shoulder, and she jumps, whizzing the microfiche away from the descriptions of marital violence, and onto a 1970s advertisement for thermal underwear.

‘Hello,’ he says.

‘Oh. I’ve come to return your book,’ Linda says, taking it from her bag. ‘It was kind of you to leave it for me.’

‘Did you hear anything? About your Canadian?’

‘He died thirty years ago.’

Alex drags a chair over and sits down. ‘I’m very sorry,’ he says. He looks her right in the eye.

Linda holds his gaze for a moment. ‘Thank you,’ she says. She feels herself welling up. It has been a difficult day. ‘I don’t know why I’m getting upset. I mean, what did I expect…?’

‘Sometimes it’s just seeing the name and dates written down, isn’t it?’ Alex says.

‘Sometimes that’s enough, when you’ve been looking for someone.’

‘That’s it,’ Linda says. ‘That’s exactly it. And those letters. I thought there might be more. They seemed like part of a much bigger picture. I don’t suppose I’ll ever know, now. Probably for the best.’

Alex nods, and waits for her to continue.

‘They brought back all these memories of my mum, you know. Stuff I haven’t let myself think of for years.’

‘Like what?’ Alex asks.

Linda is surprised by the question. It forces her to think. ‘Well. She took me to the pictures a lot. I remember seeing Snow White, sitting on her lap. And I just couldn’t believe how big all the characters were. You know: how come the dwarves
were ten times bigger than me?’

Alex smiles.

‘Mum used to go to this place called The Cinescene?’ Linda says.

‘Yes. I used to go there myself, with my older brother.’

‘What happened to it?’

‘I’ll show you.’

He stands from the chair and strides towards the door, holding up ten fingers to one of the other librarians. Eventually, Linda follows, and they are soon outside in the damp air, walking past the theatre and up North Street, with its wet pavement the colour of seal skin, towards the clock tower. Alex walks quickly for a heavy man, and glances back to make sure Linda is keeping up.

Finally, he stops and nods across the road. Linda follows his gaze, and waits for a bus to pass. ‘What am I looking at?’ Linda asks.

‘The old Cinescene.’

The top half of the building is creamy white, the thin windows painted over. The shopfront below is a fast food restaurant, in primary colours.

‘It’s a Burger King,’ Linda says.

‘A film-themed Burger King, if you look closely.’

The windows are lined with clapboard black and white. A poster shows the Titanic crashing into a cheeseburger.

‘Do you go?’ Alex says. His face reddens, and Linda supposes it’s from the effort of the brisk walk.

‘To Burger King?’

‘To the cinema. Do you go to the cinema? Perhaps with your husband?’

‘Oh. No. We’re separated, actually.’
‘I see.’
Linda shakes her head. The first time she tried to go to the cinema, after her mother died, she had a panic-attack in the foyer. It seemed so unfair that her grief should rob her of something they loved to do together. ‘I haven’t been for ten years or more.’

‘Mm,’ says Alex. ‘It’s true: there hasn’t been much on.’
Linda laughs.
‘Would you like to go again?’ Alex says.
‘I don’t know. It’s been so long,’ Linda says.
‘I mean with me.’
‘What?’ Linda says. She looks at Alex Lamb. His eyelashes are oddly delicate, almost white. But he stands tall in the street, and does not back away from his offer.
‘That would be nice,’ she says.

* * *

One morning, Cassie comes into form period wearing leather boots with a metal ring on the side of each. The boots are jewelled with the amber beads of grit they put down for the frost. Lucas thinks back to his old rules of survival: do not bring attention to yourself by speaking to attractive girls; do not show strong emotions, such as anger or love. Cassie is smashing his principles to bits.

Cassie sits down, and they greet each other covertly in sign language. Iona comes in late. On seeing Lucas and Cassie signing, Iona – instinctively – signs, How are
you? to Lucas as she walks to her seat.

Cassie looks at Lucas, intrigued. ‘Did she just…?’

Lucas shrugs.

‘She’s nice,’ Cassie says. ‘I think she likes you.’

‘Not my type.’

‘Shhh,’ Cassie says. She turns to smile at Iona. Iona has hardly spoken to him since Cassie arrived. Or, maybe, Lucas has been ignoring her. In any case, she has changed her look, recently. She fell in with a crowd of older girls from the art college, and now she has a severe undercut and dyed black hair. While everyone else listens to The Spice Girls, Iona writes Gouge Away on her art portfolio.

*Did you know that in France, sign language was once banned because it was too*, Cassie signs. The sign for France is the twiddling of an imaginary moustache.

*What?*


*Really?*

*Yes. In France! It was too sensual for France.*

Lucas can believe that. You are constantly touching yourself when you sign. A thumb to the temple for *I know*, fingers tapping the chin for *uncle*. When she signs about where she used to *live*, Cassie’s middle finger presses into the top of her breast and circles, so that her white blouse dimples and stretches, the intricate lacework of the bra pressing forward through the cotton.

If he was a minister, he’d ban it.

Later, he strides in front of her, down the glass-walled corridor from the languages block to the Basin. The space is too narrow to walk side-by-side, so they don’t sign,
but Lucas enjoys the feeling of being near to her in the strong winter light. Youds and Sam Carder walk towards him. ‘Hey, Mario,’ Youds says. ‘I’ve got a question about sign language. What does mean?’

Youds performs the blow-job mime, the tongue rhythmically pushing into the cheek. He’s quite good at it, and Lucas is about to smile, but then Sam Carder says, ‘because your mum says it means I owe her a fiver.’

Lucas sidesteps them, and walks on, as usual. But he can feel Cassie watching him. He turns off his hearing aid, and clenches his fists. He feels different when she’s there. Angrier. Cassie puts a hand on his shoulder, and he turns. They stand still in the middle of the flow of pupils, and she signs to him.

*What was that about?*

*Forget it. I can’t be bothered.*

*It’s . You need to stand up for yourself.*

*This is how I deal with it*, Lucas signs, as the passing kids clatter against him with their heavy bags. *Trust me, I know what I’m doing.*

*You’re not doing anything.*

Lucas feels penned in. She has pushed him too far. He turns. ‘Excuse me, Duncan?’ Lucas shouts to Youds, who is reaching for a door handle, further down the corridor.

He looks over his shoulder, laughing. ‘What?’ he says, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

‘Fuck off!’ Lucas yells.

Lucas sees all of the faces in the corridor turn towards him. He regrets the outburst, immediately, and looks for teachers who might have heard. After a few seconds, Youds laughs and his friends begin their mock signing again, performing
‘up yours’ and ‘wanker’. Youds, it seems, has even learned the old sign for ‘deaf and dumb.’ The moment passes, and everyone carries on to their next lesson.

The Basin smells of hot wet wool from the gloves hung on the thick fins of the radiator. As Lucas sits down, he thinks of the expression on Youds’ face just after he’d told him to fuck off. Before he started laughing. It was something new. Shock was too strong a word, and it certainly wasn’t fear. It was like the world had stopped working properly for Youds. Lucas knows that feeling well.

Cassie sits down opposite Lucas, now, and beams. She nudges him in the ribs. That was awesome, she signs, and he can’t help but smile.

They must keep their language secret, so she draws the concertina partition in the Basin, and writes down POINT OF VIEW in her black notebook. Very important for BSL, she signs. It was one of the first things my brother taught me.

Outside, the world is slowly dripping with thawed frost. It makes the trees look like they are coated in silver goop.

If you’re telling a story, she signs, you first put the person in a scene. Think of it like a film. You have the long shot...

With her hands she creates a thick dark forest, which hangs in the room. She makes the sun plummet in the sky. Her fingers become the legs of a tired old man, walking through the trees. She points to the lonely wanderer.

‘So there he is,’ she says, using her voice. ‘But now go to the close-up. Now, you become him.’

And, just like that, she is the old man – two fingers dragged down her face. She makes him hunched over, heavy-browed, looking up apprehensively at the trees. She shows him thinking of his wife. There is an owl in the branches. Cassie describes –
and then becomes – the owl, looking down on the man.

Lucas shivers with recognition.

Cassie straightens up, smooths her blouse, and re-enters herself. ‘You see, every deaf story is a first person story,’ she says. ‘You become each characters, you switch roles. It’s very .’

‘Very what?’

She signs the word, but he doesn’t understand, so she writes it in her notebook.

COMPASSIONATE.

‘Oh,’ he says.

*My brother used to say that signing helps you think of others. Then he’d hit me around the head.*

Lucas frowned.

*What’s wrong? Cassie signed.*

*What happened to him?*

*My brother?*

*The old man in the forest.*

*Don’t know. What do you think?*

*Dead,* Lucas signed

For a few moments, their hands lie still. Lucas is thinking, remembering. *What’s the sign for C-I-N-E-M-A?* He spells the word on his fingers.

She does it for him: the left arm horizontal, the right arm vertical behind it, fingers splayed, palm out, moving side-to-side.

*Is that the actor, on the screen?* Lucas asks.

Cassie shrugs. *Signs don’t always look like the thing.*

It looks like a tree blowing in the wind, or someone simply waving goodbye.
‘Mum, you know Nanna?’ he says, that evening.

His mother is making egg-in-a-window, and she stops dead still, with the spatula quivering in the air. She turns. ‘Yes?’

‘She liked films, yeah?’

‘Very much.’

‘Did we go to the cinema with her a lot?’

‘Yes. The three of us every week.’

Lucas can see that she is remembering. Her eyes are half-closed and she looks up at the ceiling. She is about to continue, but doesn’t. ‘Have you thought about what you’re going to do in September?’ she says.

He sighs. For the last five years, the idea of finishing school has kept him alive, and now, right at the end, he doesn’t want to leave. ‘I was thinking of getting a job.’

‘An apprenticeship?’

‘There’s work going at the school,’ he says. ‘Caretaking, you know. Mending stuff.’

‘What? The school? I thought . There’s no way, Lucas! clever boy cleaning toilets.’

‘Well, what else should I do, Mum?’

‘There are loads of things. Just because you’re - ’

‘Just because I’m what?’

‘There are…lots of things you can do.’

He watches her trying to think of suggestions. He sees her hitting the barriers. The rich smell of burning egg-white fills the kitchen.
‘You just let me know when you think of something, okay?’ Lucas says. He stands, but as he leaves the room, he sees his mum’s shoulders drop and her eyes close.

In his mind, he says, *For fuck’s sake, Mum, pull yourself together.* Aloud, he says, ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to get angry.’

‘It’s probably my fault,’ she says, with a weak smile. ‘A lot on my mind, lately. Not very sensitive. I just think you should be positive about your opportunities.’

‘I am,’ he says. ‘Hey, maybe we should start a business – you and me!’

‘What could we do?’

‘We could…people could hire us to stare at their enemies until they feel uncomfortable.’

Linda laughs. ‘Professional unnervers!’ Her face becomes serious again. ‘Lucas,’ she says. ‘You know that solvent abuse can kill, don’t you?’

Lucas takes a moment to follow the thread of her thinking. She has been into his room, found the deodorant, and concluded that he is sniffing aerosols.

‘Instantly,’ he says. ‘But you need to stop going through my stuff.’

She tries to protest, but he holds up his hand to deflect her words. ‘Just stop it,’ he says.

* * *

When Linda’s mum got cancer, it was the cinema she missed most. After the second operation, and the chemotherapy, she was too weak to go out. She could hardly sit up to read a book. Linda remembers the old bedroom. She remembers cranking the
window open for the sea breeze. ‘If it’s going to be like this,’ her mother had said.
‘Then what’s the point of going on?’

Linda was shocked by that. Later, when Daisy died, Caroline would bring it up all the time.

‘Mum, that’s not like you,’ Linda had said. ‘You’ll be up and about soon.’

‘I can’t even get down the road to watch a damn movie.’

‘We can bring the TV and video-player up to your room.’

Daisy had a Betamax, but you could still get a few films.

‘It’s all right. I’m being grumpy, that’s all. It’s just…frustrating.’

Through the open window, Linda could hear her little boy kicking a ball around, and her father working in the shed. She spent half her time looking after her dad, during Daisy’s treatment. He could barely cope, had never made a meal for himself. Every day, he walked to a food van on the beach and bought a cheese and onion roll. When he made Linda a cup of tea, she could taste the raw onion on the lip of the cup.

In the end it was Lucas who had provided the link to the cinema. Young as he was, he forced Linda to take him to see a film every weekend, and then he would go to his grandmother’s house and sign the plots to her. Without access to the dialogue, Lucas had to make up the story from the pictures on the screen. The plots always differed wildly from the version that Linda had seen, but her mother didn’t seem to mind.

Sitting on the edge of Daisy’s bed, Lucas signed:

_A boy drives a car into his dreams, where his mummy and daddy have time to play with him and they don’t argue, and his mummy loves him properly._

That was _Back to the Future_. Lucas was a genius and a poet, turning his hand into Marty McFly’s car when he signed, and sending it crashing (the fingers spread across
his forehead) into his mind.

In her memory, Linda can see her mother’s fingers, trembling with weakness, rising to ask Lucas for clarification. She can see Lucas walking around her bed, his chest puffed-up like Biff, lost in a story which was better than the real thing.

* * *

Lucas opens his bedroom window, and sprays a long burst of Cassie’s deodorant into the cold evening air. He looks out at the larches across the road. The streetlight has just come on. The light is pink. Lucas has learned about this in science. When a streetlight first activates, the argon and neon gases give off a pink colour until the sodium vaporises and turns the light orange. Looking at the streetlight, he is hit by another memory.

He rose from bed and stood at the window, just as he does now. It was early evening, and he was five years old. He didn’t know what had woken him. He opened the curtains and saw his Nanna coming out of their house and crossing the road. He waved, then rolled his eyes and knocked on the window. Nanna froze, as though it was a game. She turned and signed something that he couldn’t see because of the failing dusky light. He pointed to the streetlight, and she moved into the beam.

Lucas turned on his bedroom lamp and rushed back to the window. Nanna was small at that distance, like an action figure. Her long red coat was cinched at the waist. The smallness frightened him, somehow. She smiled, under the light, which burned her silhouette onto his eyes.
You didn’t see me, she signed.

What? I don’t understand.

I’m sneaking. Your mummy is asleep. Don’t tell.

Lucas liked the idea of keeping a secret. Where are you going?

Cinema, she signed.

I won’t tell.

His hands were sealed.

His Nanna blew him a kiss and signed thank you – the gestures were almost the same. She looked left and right and then slipped out of the light. She became darker, until she was part of the street. A moment later, a fox crept under the streetlight, looked at Lucas, and then bolted.

Now, dazed at his window, Lucas tries to figure out the mysteries of the memory. Why was she sneaking away from his house? And why did she seem so vulnerable to him? Perhaps it’s just hindsight. Lucas knows what happened to his Nanna. He does not remember, but he knows. There is a difference.
One winter night, Daisy woke in her front room. She’d fallen asleep in the armchair, and now Robert entered the house. She watched him swaying in the hall. Green tie, grey suit. He did not close the front door behind him, and the streetlight lapped in. He rubbed his face with his hands. After a moment, he began to undress, right there. Jacket off, shirt and tie off (he loved his ties, and was careful to hang this one on the
bannister). His shoulders were wide, and his vest covered a paunch, these days.

He turned to the coat pegs, and lifted the cardigan that Daisy had knitted for Caroline. Robert draped the cardigan over his hand, the plum-coloured wool hanging from his fingers. He put the garment to his face, and released a long, shaking breath. Daisy sat motionless in the shadows of the living room, observing the scene through the mesh of her eyelashes.

Eventually, Robert discarded the cardigan and bent down to untie his laces. He found something on the end of his shoe. He dabbed it with one finger, picked it up that way, and held it above his face. Daisy couldn’t be sure from that range, but it looked like a whole fingernail.

The year was a busy one. In spite of Daisy’s social failings, Robert made CID. Ray Hammond went through in the same batch, and they were initiated with a so-called ‘stag night’. No wives.

Linda was born in November, and Daisy stayed in hospital for a while with an infection. She had enjoyed the pregnancy, and had listened to the wise and sinister blood-sent advice of her unborn child. Eat something red. Sleep on the floor. When she came, Linda was dark and small, and on the ward, the sunsets throbbed pink in the big windows. Daisy was glad to get home, although the place was a mess, and Caroline seemed traumatised and hungry after a week with her father.

A couple of days after her return, she called to Peggy out of the kitchen window. ‘Peg, do you want to come and see the baby?’

‘I’m busy for now, thank you,’ Peggy said, hanging up the washing in her yard. She went inside and turned up the wireless as loud as it would go. Daisy had heard of women not speaking because of a promotion, but she could hardly believe it.
There’d be no chance to talk it over, either: no more night shifts sharing a beer and a cigarette, now that Robert was in the CID.

There was less socialising, altogether. The CID men didn’t even attend their own dances, and wives were rarely welcome at the unofficial gatherings.

‘Jesus, Daisy. When you were invited, you never wanted to go,’ Robert said one morning, sawing the top off his boiled egg, in the cold kitchen.

‘I just want to know why I’m not allowed,’ said Daisy.

‘It’s a different kind of police work,’ he said. Then he grinned, hung over. ‘Wives talk.’

She scowled at him, and he laughed.

‘I think you just like your privacy,’ she said. ‘You and your little brothers.’ She could not help but feel proud of him.

The letters started arriving again before Linda was a year old. When the first letter came through the door, and she saw the handwriting, Daisy felt a bolt of energy through her body. She did not know if it was fear or pleasure. Holding her baby on her hip, she squatted down and picked up the envelope. The bristles of the welcome mat scratched the backs of her fingers.

Carefully, she stood, opened the door, and looked along the terraced row. The September morning was fine, and six of the nine houses had women outside. Police wives. They were watering hanging baskets, weeding, putting out empty milk bottles, snipping grass back from the path, walloping rugs, and talking. Always talking, always watching.

The postman was still visible at the end of the street, and for a moment Daisy thought of running after him, and telling him in front of everybody that she did not
want this nuisance letter.

  Linda reached out for the envelope, her mouth open. Daisy gave her a knuckle, instead, and felt the pinch of her daughter’s incipient teeth.

  She read the letter in her living room. There was no mention of his methods, of how he’d tracked her down. His tone had not changed. There was no pressure to reply, no desperation.

  *I am sorry I didn’t write for a while. Sometimes, I feel sort of hopeless and foolish. You ever feel like that? I hope not, Dee.*

  *In Winnipeg, in autumn, there is a kind of dread for what is coming. We’re fending it off with this guy Elvis Presley on the wireless. He is a very pretty guy. He has this tune, ‘Heartbreak Hotel’. Some people say it is morbid, but I like it.*

  *I am still working at GM, but I am finally onto the next phase of my Big Project. I’m studying aerospace. It is a big wow, Dee. The first thing they tell you is that you don’t even think about an aircraft for the first two months. You just think about air! How it moves, what it’s made of, all that. Have you ever thought about air, Dee? These teachers get paid crazy wages for this goofy stuff!*

  *I’m certainly spicing up the conversation during coffee break at the factory. Everyone hates my guts. I hope you don’t.*

  She hid the letter under tissue paper in a shoe-box in her wardrobe.

  It would be months before she heard the song ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ on the radio at home, but she recognised it quickly. She danced with Linda on her shoulder, while Caroline sang along. The song’s arrival gave Daisy the sense of a line drawn across the Atlantic, of an ocean bridged by a voice. She knew it was silly. When the song finished, she turned off the radio, and could hear through the wall the strong stream of Neville Gaye urinating in his toilet. Nothing on this estate could be hidden. She
went through to her bedroom, took the letter from the shoe-box and threw it in the bin.

That night, she stood on the stairs, as if in the middle of climbing, and listened to the conversation between her husband and Ray Hammond in the kitchen. Robert, who was drunk, complained that he could not make sense of his job.

‘Nothing ever goes anywhere,’ he said. ‘We never close a bloody case. You can’t…you can’t crack the code of this city.’

‘What are you talking about, Robert?’ said Hammond, impatiently.

‘It’s like looking for God!’

‘Robert, please,’ Hammond said. Daisy noticed that Hammond never seemed to feel the effects of drink. He spoke more quietly, so that Daisy could not hear his reassurances, only Robert’s reply.

‘Maybe you’re right,’ Robert said. ‘But so, what are we doing then? What can we do?’

‘We can try to get by,’ said Ray. ‘Make a little money out of a bad situation. We can try to exert some control…try to survive. You’re too mystical about things, Bob, that’s your problem. You think too much, and you’re not overly good at it.’

Daisy tightened her grip on the bannister. She hated Ray Hammond more than anyone she’d ever known.

‘Daisy thinks I ought to go to night school, learn a new trade,’ Robert said.

Hammond laughed. ‘Robert, you’re CID. The bedrock of your attitude is that nobody can tell you anything you don’t already know.’

Hammond suggested Robert take up a sport, instead, but Robert could not think of anything he’d be good at. ‘I’m too clumsy for games,’ he said.
‘We could join the rifle team,’ said Hammond.

They were quiet for a few moments. Daisy heard the hiss of beer bottle gas, and her husband sighing. She thought about going up to bed.

‘Look,’ said Hammond. ‘Just because things are chaotic, it doesn’t mean we have to be. An example. A lady in Brunswick. Old girl. She helps out kids in trouble. You know. Babes.’

‘ Abortions? That’s illegal,’ said Robert.

‘Well then, let’s have a cup of tea with her tomorrow,’ Hammond said. ‘Tea and a chat.’

‘About the law?’

‘About business, Robert.’

‘I don’t…wait. What was that?’ Robert said. ‘You hear something?’

Sometimes, now, Robert was gone for long stretches. When he came home, Daisy was shocked by the changes in his appearance. His hair had receded, he was unshaven, and his nose seemed to have healed although she was unable to recall the original injury.

He sat at the oval dinner table one evening, and she almost forgot to serve him. He had brought home a bag of grey cod fillets, and she’d made parsley sauce from the packet. ‘Looks very nice,’ he said, when she placed the plate before him.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

The shirt he wore was new. The weave was thicker than the ones she was used to washing. But it was not straight out of the box. It had been ironed. Daisy did not know where to start with the questions, and could not imagine an answer that wouldn’t wound her.
Caroline sat holding her father’s little finger. Linda, from her high-chair, seemed not to recognise him. The mashed potato, which Daisy had flattened down into furrows, made a dry tearing sound as Robert scooped up a forkful.

‘How was work?’ Daisy said, sitting.

Robert laughed so loudly and suddenly that Caroline flinched with shock.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Sorry, Daisy. I can’t really talk about it.’

‘I think a man should be able to tell his wife about the day’s events.’

Robert blinked and looked around the room. He stared at the deep blue corduroy of the curtains. ‘I wouldn’t know what language to use.’

‘Are you all right, Robert?’

He sniffed, and nodded. ‘Yes, thank you, Daisy,’ he said. ‘Thank you.’

The wind funnelled through the alleyways of the estate, and Daisy had to lean forward to get Linda’s pram going. It was ten past nine in the morning; Caroline was in school and Robert at work. Daisy saw the postman emerge into the alley from the other end. To her, the postie was like a travelling ragman in the plague. And he knew who she was. ‘Ah yes,’ he said, as he came towards her, digging into his bag.

‘Good morning, Mrs Seacombe.’

His face was as red as Daisy’s coat, and he held his hat in his hand. She wondered how much hair grease he had to use to keep the strands so stiff in this gale. He held out the bundle of mail: a bill, something work-related for Robert, and a transatlantic letter. Was that a grin?

‘Thanks, now,’ she said.

When he’d gone, she ripped off the airmail envelope, and stuffed it down into a
drain grate. ‘This has got to stop,’ she said to herself. She wrapped the folded letter around the bar of the pram, and held it there with her left hand. She turned right out of the alleyway, and headed for home with her sleeping daughter.

When she got into the hall, the wind dragged the door shut behind her, and she closed her eyes, relishing the silence of the house. With the folded letter threaded between her fingers, she took off her coat.

‘Is that new?’ Robert said.

She spun, quickly, and saw her husband sitting on one of the stiff dining room chairs. ‘I thought you were at work,’ she said.

‘The coat. Is it new?’

Daisy forced her hands to stop shaking, and turned to hang up the coat, slipping the letter into the pocket as she did so.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I’ve had it since autumn.’

‘I’ve never seen it.’

She smoothed her grey woollen skirt. ‘Well, Robert, I don’t know what to say about that.’

He had a look in his eye that she’d never seen before. Blank. Dead. The way he was seated made his trouser cuffs ride up, and the thick wad of his crotch was prominent. His tie hung below his belt like viscera, and the chair looked small and girlish beneath him.

‘The colour of the coat is sluttish,’ Robert said.

Daisy let her shoulders drop. ‘You’d know all about that.’

‘Yes, I would. I go to disgusting places, so that people like you don’t have to.’

‘I think you like it,’ she said.

‘Where were you, yesterday?’ he asked.
She removed her scarf. ‘What? Shopping, in the morning. Then I -’

‘Where? Shopping where?’

‘Western Road. Then I popped over to the Hook’s to help Iris with the christening gown.’

‘Another baby for the Hooks, eh? What’s that, five kids?”

‘Four. What’s your problem, Robert? What are you trying to find out?’

She walked over to him, away from the coat, away from the letter.

‘Sit down,’ he said, as he himself rose. Daisy was shocked to find herself seated, even before she’d registered the command. He stood between Daisy and the window, so that he was blacked out. ‘Trevor and Iris Hook have gone to Suffolk, to see his family.’

‘Yes. They were packing when I left. What’s your point?’

‘I am trying to account for your time.’

‘I’m not one of your little villains, Robert. And I have a baby on my arm all day.’

‘She’s not much of an obstacle.’

‘Is that the nicest thing you can say about your daughter?’

‘Don’t be smart.’

‘I can’t help being smart,’ she said. ‘What’s wrong with you, Robert? What’s happened? You never used to be like this.’

‘Don’t say that,’ he said, gritting his teeth. ‘It’s unkind. You’re supposed to support me.’

He stared over her, and then closed his eyes, but she could see the emotion flooding back into him. He turned, and walked away, sidling past the pram, hands in pockets. ‘Robert?’ she called, but he opened the door and walked out into the gale.
When he was gone, she took the letter from her coat pocket, intending to destroy it. She began to read as she walked towards the kitchen, where she kept the matches.

Dear Dee,

I want to say two things: firstly, it was NOT me, nor any of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, who wrote the ‘F’s on all those road signs for Uckfield. I quite liked the place. Secondly, when I told you that I loved you, all those years ago, I meant it.

You may say that we only knew each other a short time. You MAY say, “I love this guy, too, and I’d write him straight away, only I lost my pencil in 1951”. I know all the obstacles, all the problems. For starters, there’s about four feet of snow here in Winnipeg, now. I can’t even get to the store...

She laughed, and as soon as she laughed, she almost cried. That had always been the way, for Daisy. It was the comedies that made her weep. It had been a long time since somebody had told her a joke, or said something gentle.

When she finished reading the letter, she leaned her head against the wall, and listened to the children of the police playing in the street outside. One of the kids was rhythmically knocking a house brick on the pavement while the others sang some tribal song.

Daisy remembered how, in the week after Maureen’s house was bombed, she had gone down to the big grey storage shed in town, where they kept all the household items that had been cleared from the blitzed houses. In the high-roofed, breeze-blocked space, there stood small oases of home: an arrangement of sofa, armchair and lamp in one corner; a cutlery drawer, kettle and stack of tins over by the far wall.
It was obvious the damage a 500kg bomb could do, but strange, too, how it could leave things completely untouched. Daisy soon recognised the bookshelf from Mo’s living room, and she knelt before Mr Williams’ encyclopaedia set, which she and Mo had once scoured, almost heaving with laughter at the anatomy illustrations. And shining there by the foot of the bookcase, without so much as a layer of dust on the glass, was Mo’s mother’s pint bottle of gin.

Now, in her hallway, Daisy was shaken from the memory by the laughter of her youngest, Linda, who had woken from her morning nap in her pram. What sort of a child wakes up laughing? Daisy looked down at the letter in her hand, and she made a decision. She went to the kitchen, took a piece of paper and a pencil, and she wrote:

Dear Paul,

As you can see, I found my pencil.

Well, it doesn’t look like there’s any way of stopping you writing these nuisance letters, so I suppose there are two options. Either you continue to address them to my house, where they will eventually cause some sort of disaster, or you send them instead to the following P.O. Box.

She left a blank space to be filled in later, and went over to the pram. Linda sat up and shook one of the coloured wooden rings her sister used to play with. Daisy pointed back. ‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘We’re going for a walk.’
SEVEN

1998

Lucas uses the same method for engaging Cassie as he does for catching up with work he misses in lessons: he simply reads around the subject. He memorises the ingredient list of her deodorant, like it’s a poem. She sometimes rides a bike to school, so he loans the Bicycle Maintenance Handbook from the school library and copies out the diagrams.

*Did you know that Leonardo Da Vinci invented the scissors?* he signs, one day in Mr Solomon’s biology class.

He likes the sign for ‘invented’, which comes out of the head, but it takes him an age to fingerspell Leonardo Da Vinci.

*Who?* Cassie asks, finger twirling.

Lucas slumps and starts again. *L-E-O.*

*Just joking,* Cassie signs. *No. I didn’t know that.*

*Did you know that hairdresser...* he takes her notebook and writes, *IS THE JOB WITH THE LOWEST SUICIDE RATE?*

*Really? Good news. It must be all that physical contact.*
Lucas feels the blood pulsing in the vessels around his groin.

Cassie takes back the notebook. IT WOULD BE “BARBERCIDE”, she writes.

Lucas doesn’t get it, but Cassie laughs in a carefree way. She seems happy. Lucas wonders if he has anything to do with that.

For a moment he turns his attention back to the mung beans drying on a paper towel on the desk in front of him, and the instructions on how to make them grow.

Cassie taps his shoulder.

*Hey, I forgot,* she signs. *Your dad fixed my mum’s car, the other day! The car started smoking, on the way into town, and when we took it to a garage, he was there. The mechanic didn’t know what was wrong, but your dad rolled up his sleeves and figured it out.*

Lucas smiles. *He is good at fixing things.*

*There was an oil leak. He said if the engine had sparked, we’d have blown up.*

*He is good at telling stories, too.*

Cassie nudges him. *You look a bit like him, you know. Broad shoulders.* She studies his face, and Lucas blushes. She touches the ridge of bone by his ear, where the jaw meets the skull. *You shave very high, here,* she signs. *Very 80s.*

*Are you telling me this is not the 1980s?*

*You’re funny. Sideburns give shape to a haircut. It would suit you, because you’re dark.*

Beyond the audiologists, the ed. psychs., and the occasional bully, she is the first person to describe him, to tell him who he is. He is dark, apparently.

*What’s your mum like?* she asks.

*Clever. Kind. Depressed.*

*Why?*
Don’t know. I think she’s always been like that.

What does your dad think?

He left. So I guess he doesn’t care about anyone but himself.

Lucas feels partly terrible for saying that, and partly relieved.

That’s not true, Cassie signs. Probably.

Youds walks by the table, and flicks on Lucas’s gas-tap. Lucas turns it off again.

Youds points at the mung beans on the paper towel. ‘I didn’t know your testicles on the table.’

‘Youds,’ Lucas says. ‘When you talk, it makes me glad that I can’t hear.’

Lucas feels a surge of power. This is how he deals with the abuse, nowadays. As long as he has Cassie beside him, he can say what he likes. He glances around and it seems that everyone in the class is laughing at Youds, although later he will realise it was only half of them.

The more of the language Cassie teaches him, the more the memories come back.

In the beginning, it is just a feeling, or a sense. Sometimes that sense is the start of a trail that eventually leads to a story or an image. He remembers the smell of his grandmother’s scarf. It was not a normal clothes smell. It was more animal, or like something from the ocean. Then, later, he remembers that smell along with the feeling of his shoes sticking to the floor of the multiplex. Later still, he remembers burying his face in his grandmother’s scarf, before emerging into the light of the coming attractions.

Smell? he signed, his fingers paddling up towards his nose.

In his memories, now, his grandmother’s face is so clear. The eyes peering over
the glasses, the laughing mouth. *What kind of smell? Is it good or bad? Which?* she signed.

Lucas held up the scarf.

*Ah.*

She wouldn’t have spelled the word ‘silk’ to him on her fingers, because he couldn’t yet spell. She just gave him the scarf, let him handle it. *It’s made by worms.*

*Ha-ha, no it isn’t.*

In the half-light, with her hands, she showed him how the fabric was manufactured. She put the silkworms on the leaf, made the cocoons, dropped them into the boiling water, and weaved the thread. Lucas didn’t believe her. He bundled up her story like a soiled shirt and chucked it away. *You’re lying!* he signed.

Later, during the film, she looked worried, and Lucas thought it must have been because of all the worms that had died to make her scarf.

There are other memory crumbs: a candle, a shed. He just has to wait.

That week, Lucas fantasises almost constantly about the evening he will spend with Cassie, at the Deaf night. Many of his thoughts focus on trying not to die before it happens. He avoids white meat and fish, for fear of food poisoning, and he crosses at the lights.

He makes it to Friday, and during form period after lunch, he is convinced that
nothing can stop him. The sky outside the window is bright and glassy. Cassie rubs her temple, as though she is tired. Perhaps, he thinks, she is nervous about tonight, too.

‘So, when you’re signing, there is a space in front of you,’ she says. ‘That space has meaning. You can put something there, and it stays there. Watch.’

With her hands she builds a landscape to the right of her body: mountains, and a stream. She flicks her cheek, and puts a girl in the mountains. Across the other side, on her left, she creates a boy, packing a rucksack with sandwiches, fruit, and a flask of tea. Then she goes back to the girl, who is waiting. ‘Do you see?’ she says. ‘called ‘placement’. The girl stays where she is, and the boy makes his journey.’

Lucas nods. He totally understands. Since they met, the world has looked different to him, sharper. It reminds him of when they first replaced their VHS with a DVD player. Objects bloom out of the blur.

Now, he sees Iona approaching with a stack of homemade flyers. He recalls, with nostalgia, how he, Iona and her cousin used to go to the local carnival, and sit quietly on a bench, eating candyfloss. She puts a flyer on his desk. He notes her black painted nails. ‘It’s for my band, Shovel. We have a gig, tonight.’ She has always been a clear speaker.

‘Thanks, but I’m deaf, remember,’ Lucas says. Cassie is watching him.

Iona frowns. ‘You used to listen to music at my house. You used to sit by the speaker. Nicky’s coming.’

Lucas shrugs. ‘I can’t tonight, anyway. Me and Cassie are going out.’

‘Are we?’ Cassie says.

Iona drifts off to leaflet the other desks.

*It’s the Deaf pub night*, Lucas signs. *Remember? Which you are forcing me to go*
Tonight? Cassie signs. Oh, shit.

Lucas sinks in his chair, but tries to swallow his hurt. It’s okay if you’re busy.

Don’t worry. We can do it another time.

No, it’s fine. I’ll come.

By 4pm, it is dark, and Lucas does push-ups in the streetlight coming through his bedroom window. He has a black sweater that fits him well, but the polo neck bears the logo of an unfashionable sports brand, so he turns it back on itself. His hair needs a trim, but for now, he slicks down the sprouting curls with water.

In the hallway, his mother emerges in a sky blue dress under her navy coat.

‘Whoa, Mama!’ he says.

Linda blushes angrily. ‘You’re going out.’

‘So are you.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘What?’ he says.

‘Lucas, come on. You heard me.’

‘I already told you where I’m going. It’s a school thing.’

‘Hmm.’ She squints. ‘What have you done to your lovely polo neck?’

She reaches for his sweater, but he dances away.

‘Where are you going?’ he says.

‘Pardon?’ she says.

‘I said where are you going?’

‘Pardon?’ she says, again.

Lucas laughs and gives her a hug. ‘Anyway, you look a million dollars.’ He bolts
out of the door, before she can give him a time to come home, or tell him to take a
coat.

He waits for Cassie in the old part of town, in a square which contains a shaggy
pile of Christmas trees to be recycled. The scent of fried fish wafts out of the
Regency café, and he can smell the syrupy lager of the street drinkers, who sit on a
bench with their legs in sleeping bags.

Lucas has imagined coolly embracing Cassie, perhaps kissing her on both cheeks,
but now his body is shaking with cold and nerves. He jumps when she taps his
shoulder. ‘Let’s go,’ she says. As they walk to the pub, Lucas takes every
opportunity to glance at their reflection in the dark shopfront windows. He is taller
than her by a head. She wears tight pinstripe trousers and a red cowl neck sweater.
Her hair is fine and dry.

Outside the pub is a chalkboard sign which reads: DEAF CABARET – “UNDER THE
STREELIGHT” – OPEN STAGE.

He follows Cassie inside. Whatever he expected, he is wrong. He has, of course,
been in a pub before, but this place is different: the wallpaper is violet, and golden
cherubs burst out of the wall, holding a huge clock with roman numerals. The bar is
long and lit up like the star prize on a gameshow. Chandeliers hang from the ceiling
– there is light everywhere. A man at one end of the bar signs to a friend at the other.
Everyone is signing. Lucas has never, in his whole life, experienced so much
language in a place. He feels drunk with it.

_You okay?_ Cassie signs, with concern.

_Bit nervous._ He taps his chest with a hooked finger.

Lucas is used to hiding. His survival strategy is to drift into corners, into
ignorance. But here, he knows what people are discussing. An Indian woman, who looks very familiar, sips sherry from a tiny glass. A man in make-up signs about an aeroplane.

What he notices most of all is the expressiveness of the faces. There is a range and subtlety in the features, which opens up a whole other dimension. For the first time, he considers that Cassie is perhaps not the expert signer he imagined her to be.

Suddenly, one man comes very clearly into view. He is tall, and wears a blue denim shirt, the short sleeves of which are tight around his shoulders. His arms are muscular and decorated with elegant tattoos: a burning sun, a labyrinth. His long black hair is slicked back. This is Dan, Cassie’s brother. She hugs him, and he pinches her cheek. He takes a long look at her, and then turns his gaze on Lucas.

*Welcome to our crazy town*, he signs.

*Thank you*, Lucas signs. His fingers stiffen, and his mind empties of thought. *It’s a nice place.*

*Your signs…are you hearing?* Dan asks.

*Fuck off*, Cassie replies, slapping her brother’s arm.

They begin to sign so quickly that Lucas cannot follow. Dan signs differently. Almost every part of his upper body seems to thrum with meaning. Lucas can’t keep up.

*not being cruel! Sometimes hearing teacher deaf with a small d that’s all,* Dan signs to Cassie.

*Just remember how things were for you, before,* Cassie replies, sternly.

Dan mimics her face. *Why don’t you do the remembering?* He turns to Lucas and signs more slowly. *I am very happy to see you, here, tonight. If there is anything you need, just wave.*
Lucas waves, spontaneously, and then hates himself. Then the most beautiful woman he has ever seen approaches Dan and squeezes his bicep. Dan continues to sign to Cassie, but briefly puts a huge hand on the woman’s thigh, to acknowledge her.

The woman is about twenty-five, tall, and mixed race. She wears a long white fitted shirt, black jeans, and bright yellow loafers. She is so startlingly attractive that Lucas doesn’t even fancy her. She makes him want to laugh. Finally, Cassie introduces her to Lucas. She has to fingerspell the woman’s name three times before Lucas manages to pick it up. His eyes keep drawing away from Cassie’s fingers to the woman’s impossible body. V-I-O-L-E-T.

Dan seems to understand the reason for Lucas’ distraction, and laughs gently. He then kisses Violet, who slides a hand up the back of his shirt and gives him a deep pulsing scratch. They take a step back from each other and begin to sign.

Lucas thinks hard. Dan is behaving as if it is perfectly normal for him to have a girlfriend. And for that girlfriend to be unbelievably fit. And Dan is Deaf. Just as Lucas starts to calculate what that might mean for his own life and future, he witnesses another, even stranger thing. Violet bends to take a mobile phone from her handbag, and she answers it. She puts it to her ear, and speaks. Violet is hearing.

Lucas has little time to consider this miracle, because Cassie drags him into a crowd. She introduces him to a bald man and his wife, or maybe his sister, and then three more people greet him. He has never been touched so much.

On the edges of the group, Lucas takes a long, unsteady breath. He scans the room again, and sees snatches of conversation rise with perfect clarity:

No, no, because she’s sixty, she’s much too old for everytime. Tuesdays are busy because of the children
an implant. No, because actually the technology is really improving and
injured, and now they have to go to Liverpool and win. It won’t be easy
is that right? I never see him anymore. That last time was so painful, and I drank
too much, I...

Lucas has to close his eyes.

Soon, the chairs are pulled into a semi-circle in front of the small, brightly lit stage.
Lucas feels better now the lights are dimmed a little, and he can sit down, out of
view. Cassie returns from the bar with a Coke for him, and a pint of Guinness for
herself. She fidgets, and looks at her watch. An old lady shuffles past them to get to
her seat, and knocks Cassie’s arm, spilling some of the black body of the pint onto
Cassie’s red jumper. Lucas is surprised to see her stand in alarm, her mouth open.
She pulls the sweater taut, and stares with horror at the wet stain. A shadow falls on
her skin above the belt line, and Lucas forces himself to look away. Maybe, he
thinks, she regrets bringing him here. Perhaps he is cramping her style.

Such thoughts vanish when the entertainment begins. The first act is called
Hearing Pete. The title character is an obnoxious man in a suit, carrying a number of
caption boards, who shouts things in English, using exaggerated lip patterns. Next to
him, a woman gives sarcastic interpretations in BSL.

‘EXACTLY HOW DEAF ARE YOU?’ says Hearing Pete, holding up a board with
the same words.

Are you worth bothering with? The interpreter translates.

‘WHERE DO YOU WORK?’

Are you claiming benefits, funded by me, the taxpayer?

‘IS SIGN LANGUAGE INTERNATIONAL?’
Like English.

‘ARE YOU SURE YOU CAN’T HEAR?’

Didn’t we solve the whole Deaf problem? You must be a con artist.

Lucas roars with laughter and recognition.

At intervals, Hearing Pete says, ‘CAN YOU LIP-READ?’, and everybody shakes their heads and say, ‘No!’, as if this is a well-known joke.

I should be taking notes, Lucas signs to Cassie, who smiles weakly.

Hearing Pete finishes with the interpreter bashing him over the head with his caption boards, and the audience raise their hands as one, fingers wiggling.

The poets are next. At first, Lucas tries to translate the poems into English, but that doesn’t work because they use a lot of signs he doesn’t know. In fact, they are making signs up. Eventually, he just lets the images slide over him. The last poet – one of those weather-beaten old rockers who always end up on the coast, performs what he calls a ‘two-hander’ – a poem enacting an argument he once had with a young woman, his former lover. Initially, it seems absurd to Lucas, almost disgusting, when the man switches into the body of the young woman, but by the end of the poem, Lucas is close to tears. It ends with the man regarding his own reflection – this fallen image of himself and his future – in a toyshop window.

Lucas shakes his head and looks to Cassie, but she is no longer beside him. The lights come up, and people drift over to the bar. Lucas stands and peers into the crowd, but he can’t see her. He thinks she’s probably gone to the toilet, so he sits at a table near the window, and waits.

Ten minutes pass, and then Dan sits down opposite him with two whiskeys. He pushes one towards Lucas.

No thanks, I don’t drink, Lucas signs. Have you seen Cassie?
Dan shakes his head slowly.

_She was here, Lucas signs, watching the show, but..._

_This is what happens. It’s normal._

_What?_

_They go, signs Dan. They leave._

_I don’t understand._

_I know you don’t. Come and meet some people._

Lucas is unsure.

_We are not monsters, Dan signs._

_I know._

Dan downs one of the whiskeys, picks up the other, and stands. He begins to walk away, and then turns. _You can sit here and wait if you want, but she’s gone, he signs._

_It’s what happens._

Eventually, Lucas follows Dan over to his circle of friends. People are kind to him. They ask questions which his mother would find shockingly personal, but they smile as they do so. Although he understands most of what they say, his language skills are far below their level. When they leave gaps for him to ask questions, he can’t think of any that aren’t stupid. _Do you think I will ever be like you?_ is hardly small talk, and he doesn’t want to ruin their relaxing evening by asking, _YOU SPORTING ACTIVITIES LIKE WHICH?_ or _HOLIDAY GO WHERE?_ like some second-language imposter. So he fades into the background, waits ten minutes, and then slips out.

He catches the bus back to Ringdean and goes straight to bed. His mum is not back, yet, and he’s glad, because he doesn’t want to talk to her. He wishes that Cassie had not left without saying goodbye. He wishes she had not left at all. It makes him feel frightened, somehow. It is a sensation he recognises.
Linda is to meet Alex at the Marina, a ghostly commercial village on the edge of town. She slowly crosses ASDA car-park, and glances up at the chalk cliffs which rise above the supermarket. The wind carries the ripe stink of the sea through the gaps between the empty casinos and restaurants. She has told Alex she will be late, and that he should find a seat and wait for her. She chose the multiplex here because her mother died before it opened. She thought it might be less overwhelming than the old picturehouses in town, which they had so often visited together. But Linda is struggling, anyway. As she walks the harbour deck towards the cinema, her hands begin to sweat, and she feels dizzy and cold. Memories come to her, unbidden: the make-up dusting the carpet of her parents’ room, the blood and feathers. She remembers a conversation she overheard at the hospital on the day her mum died. ‘Was resuscitation attempted?’ the receptionist had asked. ‘It was not possible,’ the paramedic had replied.

The cinema’s readagraph board is lit up yellow against the dark blue sky, and for a moment those colours soothe her. The automatic doors slide open while she is still fifty yards away.

Inside, the foyer smells of artificial butter and nacho cheese. In the centre of the floor stands a cardboard cut-out of an actor behind an actress on the prow of a ship. The woman has her arms spread like Christ. A real-life teenager is pretending to have sex with the front of the cut-out, and calling to his friends, ‘Look! Me and Leo are doubling her. My Arse Will Go On!’

Linda sees Alex Lamb at the ticket desk. He wears a blue checked shirt, and his
face is closely shaved. His black shoes shine. He does not see Linda, so she hangs back behind one of the foyer pillars.

‘…yes, two tickets for the 8.40 showing, please,’ Alex says. ‘I’d like to leave one here for my friend. Her name is Linda. Yes, she knows.’

Friend. He says it with such disarming confidence. Studying his ticket, he walks right past the pillar that Linda is standing behind. He hesitates at the fork in the carpet, and then proceeds toward screen B. Contact.

Linda’s hands are shaking, now. She looks over to the box office. There is a part of her that wants to collect the ticket and go in, but she can barely breathe, and there is a sharp pain in her left arm. She feels much as she did in her father’s hospice room. Closing her eyes, she tries to think of her mum, of the good times they had in the cinemas of the town. Instead, her memory gives her larch needles in the sink, and her father in intensive care, opening one swollen eyelid. She grips the corner of the pillar for a moment, and then walks out of the humid foyer into the brittle night.

She crunches along the half-built path of broken rubble that connects the Marina to town, and she hates herself. Blocks of strange brown foam rise from the surf, and float inland. There is the stink of storm drains. Linda calls herself names: weirdo, failure, malfunctioning individual. She can’t even go into a cinema, for God’s sake. She vows never to return to the local studies library. Her eyes sting with the cold, but ahead she can see patches of light from the seafront pubs. She needs a drink.

The first place she reaches is the Red Lion. The dull bulbs left over from Christmas tink against the stone. As she is about to enter, she glances in the window, and stops because she sees her husband within.

The sight is surreal. Only Mike’s head and shoulders are visible above the window
sill and it takes Linda a while to understand that he is on his knees. She steps back, knowing that the dark of the street cloaks her. In the warm glow of the pub, Mike is scrubbing at the hem of a woman’s red sweater with a bar cloth. The upper half of the woman is hidden by the partially drawn blinds, but Linda can see the flesh of her belly, where Mike has pulled the sweater away. She can see the pulsations of the woman’s laughter.

Linda’s stomach drops, like it used to when she first met Mike, when they fell in love. The trials of the night have left her half-numb, and for a moment she can almost appreciate the odd beauty of that single shot, framed by the pub window. She strides to the off-license, three doors down, buys a small bottle of vodka, and drinks a quarter of it while she’s waiting for the bus.

On the way home, she finally manages to call up a memory of her mother. She was pregnant with Lucas, and sitting at her mum’s kitchen table. Daisy had started an evening course in film appreciation at the polytechnic. ‘So, a movie is made up of still images, with tiny gaps in between, right?’ Daisy said.

‘Well, yeah,’ Linda said. ‘What’s your point, Mum?’

‘The teacher said that a cinema audience spends forty percent of the time looking at a black screen.’

Now, on the bus, Linda rubs her eyes, and tucks the bottle of vodka into her bag. She has to keep herself together, in case her son is still awake when she gets home. Forty percent, she thinks. Back then, Linda had thought that seemed like an outlandish figure for time spent in the dark.
EIGHT
At the divisional dance, held that year at the Corn Exchange, she found herself standing next to the chief constable’s wife. Daisy was five inches taller than Mrs Clore, and could see the delicate skin of her scalp. Both wore black. Mrs Clore nodded across the vast hall towards Robert. ‘Detective sergeant,’ she said.

‘I’m not even wearing my badge,’ Daisy said.

Mrs Clore smiled, revealing teeth separated by perfectly regular gaps. ‘He’s young for that.’

‘He works double the hours of most men,’ Daisy said.

‘Yes. Lucky you.’

Daisy was strong, now, though no longer young. Her face had become sharp, like her father’s, and she could not suppress the thin fibres of muscle that shifted in her forearms. She looked up at the gigantic chandelier and wished that it would fall. Neither she nor Mrs Clore wanted to dance, and only Mrs Clore wanted to talk. ‘My Gerry can’t sleep at night,’ she said.

‘Really?’ Daisy said. She thought, instinctively, of her husband’s old night terrors, which were long gone, now.

‘He thinks there are…persons in the room,’ Mrs Clore said.

‘Persons other than you?’

‘Other than me.’

‘What people? Victims, you mean? Ghosts?’

‘No.’

‘Murderers?’

‘No, Mrs Seacombe. When he wakes up, he sees your husband.’
They suddenly had some money. Robert bought a bright black Standard Ten, secondhand. They moved off the colony into a detached house in Saltdean, looking out over the Channel. In the winter, up there, you could taste the sea before you could see it. For some reason, the living room was North-facing, but even so, they got a lot of light through the French doors. The number of windows surprised Daisy, because her husband was such a private man. The street was pleasant, although Robert kept a keen eye on a family with three teenage boys. The Seacombe’s house was at the end of the row, so their garden blended into miles of fields. The first thing Robert did was build a fence.

In the dark morning, she woke to the drone of the sea wind, and watched Robert put on a tie, loosely, over his vest. Before leaving, he sat on the bed and gently took hold of her ankle through the sheet. He whispered some sort of prayer to her that she could not hear.

‘Robert?’ she said.

‘It’s all right, Daze,’ he replied in a low voice. ‘Back to sleep, girl. It’s early.’

But she told him what Mrs Clore had said about her husband’s nightmares.

Robert laughed quietly. ‘Ray’ll like that one,’ he said.

‘Why would she say that, though, Robert?’

‘Look, Gerry Clore is only frightened of what the villains are frightened of: knowledge. Matters that have come to our attention.’

‘Like what?’

‘You don’t want to know. Ray nearly fainted when I told him what I had on Clore, and you know Ray.’
Daisy shifted onto her elbow, and squinted at her husband. He had his back to her, his face half-turned. The shaving lotion on his neck caught the weak trace of light coming through the curtain. ‘I just worry,’ she said. ‘I read the papers. I worry about the dangers.’

‘You’re concerned that I’ll get hurt?’

‘I worry that you’ll hurt someone else.’

He picked up her hand, which was deadened by sleep. He kissed it gently. ‘I’m not a monster, Daisy. I’m working up to it, but I’m not there, yet.’

He stood, shrugged on his shirt, and left. When he opened the bedroom door, the light from the hallway flashed across the marble eyes of the stuffed owl in the corner of the room.

When the children were at school, she sat at the kitchen table to write. She restricted herself to one letter per month, although she received many more to the Post Office box in town. In front of her, now, she had Paul’s most recent letter, taken from the stash she folded into the old movie magazines, which she kept in a filing cabinet in the cupboard under the stairs. She re-read the letter, carefully.

…I preferred ‘The Apartment’. It’s not so flashy, and has some depth to it. Okay, say what you like about Norman Bates, but at least he’s not writing obsessive letters to some woman he hasn’t seen for years.

Our aerospace instructor told us a fact that I just can’t get out of my head. Get this, Dee. A jumbo jet can glide for 100 miles after its engines have failed. Can you believe that? Well, I got to thinking that this fact reminds me of you! It’s difficult to explain. No woman likes to be compared to a jumbo jet, right? But I’ll say this: both you and that fact are very, very good news.
Now, I have to scram.

Daisy started on her reply, her cracked ice Conway Stewart fountain pen gliding smoothly for a few lines of small-talk. She had tried to set guidelines for the subjects she would write about in the letters, tried to keep her family out of it.

...In the Electric, there is a poster of Alf Hitchcock pointing and saying ‘No’ to rolling programmes, but I watched Psycho at the Regent instead, and so I came in halfway through, saw his mother spin round in the chair, and that was that for the suspense! But I still thought it was deadly, and Hitchcock is the crème de la crème!

When I was walking out of the pictures, a strange man told me that he thought his life would make a good film. I got away from him quickly (it was only 2 in the afternoon, but I didn’t like his tone). Lots of people say their lives would be good films, but the truth is we don’t know, do we? Our lives are all middle. We don’t remember the beginning, and we don’t know much about the end. Anyway, enough from philosophy corner. I don’t know what I’m on about.

How is your mother?

That spring, Robert bought a swing chair for the garden, with a pattern of orange and brown flowers, and a tassled awning. He dug deep foundations for a shed, and he and Daisy carried the slabs for its floor, while Ray Hammond watched, smoking, in his suit. Ray had a bad back, apparently. In the shed, Robert kept seeds, a sack of lime, and a padlocked gun cupboard, containing his sports rifle, and an old revolver he said he’d found in an abandoned house.

Later that month, Daisy sat with Linda in the living room, and listened to Ray and Robert talking, through the French doors. ‘No,’ said Robert. ‘Their stories are
fantastic. They’ve got nothing, Ray.’

‘Not yet,’ said Ray.

‘Nothing they can use. It’s gonna be fine.’

Robert was leaning back in the swing-chair, rocking gently. Daisy studied her husband: his red and white polka dot tie, his sleeves rolled up for gardening. She tried to know something of him, because she felt that should be possible, after so many years. But his face was in shade. She realised that Ray Hammond, standing beside the chair, was watching her through the glass.

‘Linda,’ she said.

Her daughter looked up from a game she was playing with some Union Jack darts she must have pilfered from the Crown and Goose. ‘Yes, Mummy?’

‘Let’s go see a film.’

‘Go and see, Mummy. Go and see.’

_Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs_ was showing that afternoon, at the Duke of York’s. Daisy remembered seeing it herself, as a child. Her father had taken her, and she had marvelled at the glowing carapace of the organ rising out of the floor like some massive insect, and trays of teapots and teacakes passed along the rows. The cinema was half-empty, now.

Linda lay on Daisy’s chest, with her jelly sandals planted on her mother’s thighs. The neon strips on each side of the screen blinked off, leaving traces of light in the dark air. Daisy calmed her daughter with a kiss on the head. She recognised in Linda her own tendency to be dragged under by the illusion, and held her tightly when the wicked stepmother appeared. But it was the idea of a pig’s heart in a box that did for Linda. She began to burn up, and when Daisy put a cool hand on her
chest to check her temperature, the girl screamed.

On the bus home, Daisy made Linda suck ice-cubes. She had drenched her fringe in water from the fountain. Daisy worried that she would fight with Robert about it.

Too young for fantastic stories and excitable nonsense.

But when they arrived home, Caroline was lying before the record player, kicking her legs, her face buried in the carpet. ‘I Love you’ by Cliff Richard and the Shadows, was playing.

‘Where’s your father?’ Daisy asked.

‘I don’t care!’ Caroline wailed.

Hours later, when Daisy put her to bed, Linda said, ‘What is Snow doing, now, Mummy?’

Daisy smiled. White, of course, was a perfectly sensible surname. ‘The film is over, my darling.’

‘Yes, but what is she doing, now?’

For a child, the film goes on, like life. ‘I don’t know,’ Daisy said. ‘She’s probably asleep. I mean…God…in a nice way. Resting. She is probably resting.’

Linda nodded. She slid down in the big bed. ‘Mummy?’

‘Yes, darling.’

‘When can we go to the cinema, again?’

Robert didn’t care for the cinema, but the film-world sought him out, anyway.

‘Some spiv walks in to HQ, today, says he wants to make a picture about us,’ he said, over dinner.

Daisy took her hands off the table, and rested them in her lap. ‘What in God’s name are you talking about, Robert?’
‘God’s honest truth. Fellow with a girl’s name. Vera Something…director.’

‘Not…Val Guest? The Hammer Horror man.’

‘That’s him. The Chief’s given him access, and he’s been following detectives around. He wanted to come out with me and Ray.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I told him to sod off back to Hollywood.’

The girls looked up from their pork chops, and Robert stared back at them. ‘That’d be funny, wouldn’t it? Old Daddy on the big screen, doing his job?’

‘They’d use actors,’ Daisy said.

‘Dead right. And they’d have to make it all up. You couldn’t show what I do at the pictures,’ Robert said, standing from the table, and refastening his belt. He leaned down to Daisy on his way out of the room. ‘It’s not decent,’ he whispered.

More often, now, associates of Robert would call at the house: a moustachioed dandy in a three-piece suit, a harassed-looking man who was balding in strange patches. ‘I need the living room,’ Robert would say, and Daisy thought how much it sounded like Linda’s requests to go to the toilet.

Robert would always make a show of playing with the children as they filed out into the hall. Cowboys and Indians. He was always the sheriff, sharp-shooting before tucking his pointed finger back into his belt.

In the dying days of that summer, Robert took them out to the countryside. He drove quickly. His thick hands, grubby from the garden, gripped the wheel as if he was trying to pull it off. They parked on gravel, and walked out through the marshland towards Seven Sisters beach. Robert marched ahead, in one of his strange moods. When the cliffs came into view, Linda stopped. ‘Wow,’ she said. ‘Mummy,
is that the end of the world?"

‘It’s not that bad,’ Daisy muttered, her eyes still on her husband.

Of course, Robert wanted to climb the steep grassy slope to the top of the cliffs, and they all trailed after him, Caroline chewing her hair, Linda silent and squinting. Daisy found herself quietly overcome by the nearness of the clouds, their craggy, rock-like definition. The disturbing thing about the top of the Seven Sisters cliffs was that the green land rose and fell in waves, so that you never knew if the edge was over the next grassy crest. Daisy thought she might put it in a letter, but Paul had not written for two months, now.

She turned to her youngest daughter. ‘Do you like it, up here, Lind?’

‘When you’re on top of the cliffs,’ Linda said, ‘you can’t see the cliffs.’

On the way home, the kids fell asleep in the car, and Daisy pretended to. Robert parked the Standard far down the road, because Ray Hammond was due to visit and he always let Ray park outside the house. On getting out of the car, Linda was disoriented, and sniffled.

About six doors down from the Seacombes lived an older couple who owned a large black dog, a chow. It barked as they passed, and Daisy heard Linda – too tired to control herself – take a fearful inhalation. It was all Robert needed. ‘Right,’ he said.

‘Robert, leave it,’ Daisy said.

But he took hold of Linda by the shoulders and dragged her back to the gate of their neighbour. ‘You are the daughter of a policeman,’ Robert said. ‘The way you deal with any given situation reflects on me, and by extension, the force. People know.’
Linda was silent, stumbling forward in her pumps. The couple who owned the chow had replaced their curlicued gate with something more functional and robust that summer. They’d reinforced it with chicken wire. The black-tongued beast was thick and overheated, and it did not appreciate the attention. It growled and pounced at the gate.

‘This is nothing but a family pet,’ Robert continued. ‘And it is penned in. It cannot hurt you. The reason I joined the police force is so that people do not have to live in fear on their own street. We are going to stand here until you get used to this barking, because that’s all it is.’

‘Robert, is this necessary?’ Daisy said.

‘It’s fine!’ Linda shouted, but Daisy could see that her feelings were all mixed-up. She was almost crying.

The dog sprang at the gate, and Daisy saw the judder in her husband’s shoulders as he held Linda in front of him. After a moment, Linda tried to escape, but Robert pushed her back towards the gate.

‘Enough!’ Daisy shouted, taking hold of her daughter and pulling her away. ‘You leave her alone.’

She half carried Linda back home, and Robert did not follow for some time.

Daisy watched her husband carefully, that evening. She watched him while they ate their dinner of egg sandwiches and leftover pork pie. When the children were bathed and in bed, she watched him reading last week’s local newspapers, one after the other. She went outside to tidy the garden, and found an old toy the kids used to play with. It was a short wooden staff with a heavy round base, and three coloured rings that slotted over it. She took off the rings, and inverted the staff, held it like a hammer. She came in through the patio doors, and she slammed the toy down onto
Robert’s wrist with all the force she could muster. He roared in pain and flung his newspaper across the room, but Daisy was already halfway to the door. ‘That’s for your daughter, who is too young to defend herself.’

She ran upstairs, and locked herself in the bathroom, hoping to give him time to calm down enough not to kill her. There was no sound from downstairs apart from a few pitiful curses.

Later, when he came to bed, he apologised in the dark. ‘There’s a lot happening at work,’ he said. ‘It makes me jumpy.’

‘You may bully people in your job, Robert, but I won’t let it happen to my children.’

‘I don’t want to bring it home with me, but I can’t seem to help it.’

Daisy was silent. Robert was a puzzle she would never solve. Sometimes she spoke to women who were bored by their husbands, but Daisy never knew what Robert would do next, or what he would say.

‘I’m glad the girls have a mother like you,’ Robert said. He took her hand carefully, and she rubbed his forearm, felt the jelly-like lump that had formed at his wrist. ‘But they need me, too,’ he went on. ‘And so do you, Daisy.’

The next day, Daisy went to the post office. There was no mail from Paul. She wandered into town, and found herself passing the women’s shelter. It was a former church building, recently whitewashed. Daisy watched a woman limp down the front steps – she was about fifty, big, and dressed like a tart. The flesh around her eyes was swollen from crying. It was difficult for Daisy to imagine what such a woman might have been through, but easy to imagine how Caroline would react to the idea of sleeping in the next room to her. The woman cleared her sinuses, and went inside, and Daisy’s vision drifted down the street, to where she saw Ray
Hammond, watching her from his car.

She took to reading Paul’s old letters, for want of new ones.

Thank you for the birthday wishes! Mother is well at the moment. She baked me a cake. Marguerite bought me a tie-pin with JPL engraved on it.

My birthday party was a lonely drive through Manitoba in the truck. It was a very glamorous affair. I don’t really care for sports – all that hunting and stuff – but I like to get out into the wilderness now and then. Must be my half-breed farmer roots. I drive around the prairie land, mostly. Camping in the truck is something I have learned to do. It gets me away from the books and the factory, and Mum, God bless her. I look at the sky. Skies are my business, or will be, I hope.

I am becoming a curious individual. At school they used to praise my curiosity. I am curious about you.

Daisy took a stool out into the garden, stood on it, and peered over the fence. It was dizzying, the way the land leaned into the sky, and those small brittle trees, crippled by the memory of the wind, even on a still day.

One morning that winter, Mrs Harrison from number 22 paid a visit, with her limping chow. Mrs Harrison was one of those white-haired people who played tennis. Forever in a pony-tail and white shoes. Daisy always felt sorry for the husband, who clearly disliked the dog, and had been forced to fortify his home to keep the beast inside.

‘Hello,’ said Daisy.

Mrs Harrison’s eyes were red, and she struggled to hold back further tears.
‘Someone’s attacked my dog! Look at this,’ she said. ‘Will you just look!’

Daisy stared down at the dog, which kept its wounded left forepaw carefully off the ground. When she looked up, Daisy saw that Mrs Harrison was holding two Union Jack darts, the points streaky with blood.

‘Two of the things!’ the owner cried.

‘God help us,’ Daisy muttered.

Robert was at her side, now.

‘I just thought you might be able to do something,’ Mrs Harrison said to him, ‘you being in the police.’

‘It’ll be those boys down the road,’ Robert said. ‘The swines. Excuse my language.’

‘That was what I thought,’ said Mrs Harrison, reaching down – not very far – to stroke her injured pet.

‘I will have a word with them, now,’ Robert said. He stepped into the kitchen to get his coat, and Daisy followed him.

‘Robert, wait - ’

‘Don’t try and stop me, Daisy. They’re a bunch of little sods, and I’m going to give them what for.’

‘It wasn’t them, Robert,’ Daisy hissed in a whisper.

‘Of course it was.’

‘It was Linda.’

‘Linda?’ Robert said, his eyes widening in horror. ‘…Where the bloody hell is she?’

Daisy put a finger to her lips. ‘She’s at the pictures with Caroline. So you need to calm down, and deal with this lady. I will talk to Linda when she comes home. If

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you so much as touch her, Robert, I swear…’

But Robert looked more bewildered than angry. He returned to the doorway. ‘Mrs Harrison,’ he said. ‘I am going to speak to the local constable about this. He takes such incidents very seriously, indeed. In the meantime, I suggest you take the dog to a vet.’

‘But I thought you were going to - ’

‘Thank you, Mrs Harrison,’ Robert said, already closing the door. ‘It’s a police matter, now.’

In October, she stopped checking the Post Office Box. Christmas came and went. In 1962, Val Guest’s Jigsaw came out, and Robert took Daisy to see it at the Academy, along with Ray Hammond and his current squeeze. The film, a murder mystery, scared Daisy out of her wits; she loved it. But Robert and Ray laughed all the way through. ‘It was all right apart from the end,’ Hammond said, as they came out.

‘What was wrong with the end?’ Daisy asked.

‘Well, they solved it. Totally unrealistic.’

One Saturday morning in February, the letterbox rattled, and out of habit she hastened into the hall, always wary when Robert was home. The light through the glass in the door made an angular shape on the pale grey carpet. Outside was crisp bright blue.

The letter, which was inside a small, clear plastic bag, lay on the mat. On seeing the handwriting, she hurriedly picked it up, tucked it into the waistband of her skirt and slid it around to the back, where it would be hidden by her red sweater. In the few seconds it took to perform that action, she was overwhelmed by a sense that
something was deeply wrong.

She could hear the rolling grumble of her husband's voice as he spoke to Hammond in the dining room. Daisy headed for the bathroom, trying to figure out the riddle of the letter in her mind. She had caught a glimpse of the envelope as she’d hid it. The postmark, the stamp.

Her sweater rode up, now, and part of the clear plastic of the outer envelope lay against her bare skin. She felt like it was poisoning her. The components were all mixed-up, and the meaning of the letter began to dawn on her.

When she opened the bathroom door she found Linda on the floor with her father’s shaving kit. ‘Goodness, Linda, you scared me to death. What are you doing? There are razors in there. Sharp.’

‘I was just looking in the mirror,’ she said, holding up the cream-spattered circle of glass.

‘Well?’ Daisy asked, trying to stay calm. ‘Did you see anything nice?’

Linda shrugged and smiled. She blinked her fringe out of her eyes.

‘You may take the mirror and play with it for a while,’ Daisy said. ‘But not in here.’

Linda left. Daisy locked the door and reached back for the letter.
A memory.

It was autumn, and Lucas was four or five years old. He wore fingerless gloves in the cold sunlight of the park, and so did Nanna, so they could sign. They noticed that formations of leaves were falling slowly from the trees on the high bank. Except, when they looked closely, they found that they weren’t really leaves, but those helicopter seed-pods that spin in the air. The wind was strong, and the seed-pods kept rising and falling and rising.

Nanna suggested they play a game. You had to nominate a pod while it was high in the air, and then you had to catch it.

At first, Lucas thought it would be easy, because the helicopter seed-pods were so slow. But the pods travelled great distances in the gales, and Lucas and Nanna found themselves sprinting over the boggy ground with their cupped hands outstretched. Sometimes, a seed-pod appeared to be dropping nicely into your grasp, but then the breeze whipped it away.
They became red-faced with the effort and laughter, and stopped for a brief rest. Nanna was breathing hard. *Okay. This time, we pick the same seed. We must fight for it!*

*Yes! Good idea!*

*You pick.* Her fingers pinched the air.

Lucas looked up. A flock of seed-pods came sweeping high overhead. One broke from the pack, and floated over to his side. He pointed to it, and ran. His grandmother chased him, pulling him gently back by the hood on his coat. He screamed with glee. Nanna got ahead, but then Lucas barged past her. The seed-pod came spinning down towards him, but he bumped into a tree. It was only a sapling, but it slowed him down.

Nanna overtook. The seed-pod dropped below head-height, now, and flew almost horizontally in the wind. Nanna leaned forward, pumping her arms. Lucas had no idea she was so fast. The pod dipped again, and Nanna’s hand came out, the fingers spread like star-points. She dived forward to catch it, her arm extended, her body thumping into the muddy football pitch. She was right there.

But a tiny breeze lifted the seed-pod one last time, and it spun softly down to land on the back of her head. Lucas dived onto her, picked up the seed-pod with two hands and raised it like a tiny trophy.

The winner.

He descends Downside, now, with his mother. He is taking her out for her birthday. She is shorter than him, and in her brown shawl, long skirt and flat shoes, she seems to glide. The clocks have changed for spring, and the uppermost parts of the houses they pass are sunlit yellow. Everything else is blue with shade. He thinks
about describing the memory to her – how he chased the seed-pods with Nanna. It
seems a shame to keep all these memories to himself, but he must bide his time. His
mum’s mood has dipped, lately, and he doesn’t want to upset her.

The Cut is closed. Lucas glances up at the top window, but the curtains are drawn.
Outside the take-away pizza place is a cardboard cut-out of a cartoon Italian chef
with a big moustache and toque. In the speech bubble by his mouth are the words,
HUNGRY? SAD?

After the row of shops, Lucas and his mother come to a break in the pavement.
Out of the corner of his eye, Lucas sees a silver van emerging from a concealed exit.
He stops at the kerb edge, but his mother steps into the road. ‘Mum,’ Lucas says, but
she doesn’t hear. The van is going fast, the driver looking down at his radio.

‘Mum!’ Lucas shouts.

He grabs her shoulder, and drags her back, out of the way of the vehicle. Her
shawl unwraps as she spins onto the pavement. It takes her a moment to realise what
has happened. She holds her son’s arms to steady herself. ‘Jesus,’ she says. ‘Thank
you, Lucas.’

‘Saved your life,’ Lucas says. ‘Happy birthday.’

He hugs her close, because the shock of it has brought him close to tears and he
doesn’t want his mum to see. The audiologists always praised his peripheral vision.
One of the few benefits, they said.

After a moment, they walk on, and Lucas tries to compose himself, tries to hide his
feelings, but his heart is still thundering. Of course, his mother notices his distress.

‘Lucas?’ she says.

He pretends not to see that she has spoken.

She tugs the strap of his rucksack. ‘Lucas. I’m sorry, love. I should be more
careful.’

He laughs. ‘God, Mum, you’re the most careful person in the whole world.’

* * *

The Windmill is Ringdean’s only pub. Linda hasn’t been here for years. In one corner of the bar, local men sit in a tidy arc around a television showing the football. The rest of the place is pretty much empty – all deep red upholstery and purple lampshades. They choose a table by the window, and Lucas takes out a candy-striped candle. ‘For the cake,’ he says. ‘Or we can put it in the ice cream, if you want a Sundae.’

He seems to have recovered from the shock, outside. She reaches across and runs her hand through his hair. It is stiff with dried gel. ‘You’re a sweet, sweet boy,’ she says.

He smiles bashfully and holds up the candle. ‘Twenty-nine again, eh?’ he says. She is forty-three. ‘How does it feel to be out on the town?’

‘It’s a treat,’ she says. ‘Thank you.’

She has hardly left the house at all, since the cinema disaster. Alex Lamb has called four times, and left one message on the answer machine. Linda felt so depressed when he described himself as ‘Alex…from the library’, that she pulled the phone cable out of the socket.

Lucas orders BBQ ribs, and Linda has a tuna-mayo jacket from the lite-bites menu. She drinks a glass of wine which is almost bright green in colour. The glasses have got bigger since she last went to a pub, and soon she feels warm. They eat quietly, and finish quickly.
A large, balding man comes in, and for a moment Linda thinks it might be Alex Lamb, but this man is heavier, with dark stubble. He hangs his military-style jacket on the coat stand next to their table, takes some money from the pocket, and goes to the bar. He leans there, watching the football.

When the slices of chocolate fudge cake come out, Lucas lights the candle. ‘I won’t sing,’ he says.

‘You don’t have to, although you have a lovely voice.’

‘I do not. Hey, remember that Chinese we used to go to with Nanna?’ Lucas says, cautiously.

‘The Water Margin,’ Linda replies.

‘They used to bring out those hot plate things to put the food on, and Nanna used to flick beer foam on it, and the foam would dance,’ he says. He speaks loudly, and runs the words together.

Linda recalls the restaurant. They used to go there because the lighting was stark, so they could see each other signing. ‘You remember that?’ she says.

Lucas nods. ‘I’m remembering a bit more, these days.’

Linda looks down at her dessert, wondering where such memories might take him.

‘Oh, yeah, nearly forgot,’ Lucas says. From his rucksack he produces two boxes wrapped in brown paper. Linda recognises her husband’s neat, competent folds.

‘From Dad. One for me, one for you.’

They unwrap the boxes, and find two large Nokia mobile phones. Linda shrugs.

‘Wow,’ she says.

She sees that her son is more excited. He has already taken the handset and the big plug out of the box. Linda finds a note from Mike:
‘I suppose everyone seems to have them, these days…’ Linda says. It is hard to watch someone change. If Mike is going to start talking about ‘communication’, what will she have to complain about?

‘I’ll get the bill,’ she says.

‘No, I’ve got it. Dad gave me some money.’

‘You shouldn’t be spending it on me.’

‘He wanted me to,’ Lucas says.

Linda watches her son pay at the counter. Afterwards, he walks towards the toilets, but his path is blocked by the arc of men surrounding the television. Lucas almost taps one of them on the shoulder, but he waits instead for a break in play. The man at the bar with the stubble tuts. His view, Linda sees, is obstructed by Lucas. A few more seconds pass. ‘Fuck’s sake,’ the man mutters. Then he shouts, ‘Hey, sit down fella. I can’t see the telly.’

Lucas doesn’t hear him. He suddenly looks so young to Linda. Her pulse quickens.

‘Oi,’ the man shouts. ‘I said sit down, or move, you mug!’

Linda rises from her seat. ‘You leave him alone!’ she says, but the man is already crossing the pub towards Lucas. Linda follows him, but she’s too slow. The man takes Lucas by the shoulder, and he turns. Linda sees his alarm.

‘You’re bang in front of the box!’ the man shouts. ‘What’s wrong with you, are you fucking - ’

Linda reaches the man, now, and shoves him. ‘Get your bloody hands off him,
‘Now!’ she says. She hears her voice breaking with rage.

‘He’s in the way,’ the man says.

‘You’re being pathetic!’ she replies.

‘Mum,’ Lucas says. ‘It’s all right, Mum. It was my fault.’

Hearing Lucas’ voice, the man understands that he is deaf. He begins to smirk.

‘It is not your fault,’ she says to Lucas. She turns back to the man. ‘It’s yours. And wipe that stupid grin off your face.’

‘Hey steady on, Darlin.’

‘I’m not your darling. You make me sick, men like you.’ She points at Lucas.

‘He’s just a child.’

‘If he’s a child, you shouldn’t be bringing him in pubs,’ the man says, and walks back to the bar.

Linda closes her eyes.

‘It’s okay, Mum. It was just a misunderstanding,’ Lucas says.

‘I hate him,’ she says. ‘I hate people like him.’

‘What is it you always say, Mum?’ Lucas says. ‘Don’t get drawn into negative things. Just smile and walk away.’

When he returns from the toilet, they take a different table, far from the bar, while Linda calms down. The man is ducking and flinching at what he sees on the television, occasionally sharing a joke with the barman. She wonders how people like that can be liked. How can they have friends? And why do they always win?

‘If you want,’ Lucas says, ‘I can ask him for his number.’

‘What, Love?’

‘Come on, Mum. Let’s just go.’
They walk towards the exit. The man does not even notice that they are leaving. He has forgotten they ever existed. Linda pulls open the door, and shepherds Lucas through. Without pausing for thought, she swipes the man’s jacket from the coat stand and steps out into the night. She strides briskly down the street behind Lucas. A mist is coming in. The cold air and the wine and the adrenaline make Linda feel suddenly fresh and weightless. Lucas turns to speak to her, but sees the coat in her hands. He frowns while he works it out.

‘Is that…?’

Linda nods.

‘Mum, are you mad?’

‘I am furious,’ she says.

She hears a blast of noise from the pub, as the door swings open. ‘Quick, Lucas,’ she says. ‘Run.’

‘What?’

Linda balls the jacket under her arm and sprints towards Downside. Her vision rocks with the impact of her footfall. Soon, Lucas is beside her, his thick arms pumping, his lips pursed. For the first time in a long time, Linda runs as fast as she possibly can.

They stop outside the shops. Linda feels a sharp pain beneath her ribs. The delicate moisture of the mist settles on her eyelashes so that the streetlights swell when she looks at them. Behind her, the street is empty. ‘I think we’re okay,’ she says.

Lucas starts to laugh, loudly.

‘It’s not funny,’ Linda says.

Lucas laughs more.
‘Look,’ Linda says. ‘Stealing is not acceptable. What I did was wrong.’

‘It was bloody amazing,’ Lucas says. He pokes her in the midriff and pretends to be scandalized. ‘Is this the new you?’ he says. ‘Fighting and nicking stuff?’

‘Stop it,’ she says, biting her lip. ‘The fact is, that man was being an absolute moron, and I couldn’t let him get away with it. I couldn’t let him win.’

‘You’ve shown him, now, eh?’ Lucas says, beaming. ‘Now, he’s going to be a bit cold when he walks home. Brrrr.’

Linda shakes her head and tries not to laugh. She looks down at the jacket.

‘Stupid,’ she says. ‘What are we going to do with this, now?’

Lucas squints to read her lips in the streetlight. ‘Set fire to it?’ he says.

‘No!’

Lucas looks around. ‘Give it here,’ he says. As he takes the jacket from her, the contents of the pocket fall out onto the pavement. There is a Blockbuster video card, some breath mints, and a passport photograph of a middle-aged woman with huge glasses and a perm, taken around 1985. Lucas picks up the photo. ‘His mum,’ he says.

‘Deceased,’ says Linda, quietly. She puts the items back in the pocket. Lucas walks over to the take-away pizza place, and slips the jacket over the shoulders of the cartoon Italian chef. He is even able to get one of the arms through. It is perfect.

Linda laughs spontaneously, once, and then claps a hand over her mouth. She takes the hand away and says, ‘I feel terrible. Let’s forget this ever happened.’

‘You can’t forget something on purpose,’ Lucas says.

‘You can try,’ Linda says.

She puts her arm around Lucas and they begin to walk home. Linda glances back at the chef. She no longer feels guilty about stealing the jacket. Not really. She
realises it is exactly what her mother would have done.

Her mother would have called Alex Lamb and said sorry. So, as much as she doesn’t want to face the humiliation, she phones the local studies library, the next day. She apologises for standing him up at the cinema, and for failing to return his calls.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he says.

‘It does. It’s difficult to explain.’ She can hear one of the old men from the library noisily trying to clear his throat in the background.

‘I have something for you,’ Alex says. ‘That’s why I’ve been calling.’

‘What is it?’

‘Information. I want you to come and collect it.’

‘You can’t tell me, now?’

‘I want you to come to the library.’

He does not explain further, and she knows she owes him the visit.

The browns and greens of the library are relieved by lines of yellow Easter chicks made by local school children. The highest windows are open to the year’s first heat. Linda is happy to catch that scent of old paper, again. Alex nods to her, and opens the gate to allow her behind the enquiries desk. ‘Aren’t you angry with me?’ she asks. She speaks a little too loudly, at first, and senses some of the other library users stirring with interest.

Alex shrugs. ‘Not angry, as such. I’m sure you had your reasons.’

‘I did, Alex, but that doesn’t make it okay.’

‘Was it about your husband? Because that’s fine. I understand. I saw your
wedding ring the first time we met. I knew. I should’ve known.’

Linda shakes her head. ‘It was a shoddy thing to do, to leave you on your own.’

‘I often watch films on my own,’ he says, frostily. ‘I don’t feel ashamed about that.’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, in any case.’ He sighs, and rubs the smooth skin above his forehead. He takes a letter from a brown envelope. ‘Here.’

The letter is from the Canadian Veterans of Britain. ‘Oh, I’ve already been in touch with - ’

‘Read it properly,’ Alex says.

Linda smoothes the letter out on the enquiries desk, and turns the pages. There is a name, an international phone number, and a list of postings in Sussex. But the document refers to a different person with a different history. She studies the name.

_Officer J-P Landry_

‘J-P…?’ she says. ‘But his name was Paul.’

‘Think about it…’ Alex says.

It takes her a moment. ‘Jean-Paul,’ she says, quietly.

‘Apparently, his brother’s name was George-Ringo,’ Alex says. He puts his hands on his hips. ‘It’s just in case you got the wrong man, first time.’

Linda looks down at the dates on the document. ‘He’s alive,’ she says. ‘This man is alive.’

‘Best to take it slowly. Might not be him. Probably isn’t.’

‘God, Alex. Thank you so much. You really didn’t have to do this.’
‘It’s my job. I hope you find him. It clearly means a lot to you.’

For a moment, they are quiet. His clean, cool smell cuts through the mustiness of old things. The stacks behind them begin to shift, as another librarian turns the wheel.

‘Well,’ Alex says. ‘I’m on my lunch break, so I should go.’

‘Would you like to, maybe get something to…’

‘I brought leftovers. Good luck, Linda. Goodbye.’

* * *

In the Basin, he unfolds a note passed to him in the corridor by Duncan Youds. The margins are decorated with drawings of udders, and the word ‘Moooo’. Lucas is intrigued. He reads the note:

DEAR COW,

DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHAT YOU SOUND LIKE WHEN YOU TALK? OH SHIT, FORGOT, OF COURSE YOU DON’T. WHEN YOU SHOUT, IT LOOKS SO RETARDED YOU HONESTLY SOUND LIKE A BSE COW MOOING. YOU NEED TO KNOW THIS. YOUR FUCKING DISGUST -

Cassie comes in, and he folds the note away. For a few moments, his mind races. It shouldn’t hurt him, but it does. He knows that his lip patterns are exaggerated, that his mouth strains for the shapes of the words. He thinks of the way a cow’s jaw moves from side-to-side as it chews.

‘Everything okay?’ Cassie asks, slumping into the seat beside him.
Perfect, he signs. And while that isn’t quite true, things are certainly better now she’s here.

Cassie had left the Deaf night because of sickness. That’s what she says. A bug. Lucas has no reason to doubt her. Now, he shows her his mobile phone, and they exchange numbers. ‘Wow. You’re a real Deafie, now, eh? Apparently, they’re going to make one that vibrates when you get a text.’

The heating in the room is stuck on high. The windows are open. The white and yellow daffodils outside smell like animal piss.

*I’ve been reading about B-A-R-B-E-R-P-O-L-E*, Lucas signs.

‘Barber…? Oh, right, yeah,’ Cassie says. She winces, pulls the collar of her shirt away from her neck, and massages her muscles.

Lucas explains, as best he can, that the stripy poles are a reference to ancient days when barbers were also responsible for blood-letting and minor surgery. They had the best tools, after all. On the hills of old England, they would wrap a blood-soaked cloth around a white pole, so that people would know where to come for help.

*That’s what they thought?* Cassie signs. *They thought that cutting your veins open would help?*

She stares at the frayed ribbing of the rug which makes the Basin a homely place to learn. The sign for sad, Lucas knows, is a line drawn down the centre of the face with a stiff hand.

Lucas takes out his work. At the end of term, each pupil must read their *Life in the Day* project in front of the class. Initially, Lucas had dreaded the task. He knew the other kids might laugh at his voice, or struggle to understand him. But Cassie has suggested that he *sign* his daily routine, and she will interpret for the class. So, now, he goes through the first lines of his project, trying to translate.
‘I’m confused about how you talk about the past, when you sign,’ Lucas says. He’s doing what he does when he feels his mother’s moods coming on. He’s trying to engage her.

‘Not like English—don’t really have tenses in the same way in BSL. You establish the time period you’re talking about, and then you as if it’s the present.’

She has taught him this before. Time surrounds your body. It is a line which runs from behind your right shoulder to the extent of your reach.

‘Give me an example,’ he says.

She signs and speaks at the same time. ‘Last week, I love him. Today, he loves me. Tomorrow, I hate him.’

Lucas thinks for a moment. He gets a trace of her deodorant, which now reminds him of his bedroom. He takes her notebook, and writes: SO, IF SOMETHING HAPPENED ONCE, IT IS ALWAYS HAPPENING?

‘Too deep for me on a Friday afternoon, Mario,’ she says.

_It was nice to meet your brother._

She smiles. _Dan can be difficult, but it’s good for you to meet other Deaf people. You’ll see that it doesn’t have to be like this for the rest of your life._

She gestures to their surroundings, and Lucas follows her gaze. There is nobody else in the Basin. Her red lacquered nails glint, and the shimmering heat haze rising from the fins of the radiator makes the outside look like it’s about to disintegrate.

Lucas suddenly loves the Basin. He _wants_ it to _be like this_ for the rest of his life.

The next time he goes to his father’s flat, he notices changes. The differences are subtle, but Lucas is sensitive to spaces. The dark blue sofas that came with the lease still face each other across the living area, but now the television rests on a stand,
rather than the floor. The huddle of cleaning products, which had gathered in the corner of the room, are now out of sight, presumably in a cupboard. His dad has bought lamps, so that the place is no longer lit by the bare bulb in the centre of the ceiling, and in the open-plan kitchen, Mike now takes potato gratin from the yellow glow of the oven.

‘made this the other day. not bad, for me,’ he says.

‘If you start cooking, the Balti house will go out of business,’ Lucas says.

Mike turns away, and then spins back round, this time with a recipe book in front of his face, so that it seems that his head has been replaced by that of a popular female chef.

They eat off trays on their knees. Lamb chops bleed into the potatoes. Mike and Lucas eat with the same passion and skill, tearing every last shred of meat from the bone. When he’s finished, Lucas sees that his dad has a feminine gloss of grease on his lips. Lucas wipes his own mouth aggressively with a paper napkin.

‘son?’ his dad says, leaning back into the sofa. He wears a new pair of stack-heeled boots.

‘You should grow your sideburns,’ Lucas says. ‘You look really 1980s.’

Mike smiles. ‘don’t like sideburns. facial hair is a bit vain. girly.’

‘You think sideburns are girly?’ Lucas says. They both laugh.

‘So,’ Mike says. ‘Any young ladies on the scene?’

Lucas instinctively thinks of Cassie. He thinks of how her skirt once rode up so that he could see the darker band of nylon on her tights.

‘No,’ he says.

‘Yeah, it must be hard,’ his dad says.

‘Why?’ Lucas says.
‘Pardon?’

‘Why must it be hard? Why is it necessarily difficult for me?’

‘I just meant. Well, it is difficult, isn’t it? For everyone.’

‘For you, maybe,’ Lucas says. ‘Idiot.’ He balls up his napkin and throws it as his dad, who catches it. Mike suddenly turns his head, and looks across the room, which means the phone is probably ringing. Mike does not get up.

‘Dad, when are you coming back?’

‘Where?’

‘Home.’

Mike winces. ‘God, Luke, I don’t know, mate. I don’t about that. It’s very complicated.’

‘Mum’s been doing loads better.’

‘Yeah? How do you mean?’

‘Well,’ says Lucas. ‘She’s been out, and stuff.’

‘been out?’

‘Yes.’

Mike frees some food from his back teeth. He folds his arms, and a wave of motion passes through the muscles in his forearm. ‘Yeah, well, so have I,’ he says.

Lucas looks at the red, watery juices on the serrations of his knife. He thinks about ramming the knife into his dad’s neck, and then he feels guilty. He carefully places his tray on the laminate flooring. ‘I’m going home,’ he says.

His father glances at his watch. ‘Already? Why?’

‘Somebody has to.’

* * *

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Linda must wait until late afternoon before she calls, because Canada is six hours behind. She thinks of Mike, and the conversations they had just before he left. ‘It hasn’t been easy,’ she’d said. ‘Since Mum died…’

‘It was ten years ago, Lind. I thought you’d be better by now.’

‘I suppose I’ll have to get a job, if you go.’

Mike shook his head. ‘I’ll make sure you don’t go without. You and Luke.’ He choked up, then. ‘I’ll keep you in the…what is it the lawyers say, on the telly?’

‘The manner to which I am accustomed.’

‘Yeah. I’ll make sure you can carry on living as you are, Linda. But I can’t live that way, anymore.’

Sitting in the kitchen, now, she hears a seagull thump down on the roof of the house. She hears the scrape of the roof tiles.

Paul Landry’s number, with its prefixed codes, is very long. Linda straightens the coils of the telephone cord while she listens to the subtle clicks on the line. She does not know how a phone call like this is connected. She wonders if there can be wires beneath the Atlantic.

She has practised in front of the mirror all morning, and played out the possibilities. A man speaks on the phone, but it is only the operator. ‘Connecting you, now…’

The next voice rips down the line, mid-sentence, in *French*. Of all the things she imagined, she has not planned for French. The voice is female, elderly, and very agitated. The woman is almost screaming. Linda, already nervous, panics.

‘Hello,’ she says. ‘I’m sorry. Do you speak English? I’m looking for Paul
She cannot tell if the woman recognises the name, because her shouting does not change in pitch or tone. Linda learned a little French at school, and tries it, now.


The woman does not pause in her ranting. Linda apologises quietly and puts down the phone.

As she walks through the bungalow, she feels like the seagull on the roof is tracking her movements. Her breathing is ragged. It had taken a great investment of will to pick up the phone and dial Paul’s number. It could not have gone much worse.

In the living room, she pulls down her mother’s old Collins Pocket French from the shelf. She’d taken a night class. The rubbery blue cover is scratched and faded. She turns the thin pages, but doesn’t know what she’s looking for. She feels like the madwoman’s voice is still in the house, somehow.

As she flicks through the dictionary, something comes back to her, from the phone call. There was another voice in the background, just before she put the receiver down. A younger woman, asking questions. Linda was too panicked to acknowledge it, at the time, but now, it gives her hope. She picks out a few words from the dictionary, and goes back to the kitchen.

Sitting at the table, Linda talks to herself in the voice of her mother. Don’t be so English, she says as she dials the number. Just because someone’s foreign, it doesn’t mean they’re insane, Linda.

But the woman does sound insane. She answers again, shouting. It is like
something out of a nightmare, but Linda forces herself to smile. She twists the phone receiver so that she can speak into the mouthpiece without listening. Quickly and loudly, she says, ‘Je voudrais parler avec l’autre femme, si’il vous plait. L’autre femme.’

The other woman.

She counts. By the time she reaches six, the noise stops, and she puts the receiver to her ear again. Silence. But now she hears the other voice, asking questions in French. Quieter, calmer. Linda breathes. ‘Do you speak English?’ she says.

‘Well, yeah,’ the woman replies. ‘Who is this, please?’

Linda almost laughs with gratitude. ‘Thank you. I’m so sorry. I’m looking for Jean-Paul Landry. I’d like to speak to him, please.’

‘But who are you?’ the young woman says. The accent is slight, appealing.

‘My name is Linda Weatherall. My mother knew Paul. He wrote her some letters.’

‘Who is your mother?’

‘Daisy Seacombe. She died some time ago.’

‘Just a minute.’

The young woman has clearly placed her hand over the receiver, but Linda can hear her speaking in a reassuring voice. She hears her mother’s name, pronounced very deliberately, in amongst the French. The older woman replies, ‘pas ici, pas ici.’

‘Hello?’ Linda says.

‘Listen,’ the young woman says. ‘I’m with my grandmother, who you just spoke to. She is not completely…she’s nervous around phone calls. Paul was her stepbrother.’

‘Was?’
'Was. Is. Who knows? We haven’t heard from him for years. We don’t know if he’s alive, really.'

‘I’m sorry,’ Linda says.

‘It’s okay. He left my grandmother the house, so…’

‘Did you know him? Did you know Paul?’

‘No. I think maybe I met him once, but I was a child.’

‘Do you at least know what part of Canada he might be living in, now?’

The young woman pauses. ‘Canada?’ she says. ‘No, no. He moved to England. This was what, a long time ago. I mean, maybe he moved again, but we never heard of it.’

‘What city?’ Linda says.

‘Excuse me?’

‘What city did he move to? In England.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Can you ask your grandmother?’

At this point, the older woman begins to shout again, in the background. ‘Look, lady,’ the young woman says. ‘She’s very tired.’ She drops her voice. ‘This is upsetting for her, you know? It’s been years.’

‘How many years?’

‘Try to understand. Paul is not here. We cannot help you.’

The young woman puts the phone down, but the line goes into that neutral zone. There is no dial tone, and Linda sits in her kitchen listening to a hollowness that sounds like a room everyone’s just left.
The bathroom was Daisy’s favourite place in the house: windows scarred with flower designs, lots of light, wipe-clean tiles and a lock on the door. She sat on the edge of the bath and she took the letter from the waistband of her skirt.

Now she was alone, she quickly made sense of the mystery. Inside the outer plastic envelope was a note from the Post Office explaining that, when mail lies uncollected for three months, the PO box is closed down, and the mail is forwarded to the owner. She discarded the note and looked at the envelope inside. The handwriting she recognised immediately, but the stamp was a Wilding issue – Queen Elizabeth half-turned, 3d. An English stamp. He was here.

She opened the envelope simply to get rid of the feeling that she might scream. The bathroom towels were in the wash, so the room was hollow and echoey, and the rustle of the paper too loud as she unfolded it. Had he taken some sort of foolish holiday? Was it a detour from a London business trip? Maybe, at last, he was traveling with his family.

The letter began in his familiar tone: Now, don’t be alarmed...

She looked at the return address. It was her town, but it was not the district of guesthouses and B&Bs. It was residential. She read on.
He had moved here.

*I understand how it must seem, Dee – that you might feel upset, or even threatened.*

*If so, I’d ask you to look over my other letters.*

If she wanted him to keep well out of her way, he wrote, he would certainly honour that wish. He meant no harm, and promised not to walk by her house, or follow her, or try to see her without consent. But he hoped they could meet just once. They were no longer twenty years old, but she had been in his life in a significant way for so long. Perhaps friendship wasn’t out of the question.

He was, he wrote, in no hurry. *I imagine that you, on the other hand, are just mad about the idea of meeting a strange man who has travelled halfway across the world to be in the same city as you. Sure that sounds like quite the prospect.*

She tried several times to compose herself before leaving the bathroom. When she finally made it into the kitchen, she picked up the A-Z of Brighton and Hove, and left via the front door.

‘Mummy?’ said Linda, light flashing in the shaving mirror.

‘One moment.’

‘Leave her, she’s in a mood,’ said Caroline.

Daisy crossed the road, and stood by the wire fence at the cliff edge. She opened the street map, and then looked out over town. She found that she was shaking. The roofs of the houses on his street were visible, but not the windows. He had put himself in view of her, but promised not to look without permission. She turned back towards the house. Suddenly, she felt very tired, but she forced herself to carry on.

When she re-entered the house, she heard Robert and Ray Hammond’s conversation stop, and then start again in the dining room. She stooped into the storage space
beneath the stairs, and crouched by the filing cabinet. She put the letter in amongst her old film magazines and remained there, in the dark, for a moment. A phrase came to her, something to do with her mother’s church. *Bodily presence.*

When she went to the post office to renew the box, there were two more letters waiting for her. She opened them in a café round the corner. The letters described his attempts to adjust to life in town: the quirks of England, the good walking, the particular difference between the cold here and the cold back home.

*It’s not so serious, here, of course. It’s not forty below. But it’s deceitful! It lures you out with no overcoat, and then socks you with that wind! Like a bayonet!*

He wrote about drinking tea in the aquarium café, and she could easily imagine the exchange he had with the waitress who – after several attempts to understand his order – began to mimic his accent. He did not press her on the matter of their meeting.

Paul had secured a job at the new airport, and suddenly the subtext of his letters and the design of his life made sense to her. He had planned it. He had planned it all. *Sweet Jesus.*

*You still watch movies, I take it?*

Daisy did not feel able to write her reply in the house. She went to the Regency Café at lunchtime while the children were at school, and ordered a bottle of beer. She worked quickly, having composed and edited the sentences many times in her mind. The letter was brief and without flourish. A date, a time, a place. Her husband had told her never to sign anything she wouldn’t be happy for the whole world to see, so she didn’t sign it.
That first afternoon, in early March, she had no intention of speaking to him. She waited across the broad stretch of Kings Road, her collar pulled up around her face. She watched the Regency Café, where she’d sat to write the letter. The cold waves hissed like hot fat on the pebbles behind her.

Would she recognise him, after all these years? Her clearest memory of him was in the light of the usher’s torch at The Electric. In her dreams, he wore his uniform, but he’d outgrown it, comically. She thought he might be the sort of person who sat by the window. A watcher. She didn’t know why. It was reasonable to imagine that some elements of his personality had become known to her through the letters.

She was right. He was five minutes early, and she thought about that. He’d been travelling for years and he arrived with just a few minutes to spare. From that distance she could not tell much about his features. The information came from posture, gesture. He was well-dressed, comfortable, straight-backed. He engaged the waitress for some time, mostly listening.

He sat for thirty minutes and did not once look at the huge clock on the wall. If he glanced at his watch she did not see it. Time did not stand still. He did not pour milk from the little jug into his tea. He sipped it black. Yellow clouds appeared in the glass front of the Regency – a sign that it was getting late. She would soon have to collect the children, and she felt cold.

Just as she thought about moving, Paul stood and paid. Daisy held her ground. He went outside and looked at the sea. Daisy lowered her head slightly and tried to blend into the scene. The road between them was mercifully wide. But Paul held up his hand to her in a brief, reassuring wave, and then he walked inland, through Regency Square, towards town. He did not look back.

Daisy turned to the sea and tried to calm herself. Above the silky band of yellow, a
strip of darkness had formed. That was the thing about seaside towns: you could see what was coming, but you couldn’t get out of the way.

She was sure that her children knew where she’d been. Linda always watched her closely, and was brighter than a house fire. When Robert arrived home, earlier than usual, Daisy walked straight out of the living room and put the kettle on the hob. She could hear him coming through the house. For a detective, he was not a discreet man. That wasn’t the way he worked. In leather-soled shoes, on a deep carpet, you could still hear his footsteps.

‘Tea?’ she said when he got to the doorway.

When he didn’t reply, she turned around. He was laying notes on the kitchen counter. He wore a yellow tie. ‘There’s a dinner on Friday,’ he said. ‘We need to look nice.’

Linda was by his side, holding what looked like a token. It was, in fact, dried mud. ‘Daddy, you didn’t take off your shoes.’ She held up the evidence, which crumbled slightly in her fingers.

Robert looked down at her and sighed. He slipped off the shoes, toe on heel, and left them in the kitchen doorway. He walked away in socks the colour of dishwater wrung from the rag. In the bright red teapot, Daisy saw her daughter’s silhouette dark against the window behind. Like a bird, watching her.

Linda hesitated, studying the shard of mud. Then she bent quietly and placed it inside her father’s left shoe.

*     *     *
It sure was good to see you again, Daisy, he wrote, the next week. Thank you for recommending The Regency, which was excellent. The tea was fine, but most of all, I liked the view.

At the time, watching him walk away into Regency Square, she’d been thinking mostly of herself. She had felt exposed. Certain things did not occur to her until later. It was three days before she realised he’d had a limp. He had not limped when she’d first known him, but it seemed habitual, long-term. He hadn’t mentioned it in the letters. The way he sat back in his chair in the café, the way he spoke to the waitress – he didn’t conduct himself like someone with an injury. But now, in her memory, she saw him pressing down hard with both hands on the table as he rose to his feet.

She remembered a rare morning-off for Robert, when they had taken the children to the beach. ‘It’s a lovely place to live,’ she’d said.

Robert, his eyes darkly ringed, had said, ‘Yeah. Course, it’s all mafia, the seafront.’ He had aimed down the sight of his index finger at Linda and Caroline. ‘Rotten to the core.’

The Regency Café. What had she been thinking? Robert probably had eyes all the way along the promenade. But what had she done wrong, really? She had walked to the seafront. Looked at a café. Walked away. She hadn’t even waved.

It was like a scene to her, now, like one of those modern paintings where nothing was quite right. It was as if the sky and sea were made of the same glass as the Regency’s big windows. The houses in the square were the colour of buttermilk.

Paul Landry had waved to her like someone a child had drawn, but she hadn’t waved back. What made it all wrong was the way she had felt.
I was surprised you chose somewhere so out in the open, he wrote. I wonder if that stopped you from saying hello.

I once read a news article about a woman who cured her chronic fear of dogs little by little. She started off at Easter, standing half-a-mile away from a poodle, and ended up sleeping with a wolf on Christmas Eve. That's a rough sketch, of course.

I will be in the tea-rooms above the Astoria cinema, on Saturday at 2pm. I hear it’s a nice place to watch someone drink a beverage.

As soon as she walked into the clatter and chat of the tea-room, she could feel his silence. This man who was made of words and words, none of them spoken. He wore a light blue shirt, open at the collar, and grey trousers. He smiled easily.

‘Daisy! Thank you for coming,’ he said. He rose, hiding the effort it took, and held out his hand.

For a moment, Daisy kept her distance from the table. ‘I don’t know what you think you’re doing,’ she said. ‘It’s ridiculous. It’s the maddest thing I’ve ever heard. You leave your home…you…I’m very angry, really.’

He sat down. ‘It’s nice to hear your voice, Dee,’ he said. ‘The louder the better, I guess.’ He was trying to maintain his confident good humour, but Daisy could sense nervousness. For a fleeting second, she felt within her the power to smash his life to pieces. To dissolve him.

She sighed. ‘Look. Those letters. You must have known they were a danger to my family life.’

‘You wrote back,’ he said, looking slightly hurt. ‘Anyway, I never wanted to hurt anyone. I just - ’
‘You just what?’ she said, sitting down. ‘What were you expecting? What do you expect, now?’

He regained his calmness. An expression settled on his face that she almost recognised. He looked happy. Relieved, almost. ‘I just wanted to see you.’

‘Do you know anyone here?’

He shrugged. ‘Some of the guys stayed, after the war. So, yeah, I know a couple people.’

A couple of people, she now realised, who had supplied him with her changes of address, through the years.

‘Won’t you miss your home?’

‘I’ll write it a letter.’

‘But you have family, back in Canada. Your mother.’

‘You are trying to get rid of me. I can understand that.’

Daisy looked out of the huge windows onto the Level. She could see the church at one end, and the helter-skelter at the other. She looked up into the high bare branches of the trees. ‘I can’t stay,’ she said.

In April, they tried again. She walked down one of the alleyways leading to Bond Street, and stopped to watch the demolition of the Paris Cinema. The workmen had taken the face off it, and they wandered off, now, for their lunch-break. Daisy felt ashamed, somehow, looking in on the tiers, which were exposed to the street. The Paris had once been a drama theatre, and the balustrades were now thickly covered in brick dust. The seats had been ripped out, and a pile of joists lay like campfire kindling in the stalls. Daisy was looking in from where the stage used to be. They’d
torn up the floor, and she could see down into the basement.

This was a sad loss. The Paris Gala Club showed banned and censored films every Sunday. *Had* shown.

When she saw Paul coming down the alleyway, she walked towards him. She dropped her handbag, and he stopped. There was a moment of hesitation, and then he laughed. ‘I guess you dropped that for me to pick up. Like in the movies. A reason to talk.’

She felt herself blushing. Her whole life was made of film tricks.

‘It’s a nice idea,’ Paul said. ‘The problem is, I have this injury…I’m very sorry, but I can’t actually reach it.’

Out of nerves, and the absurdity of the situation, Daisy laughed. She bent down to retrieve the bag. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Really, so am I,’ said Paul. ‘I’m usually very chivalrous, but the position I’d have to get into…I’d have to actually lie down! It might draw press photographers. We’d end up in the news.’

She laughed again. ‘Stop it.’

He looked over her shoulder at the wreck of the cinema. He limped towards the open front and leaned against one of the demolition vehicles. Daisy, remembering the tone of his letters, thought he might say, *Behold the fall of Paris,* or, *I guess that’s the way it crumbles, cinema-wise.* But there were no smart remarks. Instead, he made a solemn theatrical half-bow to the ghost of the audience.

‘If you can bow, you could have picked up my handbag,’ she said.

He grinned.

‘I used to come here to watch all the high-brow stuff. Bergman and all that,’ she said.
‘Did you like them?’

‘They were all right. I would’ve liked to have known how to feel about them. I suppose you think that’s silly. You can’t learn how to feel about something, can you?’

‘Sure you can. Why not? I’m a big believer in lifelong learning.’

They looked at each other, standing there in the toothless mouth of the cinema.

‘We shouldn’t have met outside,’ she said. ‘It was a mistake.’

To her surprise, he said she was probably right.

_Dear Dee,_

_I just saw Hud. What a cheery portrait of humanity that was! Sure, Newman is pretty enough, but a real nasty piece of work. It’s a sad state of affairs when you go see a movie and the nicest guy in it is a herd of dead cows._

_That Saturday, Daisy took the bus down the coast road and watched the last two-thirds of Hud at The Astoria. Alone. The cinema was half-empty, and it set her to wondering where all those film-crazy girls had gone. They would probably say they had grown out of it, that films were fantasies, and they had real lives now, with real men._

_She had done this for a long time with the letters: watched what he watched, listened to the music he mentioned. She enjoyed the film. Newman was as cruel as Paul had suggested, but more beautiful. Everyone in the film was sweating. Where they lived, it was too hot to sleep._
Later that week, she picked up another note from Paul, read it as she walked out of the Post Office, and then dumped it in the bin at the end of the road.

*Would you like to spend a couple of hours in the same picturehouse as me? It seems obvious, really. I know those places are notorious, but I swear I wouldn’t bother you. The auditorium lights flatter my complexion, especially when they turn them off. I know you are not scared of the dark, because you told me, last time we went to The Electric Theatre, about 300 years ago. Shall we go to The Electric?*

Back at home, she carefully cut out a square of newspaper and drew a circle around *This Sporting Life*. She wrote a time in the margin. As she prepared to put the clipping into the envelope, she saw the listing for *Anthony and Cleopatra*, the next day. She snipped it off. She could not stand the thought that he would joke about infidelity.

In the end, Robert was late returning from work, so she couldn’t go that first night. He came home a little drunk, but not too bad. Tiny stars of liquid shone on his trousers: beer or splashback. He seemed edgy, restless. She looked deeply at her husband’s face until it split into two overlapping images. Her heart beat so hard that her head shook. Robert looked away first.

*This Sporting Life*, The Regent Cinema, second attempt.

She watched him come in. He moved slowly down the aisle. At that pace, he could hide his limp. When he saw her, halfway down on the left, he stopped and sat on the right. She watched his eyes, glassy and blank for a moment as they adjusted from bright afternoon sunshine. He was working nights.
She had wondered all morning how it might feel to be there with him. She had become anxious in cinemas before, for no obvious reason. Her throat sometimes felt like it was closing. But not this time. She was calm, or perhaps even impatient. She looked across the aisle, and the words that came to mind surprised her. *For God’s sake, Daisy, you’ve known him all your life.*

She stood and headed for the toilets. The cinemas had hardly updated their pre-war luxury. Thirty years of dust and damp and gravity had taken a toll. The lobby was like a sore throat, now, with all that blotchy faded velvet. In the toilets, she stood before the mirror and acknowledged what time had done to her appearance. She waited for some ominous feeling to overtake her. Horror, or self-hatred, or mad passion. There was nothing but peace.

When she returned to the auditorium, she sat next to Paul. She did not speak, or look at him. Wear had softened the seats. The lights dimmed further. *Wooooo.* He laced his fingers and placed them in his lap. She could feel him smiling. He slid down in his seat, and she suddenly remembered how he had done that, all those years before. The sensation of him slipping down was there, already, in her mind.

The film was good: violent, moody, and mud-soaked. She wondered briefly if Paul would be able to understand the Northern accents, but he was just as engrossed.

It was the prettiest, lightest feeling, being beside him. At the end, Daisy left before the national anthem. Paul did not move.

And that was how it went, for a little while. They saw three films together over the next two weeks. They didn’t speak, didn’t touch.

In her living room, the door swung shut, and the reflection of Linda in the glass, coming towards her, made Daisy call out. She found that she was going to see films
with Paul simply to get relief from the worry of the in-between times. That, she
supposed, was how addictions started.

Flicking through the newspapers, Daisy steered clear of any film that seemed too
relevant. They skipped *In the Cool of the Day,* and *Tom Jones.*

The Odeon closed down around that time. Along with the Paris, it was one of the
first of many closures, although they didn’t know it, then. During a newsreel at the
Electric, she told Paul about the day, in 1940, when a bomb fell on the Odeon kid’s
club. ‘We never really went to the Odeon. But my mother panicked. She had
washed a load of clothes for our granddad, and when she heard about the bomb she
dumped the washing and ran. Me and Mo Williams were at the Curzon with her
little brothers. We didn’t know a thing about it.’

‘What did she do, your mum?’

‘It was the only time I saw her cry. A girl from our school died in the blast.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Paul said.

‘I was just a kid, then. We thought we’d got lucky, me and Mo. Though, of
course… Anyway, when my mum walked back into town that day, somebody had
folded granddad’s clothes and left them in a pile on the wall, next to where she’d
dropped them. They rebuilt the Odeon in a couple of months, and now they’re
turning it into a bingo hall.’

Daisy looked around the auditorium of the Electric, but she didn’t recognise any
faces. The place was almost empty. ‘What does *your* mother think of you coming
here, to England?’ she said.

‘She died.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Daisy said. ‘You never mentioned it.’
‘She’d been sick for many years. I waited until she was gone, before I came.’

Daisy did not ask any more questions. His life, which she had constructed from his letters, shifted again, re-settled.

‘Do you want to go to the Odeon, for the last show?’ he said.

‘No. They’re playing *Light Up the Sky*. It’s distasteful.’

There were dreams where the wall-lights of the cinema were on the inside of her skull, like rivets. It was not sensible to sleep. She sat in the living room all night, and listened to the house wake up after dawn.

Robert was growing a moustache that year. He’d been suffering from coldsores, and wanted to hide the blemishes. Brylcreem had darkened his hair for so long that she was utterly surprised when his facial hair emerged a rusty orange colour. He was upstairs trimming the moustache when the doorbell rang.

Daisy opened the door to a young Scottish woman, well-spoken, smartly-dressed. She brushed at the lapel of her jacket in long slow strokes. ‘Is this the residence of Detective Seacombe and family?’

‘Yes, can I help?’

‘We’ve been given permission by Detective Seacombe’s superiors to conduct a survey on the family life of policemen.’

Daisy took a step back. She was tired and paranoid. The woman smiled, and her eyes widened in a way that Daisy thought threatening. ‘A survey?’ she said.

The woman handed Daisy a small booklet. ‘This explains it.’

Daisy flicked through the pages. ‘What’s a…marriage integration index?’

The woman laughed. ‘You don’t need to worry about that.’

‘Who are you?’ Daisy said.
The woman continued to talk about the questions she would ask, but Daisy could barely hear because of the noise of horses clopping past on the street.

‘I’m sorry, what do you want?’ said Robert, who was suddenly beside her. Daisy saw the irritation on his neck, the blood in the remaining globs of shaving cream.

‘The lady was just explaining - ’

‘Explain, then,’ said Robert.

The woman repeated her spiel about integration and the permissions she’d obtained.

‘My superiors?’ Robert said. ‘Look, it’s not appropriate. I’m CID. Privacy is important.’

‘The survey is completely anonymous,’ the woman said. She took a small step towards Robert.

‘Well. I’m the one who asks questions around here.’

The woman laughed again.

A car pulled up outside, and Robert squinted over the woman’s shoulder. It was Ray Hammond. Hammond also had a moustache. Daisy had forgotten. He came up the path and smiled at Daisy with his little square teeth. He stood next to the Scottish woman. ‘Who’s this, then?’ he said.

Daisy, who now found herself drawn to the woman, tried to speak up, but her husband got there first. ‘She’s doing a survey on marriage aggravation in the force.’

‘Integration,’ the woman said.

‘Well,’ Hammond said. ‘You ought to have a word with some of my wives.’ He stepped in front of the woman. ‘You and me need to talk.’

‘What about?’ Daisy said, too loud.

Hammond frowned. ‘I meant Robert.’
Robert closed the door, and Daisy caught only a strange glimpse of the woman’s manic smile. Her hair was bronze and her irises were almost red.

*It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, Duke of York’s, Preston Circus.

She put her hand onto the armrest of the seat (they never sat at the back). She watched the light on her own skin. The tendons and bones reminded her of the exposed structures of a building half-demolished. He put his hand over the top of hers, slid his fingers into the gaps, and gripped. The feeling was delicate, but it went up her arm, across her collarbone, down the other side.

When she got outside, it was gently raining. A train rolled slowly over the viaduct, and the night was so dark that only the window squares were visible, the people looking out. Like little paintings in the sky. One of the carriages was empty, and she could see the patterns of the seats, the numbers on the door.

Paul came out and blinked, turned up his coat collar and stood for a moment. Usually, she was gone by this time. She waited for him to notice her. She loved the way his face changed when he did.

‘You stayed!’ he said, strolling towards her.

‘It’s because you laughed so much. It made me like you.’

‘The end credits were the best bit. Doodles Weaver! What a name! Would you have waited for me if my name was Doodles Weaver?’

‘I’d have married you.’

‘You’d do anything to get into Hollywood.’

They walked alongside each other, an arm’s length apart. The audience had dispersed. Daisy imagined them as seen from above. A crane shot.

‘The feeling of someone next to you in the dark…’ Paul said. ‘That’s a real thing.’
‘Well, of course.’

‘No, I mean it’s scientific. I read about it. Humans know when someone is close. It’s an actual sense, like hearing.’

‘It’s so you can kill people before they kill you,’ Daisy said.

‘Jeez. Remind me to sit away from your sword arm.’

‘When Robert came home, the day after I saw you at the Regency, I thought I might faint.’

‘Not like you.’

‘How would you know?’ she said. She didn’t mean to sound so sharp.

‘You weren’t afraid of anything when I first knew you. Remember when you broke the barricades?’

‘No.’

‘And remember Casablanca? Shouting at trained military personnel…’

‘There wasn’t so much to lose, then. I didn’t have the children.’

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘This doesn’t have to be Brief Encounter. It’s not the thirties. We don’t need to have some ruinous, tragic affair.’

‘Who said anything about an affair?’

‘Nobody! That’s what I mean.’

‘Well, what are you suggesting?’

‘Whatever you want. It doesn’t have to go much beyond this, does it? What more could I ask for? The occasional cordial meeting in a movie theatre.’

The rain intensified. Neither of them had brought an umbrella.

‘And sex every day,’ Paul said.

Walking home alone, she wondered how honest he was being. She wondered, in truth, when he was going to invite her to his flat, or to a hotel. The thought
depressed her, but what should she make of the fact that he hadn’t? Maybe he had never been with a woman. How awful it would be, the burden of initiating him. Actually, she suspected that was not the case. There was something about his sense of humour.

She lay on the floor, amongst the children’s toys, exhausted on a Sunday afternoon. She half-thought, half-dreamed of Paul’s wristwatch. It was not the kind of watch you could buy in England. Neither was it particularly expensive-looking. The face was large and round and white. She liked the numerals, and felt like she knew how cold the glass would be against her skin. The smell of him would be deep-woven into the hide of the strap. Not that pleasant soap smell he had, but his real scent. It was why women rubbed perfume on their wrists. That place was important.

As she surfaced from these hazy thoughts, she heard Linda’s concern. ‘Mummy’s not waking up,’ she said. ‘Caroline?’

‘Well. What should I do? I know – I’ll get something,’ said Caroline, leaving the room with the purpose of a teenager in charge.

Daisy waited. She kept her eyes closed and tried to be absent. She wasn’t playing dead. It was not a game. She did not know why she was doing it.

Linda put her head on Daisy’s chest and listened. ‘Caro! Should we call a policeman? I can’t hear her heartbeat.’

Daisy didn’t wake. Couldn’t. Didn’t. She thought of all the actors she had seen playing dead, their chests sometimes fluttering, sometimes their eyelids. Daisy wondered if lying there with her eyes closed was perhaps the only sensible way to proceed with life.

‘Caro!’ Linda said. ‘I asked you a question.’
'I don’t know!' Caroline shouted back.

Daisy felt the pressure of Linda sitting on her stomach, and the little hands knitting together behind her neck. She felt her whole upper body being dragged forward and upwards. ‘Wake up,’ Linda grunted into her ear. ‘Goddamn you, Mummy.’

Daisy opened her eyes and looked at her daughter, whose feet were in a wide stance. Linda nodded with satisfaction. ‘Caro, it’s fine,’ Linda shouted.

Caroline ran back into the room, panting, with something in her hand. ‘We thought you’d stopped breathing!’ she said.

Daisy blinked. ‘What did you fetch?’ she asked.

‘A packet of butter,’ Caroline said.

‘The correct course, if you think there’s a serious problem, is to call the emergency services.’

What a joke that was, Daisy thought. Imagine Ray Hammond coming to her aid.

Caroline stomped out of the room, muttering, but Linda continued to sit in Daisy’s lap, absently holding her mother’s thumb. Daisy whispered to her, ‘Linda. Perhaps we should talk about your language. “Goddamn you, Mummy”?’

Linda looked away. Daisy could not tell if she was smirking or ashamed.

_The Birds_, Curzon Cinema.

‘Our seagulls would’ve eaten those birds for breakfast,’ said Daisy.

‘Your seagulls could eat Hitchcock for breakfast.’

They waited for the film to start again, to see if its opening scenes contained the key to its abrupt ending. The cinema was full of too-old Teddy boys who were a decade late for their own clothes, and didn’t have anywhere else to go. Daisy turned
towards the entrance.

‘Are you worried about him walking in?’ Paul said.

‘Of course. Irrational, I suppose. He hates films.’

‘Do you think he’s going to come and arrest these guys?’ Paul nodded to the Teds.

‘Not his scene,’ Daisy said. ‘I’m not sure he really arrests people, anyway.’

Paul pushed back a strand of his black hair. ‘It’s difficult to know what you really think of him.’

Daisy shrugged. ‘I don’t know where he is.’

‘Right now?’

‘Ever, these days.’

‘It must be a hard job,’ said Paul.

‘The people he works with. The criminals, I mean. They’re a new type. Sordid. The things they do are wicked, but not in an exciting way. Not like up there,’ she said, gesturing to the screen. ‘It’s meaningless. I think it gives him this idea that people are disgusting. Why wouldn’t he think that?’

Paul nodded, slowly.

‘And then,’ Daisy continued, ‘he does his calculations, and he realises that he’s human, too, and so therefore also disgusting.’

‘And you? What does he think of you?’

Daisy shook her head, and then looked over her shoulder again.

‘Do you want to go somewhere else?’ he said.

‘No.’

‘We might have to, eventually,’ said Paul. ‘Your husband keeps closing down all the cinemas.’
'Bring me the kettle out,' Robert said, standing in the garden one evening, in August.

'What do you want, tea?' Daisy said.

'No.'

Daisy went inside, and returned with boiling water. Robert took the kettle, and looked at her. His mouth hung open. Robert suffered from grass allergies, but whenever he was home, he favoured the garden. The swing chair creaked.

'What is it?' Daisy said. 'What’s wrong?'

'Bindweed,' he said.

With his finger, he traced a vine with large, lush green leaves and bright white flowers, as it gushed over the fence from next door, spread all the way along the patio, and coiled around the black drainpipe of their house. Daisy could see the curled tail of the vine weaving in and out of the slats of the shed, too. Robert bent down, and picked up a garden spade which was utterly strangled by the weed. As he lifted the shaft, half of the garden seemed to rise up, and the fence creaked. He ripped the spade away.

The trumpet-shaped flowers glowed in the dusk. They were closing for the day.

'These are nice, at least,' Daisy said, stroking the underside of one of the flowers.

Robert laughed bitterly and began to pour boiling water over the roots. 'You see this all over the banks when you’re on the train to London. When we’re all dead and gone, this stuff will take over the world.'

He reached down into the steaming undergrowth, wrapped the vine four times around his fist, and pulled. There was a deep tearing sound from the earth. 'Not yet, though,' Robert said.

Daisy wondered when Robert ever went to London on the train, and why.
The next morning, she smacked her hip against the table while she was clearing away the breakfast things. Only she and Linda were in the kitchen. She closed her eyes and let the pain dig in, fade out. ‘Sometimes the things I do astound me,’ she sang, smiling.

When she opened her eyes again, Linda regarded her with a frown, a sharp angle of toast held in her hand.

‘Are you okay, Lind?’ said Daisy.

‘You don’t sing, Mummy,’ Linda said.

Daisy and Paul were watching a thriller in the Academy. There was a stalker on the loose. The tension of the story had really got to Daisy. She could feel the peaks and troughs of fear in her body, and totally forgot that it was early afternoon on a Wednesday. At the corner of her mind, she was aware of Paul’s body, next to her. She could feel the heat of him, sense the rise and fall of his quickened breath. The voices on the screen were low and urgent, the options for escape limited. Daisy reached up and ran her left hand along the back of Paul’s neck, up into the short, freshly barbered hair, which prickled against her fingers. He put his hand on her knee, and let it slide up and over her thigh. She heard the shush of his palm on her tights. She felt her skirt crumpling. On the screen, a man moved around a room, lifting objects, putting them down carefully. Daisy could sense the pressure in Paul's hand, and how hard he was working to keep that force in check. He was at the dark band of nylon at the top of her thigh. She scratched the back of his head, slowly, feeling the flesh over his skull move under her nails. She turned and put her face against his neck. The scene changed, and the light on his skin was blue. He gripped the hem of her skirt, and tugged it upwards. She felt as though she could almost hear
the hum of her blood. ‘Out,’ she whispered to him, barely knowing what she meant.

Moments later, they were walking the red carpet of the dimly lit corridors. Daisy opened a door marked ‘staff’, and Paul followed. They went past a couple of small offices, and through another door which led down some stone steps to a storage area. Most of the room was below ground, but up near the ceiling were frosted windows, through which Daisy could make out the dark shapes of feet going past on the street. She recalled that the Academy had once been a Turkish baths, and behind the stacks of orange juice cartons and boxes of sweets, she could see tiles in faded Moorish design. Paul was behind her. He put his hand on her hip. Together, they walked to the wall, and she wiped the dust from the tiles.

It was like nothing she’d seen in the movies, but it felt right that broad daylight came through the windows, and that there were plants growing out of the cracks in the floor, and that there was a mold stain on one of the high pipes that looked like God, with the cloudy hair and the big beard. There was the tinny smell of water and rust, and someone had dropped the rainbow sherbet, which spread on the cement floor in a powder bomb of colour. She tried to reach out for him, but he shifted her hands away. He turned her around and held her, face first, against the wall. ‘I won’t kiss you,’ she said. She didn’t know what she was talking about.

He used only his hands. She had known, she supposed, that what he did was possible.

That afternoon she came back to an empty house. She washed. She drank tea with bubbles on the surface. She cleaned. There was a knock on the door. Outside stood her husband with two men in good suits. The older of these men was tall and slim, and had thin grey hair. He looked at Robert and waited for him to speak. Daisy tried
not to think.

‘Daisy,’ said Robert. ‘This is Inspector Lyle, and…what’s your name, again?’

‘Ford. Inspector Ford,’ said a younger, broader man in spectacles.

‘Right. I’m going to show them around the house,’ Robert said. Daisy could not read his expression. He would not look at her.

‘Shall I put the kettle on?’ she said.

Robert laughed in a derisory way.

‘That won’t be necessary, thank you,’ said Inspector Lyle. ‘We shouldn’t be long, Mrs Seacombe. I’m very sorry to interrupt your day.’

‘Robert…?’ Daisy said.

‘Later. I’ll talk to you later.’

They passed her, and went up to the master bedroom. Daisy waited a few moments and then picked up a pile of towels and quietly climbed the stairs, avoiding the sixth step – which creaked. She stopped near the top, and through the slightly open door of the bedroom she observed an odd scene. Inspector Lyle was carefully laying her husband’s ties on the bed. He studied each label before putting them on the bedspread. ‘Quadrant Arcade,’ he said. ‘Where is that?’

‘You know where it is,’ said Robert. ‘Covent Garden.’

‘Did you buy this tie yourself?’

‘Simpson bought it me. No harm in that, is there? It’s only the one.’

‘What about this one.’

‘Well, yeah, he bought that, too.’

Daisy watched Lyle handling a tie she’d never seen before. Black. Red spots.

‘Burlington Avenue. Simpson, again?’

‘Must have been, I suppose. Wouldn’t go there on my own.’
As he laid the tie on the bed, Lyle turned and caught her eye. Daisy continued to climb the stairs, as if she hadn't stopped at all. She put the towels in the bathroom. There was silence from the men. She understood that they were waiting for her to go, and so she descended to the kitchen and opened the window. Daisy realised she was shaking. She did not know why the men were here. She did not know who this ‘Simpson’ was. Out on the street, she heard a boy, playing truant, commentating on his own game of football, his pitch rising to a climax. *He slashes through the defence! He tears them open! Shoots....*

Soon enough, Lyle and Ford reappeared with her husband. ‘...Yeah well,’ Robert said. ‘I never said that. It was Hammond said that.’

The young Inspector nodded to Daisy as he passed the kitchen and opened the front door.

‘I would imagine we will be in touch,’ Lyle said to Robert.

‘Can’t wait,’ said Robert, with a childish shrug of his big shoulders.

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Seacombe,’ Lyle said.

They left. Robert stood looking at the closed door. The light through the coloured glass flickered on his shirt.

‘Robert?’ she said.

Robert looked her up and down, and then glanced at his watch.

‘What was that about?’ she said.

‘Sod all. I offered to show them around. The bloke’s a pansy, and what he is implying is fantastic. They’re trying to put together some sort of investigation. “Corruption”. It’s an internal thing. Won’t happen.’

‘What are they saying you've done?’ asked Daisy.

She felt him continue to look at her in the doorway of the kitchen. Her breasts, her
neck. Her breath came uneasily, and she worried that some trace of Paul was visible on her. ‘Robert,’ she said.

‘It’s all bollocks. Politics. They’re working out of the Town Hall, trying to put the frighteners on us. But it will come to nothing.’

She looked out of the window. ‘Should I talk to the children, when they get back?’

‘They won’t find anything. That’s why I showed them around.’

‘Who are they?’

‘The Yard.’

‘Jesus.’

He walked towards her, hands in pockets. She couldn’t look at him. ‘Daisy,’ he said.

‘Yes?’

‘You don’t talk to anyone.’

She didn’t know whether that was an observation or a command.

Robert went over to Ray Hammond’s that evening, and Daisy cooked sausages for the children and tried to act normally until they went to bed.

Later, she stood alone in the dark kitchen, and felt her body tingling, reprising the sensations of day. ‘Oh, please,’ she said to herself. ‘Just stop it.’

Across the road, a car was parked near the bus-stop. A Morris. It had been there all afternoon. The young man inside had his head turned towards the house like he was posing for a portrait. Daisy made a cup of cocoa, and took it outside. The sea was calm, and goldcrests scattered from fence posts at the cliff-top as she approached the car. The last days of summer.

Stupidly, the man in the Morris looked away when he saw Daisy coming. She
knocked on the window, and he lowered it.

‘I’ve brought you a drink,’ Daisy said.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ he said.

Daisy laughed. ‘God. You’re not exactly KG bloody B, are you?’

The man sighed. He was young, with brown curly hair. The inside of the car smelled of average cologne. He was the new type of policeman. She offered him the mug. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Or it’ll get a skin on it.’

‘I can’t take the drink, madam, sorry,’ he muttered. ‘Wouldn’t be right.’

Daisy took a sip. ‘What time does your shift finish?’ she said.

‘Look, madam,’ the man said. ‘It’s for your own safety, all this.’

Daisy walked back to the house, thinking about the letters.

Robert didn’t come home that night, and at some point during the clammy early hours, Daisy went down to the storage closet under the stairs. She opened the top drawer of the filing cabinet, and took out her stack of ‘Picturegoer’ magazines. Corners of Paul’s letters, and torn flaps of envelopes protruded from the pile. Daisy realised that she could not take them to the bin. Not now. She took out as many of the letters as she could find, and folded them into a small metal money tin. She locked the tin, put it into the top drawer of the cabinet, and pocketed the key.

The cabinet was about the size and weight of a five year-old child, but more awkward and angular. She slid it up the stairs. On the landing, she rested, and felt a single bead of sweat drop from the end of her nose. She stood on the stool from her dresser, popped the attic cover, and pulled down the stepladder. Her shoulders trembled as she lifted the filing cabinet above her head, but she was strong. She got it up into the attic, and pushed it to the back, against the pink insulation foam.

When she came down, her clothes were covered in whitish dust. She put them in
the washing machine, and felt Linda watching her from the hallway.

The next morning, exhausted, she scribbled a note for Paul in the living room, with the curtains drawn. She said something had happened at home and she couldn’t see him, couldn’t talk about it. Please, she wrote, no more letters. She sealed the envelope, and put it in her handbag. When she opened the curtains, she saw a figure emerge from the garden shed. She let out a cry of shock, but it was her husband, in last night’s clothes, rubbing his eyes. Had he slept in there? She left the room before he saw her.

Daisy sent the note hastily, to get rid of the pressure that was building in her skull. Only later did she think of how Paul might receive it. He would think she was ashamed of what had happened between them in the basement of the Academy, or that her husband had found out about their meetings. He’d think she was calling it off.

But she couldn’t take it back, and she didn’t dare write another. She felt like she was running out of time.

ELEVEN
Outside the living room window, England is the colour of an old sports sock. Grey pigeons, grey squirrels, and a grey humid sky. Baywatch is on television: the white sand and red swimsuits of Los Angeles.

Linda turns away from the screen, drags the coffee table over to the window, and lays her transcripts of the letters on the biscuit-coloured carpet. Walking around the pages, she looks for clues.

Some of the younger boys at the factory have let their hair grow long, though I don’t think it would suit yours truly.

So he worked in a factory. In the letters, he mentions evening classes. It probably wasn’t anything to do with her mother. Perhaps his work had taken him to England. Did he have connections elsewhere in the country? Linda calls directory enquiries again, and asks about listings for Landry. Nothing for J, J-P, or P. She wonders if Alex might have a way of finding him, but she can’t go back to the library.

She thinks about her father in the hospice. For the first time in years, she feels sorry for him.

Lucas comes to the threshold, and stops abruptly. He wears a short-sleeved pale yellow shirt. He looks startled.

‘Are you okay, Love?’ Linda says.

He surveys the letters. ‘Me? Am I okay?’ he says. ‘Mum, you’ve got to…’

‘Got to what?’

‘Never mind,’ he says. ‘I’m going out.’

‘Where?’
Lucas looks at the television. ‘Aircut,’ he says, and leaves.

She remembers going to the cinema with Lucas and her mum, just before Daisy got ill. There was a special re-release of *E.T.* After about fifteen minutes, Lucas began to reach up and stroke his Nanna’s cheek at regular intervals. It was a curious thing.

‘What’s all that about?’ Linda had whispered to Daisy.

‘He’s waiting for the bit when the grown-ups cry.’

Now, the gate clangs, and Linda jumps.

* * *

Lucas kicks his way through the feathery piles of cherry blossom, which are already beginning to turn brown at the edges. When he reaches the bottom of Downside, the bright square of The Cut is like a cinema screen against the slate background of the pre-storm sky. From that distance, he can see the cold hard facts of Cassie: she is twenty-one, and – in an odd sort of way – beautiful. From fifty yards, she doesn’t look like the sort of person who might go out with a seventeen year-old deaf boy, but who does?

Lucas knows that people fall in love with film stars, but this is different. This is real. When they are together, the certainties of life – those rules that exclude him from everything – seem to drop away. They have a language together: a machine with which they can build another world. They have actual conversations. You can’t deny that. It is not a fantasy.

He crosses the street and steps into the light of The Cut. When Cassie sees him, her eyes widen with shock. Then she composes herself and nods. It is her mother, Shell, who greets him. Shell wears a long denim shirt over leggings with foot-straps.
She knows who he is. Her foot taps – to music, probably – his aids don’t pick much up over the hair-driers. She makes the sign for sign, but she looks like she’s dancing.

Lucas nods.

*Cassie’s friend?*

He fingerspells his name.

Shell tells him to sit on one of the plastic seats in the waiting area, and he does. Cassie smiles. *Five minutes*, she signs. Lucas looks up at the television mounted on the wall. *Baywatch* lost its way for him when Erika Eleniak left.

His eye is drawn away to an article in an old newspaper on the adjacent seat. It is about a woman who has a rare disorder that gives her super-sensitive hearing. The condition causes her much discomfort; she can only eat very soft pears, because she can’t stand the noise of her own chewing, and she can’t sleep for the loud and constant workings of her internal organs. She first noticed the problem whilst playing Tetris on Gameboy: she heard her eyes move.

Such sounds are, apparently, beyond the range of normal hearing.

Lucas wonders if there is a similar condition of super-sight. Imagine, he thinks, if you could see across the Channel, through the windows of French houses, and watch the beautiful women eating breakfast. That would be amazing. Actually, no, he thinks, it would be bad, because the things that are closest to you would be unbearable.

People often ask him if he has special powers, being deaf. Can he see around corners? Does he have visions of the future? Does he hear high-pitch dog whistles? Do written words appear to him in the air? He wishes he could say that such questions were only asked by children.

He has no magical abilities. But – like many people – he can tell when the person
he loves is tense. When Cassie comes to him, now, black cape held out before her, he sees that her hair is still wet from the shower, and she has red stripes on her neck from where she has scratched at herself.

‘Wait,’ he says. He removes his aids and fishes his mobile phone out of his pocket. Don’t want to get them wet, he signs. Cassie takes them with a smile, and places them on a small shelf, next to an old picture of Ryan Giggs. Lucas stands and puts his arms through the cape, and Cassie slides behind to tie him up and manoeuvre him in front of a mirror. He feels her breath on his neck, smells Juicy Fruit.

Good to see you, she signs into the mirror.

He nods.

What would you like?

I would like to get away from here. Maybe just ride my bike out into the wild.

Some place where it’s just nature and weather.

I meant your hair, Cassie says. What are you having done?

Oh. A trim. Will you do the cut?

No. Mum will cut. I just wash.

Perfect, Lucas thinks.

Don’t ask for too much off, though, Cassie signs. These sweet curls.

Lucas rolls his eyes, but blushes.

She tucks the towel into the cape, and leads him over to the sinks. She moves his body the way she sometimes moves his hands, sitting him in the thick leather seat, and positioning his neck in the cold cleft of the basin. His view tumbles up to the ceiling, the steam swirling there, and then focuses on her face, upside down. The gummy smile.

This is his time. He relaxes. The needles of water feel good against his scalp. Her
hand reaches round to ask him if the temperature is okay. It is too hot, but in a good way. For a moment, as the water gets into his ear, he is reminded of the calorific hearing tests he underwent as a young boy, but soon all such thoughts leave him. At first, her touch is gentle, her hand a visor at his forehead. The scent of her wrist surprises him with its floral sweetness, but the cables beneath her skin remind him of her bicycle – the perfect logic of it. She rubs the calloused pads of her palm deep into his skin, and scrunches the whipped-up weight of his hair. Where else can you go to experience such a thing, he thinks, and what in the world could be better?

He feels his penis stretching out down his trouser leg, but he does not touch himself beneath the cape. He does not want to cheapen it. For a second, he thinks he might cry with happiness, but he quickly regains control, and laughs at how embarrassing that would’ve been.

Now, he looks up at her, and she frowns. ‘Okay?’ she mouths, her hands busy.

He nods.

*Take a seat over there, and Mum will be with you in a minute.*

*Thank you*, he signs, standing up.

*Pleasure. How’s it going with your Life in the Day project? Have you been working on the signs? Are you ready to perform it?*

*Yes. It’s going okay. Do you mind if I put in something about you?*

She just looks at him, her eyes moist. *I will see you on Monday*, she signs.

They stand there for a second. Later, he will think back, and feel sure that something passed between them in this moment. He will argue that the feeling was too powerful for him to have experienced it alone.

On the television, beyond Cassie, a man is being dragged out of the water, free at last of the ocean’s weight.
Caroline inadvertently solves the mystery, when she calls Linda. ‘I have been trying to contact you for weeks,’ she says. ‘Don’t you pick up the phone? Is everything okay?’

‘I’m sorry, Caro. I’ve been busy,’ Linda says. In truth, she may have let one or two calls go, recently.

‘It’s just that we can’t proceed until you confirm that I’m the sole legal vendor.’

‘What are you vending, Caroline?’

There is a brief silence. ‘The house! Daddy’s house. Jesus, Linda. I’m not asking for much. I’ve been through the mill with the solicitors. All we need from you is a signature.’

She thinks of the wall behind her parents’ bed. She thinks of the plaited tie-backs on the curtains, the cornflowers on the bedspread, and the red numbers on the digital alarm clock. She imagines workmen ripping up the floorboards. ‘Who is moving in?’ she asks.

‘Some people who work at the University. I don’t know. They’re from Spain or Venezuela. They wanted to know about the heating.’

Linda looks down at the pile of telephone books she has bought by mail order. One for each of the major cities of England. None of them with a J-P Landry.

‘Caroline, can I ask you something? About Dad.’

‘Sure, but can it be quick? I’ve got Martin’s supper on.’

‘Well. You’ve done so much, for Dad. You know, looking after him…’

‘Hey, Linda. Don’t worry. I know it’s not been easy for you. We all have our
different ways of coping.’

‘No, it’s not that. It’s just…’

Suddenly, Linda has a flash of memory. A pub garden, when they were young, Caroline sipping shandy by the slide, and their parents arguing at a wooden table in the distance. She sees her father walking around the table, picking up each almost-finished glass, and hurling the dregs over their mother. She sees her sister, trembling, next to her. She can almost smell the yeasty odour that came from her mother’s blouse on the drive home. Did it really happen? How had she forgotten it? There are all of these pieces of memory, but what do they add up to?

‘Lind?’ Caroline says.

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Look. If you want to help Dad, be a love and sign the forms, will you? Then we can free up some money to pay for the hospice. And if you need to re-think, I’m happy to put some of my share aside for you, given that Mike’s left and everything.’

‘No, no. I don’t want it. I don’t want any money from that house.’

‘Okay. That’s your concern,’ Caroline says, and then lets out a long sigh. ‘Just sign and date it, then, Sis.’

The folder of documents is in a pile of unopened bank statements and Mike’s car magazines on the kitchen counter. Linda opens the folder and begins to wade through the legalese. The bookmark is in the middle of a ten-page contract. The painted thistle looks like a pressed flower. Linda holds it up in the pink light of dusk.

She remembers watching, through the square window in the hospice door, as the old man sat hunched, reading to her father. She recalls how the reader had dropped the bookmark in the corridor and then disappeared.
Linda turns the bookmark over, now, and finds a neat list of dates and page numbers, with the heading, *Robert Seacombe. The Prime of Miss J B.*

The loops have slackened over the years, and the capitals are less slanted, but Linda recognises the handwriting the way one recognises a face.

* * *

On the bus to school that Monday, the breeze through the open windows feels cool against the closely shorn sides of Lucas’ head. Pollen tickles his nostrils, and everything outside the top deck of the bus is blue or green. Sky, fields, sea.

He considers how he should play it with Cassie, after their moment in the hairdressers. *I wasn’t just imagining it, was I?* he might say.

When he sits down in English class, Cassie is not there. He finds a small plastic Friesian on the desk. He turns, briefly, to look at Youds, who performs his tortured gurning. This is the price he must pay for standing up to them. But Cassie is the reward. Lucas pockets the toy, and Mrs Finch welcomes everyone to class.

‘Imagination,’ she says, ‘is a great moral tool.’ Lucas looks away.

Cassie arrives late, carrying a small hold-all. ‘Sorry,’ she mouths. She unzips the bag and takes out her denim pencil case. The other pupils begin to busy themselves with their green exercise books. ‘What are you supposed to be doing?’ Cassie asks.

‘I don’t know,’ Lucas says, nodding to Mrs Finch. ‘I didn’t see what she said. I think we’re practising for our performance.’

Cassie sighs. ‘I’ll talk to her.

Cassie strides up to the front of the class and talks to Mrs Finch. Lucas sees his
teacher roll her eyes. He casts a glance at the hold-all beside Cassie’s chair. The flap lies open, and within, Lucas can see her phone, lying on top of a garment of dark blue silk. The garment is folded, so he can’t tell what it is. The dusty morning light makes the fabric look like car metal. His face becomes hot, and he forces himself to turn away.

Cassie sits down next to him, and speaks, but he doesn’t pick up her words.

‘Pardon?’ he says.

‘You have to imagine you’re a nineteenth century farm labourer in the North of England,’ she says.

‘That’s what the career’s advisor said,’ he replies.

Cassie smiles.

*Were you out last night?* he signs, nodding to the hold-all.

She looks at him for a moment, but does not speak or sign.

*I thought maybe you had a boyfriend.* He laughs, and hates himself for laughing.

‘No,’ she says.

‘Okay,’ he says.

‘You haven’t even stuff out, Lucas,’ Cassie says, gesturing to his desk.

‘You haven’t even mentioned my new haircut,’ he says, mock-patting his curls.

Cassie remains straight-faced, and he feels a chill across his skin. Shame. To fend off the feeling, he dips down and takes his pen and exercise book from his rucksack. He begins to write, trying to concentrate on the loops of ink. Cassie’s phone glows green in her bag. She reaches down and turns it off.

*What do you think they did with deaf farmers in the nineteenth century?* Lucas signs.

‘think manage this on your own, Lucas, don’t you?’ Cassie says.
What’s wrong? he signs.

‘Nothing. Look. The department is quite busy at the moment.’

The what?

‘The department,’ she says, exaggerating the lip pattern. ‘Pupil support. Funding. People like you who are doing fine. New pupils.’

‘Slow down,’ he says, brushing his right hand along his left arm. He knows he has spoken loudly, because he can feel people looking at him. He fires a fierce glance of warning around the classroom, before addressing Cassie. ‘What are you saying?’

‘I’ve told them you don’t need me in history and maths.’

‘What? But the exams are coming up!’

‘There’s a new boy in year seven. Into the area. He has .’

‘He has what?’

‘Hydro. Ce-pha-lus. On Monday afternoons, he needs a lot of extra support.’

‘So do I! On Monday afternoons, two of the teachers have facial hair! I can’t see what they’re saying!’

‘Come on, Lucas. Perfectly well alone even in the same league as this boy.’

‘He should have to wait.’

‘Do you know what hydrocephalus is?’ she says.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘No.’

‘It’s water on the brain.’

‘That’s not my fault.’

‘If he’s lucky, he’ll make it to twenty, okay?’

Lucas does not respond. He carefully places his pen next to his exercise book, in which he has written one and a half lines. He remains still until the class is divided
into small groups. Then, he joins a circle of other pupils, and Cassie sits behind him.

In a classroom full of background noise, he turns his head just in time to see each
speaker finish a sentence. He can’t follow the conversation at all, but he doesn’t ask
Cassie for help.

At the end of the lesson, she taps his arm. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?’

That afternoon, his history teacher’s thick moustache obscures much of a lecture on
Native Americans. Lucas looks out of the window, and sees Cassie with the new
kid. The boy is about four feet tall. His head is very large, and he wears spectacles,
held in place with a black elastic band. Even from that distance, Lucas can see that
he is wearing shoes from the infant section.

Lucas covers his eyes with his hands. He has a plunging feeling in his chest that he
recognises from a long time ago.
Linda started to act strangely that autumn. She had always had her little rituals – such as her need to touch every glass panel of the door before leaving the house – but now she was not sleeping, and her skin looked blotchy and pale. She tried every old trick to stay off school.

‘You’re not hot, Love. And you haven’t been sick. Is there something else?’ Daisy said.

‘No. I feel poorly.’

‘You know, Dad is going to be fine. He hasn’t done anything wrong.’

‘I know,’ Linda snapped. ‘It’s not to do with that. I need to stay home.’

‘Linda. We’ve been through this.’

Linda rubbed her face with exhaustion. The gesture seemed so grown-up.

‘What is it, Lind? Come on, Love. You can tell me.’

‘I’m going to ruin everything,’ Linda said.
‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m going to do something wrong, and the man is going to catch me,’ she said.

She spoke in a low voice, now, through gritted teeth.

‘What man? I don’t understand.’

‘They’re following me, Mum! They wait outside the school in their blasted car!’

‘Who?’

‘The men! The men who are after Dad. What if I do a bad thing, and it gets Dad into trouble? It will be my fault! I can’t be good forever!’

Daisy opened the front door, and looked out. Everything seemed normal: the cars hammering down the coast road, the groups of children walking inland through the rapidly expanding network of streets which took them to the school. She turned back to Linda. ‘Was it the man in the dark-coloured Morris? The dark car?’

‘No. It was red. Look left. They’re waiting at the corner.’

Daisy looked left. There they were.

‘Linda,’ she said. ‘Take your books up to your room. I will bring you some toast.’

Linda’s relief nearly brought her to tears, but she managed to gasp out a ‘thank you.’

That afternoon, Daisy marched into the Town Hall, and took the wide curving staircase to the second floor offices. A secretary was stacking papers at a desk. ‘Can I help?’ she said.

Daisy ignored her. She had spotted the young inspector, Ford. He stood, holding a cup and saucer, by the door to an inner office.

‘You,’ Daisy said.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Ford. ‘I don’t believe we’ve met.’
‘Oh, you’re a top class detective, aren’t you? I’m Mrs Seacombe. You’ve been following my daughter.’

Ford had a short, thick frame, and a smug face of the type she had seen enough of.

‘Ah. Mrs Seacombe. Why don’t you come through to our office?’

‘No! Linda is a child. She has nothing to do with any of this.’

‘Any of what, Mrs Seacombe?’

‘Don’t give me that rubbish. I’ve heard it all before. I know your bloody tricks.’

She expected Ford to back down, and apologise, but instead he seemed affronted by her. Inconvenienced, even.

‘With all due respect, we have no obligation to report our methods, or explain our reasons,’ he said.

‘Excuse me?’ Daisy said.

‘Do you know where your eldest daughter goes, after school? Caroline, is it?’

Daisy lost her composure, then. She strode past the desk of the secretary, who tried to reason with her, and she swiped the cup and saucer out of Ford’s hand. It hit the wall and then the floor. Ford barely twitched. ‘If I ever see you near either of my daughters again, or hear that you’ve been hanging around their schools, I will smash every window in your car, whether you’re in it, or not!’

At that moment, Inspector Lyle emerged from the door behind Ford. ‘What in the name of goodness is going on out here?’ he said.

‘And I’m holding you responsible, too!’ Daisy said.

Lyle, in a navy blue suit and waistcoat, looked down at the shards of the broken cup.

Daisy felt herself shaking with rage. ‘This man seems to think he has the right to follow my daughter in his car.’
‘Well,’ said Ford. ‘Mrs Seacombe seems to think I’m required to discuss our preliminary - ’

‘Ford,’ said Lyle.

‘Sir, I only - ’

‘Ford! Absent yourself. Now.’

Ford slouched out into the corridor, under the gaze of his superior. Lyle opened the door to a small, neat office, lit pleasantly by a desk lamp, and full of the sweet smell of pipe smoke. He guided Daisy inside, and offered her a seat. ‘I am sorry about that, Mrs Seacombe. Ford is…’

‘He’s arrogant, and rude.’

Lyle considered this. ‘His manner leaves a lot to be desired. Well. In any case. You mentioned your daughter. Linda, is it?’

‘I want you to leave her alone. She’s barely school age, for God’s sake. It’s a disgrace,’ Daisy said. ‘Children have a right to their privacy, no matter how you feel about their parents.’

Lyle nodded once. ‘Fine,’ he said.

‘Pardon me?’

‘You have my word. Neither of your daughters will be followed.’

Daisy blinked.

‘I am glad,’ said Lyle, ‘that you came here, and we had a chance to meet.’

‘I did not come here to meet you,’ Daisy said. She stood.

‘May I walk you down to the street?’ said Lyle.

‘I don’t think so. No. Thank you.’

As she walked into the outer office, Lyle called to her. ‘Mrs Seacombe?’

‘Yes.’
‘What you said about children and the deeds of their parents. I agree.’

After leaving the council house, she looked for Paul. She tried to pretend to herself that she wasn’t doing it, but she peered into the foyer of every cinema in town. She bought a ticket at the Electric, and stood by the entrance curtains. The light from the Arabian desert illuminated the audience, but Paul wasn’t there. Her anger subsided as she came back out onto the street. After all those years, she thought, now I am searching for him.

Robert came home after the children were in bed. ‘Is everything all right?’ she asked him, standing from the armchair.

‘Tell me you didn’t go and speak to those bastards at the Town Hall,’ he said.

‘Robert.’

‘What did I say to you, Daisy?’ he said.

She put her hands on her hips.

‘What did I tell you?’ he said. ‘You don’t say…anything.’

She was sick of his rules. ‘I’m sorry, Robert, but they were following Linda, and that’s not fair, regardless of whatever you might have done.’

He smiled, briefly, then his face changed and he hit her across the mouth, so that she found herself leaning over the armchair. She did not look back, and it seemed to take a long time for him to leave.

* * *

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In mid-December, it snowed – the first signs of a brutal winter. Daisy took the children into town to replace the out-dated Christmas decorations. Robert had said he’d be there, but he wasn’t.

Daisy wore her red coat, and a matching hat she’d made. She loved to see Caroline and Linda walking before her in North Laine, holding hands through the smoke and the snow as the sky darkened to a royal blue. St Bartholomew’s looked like a beached Ark, towering above the houses. The Vietnam protestors wore Santa hats, their hands pink with the cold. Linda’s brown hair folded into her collar. Beneath Daisy’s ribs was the pain of missing Paul.

At the top of North Street, Caroline made them stop at the giant vending machine, and they bought lukewarm pasties. The lights, strung out from the clock tower, clinked and pinged in the wind.

‘Yeah, that’s her,’ said an old woman, approaching with a grown-up daughter, the resemblance unmistakable. Two generations of bad news.

‘Here, Detective!’ the red-haired daughter said. ‘It’s a shame they ditched the deaf penalty. Jail’s too good for your bastard husband.’

Daisy straightened her back. ‘You stay away from us,’ she said.

‘I wouldn’t spit on you, darling. I hope it’s true what they say about pigs in jail.’

‘I am with my children,’ Daisy said.

‘Yeah, well, so was I,’ said the younger woman. They stared at each other. The children kicked the snow from their shoes, and the wind screamed up from the sea.

There was a bad atmosphere in the house that evening. The kids fought, and hissed insults at each other. Daisy burned the chops and the smell they gave off was weird
and chemical. At 11 pm, she finally sat, alone, by the Christmas tree, inhaling its rich northern tang, her throat burning from the cheap sherry she was drinking.

Candlelight trembled behind a glass Santa above the bright hole of the fireplace.

The headlights swung across the ceiling. The car smacked into the dustbin.

Drunk. Robert tried to enter the house quietly, and failed. ‘Jesus, it’s freezing,’ he said, full of plastic good-cheer and half-concealed guilt. ‘Hey, Daze, wake the kids up, it’s Christmas.’

‘Where have you been?’ Daisy said.

‘Ray’s.’

‘Don’t you think you should be with your family at a time like this?’

‘A time like what? Screw the Yard! Anyway, Ray hasn’t got a family, has he?

Sandra’s bugged off because of all this nonsense. Jesus. You women don’t seem to have any notion.’

‘What did you say?’ she said.

‘Well, listen to you, as soon as I walk in the bastard door.’

He took off his jacket. No tie, she saw.

‘What’s happening, Robert? Are you being investigated?’

‘There’s no way it’ll go ahead. Forget it. They’ve gone in to talk to old Clore, but they won’t get anything, because Clore owes me.’

‘What does he owe you? All these people. What do we all owe you, Robert?’

Caroline came bounding in, wearing her pyjamas. ‘Daddy!’ she cried.

‘Caro! Come here!’

Robert sang ‘White Christmas’ and danced around the room with Caroline. Soon after, Linda wandered in, pained from sleep. She sat on the floor near the tree.

‘It’s late, Linda,’ Daisy said. ‘You should go back to bed.’
‘I was having a nightmare.’
‘What was it?’
‘I dreamed I couldn’t read, again.’

After Christmas, Britain was snow-covered for two months. The coldest winter since 1814. On the wireless, they said that the sea had frozen for a mile out from shore in Herne Bay. Up on the cliff, giant icicles hung from the Seacombe’s guttering. The girls pulled them down and used them as walking sticks and daggers. Steam rose from the shoulders of the workmen who gritted the roads. Steam, and smoke, rose from everything. It was as if the town was smouldering.

Inspector Lyle came to the house in January, and left a crescent of unclean snow on the doormat.

‘Robert’s not here,’ Daisy said.

‘I came to speak to you, Mrs Seacombe, as it happens,’ said Lyle.

Daisy looked over his shoulder, and saw Inspector Ford waiting in the car. A young woman sat in the back.

‘Don’t they want to come in to warm?’ Daisy said.

Lyle hesitated. ‘I thought it best if Ford remained outside.’

Both he and Daisy smiled ruefully, and they went through to the living room, which was bright with reflected light from the snow. Lyle pinched the thighs of his trousers, and sat down on the sofa. Daisy took the armchair. ‘Who was the blonde? In the car?’

‘Oh, that’s Margie. She types the reports,’ Lyle said, waving a file in his hand.
‘We have to keep her close by, because she knows everything. Apparently she’s typed 300,000 words this week.’
All those words, thought Daisy, with envy. Her own life had gone quiet, now she couldn’t see Paul.

Lyle looked out of the patio doors at the shed, and the skeletal frame of the swing chair, half buried in snow. A seagull, almost camouflaged in that weather, tried to keep its footing on a fence post.

‘I can’t get used to it,’ said Lyle.

‘What?’

‘Those. The gulls. I’m quite unable to sleep from the noise of them.’

‘I don’t even hear them anymore.’

‘I’m sure. Of course, my wife forced me to watch The Birds recently, and it had rather an impact. I don’t know if you saw it, but…’

‘I liked it,’ Daisy said, thinking of Paul, who had sat next to her. ‘Especially the opening, when she arrives at the bay.’

‘Weren’t you frightened?’

‘Not by the birds. Some of the family scenes, perhaps. The mother-in-law, certainly.’

Lyle laughed. ‘A film lover,’ he said.

Daisy ignored the comment, and nodded at the file that Lyle was holding. ‘Nobody will tell me what’s going on,’ Daisy said.

Lyle took out a piece of paper, which looked as though it had been ironed. He passed it to Daisy. ‘This is a list of household goods,’ he said.

‘Robert is not going to like that you came here,’ Daisy said.

‘But this is all very routine. Very normal. Would you look at the list, please?’

She scanned the inventory of her home. She felt exposed, and wondered how they had put together such a document. They knew the manufacturer of her cutlery. Even
Daisy didn’t know that. She stopped reading halfway down. ‘Everything seems present,’ she said.

Lyle took out a notebook. ‘We believe the deposit for the car was raised by selling…’ he consulted a page, ‘a gold necklace with leaf design to a man called George Simpson, proprietor of the nightclub, Lindy’s, on West Street. Was that necklace yours? Do you know anything about it?’

She shook her head.

‘We have been unable to trace any attendant papers of sale for the gas oven.’

‘Is this what it’s all about?’ Daisy said. ‘That my husband doesn’t keep his receipts? What a lot of nonsense.’

Lyle simply continued down the list. Several of the items had a background Daisy didn’t know. The television was ‘donated’ by a butcher. Half of Robert’s wardrobe consisted of so-called ‘gifts’.

‘What do you want me to say?’ Daisy said.

‘Did you know the means by which these goods were procured?’

Daisy did not know. She felt heat rising to her face and neck. ‘How can I be expected to remember all that?’

‘Mrs Seacombe, I appreciate this is not easy. Nobody likes to be told that their home is founded on -’

‘You don’t know what my home is founded on, Inspector Lyle.’

But he smiled, as if he did know.

February brought blizzards, and ten-foot drifts on the Downs, but when the thaw came, in March, Daisy went walking as often as she could. She found it hard to stay in the house; her own possessions began to look rotten to her. One afternoon, she
walked along the cliff-top path, and saw the kestrel’s brick-coloured back beneath her, the only bit of colour on that misty, disintegrating day. She went to a café on the seafront – not the Regency – and she watched the fog creep towards the steamed-up windows. In her mind, she wrote to Paul, told him that she could not stop thinking about him. \textit{It used to be good enough to carry on conversations with you in my head, but since we met, I realise my imagination does not do you justice. I’m bursting with words.}

When she finally stepped back out into the cold, he was coming around the corner in his work clothes, oil on his hands, as if she had thought him into being. It was like a miracle. Music drifted out of one of the hotels – just a few stray notes. Daisy looked at his jaw, which was darkened by afternoon stubble. She looked at his eyes, which were watering with the cold. She felt herself smiling, but before it came to her lips, Paul saw her. He lowered his head. He crossed the road.

‘Wait,’ she said. ‘Paul.’

But Paul did not stop, and she did not call out again, for fear someone might see. Hands in his pockets, he took the steps down to the beach, and out of sight. For a few moments, she was shocked by his reaction, but perhaps it was perfectly simple. She knew, now, how he’d taken the letter she’d sent him. She had asked him to leave her alone, and he was going to honour that wish.

Seeing him was the best and worst thing that happened to her, that day.

Robert was home, that night. He went to bed early, and when Daisy joined him, he was almost asleep. She noticed that his fingernails were bitten down to the quick, so that they looked painful and raw. That was unusual for Robert. He had a certain
pride in his appearance.

Daisy could not rid herself of the image of Paul on the seafront, and in some ways she didn’t want to. She sat up in bed, her eyes wide. She had so many things she wanted to say to him.

‘It’s okay, Daisy,’ said Robert, his eyes still closed. ‘You don’t have to worry. I won’t let anything bad happen to you or the girls.’

‘Yes. Thank you, Robert.’

She slipped into a light sleep, from which she was awoken by the presence of Linda, standing by the bed. ‘What is it?’ Daisy whispered.

‘Come with me.’

As Daisy rose and went into the hallway, there was a noise like a flailing electric cable. She followed Linda to the back bedroom, where the din became louder. Cats, fighting. The curtains were parted, and Daisy looked down on scores of cats darting and scratching at each other, their eyes flashing blank in the moonlight. It took a moment for Daisy’s vision to adjust, but soon she saw the bloodied corpses of scores of rodents, scattered across the lawn.

‘What’s happening?’ Linda said.

‘Did you see the person who did this?’ Daisy said.

‘Person? It’s cats, Mummy.’

‘Yes, yes of course.’

Linda breathed quietly for a moment. ‘Do you think someone might have put down the rats, to get the cats to come?’

‘I don’t know,’ Daisy said. She watched her daughter blink, and look out of the window. There was a fox in the garden, too, making its odd stifled screams.

‘Dad doesn’t like cats,’ Linda said.
‘No. Quite,’ Daisy said.

‘Should we tell him?’ Linda said.

‘Not now. Better let him rest.’

Whoever did it, Daisy thought, knows Robert well enough.

In the morning, she tried to keep him away from the back door until she could get out there with the shovel, but he opened the curtains in the living room. He shut his eyes and wheezed for a moment. He put a hand to his chest. ‘Robert, are you all right?’

‘I will get them,’ he said, striding past her, and shrugging on his coat. ‘And if it’s kids,’ he shouted back, ‘I’ll get the parents, too.’

* * *

Daisy did not expect Lyle to return to her house. The inspector was alone, this time. The March mist lingered behind him like a blank screen. ‘May I come in, Mrs Seacombe?’

She took his hat and raincoat, and hung them up. Lyle had been haunting the city and the CID for only a few months, but he already looked like a changed man. He had a heavy cold, or possibly a hangover, and his skin was dry and dull. There was none of the cocksure attitude he’d displayed on his first visit. Daisy was surprised that someone she’d assumed to be a gentleman would sniff so much. Where was his handkerchief?

‘You’ve missed him, again, I’m afraid,’ she said.

‘I know where he is,’ said Lyle. ‘To be quite honest, I’m glad to have a break from
him.’ Lyle paused, shocked by his own words. ‘I do apologise,’ he said, as they went through to the living room.

Lyle’s legs were long, and when he sat down, his knees rose above the level of his waist. His trouser cuffs showed chalky stains.

‘I’m not worried,’ Daisy said, sternly. ‘Robert’s not worried, so neither am I.’

‘Can I be frank, Mrs Seacombe? I think you’re intelligent. And I think it would be very difficult for you to remain unaware of your husband’s various dealings, but it struck me - ’

‘You don’t know what you’re doing,’ she said.

Lyle blinked, taken aback by her sharp tone. ‘You sound angry. Do you want him to be investigated? To be convicted?’

‘What kind of a question is that?’

‘Given the nature of what we’re talking about…’

‘I don’t know what we’re talking about, Mr Lyle. I don’t know anything. I wish to God I did.’

Lyle sniffed. ‘Be careful what you wish for, as they say.’

‘You’re not formally investigating him,’ she said. ‘I mean. Should you be here at all?’

‘Mrs Seacombe, the irregularities we are looking into are wide-ranging and unpleasant. As a relatively minor example, has your husband ever spoken to you about abortions?’

A memory of an overheard conversation came to mind. Just a fragment of talk that she didn’t really understand. ‘That’s illegal,’ she said, quietly.

‘Indeed.’

She could not imagine that her husband was liberating poor young girls who’d got
themselves in trouble. ‘What’s that got to do with Robert?’

‘We know that for some time he’s been visiting an elderly woman, Mrs Thorst, in Brunswick Square, who may or may not have performed illegal operations. It appears that this woman, who is quite frail – physically and otherwise – has been paying your husband sums of money.’

‘He’s…you mean blackmail?’

‘Mrs Thorst is not the sort of person who would last long in jail. And she has a daughter with a minor criminal record, whom she is trying to protect.’

Daisy took a moment to compose herself. ‘I don’t believe Robert would do anything like that.’

‘Ruin a family, you mean? That’s a very small part of it…shall I talk about prostitution?’

Daisy looked away for a long time. She studied the shining tiles of the fireplace. ‘I will make tea,’ she said.

In the kitchen, she poured boiling water into the red teapot. Sometimes, when the traffic died down, you could hear the sea. She thought of Robert, in the garden of their old house, back in the countryside, and how he used to wake at night, crying out. You make your choices without realising, she thought, but they are choices nonetheless.

When she came back, she placed the tray on the side table. ‘I’d like you to take a look at some photographs.’

‘I don’t want to,’ Daisy said.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I don’t want to look at your pictures, or read your lists about my house, or listen to what you’ve seen my children doing.’
Lyle pressed his fingers to his temples. ‘Mrs Seacombe. I thought, after what you’ve heard today…when you came into the Town Hall and attacked Ford, it seemed to me that you had a strong moral aspect to your character.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I find that some people…especially women…have values which are higher than their own interests.’

‘I do not believe that Robert did the things you say.’

‘Oh, come on!’ he shouted. The room whined with the following silence, but Daisy stayed calm. She’d lived with Robert her whole adult life, so she was not intimidated by Lyle.

‘Rumours and lies,’ Daisy said. ‘Not everyone likes you when you’re in the police, Mr Lyle, as I’m sure you know.’

‘It’s Inspector Lyle.’

‘Some people want to see you broken. Clearly, my husband has enemies, who are making these wild accusations. And you obviously don’t have any evidence to prove them.’

‘We have - ’

‘You have nothing!’ It was Daisy’s turn to raise her voice. ‘If you had any proof, you wouldn’t be in my house, speaking to me alone, and telling me to “come on”.’

She could see Lyle’s chest rising and falling. He had exhausted himself. After a moment, he held up his hands in surrender. ‘I’ll admit that we’ve had problems locating certain acquaintances. It seems that people don’t like talking about your husband, Mrs Seacombe. For some reason.’

‘And you thought I’d be different.’

Lyle stood. His fingers were long and thin. He looked into the middle distance.
‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I do think that. I still think it. The list of Ray Hammond’s female friends…we’ve spoken to them all. They despise the man. But they won’t do the right thing. I believed you would.’

‘You really think I’m going to cheat on my husband?’

Lyle turned to her, quickly. He was quiet for a moment. ‘Cheat on him? Don’t you think that’s a very interesting way of putting it?’

‘Not particularly.’

Lyle looked ashamed. He seemed to be pleading with her. ‘I didn’t want to do this,’ he said.

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘I mean Paul Landry, Mrs Seacombe.’

It may have been the first time that anyone had ever spoken his full name to her.

‘I’m not sure…’

‘Oh, don’t,’ said Lyle. ‘Just don’t.’

‘Get out of my house.’

‘No.’

‘You come in here…you have men sitting outside in cars, following my…my family…’

‘You. Mainly we have followed you. We have a diary full of your meetings. We’ve spoken to Mr Landry, and - ’

‘What?’

She wanted to rage at him, but she could feel the tears beginning. The image came to her of Paul turning away from her on the street, and now she knew why.

‘What have you done?’ she said.

‘Done? We talked to him, that’s all.’
Daisy clenched her fists. ‘Does Robert know?’

‘I don’t believe so. Incredibly. I do think he’s probably a jealous man, given cause.’

They both fell silent, for a moment. Carefully, Daisy rose from her chair.

‘It puts us all in quite a situation, though, doesn’t it?’ Lyle continued. ‘Because what if he did find out? Having spent a little time with him, I can almost imagine what he’d do.’

‘You shouldn’t speak to me this way,’ Daisy said.

‘And I wonder how the employers of Monsieur Landry would feel about his having an affair with a married woman. I wonder, for that matter, how the lady in Canada, to whom Paul Landry sends half of his wages, would feel about it.’

Daisy instinctively put a hand to her stomach. She began to move towards the living room door. She wanted all of this to be over.

‘Oh…,’ Lyle said.

‘Don’t you dare…’ Daisy said.

‘Oh, you didn’t know. I am sorry. You see, men like that – it’s very rarely one woman, in my experience.’

Daisy strode forward and slapped Lyle across the mouth. The surprise of the blow made him stumble backwards, and he knocked over the milk jug. In a moment, he straightened, looking suddenly older.

‘You sicken me,’ Daisy said. ‘What business is it of yours? Paul has done nothing wrong! He’s done nothing, and you just trample him.’

Lyle pressed his lip, and then examined his fingertips. His teeth were stained with blood.

‘I respect you, Mrs Seacombe,’ Lyle said. ‘On the one hand, I am sorry that your
feelings have been hurt, but you must see that this case is bigger than your private concerns. The country cannot be run by a mafia behind a badge.’

‘You’re the same!’ Daisy said. ‘Don’t you see? You’ve done exactly the same thing as my husband has done all these years.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘You’ve picked the most vulnerable person, you’ve found their weakness and you’ve exploited it.’

‘There is no comparison.’

‘That woman – the abortionist…you say that Robert used her own child against her. Well, you’ve gone after Paul, and all he did was write me some letters. Fine, barge into the house of a woman on her own,’ Daisy said, pointing to herself. ‘I married Robert. I stayed with him. I deserve it. But Paul is a good man.’

‘A good man? He’s - ’

‘You don’t know anything. Paul and I. These are normal things. Human weaknesses. Everybody has them. What’s on your conscience, Mr Lyle? What are you hiding?’

He looked away and sighed, sadly. ‘I’m afraid I’m quite incorruptible,’ he said.

‘No,’ she said, her teeth gritted. ‘No, you’re not. From now on, Mr Lyle, you’re just as bad as the others. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.’

Lyle frowned as he walked along the hallway to the front door. He retrieved his raincoat and his hat. His lip had begun to bleed again, and he sucked it. ‘I want you to know that Mr Landry…he didn’t betray any…’

‘Don’t you ever speak to me about him, again,’ Daisy said.

Lyle nodded. Daisy wanted to ask how he intended to proceed. Whether he would tell Robert, what she should be prepared for, how this would all end. What it would
mean for Paul. But pride stopped her from asking. She swung the door open.

Lyle bowed his head and walked out into the fog. Daisy closed the door, and sat at the kitchen table. An hour later, she heard Caroline and Linda on the path. She only caught part of their whispered conversation. ‘She’s crying,’ Caroline said.

‘Let’s walk around for a bit, then,’ Linda said.
In the biology lab, the lesson begins without Cassie. Mr Solomon draws a cross-section of a flower on the whiteboard. She is late, and then her lateness agonizingly becomes absence. Lucas disguises his hurt by acting it out. He stares out of the window in a way that he hopes Mr Solomon will understand as mature. But beneath the act, he fears that she is gradually slipping away from him.

*Ridiculous*, he signs to himself at break time. There is probably a good explanation. Perhaps the hydrocephalus kid needed her. He is over-reacting, surely. It is just one lesson.

* * *

At 3.30pm, he walks home. The day has been a wash-out. Cassie didn’t turn up for his afternoon lessons, either, and his hearing aids played up. Some sort of interference. Now, trucks roll past him on the B-road. Their wake almost drags him off the pavement.

He takes the alleyway behind the backyards of Ringdean. The alley smells of strimmed nettles, dog-shit, and Diamond White.

What you can do when you sign, Cassie taught him, is rebuild a space. You can’t
do that in speech. Words slip off the surface of things. Speech is full of time, and it forces you to move on. Her brother, she said, could reconstruct, in perfect detail, the flat in London where they’d lived as kids. He’d assemble it, item by item, in the air around him.

*Can you do it?* She’d once asked Lucas, in the basin. *Describe a room, from your house.*

When you sign *describe*, it’s as if you are pulling something out of your chest, hand-over-hand.

He’d told her about his bedroom, leaving out details he thought childish or embarrassing, such as his Jordan bean-bag, his poster of the Fresh Prince, the cupboards full of old toy figures from Hordak to Splinter. But now, in the alleyway, another room abruptly comes to him, and the memory is so vivid, he stops walking. He focuses on the image. He delves into the memory and looks around it, as Cassie has taught him. He sees a brown, corduroy, button-backed sofa, and a leather strap of horse bells on the wall. A shelf of videos stands on the right, next to a television with a wooden side and metal teeth for the channels. Lucas is in the room, younger, sat before the television. Summer light comes over his shoulder, making reflections in the TV screen, so he can’t see the programme.

Lucas rotates the image, and sees a set of patio doors. Outside the doors, in the garden, a man is standing by the shed. It is Lucas’ grandfather. He is looking up at the house – at the roof or the top windows. In one hand he has a garden tool, in the other hand a white handkerchief.

Now, in the alleyway, Lucas does not know why the memory disturbs him. It is something about the way his grandfather just *looks* at the house, the blankness of his staring. Lucas feels sick. He puts his hands against the flint wall of the alley and
It’s just one day, he says to himself. She’ll be back tomorrow.

* * *

The first few days Cassie is absent, Lucas asks the teachers for information. He simply wants to talk about her, but the staff don’t know anything. The only reason they notice she’s gone is because they have to deal with him, now. He sends her a text: I HOPE ALL IS OKAY. When she fails to reply, he writes GET WELL SOON. X

By the end of the week, he really begins to suffer – not in the dramatic way they do at the end of Shakespeare plays – but in that mundane everyday sense he’d suffered before her arrival. Only worse. There is nobody to take him down to the Basin after a geography lesson and explain what the hell it was all about, nobody with whom to exchange written notes on what they’d done the previous night. There is nobody with whom he can sign.

‘Hey, Cow! Where’s slut gone?’ says Duncan Youds.

Youds’ friends insinuate that Lucas has raped her, and dumped her dead body in the sea. He watches them bellowing at him. These past months, he stood up to them because of Cassie, but now she is gone.

His fingers twitch.

On Tuesday morning of the second week, he goes to The Cut before school. At 7am, it is not yet open for business. The barberpole is still. Lucas waits across the road, watching for movement from the top floor, but the curtains remain drawn.
Behind the shops, a band of violet cloud shifts to reveal the daytime moon.

Someone appears downstairs in The Cut, and Lucas’ heart jumps. It is Shell. She is setting up the shop: flicking on switches, and dragging huge leather chairs to the sinks. Lucas crosses the road and knocks on the door. Shell looks at him through the plate glass of the shopfront.

*Closed*, she signs.

Lucas points to himself. *L-U-C.*

*I know. I know who you are.*

When he realises that she will not open the door for him, he simply stares at her, through the glass. They stand a metre apart. Shell wears a faded, sleeveless Guns N Roses t-shirt; her hair is tied back, streaked blonde, and Lucas sees for the first time her resemblance to Cassie.

*Is Cassie here?* He asks.

*No.*

*Where is she?*

Shell straightens up and takes a long breath. *Don’t know. She’s an adult.*

*Do you know when she is coming back to school?*

Shell makes a pitying face. He certainly recognises that expression. *It’s not my business, really. It’s her life. You’ll have to talk to her.*

*But I don’t know where she is! You must know. She lives here!*

*Not really, these days.*

*What do you mean?*

*I’m sorry,* she signs, her fist circling on her chest. She looks away, down the street, and Lucas sees that she is disengaging. He tries to catch her eye again, but she has reached the limits of her patience. Lucas gives up. As he turns to go, he notices the
name of the blue-green liquid that disinfects the scissors: BARBERCIDE.

Sometimes, he doesn’t get the joke until it is too late.

There is a part of him that absolutely believes she will return for their joint performance of A Life in the Day, even when she fails to appear at the start of the lesson. When he sees Mrs Finch call his name, he strides confidently to the front with his paper, and stands before his peers, who sit in curved rows before him. He looks at the door, and then at his watch. Mrs Finch steps into his peripheral vision, and tells him it is time to begin. She keeps plants in the room, and Lucas can smell the warm soil in the pots. He starts to sign:

*I usually wake up with the sun. My curtains are red, and on a summer morning, they glow like a heart! I go downstairs and have breakfast with my mum at about 7am. My mum is beautiful, and she tells jokes that are a little bit funny and a little bit sad. For example…*

Lucas waits, because Cassie was supposed to tell the joke, here. It doesn’t make sense in sign language. After a moment, he goes on.

*My dad left home about a year ago, which made me pretty angry, but we're still friends. We are going swimming together most Mondays, although he’s been busy with work, recently. I like school. I wish the teachers would look at me when they're talking, but…*

Lucas looks up. Some of the other kids are watching him with their mouths open. Some of them are making an expression as if there is an unpleasant smell in the room. Others are laughing.

Iona stands up. She looks at him, and begins to talk. It takes Lucas a moment to
realise that she is interpreting. ‘…when he’s angry, he goes swimming. With his
dad. He works hard at his swimming.’

No, Lucas signs to her. You don’t have to do it. It doesn’t matter. I don’t need help. I don’t care.

‘I don’t mind,’ she says.

But Mrs Finch steps in. ‘Don’t please, Cassie. an individual coursework.’ Mrs Finch taps Lucas on the arm. ‘Lucas. You must speak, please. yourself. Otherwise, we can’t understand.’

Lucas nods for a few seconds. He looks down at the piece of paper on which his original Life in the Day is printed. ‘Okay,’ he says. ‘Okay. I wake up at 7am. My bedroom has a red colour-scheme. I brush my teeth, and take a shower. Sometimes I read for a while. At 7.30, I have breakfast. Typically, I have a high fibre cereal, such as Weetabix, or Shredded Wheat. In winter, I often warm the milk…’

He reads as quickly as he can, and soon, it is over. He does not look at the door, again, and he knows, now, that Cassie is really gone.

He is worries that he will forget their conversations. At school, he hides in the pines surrounding the swimming pool. He breathes in the warm chemical mist, and signs as if he’s signing to her. He comes up with answers that make it impossible for her to leave.

Despite his best efforts, he soon feels his sign vocabulary eroding. He’s not sure of the handshape in ‘stressful’, and forgets the whole sign for ‘busy’. He thinks of Marty McFly’s fingers disintegrating in Back to the Future.

In a maths lesson, Youds comes over and taps the table as if he’s knocking on a
door. He smiles at Lucas, but without the usual cruelty. His gang of mates are in a
different class for maths. Lucas notices, for the first time, that Youds' has eczema.
The skin flakes in the webs of his hands.

‘Good to see your itch back in town,’ he says.

‘What?’ says Lucas.

‘Cassie. Your support. I just saw her outside the staffroom.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. She said to tell you see you in biology.’

Lucas stands up, and sees the faces in the room turn towards him.

‘She’s got nice, man. I’d probably do her,’ says Youds.

‘Whatever,’ Lucas says, his hand instinctively chopping at his hip. He walks
towards the door, but his teacher orders him back to his seat. Lucas obeys, partly
because his heart is thumping so hard he can barely see.

The biology lab reeks of burned metal. Lucas waits for fifteen minutes, perfecting
an expression of sadness, which he intends to brighten into relief when she arrives.
But she does not arrive. He walks up to Mr Solomon’s desk, and makes his inquiry.
Mr Solomon has a Beckham haircut, and rolls up his sleeves during the summer
term. The girls adore him. He scans the register, trying to answer Lucas’ question.

‘Cassie? Do we have a Cassie?’

‘My support worker.’

Solomon blinks. ‘Oh yes. she’s left, though, hasn’t she?’

‘What?’ says Lucas.

‘I heard that and she quit. I’m sure they’ll hire a new rather late in the
year, now, I suppose.’

Lucas goes back to his desk. He tries to remember his old, pre-Cassie, self. That
boy would have advised self-control. So he sits down before a diagram of the human lung, and he tries to breathe. But perhaps it is too late to go back to the boy he was before she came.

At form period, after lunch, he approaches Youds. ‘You were lying, weren’t you?’ he says.

Youds nudges his friends, and they all laugh.

‘What’s up, Cow?’ says Youds. ‘gone and left you?’

‘Please,’ says Lucas. ‘Please don’t call me that. Please don’t call me Cow.’

‘Moooo!’

‘You didn’t really see her, did you?’ Lucas says.

‘hard to see someone, Cow, really, when they’re sucking your...’

Lucas grabs Youds’ neck with one hand, and squeezes his thumb and fingers into the thick flesh behind the jaw. Youds’ eyes bulge, and he tries to take hold of Lucas’ wrist, but he has no grip. One of the other boys pushes Lucas, but Lucas turns and kicks him. He walks with Youds, pressing harder into the depths of his neck. He feels like he could kill him.

Señor Potts stumbles across the room to intervene. Lucas knows that Potts is probably shouting in Spanish, but he gets the message. He lets go, and Youds falls backwards, his eyes red and watering. He keeps repeating a word, over and over. Lucas has to look beyond Señor Potts’ to see. At first, he thinks that Youds is mooing, again, but he’s not. He’s saying, ‘Soon. Soon. Soon.’

That afternoon, they have PE. Lucas finds that his kitbag is missing. He searches the onion-stinking changing rooms, but nobody will make eye-contact with him. Eventually, he finds his dark blue polo shirt soaked and swelling in one of the toilets. He uses a cricket stump to fish it out, and transfers it straight to the bin. The PE
teachers tell him he must find something to wear in the lost property box, and the only thing that fits him is a pink Global Hypercolour t-shirt from about 1990. He wears it with white shorts, black socks and his school shoes.

Mercifully, the afternoon’s activity is cross-country running, and Lucas is allowed to be alone, pounding the chalk trails of the nearby woods, and then stomping out through the parched brown fields. The enormous sky turns white, and then graphite grey. With his body-heat, the borrowed t-shirt changes colour, too: from pink to purple.

Back in the changing rooms, Youds and his crew are waiting.

‘What, now?’ Lucas says.

They all repeat his words, contorting their mouths and mooing. Lucas sidles past to get his clothes. He checks his trousers for wet patches, and his shirt tail for shit. Everything seems normal, but he stuffs his uniform into his bag, anyway. He needs to get out of here, quickly.

Youds puts a hand on his shoulder, but when Lucas turns, Youds flinches. ‘We’re not anything to you, now, Cow,’ Youds says. ‘better to wait last day. Then, we’re going to fuck you up.’

‘Like you did, today, you mean?’

‘You’ll see.’

Lucas waits for his father outside the school gates in his improvised sportswear. The other kids leave on buses and bicycles. They clamber into cars, or march off in big walking groups, licking Twisters or supping Tango. Soon enough, the street empties, and Lucas is alone. He spends a few moments looking back at the school buildings. In the high window of the dance studio, he sees girls pretending to be
ponies, but he is the Cow.

It rains, of course. The big cold drops throw up puffs of dust from the pavement, and after a while it is hammering down. There is no shelter, here. Lucas’ hair cream runs down his face, smelling of oranges and almonds, and his Hypercolour t-shirt turns pink again. It would be typical, he thinks, if Cassie were to turn up, now. He wishes it, despite himself, but she does not come, and neither does his dad.

Drenched, he stares at a yellow sign, which reads: DEAD SLOW CHILDREN.

Walking home, he sees flags of St George in the windows of the houses he passes. They droop, sodden, around lampposts, red and white and twisted like the barberpole of old. Come here to get your flesh slit, they seem to say. Come here for help.

When he gets back to the bungalow, his mother is standing in front of the hallway mirror, trying on a bright green cardigan. The price tag dangles from the sleeve.

‘You look nice,’ he says.

‘You said more colours,’ she says.

‘Yes, we make quite a pair,’ he says, looking down at his t-shirt.

She glances at him, and her face fills with worry. ‘Oh, Lucas, Love, you’re soaked. Dad called to say he was held up at work. There was nothing he could do. I called the school, but obviously…’

Obviously they don’t give a shit, Lucas thinks. And his dad ran away when things got tough. ‘It’s no problem,’ he forces himself to say.

‘He’s really sorry,’ she says. ‘Lucas? What’s wrong?’

Nobody knows, he thinks. Nobody knows what’s wrong with me. The experts have been trying to figure it out for years, and if they can’t come up with answer, how the fuck am I supposed to know? ‘I’m fine, thanks, Mum.’

‘How was school?’
‘Like bathing in a vat of acid,’ he says.

‘Pardon?’

‘It was good.’

She looks at him, and then looks at the clock on the wall. ‘Oh, well,’ she says. ‘It will be over soon.’

Lucas nods.

* * *

*I feel like life is quite simple,* Paul Landry wrote, in the second letter. *If you know what you want, you just proceed towards it, one step at a time. You don’t have to run, or make a fuss.*

Linda has waited until she can wait no more. On the day she decides to visit the hospice, Ringdean feels hot and dead still. In the brittle bushes lining Downside, she sees Lilt cans, and Mr Freeze packets like IV drips. She wears her new lime green cardigan. The silk blend feels good and cool on her shoulders. In her handbag, she carries letters and a bookmark.

She catches the bus to Hove. Through the open windows of the top-deck, she hears gulls screaming warnings to their young around the rooftops and gutterings. The slate-coloured fledglings make their early flights. Every year, she finds one or two resting on the pavement, exhausted and exposed, as if they’ve given up. She thinks of her boy. Lucas once asked her at what age deaf children die. He couldn’t remember meeting a deaf adult, and had assumed they just didn’t make it.

On the lawn outside the hospice, they have set out garden tables and wicker chairs, but these remain empty. Inside, Linda signs the visitor book. ‘I’m here to see my
father,’ she tells the receptionist. ‘Robert Seacombe. Is he being read to, today?’

The woman licks her finger and checks through a document. ‘Yes, the readers will be here in half-an-hour or so. But I can cancel if you’d prefer to speak to your father alone.’

‘No, that’s fine.’

‘Oh, and we’ve put Mr Seacombe’s music on, as you requested,’ the receptionist says with a smile.

‘That wasn’t me,’ Linda replies.

When she gets to the room, Linda finds that it is Sinatra, today, with a live audience laughing in the background. She switches it off. A shard of yellow light falls on her father, and on the rubbery blue floor of his room. Robert is in navy blue shirtsleeves. It seems to Linda that he has not aged for a decade. There is less of him, but what remains looks no older. Perhaps, she thinks, they are both stuck in the same wretched moment, unable to move on.

‘Hello, Dad,’ she says, taking the soft chair at the foot of the bed. A wooden stool stands at the head end, for the reader. ‘I hope you’re…I hope you’re not in pain.’

Her father has a ganglion on his wrist – a harmless lump of fluid. It has been there as long as she can remember – the result of a blunt impact. Occasionally, he used to go to the doctor, who would suck out the fluid with a syringe. Robert said the doctor pulled so hard on the plunger, he had to brace his feet against the desk. No need for that, now.

‘I’ve got to be honest, Dad,’ she says. ‘I didn’t come here to see you, today. I’m really sorry. I’m here to see the reader.’

The next half-hour passes in silence.
Even in bright green, Linda is someone with the stillness to sink into backgrounds. When the reader finally arrives, she has a brief moment to observe him before he notices her. He wears a white cotton shirt, open at the collar, grey trousers and brogues like blocks of wood. He holds a blue plastic cup from the water cooler, which flashes with light from the window. Although he does not immediately greet Robert, as he puts a leather satchel down on the stool, he does glance at him. His expression is difficult to read; it is almost a look of relief, as if he has travelled a long way to reach this room.

His face changes when he sees Linda. He stands very still.

‘Sorry,’ Linda says. ‘I didn’t mean to startle you.’

‘Oh, hello,’ he says. ‘I’m. I’m with. I’m a reader. I come in and read aloud each week to some of the residents. Those who can’t read for themselves.’

‘Yes, we met briefly once before. I’m Linda.’ For the moment, she stops herself from saying more.

‘Right,’ he says. Hurriedly, he opens the satchel, and roots around inside. He finds round rimless spectacles, and puts them on.

Linda feels oddly calm. She cannot be sure that this is the same person who wrote the letters. She watches a short, well-dressed man, carefully sit down with a book. He keeps his back straight, his feet flat on the ground. His hair is neat, greyscale, and clippered around the ears. It seems impossible that she could have looked for him, searched records from other continents, while he was sitting right here next to her father.

He opens the book with his thumbs, and takes out a fresh bookmark.

‘I am reading The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,’ he says to her, still looking at the book. ‘Do you know it?’
‘I love it,’ Linda says.

‘Did your father read it, before…?’

‘My father read mainly history books, and true crime.’

Now, he looks at Linda. He pauses for a moment. ‘I read only fiction to the residents,’ he eventually says. He frowns. ‘You know, if you’d like to continue your visit alone, I can come back next week. I don’t want to disturb…’

‘I don’t know your name,’ Linda says, although that hardly seems true.

He carefully stands from the stool. Linda stands too. ‘Paul,’ he says, and they shake hands by her father’s bed. They go back to their seats.

‘Please, Paul,’ she says. ‘Go ahead and read.’

He nods and turns to Linda’s father. ‘Good morning, Robert,’ he says. ‘I hope you are well.’ He looks down at the book. ‘Chapter Four. “I have enough gunpowder in this jar to blow up this school,” said Miss Lockhart in even tones.’

Remembering the line from when she read it, years ago, Linda laughs spontaneously. Paul turns sharply towards the sound, but then relaxes. He closes his eyes, and rocks gently with laughter, too. After a moment, his face settles, and he looks back at the book, but he seems unable to continue.

‘I’m sorry,’ Linda says, still smiling. ‘But are you Paul Landry?’

Without looking at her, he lets his shoulders drop, and he sighs. ‘I am,’ he says.

‘Paul,’ she says. ‘Do you mind if I talk to you in the corridor?’

‘Of course,’ he says. He turns to Robert. ‘Excuse us for a moment,’ he says, quietly.

Paul stands, and Linda shoulders her bag and follows him out of the room. The corridor is empty, and in panic, Linda commences with the speech she has written down and rehearsed at home. ‘My mother died some years ago, but I recently found
some letters with her belongings. I know it’s been a long time, but I’m trying to find out…’

She stops, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Paul Landry has removed his spectacles, and covered his face with his hands. Secondly, she can’t stand the hollowness of her speech, the fearful fake sound of her own voice. ‘The truth is, Mr Landry,’ she says, ripping up the script. ‘The truth is that I miss my mum. I miss her so, so much. When I think about it, we didn’t get very long together, you know. It feels like I didn’t know her well enough, and I want to. I want to know everything about her. And if you wrote those letters, Mr Landry, then you can tell me plenty about my mum. You owe me that, I think.’

Paul Landry leans against the wall. He blinks. The skin around his eyes is red. He puts his glasses back on. ‘How did you find me? I mean, how did you know?’ he says.

She takes the thistle bookmark out of her bag, and hands it to him. ‘You dropped this,’ she says. ‘I recognised the handwriting.’

He smiles, looking at the bookmark. ‘Smart work,’ he says. Then he looks at her and shakes his head. ‘You sure do remind me of your mother,’ he says. ‘Oh, Jesus, I hope you don’t mind me saying that.’

‘That is the nicest thing anyone’s said to me for a long time.’

Gently, he taps the book on his thigh, and looks both ways down the corridor. ‘Perhaps it would be better if we talk somewhere else,’ he says.

Linda nods. She opens the door to Robert’s room. ‘Bye, Dad,’ she says. ‘I’m sorry. I’ll be back soon. Promise.’
FOURTEEN
Daisy wrote to Paul one last time, after Inspector Lyle’s final visit. That evening, the spring light through the patio doors was just enough to see the page. She was sorry, she wrote, for the hurt she’d caused, for the position she’d put him in. She told him she no longer felt in control of her own life. *I don’t know exactly what they said to you, but I have a good idea. No wonder you turned away from me on the street. All that time ago, you said that things between us didn’t have to be dramatic, but now look.*

She folded the note, and slipped it into the envelope. She looked around her living room. The sight of the place made her nauseous, these days. Behind the neatness of the bookshelf and the cabinet and the television and the wireless, and the family photographs, she could sense the destruction to come, when Robert finally found out. She imagined the curtain pole ripped from the plaster, the radio tumbled, its works exposed, and the patio door smashed. She imagined Robert, pale and drunk, or ruddy and drunk, or sober, and garbling his accusations: *Who is he? Or I am going to jail because of you, or take the kids and get out of this house, or I will see to it that you are ruined, or you are as good as dead.*

She posted the letter that evening, but received no reply. She did not expect to.

One morning in April she was washing the dishes, looking out at the sea. A huge ship lay on the horizon line, the bent arm of some giant crane pointing upwards from its body. Upstairs, she heard Robert turning over in the bath, his loud, startled
cough.

Across the road, by the bus stop, a man in a suit observed the house. Daisy had noted the fact that he had let three buses go by. She wondered if there was really any need for this kind of surveillance, any more. Hadn’t Lyle got what he wanted, now?

The next moment, she saw Paul Landry limping down the path to her house. Her heart leapt. What suicidal act was this? She walked into the hallway, and listened for her husband, who sniffed and sighed. She watched Paul’s shape grow in the coloured glass of the door. He stopped. They were a yard from each other. The letterbox rattled, and a local newspaper fell onto the carpet and unfurled. It was an edition they had already received.

‘Daisy?’ Robert called from the bathroom.

‘What, Robert? What?’ she shouted. ‘It’s just the paper.’

She listened to the tap dripping. Next door’s letterbox banged, and she jumped.

Daisy picked up the newspaper and skimmed through it. She knew where to look. The cinema listings. The Electric Theatre. A film, underlined.

A few days later, she came home from grocery shopping to find Robert at the kitchen table, impeccably dressed in a navy suit and liver-coloured tie. His hands were clasped, and his elbows rested on the table. This is it, she thought. Suddenly, she felt able to fight.

‘It’s finished,’ he said.

‘What is?’

‘The thing with the Yard. They’re clearing their stuff out of the Town Hall. Nothing is going to happen. There’ll be no investigation. It’s as I said it would be, more or less.’
He smiled.

‘And that’s the end of it?’ Daisy said, placing her bag on the table.

‘I am sorry,’ he said.

‘For what?’

‘It hasn’t been easy on you and the kids.’

Daisy clenched her teeth, and said nothing. She felt like upturning the table.

‘There was some…wheeler-dealing, in the end. The upshot being that I am finished in CID. It’s early retirement for me and Ray. For the best, probably. We’re going into business, together.’

‘Bus-boys?’

‘Private security.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ Daisy said.

‘Daisy, those things they said I did…Half of it was rubbish.’

‘Which half, Robert?’

There was the smell of talcum powder about him.

‘I never meant to hurt anyone. I never picked on innocent people.’

‘Innocent,’ Daisy said.

‘Do you believe me?’

Daisy unbuttoned her coat, and slumped down in the chair across from her husband. ‘Why did they drop the investigation?’

Robert sat back in his seat. She noticed that he wasn’t gloating. His skin was pale.

‘We reckon it’s because of old Gerry Clore,’ he said. The former chief-constable.

‘He was meant to be their stellar witness, but he bottled it in the end. Apparently he’s had a bit of a breakdown.’

‘People can change, Robert.’
Robert shook his head. ‘No. He won’t testify.’

‘I meant you,’ Daisy said.

In the plush red dark of the Electric Theatre, Daisy kissed Paul’s cheek.

‘When you wrote to say you couldn’t see me,’ he said, ‘I didn’t know what had happened. You’ve blown it, I thought. She thinks you’re a freak.’

‘You are a freak. You always have been – writing letters to girls you don’t even know.’

‘Just the one girl. That was reckless by the way. That kiss.’

‘I don’t care. What did they say to you? The inspectors?’

‘Everything you’d expect. I was pretty sure I’d ruined your life.’ His eyes were watering.

‘Paul, I didn’t believe them, but they said something stupid about you sending money to a woman in…it’s really none of my business.’

Paul grinned. ‘I’m paying off the last of the house, for Marguerite, my half-sister. Listen, there have been stranger marriages in the prairie lands of the Canadian west, but Marguerite’s not my type.’

‘Stop it.’

‘The age gap is too big, and quite frankly she is stone cold crazy.’

‘Paul.’

‘Sure would be convenient, paperwork-wise, what with her having the same surname and all.’

The auditorium darkened, and there was a rustling, and then a hush.
After the film, she went with him to his flat. He lived at the top of the city’s steepest hill, and the bus struggled past the yeasty stink of the brewery and beyond the school, and the tight terraced streets packed with bright-coloured houses and pubs on every corner. It had always been a poor area. Daisy’s grandparents had once lived around there, amongst the herring-curers and the Italian street-vendors. But in the spring light, it looked gorgeous to Daisy.

Paul lived near the top of the hill, next to a laundrette. The hot, sweet waft of chemicals came from the windows. Daisy turned and looked out over the city: the new tower-blocks, the park, the London train inching over the viaduct.

Inside, cats roamed the communal hallway. On the wall was a wooden structure with separate slots for each resident’s mail. This was where her letters came. They went upstairs, and Daisy laughed, nervously. ‘It’s a heck of a climb,’ she said.

‘Yeah, but you should see me getting to the station in the mornings. I roll down that hill like a cheese wheel.’

Daisy was still laughing when they got into the flat. She had expected the place to be spare, plain and fastidious, but it was in fact full and warm. Much of the floor was covered by a beautiful striped rug, and the sofa was dark orange. Over by the sash window, his writing desk was cluttered with junk – cigarette cards of old ice-hockey players, and a tourist photograph of the famous giant smoking pipe from his hometown. On the walls hung photographs of his family, along with film posters, some of them in French.

‘This must be your mother,’ Daisy said, touching a black and white picture of a smiling, dark-haired woman with a baby on her hip in front of a towering wheat field.

‘Yes. And that’s me as a kid,’ Paul said, pointing to the chimp in a poster for
Bedtime for Bonzo.

‘You’re funny,’ she said, and they embraced.

‘Inspector Ford said I was an unnatural man,’ Paul said.

Daisy took a long breath to calm herself. They kissed, and Daisy let him take her weight.

‘Let me tell you,’ she said. ‘I have seen a lot of things these past few months, Paul. Honestly. There is nothing wrong with you.’

They made love in his bedroom, and later she felt a tentative sort of freedom in the privacy and quiet of his flat. She could hear kids out on the street, and the whir of machines from the laundrette, and barrels being rolled into the cellar of the Bricklayer’s Arms, but all such noise seemed mercifully distant. Paul wiped the tear from her cheek.

‘What is this?’ she said, lifting the thick heavy article with which she was covered. ‘Because it certainly isn’t a sheet.’

‘Oh, yeah. It’s a European thing. Duvet. Keeps you warm in winter, and it only takes a couple of shakes to make the bed.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘It’s amazing.’ Everything, at that point, seemed amazing.

‘You know you’re very romantic,’ he said. ‘I usually like to talk about my hopes and dreams at a time like this.’

Daisy pulled the duvet over her head.

Later, when she approached her house, there was a car across the road for the first time in weeks. Oh God, she thought, what now? But it was Inspector Lyle, alone, in his Rover. When she saw him, she stopped walking, and they looked at each other. Without smiling, Inspector Lyle nodded, and then drove away.
Of all the melodramatic endings that she’d rehearsed, Daisy had never imagined that it would all work out.

After two years, the work was coming in steadily for Hammond and Seacombe Security. They signed some big contracts in the smaller coastal towns, doing surveillance at dockyards, factories and offices. Soon, they were able to give the nightshifts to younger men, and work purely on the administrative side. The ordinariness of the work changed Robert for the better. He seemed unchained, somehow, and was mostly able to control his temper. When Caroline put on her rock ‘n’ roll records, he lay down and walked around the carpet in prostrate circles. Even Linda smiled.

Daisy was very careful, but there were moments of worry. One Sunday morning, Robert watched her making breakfast. He’d had a lot to drink the previous night, and it made him quiet. He sat hunched over, and he breathed. When Daisy brought him scrambled eggs – a little crisp, as he liked them – he looked at her carefully. ‘You seem happy,’ he said.

The smile dropped from her face. She shrugged. For a moment, he wore the expression of a detective again: bullying, relentless. But he was too hungover to sustain it. He looked down at his food. Daisy took the pan to the sink, and it hissed when it hit the water.

They bought a corduroy sofa, a cheaper car. They hung a strap of horse bells on the wall. Robert’s longer, more regular working hours gave Daisy a certain freedom, and she and Paul continued their cinemagoing through the years, even as the theatres
were closing all around them.

The West Street Odeon shut in 1973, along with the Regent. Daisy told Paul that one of her first memories was the sight of a German fighter plane positioned as if crashing into the canopy, as part of the promotion for a Jean Harlow film. She told him about the budgerigars in the foyer and the shining steel teapots, how she’d danced on the sprung-floor of the ballroom upstairs.

That same year, they stood on the same street, an arm’s length between them, and watched the Academy pulled apart, layer by layer. It was where they had first made love. The crumbling art deco interior gave way to the Moorish flourishes of the old Victorian days. They thought they recognised the basement, although the foundations were swampy and overtaken with green slime.

‘Eventually,’ Paul said, ‘we’re going to have to find something else to do with our time.’

‘Not until they pull the last one down,’ Daisy said. ‘They’ll have to drag me out of my seat.

The Astoria was a bingo hall by the time Linda married Mike, in ’77. The Curzon became a Waitrose, and later Daisy and Paul went there to run their hands across the dessert freezers, where they had once sat, shoulder to shoulder in the dark.

At the Granada, they watched a bizarre showing of *Planet of the Apes*, where the projectionist had mixed up the reels so that the ending’s grand reveal came twenty minutes in. The Vogue, which had once been the Gaiety, had its top floor sliced off, and then, just before Lucas was born, became a Sainsbury’s.

Daisy had always worried that they might run out of time, but in the end they were running out of space.

Sometimes, when Paul worked nights, she spent the morning at his flat, and one
such day she left a leaflet for adult education courses under his pillow as he slept. She had circled ‘Life-drawing’, ‘The Contemporary Novel’ and ‘Conversational French’. By the latter, she’d written: *I’ll do this one myself, to catch-up*. Descending the hill, she turned to see him open the window of his flat, wave the leaflet and smile, squinting in the daylight.

‘Lifelong learning!’ she shouted.

The decade turned, and rolled on. The Seacombes got a new television: a Ferguson with wood-effect panels, and metal teeth to change the channels. They bought an iron table and chairs for the garden.

Daisy’s first thought, when the Grand was bombed, was that she did not know where Paul was, but her following thoughts were wiped out by a deep pain in her lower abdomen.

She told Paul that he had a rival suitor – a competitor for his seat at the cinema. Her grandson, with his shock of black curls, sat with the straw of his juice carton resting on his lip, while his eyes marbled with the light of the screen. He fidgeted less than Linda had, and only sometimes did he drag her face towards him to ask, in his language, for clarification. Many of the children’s films on offer were musicals, so she took the boy to see more grown-up features. He sat, rapt, for two hours of *Splash*, and when she asked him afterwards, *Did you like it*, he paused and told her, *No*.

She told Paul about her diagnosis in the cinema, so she wouldn’t have to look at him in daylight. He nodded, slowly.

‘I’ve got a good chance of a full recovery, they say.’
‘Will they start the treatment straight away?’ Paul said.

‘Yes. At least one operation, and then the chemotherapy and all that.’

‘It takes time…’

‘I think so. Certainly, I won’t be going out much for a while, afterwards. They say I’ll be very weak, but it’s difficult to imagine that, because I feel all right, now, apart from the pain, which is pretty much constant to be honest.’

He turned to look at her. Despite the semi-darkness, she could see him just fine. His lips were turned down at the corners, his nostrils flared.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Daisy.’

‘Having to tell people…’ she said.

He leaned over the arm of the seat, and they put their foreheads together. He kept his hair unfashionably short, these days, and she felt the soft bristling of it against her skin. From the cinema speakers, the advertisements roared.

He sat back, and she listened to his breathing. Over the years, she had learned to read the signals from his body. He had become very still. He was making calculations. He was realizing that they would have to spend some time apart. She’d done the same. She suspected that his absence would hurt more than anything the doctors could do to her. They had found their unlikely peace, a way of existing, and she did not want to miss a moment of it.

‘Dee,’ he said. ‘If there’s anything you need. You want organs, I’ve got organs. You want blood, I’ve got blood. Anything at all…’

She smiled. ‘From you, I will need patience.’

‘Anything but that,’ he said.
Lucas stands in the hallway of the bungalow, his wide bare feet bright with sunlight, the rest of his body in shadow. He blinks, remembering. Vividly, he recalls his mother suddenly marching out of the kitchen, passing him in the hallway, and opening the door to reveal Nanna, beaming on the step.

As a deaf infant, Lucas had found something magical in this, as if his mother had somehow conjured Nanna, simply by opening the door. His mum always walked down the hallway so quickly, with such will. Maybe it was this desire which made Nanna appear.

His parents must have explained the concept of ‘knocking’ to him shortly afterwards. They must have talked him through the qualities of sound – how it travels through objects and through the air. They would have explained that when his mum was talking, whilst alone in a room, she was really addressing his dad elsewhere in the house. If you speak loudly, you can get somebody to come to you.

But in any case, when he was seven – even though he must have known the truth – his mother had to physically stop him from opening and closing the front door every
half hour, trying to bring his dead grandmother back to the step.

He remembers his mother’s face, swollen with tears and fury, as she dragged his fingers out of the welcome mat. She had told him Nanna was never, ever coming back, and that what he was doing was very upsetting. It hurt her to see it. And he was letting in the fallen needles from the trees outside.

Now, as he opens the door, he expects to see no-one. He did not go to school this morning, and generally skips every second day. He rides buses through Sussex on an all-day ticket, because travelling is better than being in any of the places in his life, and because he still holds the hope that he will see Cassie. Her leaving has knocked the language out of his world again, and he is terrified of what he might forget, now, or what he might remember.

* * *

Across town, Linda and Paul leave the hospice. Paul walks slowly, so that his limp is hardly noticeable. He holds in his hand the thistle bookmark. Linda shields her eyes against the brightness of the outdoors, like she used to when she came out of the cinema in the afternoon. Quietly, they make their way down to the seafront, and find a café across the road from the beach. The main road flashes with passing windscreens.

They sit outside, at an unstable metal table with a tinfoil ashtray and a shimmering hologram surface. The tassles of the parasol are grey from exhaust fumes. ‘I will order tea,’ Paul says, and goes into the café.

Boat-sails like white spearheads rise from the water. Huge grey tankers lurk on the horizon. She imagines how furious Caroline would be, if she knew that Linda
was drinking tea with a man who’d sent love letters to their mother. Perhaps fury is the natural reaction, but Linda doesn’t feel it.

He sits down slowly, his back to the English Channel. To Linda, he is dark against the bright sky and sea. ‘How many letters did you find?’ he asks.

‘Three. The last one was from 1957. I thought there must be more. I can’t remember her writing letters, but she must’ve replied, right? Did you meet her, here? I’m sorry. Too many questions.’

Paul Landry places his hands on the table. The buckle of his watch taps the metal. His hands are tanned. They tremble, slightly. ‘I am sorry, Linda, if those letters upset you.’

Linda shakes her head.

‘It must have been a shock, to find them like that, after everything that happened.’

‘Yes.’

‘I could understand if you thought them a little…’

‘I was shocked at first,’ Linda says. ‘But the letters were funny, and charming. I was glad that someone…’

A teenage girl comes out with a tray of tea. Linda pours milk into hers, but Paul takes it black. He sips, and winces against the bitter heat. ‘I never thought I would meet you like this,’ he says. ‘You know, properly. Out in the open.’

‘There’s really no need to be nervous,’ Linda says.

‘I’m not exactly nervous,’ he says. ‘I feel mostly fine, and just a little bit like my whole head is going to explode.’

As they talk, Linda finds it hard to line Paul up with the man from the letters. There are traces of the same humour, but it has receded now. He is less sure of himself, but so is she, and perhaps for the same reason. She asks him about his
current situation, his family. He lives alone, on the other side of Elm Grove, one of the highest points in the city. He writes down his phone number for her.

‘It’s a steep walk for me, these days. Sometimes I think it would be easier to catch a train to Gatwick, fly to France, and swim home, rather than walk over that damn hill,’ he says.

‘I spoke to a couple of your relatives, when I was looking for you. I think it was your step-sister.’

‘Okay. Jesus.’

‘And another woman. Younger.’

‘Probably little Marie,’ he said.

‘She said you haven’t spoken to them for years.’

He sighs. ‘Life is long. It seems that there are many phases. I never thought I’d make it through the war, and now I hardly remember it.’

‘When did you move to England? I mean, Marie said it was years, but…’

‘1962.’

‘And you…wow. Okay,’ Linda says. She squints. Across the road, the baby blue beach huts look like a picket fence. ‘That long, eh? You must have. I assume you met Mum, then?’

‘Sensibly, she resisted at first, but eventually yes. And then, many times.’

In 1962, Linda was seven years old. She feels the strangest sensation. It is as though time is broadening in her mind. The past expands, because Paul Landry was here all along. ‘You had an affair,’ she says. She can’t look at him when she says the word.

‘It’s not so simple,’ he replied. ‘Daisy loved your father. She did.’

‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. That’s not why I wanted to talk to you.’
‘What did you want to know?’ he says.

‘What do you remember? About Mum.’

He shakes his head. ‘Not enough. Memory is strange. I remember stupid details and forget the big things. I forgot the name of my neighbour’s child, yesterday.’

‘Easily done,’ Linda says.

‘The kid is called Octavius.’

Paul says it so sadly that Linda cannot help but laugh.

Eventually, he talks about the time he’d spent with Daisy during the war, and how she got him seriously interested in films. He became an expert, just to please her.

‘Your letters to her were very romantic,’ Linda says.

‘Some might say obsessive. I was a different man. Maybe a little too carefree.’

She reaches down into her handbag. ‘Would you like to see them?’ she asks. ‘The letters?’

‘No!’ he says, sharply. He regains his composure. ‘I’d be embarrassed, I think.’

But to Linda, he does not look embarrassed. His lips are parted, and he frowns. He looks afraid.

‘Paul?’

‘If I could go back,’ he says. ‘Jesus, I swear. I don’t know if I’d write them.’

Linda sits up, slowly. She feels hurt on behalf of the man who wrote the letters, and the woman who received them. ‘You shouldn’t say that.’

‘Or maybe I’d just stay put, back home. I can’t weigh it up.’

He shifts his gaze quickly, now, as if he’s in pain, as if a whole life is unspooling behind his eyes.

‘Did my dad know?’

Paul looks away, but doesn’t answer.
‘Were you still seeing her, when she died?’ Linda asks, her mind whirring.

Paul remains silent, and she sits back. She watches him, on the verge of tears, and tries to imagine what it is like to be him. ‘God, I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘You must have felt so alone. We didn’t know about you. How did you find out about what happened?’

‘I don’t like to think of it,’ he says.

‘Me neither,’ she says. ‘But I have to know. I’m sure you understand, Paul. A few months ago, I’d never heard of you, and now you tell me you’ve been here since I was a child, and…I walk into a room, and find you reading to my dad. It’s all so strange. There are so many gaps, I don’t know what questions to ask.’

He looks down at the shimmering table. He pushes his fingers beneath his glasses and rubs his eyes. Linda worries that her tone sounds aggressive, like she is accusing him. ‘I’m just confused, Paul,’ she says. ‘I’m not blaming you.’

‘Well in that case, you really don’t understand.’ He shifts his gaze to her.

‘What? What don’t I understand?’

‘It was my fault.’
Through her sleep, Daisy thought she heard footsteps on the ceiling above her. She was accustomed to surreal nightmares, now, after all the treatment, and thought nothing of it. She rested, again.

The next time she woke, the noises were very real. Lucas had turned on the television downstairs. The sound rose alarmingly, so Daisy could hear the Scotch Tape skeleton as if he was at her bedside. Lucas must have accidentally twisted the volume knob to maximum. Daisy waited for her husband to go into the living room and turn the TV down, but it occurred to her that Robert must be in the garden. He took Friday afternoons off, and brought Lucas back to their house to wait for Linda to finish work. Daisy smiled to herself, and felt her hands moving, signing pointlessly. *Loud!* The sign – a finger rotating by the side of the head – was the same as the one hearing people used for madness.

The programme which came after the break featured ordinary people with
extraordinary talents. The sound of studio applause was astonishingly loud, and Daisy knew she had to intervene. She rose slowly from the bed and made her way past the garish owl, onto the landing. A draught lifted her hair, but it seemed to come from above. She looked up at the ceiling. There was a slight gap in the attic hatch. She would get Linda to sort it out, later. Each stair took several seconds to negotiate. She felt like she was moving at the pace of a lengthening shadow.

The sunlight came through the patio doors behind Lucas, who was in silhouette, his skinny little body and mass of black hair like the boy Maradona, whom her husband was always cursing. As usual, Lucas’ hearing aid lay beside him, switched off but ready to be refitted should his mother walk in. Daisy looked at the clock. Linda was due to collect him any moment now.

Lucas waved, and Daisy told him the television was a little too loud, and turned it down. He said sorry, a fist rubbing his chest. He pointed to the screen with a look of confusion. A man was in a soundproof booth, trying to guess songs from the movement of the flame of a candle placed next to a record player.

*Why is he doing it?* Lucas asked.

*I don’t know,* Daisy signed. *Maybe he is bored.*

Lucas wore his grey shorts, grey socks and plimsolls. He had on his white, short-sleeved shirt, but had removed his tie. He looked carefully at Daisy. *Do you feel okay?* He asked.

*Yes, thank you. You are thoughtful.*

*When is Mummy coming?*

*Now. Soon.*

A hammering sound came from the shed outside. Daisy looked up. She saw the swing chair, the snap dragons in the shade like lamps turned off. She saw the garden
table, and imagined the painful cold of the iron chair on her legs. She felt her grandson’s alert gaze follow her own.

*Grandpa?* He signed.

*Yes. Making noise in the shed.*

Lucas sighed, dutifully. *Don’t worry. You need to rest. I’ll go and play with him.*

*Will you carry me upstairs, first?* she asked.

*You’re too heavy.*

She laughed. Her doctor would have told her to take it as a compliment.

Lucas stood to go outside, but what Daisy saw through the patio doors made her grip his arm. *What?* Lucas signed, with his free hand.

*Wait.*

Lucas turned to look out into the garden, and they both saw Robert standing by the shed, his feet planted wide, looking up at the house, looking up at the place where he supposed his wife to be. He was just staring. His fingers were grey with dirt. In one hand he was holding a broken metal money tin, and in the other, he had a piece of paper gone so soft from age that it looked like cotton.

*Is Grandpa okay?* Lucas asked.

Robert moved, and she felt Lucas flinch under her grip. She was still holding his wrist. Robert walked out of sight down the side of the house, towards the door which opened into the kitchen. Daisy’s first thought was to get Lucas out of the way.

*Why don’t you go outside for a play?* she signed. *Football, maybe. Run around a bit before Mummy comes.* She moved across the living room as fast she could in her weakened state. She unlocked and opened the patio door, heard the tearing release of it. The air outside was warmer. *Go on.*

Lucas frowned at her as he stepped out onto the crab-coloured patio slabs. Daisy
worried that he would come straight back in, but his attention was taken by a tide of tiny red spiders seeping from the gap between two slabs. Daisy slid the door closed, and heard her husband enter the house. The phone in the kitchen rang, and Robert surprised her by answering it. As he muttered, the delay gave her time to get upstairs, as far away from Lucas as possible.

The effort of climbing the stairs left her exhausted, and she sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to catch her breath. Through the open window came the shush of the channel, and a breeze which lifted the net curtains and made her husband’s suits and shirts and ties tremble in the open wardrobe. In films, she had noticed, the victim often reached a point of quiet acceptance in the most perilous of situations, but there was no such comfort for Daisy. As she heard Robert climb the stairs, she edged back on the bed.

Then he was in the doorway, one hand on the frame, one hand holding a bunch of the letters. His unpredictability had bound them together for years. Even now, she did not know exactly what he would do. She watched him – the freckles and peeling skin at his hairline. The sweat on his cheek. She felt her eyelids flutter, and that seemed to be an answer to any question he might have had.

A look of childish disbelief passed across his features. He exhaled, and his head dropped. He had worked so hard to control everything within his range, and she saw that the idea he’d been deceived was almost too much for him. For a moment, Daisy thought he might crumble.

But his demeanour soon changed. ‘I swear to God…’ he said. He came towards her, almost crouching, his head tilted to the side. ‘I swear to God.’

Daisy backed further away, right up to the pillows. She wanted to hold her ground, but she couldn’t. He followed her, moving around the side of the bed.
‘Robert, wait,’ she said. ‘Think. Your grandson is downstairs.’

He roared at her, then. He tore the letters and threw them in her face, and he rammed his fist into the headboard, coming so close to her that several hairs were tweezed from her scalp. She looked away.

‘I have seen the dates on these, woman. I have seen the dates!’ he shouted. ‘How long?’

She shook her head. ‘I can’t talk to you like this.’

‘You arrogant whore,’ he said. ‘How long?’

He looked around the room, then at his feet. He picked up a torn letter from the floor. ‘I know where the bastard lives,’ he said.

‘Robert, don’t.’ Her voice was still unreliable. She needed to tell him to be careful, but the words would not come out.

When he’d gone, she wanted to get to a window, to check on Lucas, but she found she could hardly move. *Where was Linda?*

She shifted over to the bedside table, picked up the receiver of the blue rotary phone and dialled her daughter’s office. The woman who answered said that Linda had left for a late meeting. Daisy pressed the black buttons in the phone cradle.

She called Paul, and as it rang, she told herself to stay calm. She needed him to leave his house.

‘Hello?’

‘It’s me.’

‘Dee!’ He could never hide his delight when she called, but his fear of her illness followed quickly. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’m fine. Surprisingly.’
'Where are you calling from? A booth?'

She had to be patient through the preliminaries, so as not to raise his suspicion.

‘No, no. I’m at home.’

‘Well, I just can’t believe it! I didn’t expect to speak to you so soon. You’re a miracle, Daisy! Jesus, you must be tired.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not at all, really. In fact, I was wondering if you’d like to…I don’t know…see a film?’

He laughed. She closed her eyes so she didn’t have to look at the letters scattered across the room. ‘Are you kidding? When?’

‘Now. I have a little bit of time, but it has to be right now.’

‘Now?’

There was a noise somewhere outside the house. She hoped to God it was Linda, coming for Lucas.

‘Daisy?’ Paul said.

‘Mm.’

‘Is everything okay? You sound a little…’

‘Let’s hear you sing falsetto, after what I’ve had,’ she said.

‘I don’t mean that. Is something wrong?’

‘Nothing. You know it’s hard to talk, here. Listen, let’s make it fast. If you leave the flat now, you can be at the Cinescene by 5.30, can’t you?’ she said, desperate, now.

‘Daisy. Be straight with me. What’s going on?’

She squeezed her skull. ‘For God’s sake, Paul!’ she hissed. ‘Just get out of your flat. Robert’s found the letters, and he’s coming for you. He’s mad as hell.’

‘Wait, what? He’s found the letters? How? Has he hurt you?’
‘No, but he knows where you live.’

There was a moment of silence. ‘Well, fine,’ Paul said. ‘Let him come. We need to talk about this. We’re all adults.’

‘Paul, you just don’t understand. He cannot be reasoned with when he’s in this sort of state.’

‘Daisy, there comes a time when you have to face up. It’s been long enough. If he’s coming, I will wait for him.

Daisy wheezed. She could hardly speak. ‘Paul, just take a walk, let him…’

The door opened downstairs. She knew it wasn’t Linda. Robert had changed his mind. He had come back into the house. She thought for a moment, and then realised what was happening.

‘Just get out of your flat,’ she said.

Finally, she put down the telephone. She reasoned that Paul would have a little more time to leave, now, because Robert was climbing the stairs again, towards the bedroom. She heard the barrel scrape the banister. He had come back for her.

The tiredness anchored Daisy. The sunlight hit the transparent pink jewellery box on the windowsill and that cast a coloured beam on the bedsheets, and on the shredded remnants of Paul’s letters. She could see his words, distorted by the creases in the paper, his black ink dissolved by damp into rings of colour.

Robert was in the room, crying, she saw, and shouting, and then there was a noise, but Daisy could hear only her breath and her blood. The body just clings on. It works and works. The air in her nostrils sounded like the bellows her father used to get the fire going. The shirts rattled in the wardrobe, and a dust of blusher rose into the air, along with a burning smell. She saw the painting of a train carriage, and the green hills in the carriage windows. She had the sense that water was getting into the
room, somehow. Gallons of water.

Robert was no longer there, it seemed.

She chose memory. It was their time in the twilight of the cinemas that she recalled most vividly. The way Paul had stood up at the end of the front row during the *Double Indemnity* re-release, and pretended to be felled by the giant cigarette Barbara Stanwyck flicked offscreen, the audience laughing so hard they missed the gunshot. She remembered *The Exorcist*, the way the tension built and released so that – during one calm, expositional scene – a woman in the audience started screaming, unable to bear the pressure any longer. She remembered how she and Paul had burst out of a rain-drenched thriller in black and white, into the hot colour of a summer afternoon.

She knew where she was. She knew from the figurines of the hounds that chased the fox across the windowsill, and from the scent of the detergent in which Linda had washed her bedsheets. She knew that the owl was watching her from the doorway, near the outstretched leg of her husband, but she chose memory.

‘We’ll always have the Electric,’ Paul had joked, when they closed practically all the other cinemas in town.

Daisy recalled one evening in the late sixties. She had gone to the toilets before the film and saw a girl rinsing out her bathing suit in the sink. There was sand all around the plugholes. The day had been hot, and the Electric was a minute from the beach. The lights in the theatre had malfunctioned, and it was like the old blackout days, an usher’s milky beam in the smoke of the aisle. You could smell the sea, sharp and pungent on the bodies of the audience. The usher pointed his torch at the beach pebbles on the floor. ‘Watch yourself,’ he said. ‘Just watch yourself.’

She had found Paul slouched in the dark, but only when the film lit up. She felt so
at ease with him, it was like she wasn’t there. Strange what she remembered. It was like the films she walked into, halfway through: when you see the ending the first time round, it makes no impression, but then, somewhere in the middle of the next showing, you begin to understand.
Sitting outside the café, listening to Paul relive the final moments of her mother’s life, Linda sucks in the stink of cars and fried fish, and she tries not to retch.

‘I didn’t wait for long,’ Paul says. ‘I knew something wasn’t right. After a little while, I called the house again, and then I figured it out. He wasn’t coming for me, at all. He’d gone back. So I took a cab over there, but by the time I arrived the place was taped off. Police everywhere.’

Linda thinks of her own experience of that day. She’d had a meeting with the parents of a boy who’d set fire to his father’s car, and they couldn’t reschedule. She’d called Mike, but he couldn’t get away, either, so she phoned to tell her father she’d be late to collect Lucas. He’d seemed distant, on the phone, but he was always distant. Always, with her.

‘What did you do then?’ she asks Paul.

‘I went to the hospital, but she was already gone,’ Paul says.

His shirt sticks to his skin, now. Linda wonders if he has ever told this story, before.
‘I had to hear it from some damned nurse,’ he says.

‘You didn’t go to the police,’ Linda says.

‘He was the police.’

‘Not then.’

‘He still had his contacts. Anyway, I thought the police would come to me. I waited for them to knock on my door. They must have known that she’d called me. I waited months. I wasn’t… I didn’t do very well, after it happened. I wasn’t very well. Anyway, nobody ever came.’

‘But you knew the truth,’ Linda says. ‘You could have told the truth.’

‘What good would that have done?’ he says. ‘I saw the way they told it, in the papers. What was I supposed to do? Make your mother a cheat? Your father a murderer? The fault was mine. I caused it. But I could never understand why he didn’t come after me, first. Maybe he knew what my life would be like, after she’d gone.’

‘You stayed here. You didn’t go back to Canada.’

Paul shakes his head and clasps his hands together, until the skin is bleached white.

‘How can you do it?’ Linda says. ‘How can you sit next to him in that room, reading to him, when you know what he did?’

‘It’s my penance,’ Paul Landry says. ‘His, too.’

To Linda, now, the punishment seems insufficient. Finally, a thought occurs to her – a thought she has banished from her mind for a decade. ‘Paul. In terms of the cancer. Do you think she would’ve got better?’

He says nothing.

Linda stands. Paul asks if she’s okay. He tells her to sit down, but she doesn’t. She walks away from him, away from the café, and along the seafront. She takes the
first right, inland, and strides uphill. Her mouth is bitter and dry from the tea, her lungs rattle with pollen. She fights the urge to run.

When she arrives at the hospice, she maintains an appearance of calm. It is something she has practised on many occasions. She smiles at the receptionist, and proceeds down the corridor. She shoulders her father’s door open, and is struck by the pleasantness of the light in his room. Someone has changed the sheets since she was last here. Apart from the patch which will never grow back, her father’s white hair is soft, now, not slick and stretched as it had been before he shot himself.

She eyes the pillow, but does not want soft barriers between them. She walks across the room, and kneels at his bedside, so that she is right next to his face. His good eye is half-open. His breath smells sour. ‘I know what you did,’ she says, quietly. ‘I know what you did to her, you bastard.’

Linda thinks about putting her hand around the thin tendons at the base of his neck. She thinks about crushing him. ‘I hate you,’ she says. ‘I fucking hate you.’

She realises that she must be screaming, because people come into the room, and take her away. This kind of outburst is clearly nothing new to the hospice staff. They have a procedure. They take Linda to a room with dusty roller blinds, where all the furniture is the various colours of a peach. Skin, flesh, stone. She sits on a red chair. From a nearby room, she can hear communal singing. The security guard hands her a box of soft yellow tissues. Next to him, the receptionist with the red fingernails somehow has Linda’s phone.

‘What are you doing?’ Linda says. Her anger is spent, now, and she is exhausted.

‘Is there someone we can call?’ the woman says.

‘No,’ Linda says. ‘There’s nobody.’

‘Don’t really want to send you out of here on your own,’ the receptionist says,
pressing buttons on the phone. ‘Oh, there’s only two numbers in the memory. Shall I call…Mike?’

‘No!’ she says.

‘The other number, then.’

‘No, please don’t.’

‘We have to contact someone. Look. I’ll call this Lucas.’

Linda sinks into her chair. ‘You can’t call him.’

Lucas is on a bus when he gets the text message. Every time his phone lights up, he thinks it could be Cassie, but he does not recognise this number. LINDA WEATHERALL IS FEELING UNWELL, AND NEEDS HELP GETTING HOME FROM THE PINES HOSPICE, YORK ROAD, HOVE. CAN U HELP.

He asks the bus driver where the hospice is, and after a couple of misunderstandings, the driver writes down the number of another bus.

Soon enough, Lucas is wandering through the corridors of The Pines. A delicate scent of cumin comes from the kitchens, undercut by a strong chemical smell like the pure alcohol they have in the labs at school. The receptionist gave Lucas unclear directions, and now he walks past a room with the door wide open, and two nurses standing over a man in a bed. He stops in at another room where old people chat amongst themselves while a younger man plays guitar. The man smiles encouragingly at Lucas, who scans the room to make sure his mother is not present. ‘Sit down if you like,’ the guitarist says, still strumming. It’s a bad gig, Lucas thinks, if your only hope is the deaf kid.

His mum is next door in a room where the blinds have turned the light soft pink. She is sitting up very straight, and holds her green cardigan in her lap. Her bare
shoulders are brown and freckled. ‘Lucas!’ she says. Her eyes are swollen, and he recognises her expression – the way the muscles around her mouth twitch with the strain of trying to smile. ‘I not to call you.’

‘What happened, Mum? Are you okay?’

‘fine, really. Just a bit of an upset stomach think. How come you’re not uniform?’

‘I didn’t go in, today.’

‘Why not?’ Linda says.

Lucas looks at her for a moment. He thinks about telling her the real reasons, the full story, but he worries that she would crack up. ‘Tummy bug,’ he says, flatly.

‘Must be going around,’ she says.

‘This is where granddad lives, isn’t it?’ Lucas says.

‘Yes.’

He waits for her to continue. Maybe she will ask him if he wants to visit his grandfather. She says nothing. ‘It doesn’t seem too bad,’ Lucas says.

‘okay.’

‘Not quite right for you, though, Mum.’

‘Give me a couple more years, eh?’ She stands up, and puts her arm through his. She leans on him, and he feels the bird-like hollowness of her chest against him.

‘Let’s home, shall we?’ she says.

* * *

Linda spends the next few days in bed, although she hardly sleeps. In the daytime,
she drifts down the hallway, and takes shallow baths. She lies there until the water is as cold as her body. It feels like the present has slowed to a pause, and the past comes in double-speed – all the parts she has worked so hard to forget.

She remembers her fury, when she arrived at the hospital, on the day her mother died. Mike had taken Lucas home, and when Linda called from the payphone, Mike said their boy was in shock. He was bathing him. Back in the family room, even at that early stage, the stories of euthanasia and broken hearts had begun to surface. People kept saying that the suffering was over. *She’s no longer in pain.* For those first few hours, Linda raged against that contrived plot. She wanted to know what had really happened. She wanted to speak to the oncologist who had treated her mother.

Caroline shouted at her. ‘Why do you have to twist everything, and make it so bloody complicated?’

‘How could he do such a thing, with Lucas in the house?’ she said.

‘He didn’t know he was there,’ Caroline said. ‘You were *late* to pick him up, Linda. You said so yourself.’

In the end it wasn’t Caroline who stopped her from asking questions, that day. It was her father’s old partner, Ray Hammond. She tried to pass him in the hospital corridor, but he stood firm. ‘I need to speak to someone,’ she said. ‘I need to speak to Mum’s doctor.’

‘You need to leave it, darling,’ he said, with a hand on her shoulder.

‘For God’s sake!’ she said.

‘For everyone’s sake.’

She tried to pass again, and again he blocked her path. She pushed him, and tried to hit him, but he did what men do: he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed, as
though he was protecting Linda from herself, as if he was consoling her.

It made the front page of the local newspaper:

EX-DETECTIVE SHOOTS DYING WIFE AND SELF IN MERCY KILLING

Linda always thought that was such a stupid sentence. It seems especially mindless to her, now. The newspapers were interested in the quirks and twists of the story. Linda begged them not to mention Lucas, not to print that he had found his grandparents. What can we do? They said. We have a responsibility to the truth. Linda knew they wanted to work an angle on Lucas’ deafness. That was the unique selling point. As if there was any way Lucas could have prevented the shootings, hearing or otherwise. He was just a little boy.

Linda blamed herself. Caroline was right. Had she not been late, had she arrived at her parents’ house twenty minutes earlier, Lucas would never have walked up those stairs and found their bodies. Mike wouldn’t have had to collect him from the hospital and scrub dried blood off his hands. Had she arrived on time, her mother would not have died the way she did.

And now, eleven years on, Linda and her boy haunt each other in the bungalow. If she can, she cooks him dinner, and leaves it under tin foil on the kitchen counter. Sometimes, that week, she finds his big wet footprints in the grey carpet of the bathroom, or hears the gate clanging as he goes to school, or comes back late. They switch the lights on and off, to say that they are home, as if they exist only in the circuit boards of the house.
They meet each other once, in the hallway, as he comes in around midnight.

‘Where have you been?’ she asks.

‘On the bus,’

‘Where to?’

He smiles, weakly. ‘To here, of course.’

Fortunately, back in 1987, the newspapermen found other twists beyond Lucas’ inability to hear. They found extra clauses for their headlines: EX-DETECTIVE SHOOTS DYING WIFE AND SELF IN MERCY KILLING. WAKES.

Robert Seacombe – who apparently could not live without his wife – didn’t die. His first shot killed Daisy instantly, but when he put the gun against his head, he must have underestimated the awkwardness of the angle, or the force of the recoil, or his sheer, stupid fortune.

When Linda first went to visit her father in hospital, she barely recognised him. She found a man with swelling and blackness around the eyes, a left cheekbone which had dropped like a coin through a pocket. His head was heavily bandaged, and he had a discoloured patch on his face like a birthmark.

She thought, that day, about his insistence on privacy. As children of mine, you represent the Force. Your conduct is on show at all times. That philosophy had bound and gagged her family for years. And now, here he was, daubed all over the papers he had fought and controlled and silenced for much of his career.

He woke once while she was by his side. She’d stayed beyond visiting hours, sleeping in a wipe-clean chair near the bed. His voice roused her. He looked frightened. ‘Where is she?’ he said.

Linda sat forward. Her father had one eye open. Black and wet. The light passed
over the surface.

‘You know where she is,’ Linda said.

At the time, despite her anger, she had felt guilty for saying that, but the next morning she couldn’t be sure the conversation had even happened. Three weeks later he came out of the coma with what the doctors called ‘limited cerebral function’. The nurses, the journalists, the coroner – they all said that he never regained the power of speech.

Soon, she returned to their house, and found the police dismantling the bedroom. She would later find out that there were problems with the management of the crime scene. Half of the evidence had been spoiled, or lost. There was confusion about when the police had arrived, and who had called them. Former detective Hammond had got to the scene before the ambulance. He had been paying an impromptu visit to his business partner, he claimed, and couldn’t remember his precise movements on reaching the house, because he’d been ‘overcome with emotion’.

Linda couldn’t go all the way into the bedroom. Instead, she stood by the owl, and looked through the half-open door. She had not expected death to be so colourful, and scented. Her father had clearly fallen backwards and taken down the dressing table. Compact powder and eye-shadow and perfume soaked into the carpet. Yellowing pillow feathers trembled on the surfaces.

The miracle of it, she thought back then, was that something could happen between two people in a room, and that event could never be recovered. Nobody would ever know what they’d said to each other.

* * *

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The lamp comes on.

‘Mum?’ Lucas says.

Linda wakes. She must have fallen asleep on the sofa. Through the gap in the curtains, she can see that it is early morning. The clouds are pink and grey. ‘Lucas?’

‘I was just wondering,’ he says. He is perched on the arm of the sofa by her feet.

‘Yes?’

‘If you were looking for someone, where would you start?’

Linda sits up a little. She can feel that her face is scarred by the grid pattern of the cushion. ‘Well, it depends who you’re looking for. Who’s missing?’

‘It’s just. I don’t really know what I’m doing wrong, but people keep…leaving.’

‘Lucas, what are you talking about? What’s wrong? You’re scaring me a bit.’

He shakes his head. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ he says.

‘It’s okay. You can tell me, Lucas. You can talk to me.’

‘No, it’s fine. Everything is fine.’ He laughs when he says that.

‘Oh, Lucas. Is this about your dad?’ she says. ‘Because your dad loves you. We both do. Me and him need to have a good, long talk, at some stage. But I’ve been…there are some things I need to sort out before I’m ready to do that.’

‘Mum,’ he says, and he casts his hand around the living room. ‘I don’t really think dad is going to come back, do you? He’s not going to come back to this.’

‘What?’

‘It’s not really about dad, anyway. What do you mean, you’ve got things to sort out?’

‘It’s been a difficult few months, that’s all.’
‘Pardon?’
He leans over to study her lips. His face looms above her.

‘A difficult few months,’ she repeats.

His body shakes. He is wearing a black t-shirt and jeans. Linda’s eyes have not adjusted to the light, yet, but she understands that he is laughing, quietly.

‘Lucas?’

‘A difficult few months,’ he says. ‘Jesus.’ He stands.

‘I’m concerned about you, Lucas,’ she says. ‘You’re acting strangely. Tell me who you’re looking for. Who is missing? What’s wrong?’

But Lucas just walks slowly out of the room. Linda rubs her face and stands. Her left leg is numb. She goes to the window and looks out across the road.

She remembers the autumn after her mum died. One morning she found some larch needles in the hall. Tiny, dry, coppery spines. She thought little of it. But later, as she was changing the bedsheets, she shook more needles out of the linen. At lunchtime she found them in the margarine. They were in the bottom of the cup that holds the toothbrushes, and in Mike’s underwear drawer. When she coughed, she found one single larch needle on her tongue.

She did not believe her mother was trying to communicate with her through nature, or anything like that, but the needles made her anxious. At dusk, she went outside with the kitchen broom. The autumn air was smoky. Some sort of berry was falling off the trees down the road, slamming the roofs of the parked cars. And the pavement was two inches thick with larch needles. Altogether like that, they created a block of colour, rich and ginger.

Linda wanted them gone. She swept them into the brambles that grew around the base of the larches. Soon, her kitchen brush was clogged, and she could feel sharp
stabs through her socks. She binned the brush and came back with a shovel, working until the streetlights came on. Slits of yellow appeared in the curtains of her neighbour’s houses, and she knew what she looked like to them, scraping sparks up off the tarmac under the pink light of the streetlamp.

Lucas and Mike turned up moments later. Linda didn’t even know where they’d been. They stood on the pavement, watching her. Mike had his hand spread across Lucas’ chest, holding him back. ‘Linda?’ Mike said.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘How long have you been standing there?’

‘Why don’t you come inside, Love?’

Linda shouted at him. She told him to stop looking at her that way. She told him she ought to be able to sweep the pavement outside her own house without her husband trying to commit her to a mental institution. She spoke quickly, and with a neutral expression, so Lucas wouldn’t understand. Mike didn’t reply. He took Lucas inside.

When she’d finished, Linda kicked off her shoes at the door, and left her jeans on the welcome mat. Mike had put some cartoons on for Lucas, and he had his head in his hands. Outside, the breeze stirred, ready to blow everything back to how it was. But Linda had found a way to deal with things. She’d sweep away the feelings, the memories, the urges. She would refuse to submit to the mess.

Now, looking out of the window, she sees the larches in full green blush. The gate clangs, and Lucas walks by. In two days, it will be his last day of school, and then his exams. She cannot go on like this. One last time, she has to pull herself together, for his sake.
EIGHTEEN

Lucas’ final day. Friday 26th June, 1998.

He has always thought that English is like a train. Word follows word; the engine
drags the carriage. Action leads to reaction; consequences flow from left to right.
‘And then, and then, and then.’

Cassie taught him that there is no ‘and then’ in sign. Things happen
simultaneously. You don’t wait for the next word, for what comes next, because it’s
already happening. Your right hand is a falling tree (your puffed cheeks tell of its
size), and your left hand is the man who stands beneath it. It all happens before your
very eyes, inevitable.

When he goes through to the kitchen, he smells smoky bacon and toast. This is a
surprise. His mother has been virtually bedridden for a fortnight, but now she is
beaming at him, in the light of the open fridge, as if her presence at this time of day
is perfectly normal. ‘Ready?’ she says.

‘For what?’ he says.

‘Big day. Oh, wait, I’ve got something for you,’ she says. From the radiator,
she plucks one of his father’s old work shirts, and squeezes it at the neck like a
piping bag. ‘I thought you could wear ,’ she says. ‘So you don’t ruin one of
your good ones.’
At his school – at all schools, probably – there is a ritual in which departing students have their shirts signed on the last day. Linda hands him Mike's shirt, and then embraces him. Lucas can feel the pressure in her chest, the tears she is holding back. She pulls away. ‘You did it, Lucas.’

‘Not yet,’ he says.

She looks out of the window. She is always looking out of the window. ‘unusual for this time of year,’ she says. ‘Usually they wait until it gets cold.’

Lucas doesn’t know what she is talking about, so he takes some toast, and the shirt, and goes to his room.

* * *

When she first sees the red mass in the corner of the kitchen window, Linda thinks it is liquid. She thinks it is blood. But it is ladybirds. After handing Lucas the shirt, she goes over for a closer look. One ladybird in your garden is nice, but a hundred in your kitchen is disturbing. ‘Look, Lucas. Isn’t it weird?’ But when she turns, Lucas is gone, and Mike stands in his place.

‘Oh. It’s you. Hello.’

Mike wears a new suit and a thick brown belt, which gives off a strong savoury smell. His sunglasses are tucked into his shirt pocket. ‘Hello, Linda. I just came to see Lucas off to school, you know. His last day.’

‘He was here a second ago. He must be in his room getting changed,’ Linda says. She glances again at the ladybirds. ‘I loaned him one of your shirts, for the other kids to write on. Hope you don’t mind.’
‘Fine. I might pop round tonight, too, if that’s all right. To celebrate.’

‘Of course.’

Mike winces, briefly. He has something else to say. Linda knows him so well. He will never be a stranger to her. ‘I’ve got something to sort out, this afternoon, so I’ll be late-ish.’

‘Work, is it?’ she says.

‘Not exactly. Listen, Lind,’ Mike says. ‘My behaviour, recently. I’ve not been acting right.’

Linda thinks of the half-seen woman in the pub window. ‘Is she young?’

‘What?’ he says. He tries to be outraged, but he’s never been able to fool Linda – that was half the problem. He sighs.

‘Is it serious?’ she asks.

‘Whatever it is, I’m done with it. It was a mistake. From this afternoon, it’s over. I’m breaking it off. When you’ve got some time, I’d like to talk to you, properly.’

‘About what?’

‘Everything.’

He scratches the backs of his hands and looks down the hallway for Lucas. ‘In the meantime, I’m going to fix that front gate.’

‘Is it broke?’

‘Course it is, Linda. It’s been broke for ages. Where have you been, Love?’

They both look deep into that question.

*   *   *

There are many reasons why Lucas doesn’t want to wear his father’s shirt, but he
puts it on, anyway. It is bone-coloured, and almost fits him across the shoulders. The cuffs are frayed. He looks in his bedroom mirror, and shudders. His hair is beginning to curl again. He needs a trim.

Lucas stops on the driveway when he sees his father squatting to fix the gate. The fins of his dad’s thighs stretch his trousers so that the fabric shines. He has always been good at fixing things.

Mike looks up, and smiles like a man in love. ‘Lukey!’ he says, standing. ‘came to see you off.’

Lucas nods.

‘You feeling good?’

‘Amazing,’ Lucas says.

‘Nice shirt!’ his dad says, and reaches out. Instinctively, Lucas grabs his father’s wrist. Mike smiles. ‘I’m coming round, tonight. be a bit later, because I’ve got a few things to sort out ’

‘Okay. See you soon,’ Lucas says. He edges past his father, and begins to walk away, but feels a hand on his back.

‘Hey, Lucas,’ his dad says. ‘Show them what you’re made of, yeah?’

The old classic.

On the top deck of the school bus, the other kids are already signing each other’s shirts. They write emotional goodbyes, limericks and swear-words; they draw breasts like bulls-eyes in green and blue. Duncan Youds has untucked his shirt, and urges the girls to sign over his crotch. ‘ down there,’ he shouts. ‘Right down there! Ah, yeah!’

The bus stops outside The Cut, but Lucas forces himself not to look. When they
pull away again, the other pupils jump and scream, turning their heads towards the windows on the left. Lucas does not turn, as the branches of a tree reach inside the open window and then slide away.

Lucas knows he needs a strategy for the shirt thing. What he might have to do is wait until school is over, take a few marker pens into the woods, remove his father’s shirt and forge some signatures. Personally, he doesn’t care about such rituals. He doesn’t care about being liked, anymore. On the other hand, he cannot bear the thought of his mother’s face when she sees him coming up the drive in a shirt nobody has signed.

When he gets off the bus, the school smells of cherry lip gloss, Hawaiian Tropic sun oil, Lilt, chlorine from the outdoor pool mixed with the scent of the pine trees that surround it, Golden Graham burps, Lynx Java, and raspberry Mr Freeze.

As the crowd make their way towards their form rooms, Duncan Youds taps Lucas on the shoulder and points back through the gates to a nearby ice-cream van. Lucas squints for a moment, and then says, ‘What do you mean?’

‘Wha do oo meeem?’ Youds repeats, his tongue pressed into his cheek.

Then Lucas understands. There is a picture of a dairy cow on the van.

All over school, groups of kids dig pens into each other’s bodies.

At form period, he remembers Cassie’s lesson on placement. In his mind, he sees her hands as she tells the story: a girl by the rocks, on one side, and a boy preparing for a journey, on the other. ‘Do you understand?’ she’d asked him. Yes, he thinks now, I do understand. The girl, like the rocks, is still there. The point is that she’s supposed to be still there.

The other kids have already cracked open the Jaffa Cakes. Lucas is the only person
still seated. The walls of the form room are plastered with collages. Lucas doesn’t do foreign languages, because they take him out for basic studies, but it seems that French and Spanish lessons consist mostly of cutting and sticking. On the walls are pictures of sandy beaches cut from brochures, women in bikinis, and a repeated word that looks like ‘vacant’. There are heartbreakingly beautiful swimming pools, unrippled. Lucas tries to focus on those bright blue rectangles of water, far away from the classroom. They look to him like thin membranes covering portholes into other worlds.

He tries to be vacant.

But it is hard. At the front of the class, Señor Potts, his form tutor, beams at him proudly. Potts pumps his fist, triumphant that they’ve made it to the end of the year. But the Rexel Clock above him shows 9.25. There is still a long time before this is all over. Anything could happen.

Behind Potts, and without the teacher’s knowledge, Youds draws the belly and udder of a Friesian on the whiteboard, with a black marker pen. Youds is mouthing a word, over and over. It takes Lucas a while to figure it out.

‘Today, today, today.’

The lessons are casual. Mr Solomon brings in Mr Kipling Bakewell Tarts (reduced for clearance), and he takes boardgames out of the lab store cupboard. The girls want the handsome science teacher to sign their shirts. He is embarrassed, but the clamour gives Youds and his friends the chance to make their ‘mooing’ faces across the room at Lucas.

Lucas turns away and looks at the door. He is angry with Cassie, but he will forgive her for abandoning him, if she will just walk through that door and say, ‘Hi,
Mario. Sorry I’m late.’

Suddenly, Iona is sitting before him with a battered old edition of Connect Four. The long straggles of brown hair, which she wears tied up above the undercut, are growing out of a black dye job, so that the natural colour seems grey. She sighs.

‘You want to be red, or yellow?’

Lucas nods to the girls holding out their shirts to their teacher. ‘Don’t you fancy Mr Solomon?’ he says.

‘Huh?’ Iona says. She looks over her shoulder, but has the sense and manners to turn back to Lucas before she speaks. ‘Oh. No. Erm. I fancy Miss Kimball, from PE.’

‘Right,’ Lucas says.

Her shirt is sparsely signed, but signed nonetheless. The people who did it have taken some care. There are a few anarchy A’s, and a wobbly-mouthed Nirvana smiley. Someone has drawn a dotted-line heart on her chest, with a scissor sign.

Lucas drops a red coin into a slot at random, and looks at Iona, who is waiting for his attention. ‘What was the joke your mother told?’ she says.

‘What?’

‘In ‘A Life in the Day’. You said your mother told a joke, but you skipped over it.’

‘That’s because it only works in English,’ Lucas said.

‘Yeah. So was the joke.’

Lucas sighs. ‘Why was the cockerill sad?’

Iona shrugs.

‘Because he only got laid once, and it was by his mother.’

Iona laughs, scandalised. ‘Jesus, your mum told you that? Your mum told you a
mum joke?’

‘She can be very inappropriate,’ Lucas says. ‘Cassie was supposed to do the joke in speech, but…’

‘Your support worker? happened to her?’

‘Yeah, I don’t know.’

Youds and his crew are gurning at him. They’ve been sniffing the gas taps, and the smell reaches him now. There is too much to monitor in this classroom, and in his head. Lucas feels like striking a match. Iona rubs a yellow coin in her fingers, but then turns and hurls it at Youds. He ducks, and it hits him on the hand. He rises up, laughing. Then he makes a ‘V’ with his fingers and sticks his tongue through it, attempting to taunt Iona.

She looks at Lucas. ‘viously, he’s never done that before,’ she says.

Lucas shrugs.

Iona takes out a blue marker pen. She puts the fingers of her free hand to her chin and then moves them forward. Please.

‘Me?’ he says.

She hands the marker to Lucas. He leans over and signs her sleeve. MARIO.

He looks away, feeling pleased. But then she taps his hand and takes back the pen. She comes around the side of the desk and gestures to his father’s shirt. May I sign it?

Lucas nods and smiles. She pretends to look hard for a space in which to write, and Lucas laughs. The way she does it is like sign language. Iona writes low on his shirt, upside down so that he can read it, one sentence either side of the buttons.

NOBODY DIES A VIRGIN

LIFE FUCKS US ALL
Lucas, fearing he might cry, looks away. There is a poster on the wall near the chalkboard. It says that humans share 33% of their DNA with Daffodils. Lucas thinks of his father. *Show them what you’re made of, son.*

At the end of the lesson, Iona accompanies him out of the science lab. Lucas senses the change in atmosphere. Youds and his friends have become almost still. One of them says something to Lucas, but he doesn’t hear. Iona is even more alert to the shift in mood, and she pushes Lucas into the corridor, with its smell of flapjack and hot dust.

‘What’s going on?’ Lucas says.

‘Best if we just keep moving. Out of their way. You have history, next, right?’ Lucas nods, and they walk briskly. After a moment, he taps Iona’s shoulder.

‘Thank you,’ he says.

She shrugs. They turn right into another corridor, which is all windows. Lucas can’t see Iona’s face with the glare of the sun behind her, so he switches sides. Better.

‘So you really don’t know where she’s?’ Iona says.

‘Who? Cassie? No. I sent her a text this morning. She has a mobile phone because her brother is deaf. But she didn’t reply.’

Lucas likes the feeling of disclosing personal information about Cassie and her family. He likes the intimacy it suggests.

‘I heard she and her boyfriend had away, or moved town or ,’ Iona says.

Lucas looks at her for a moment. ‘No,’ he says. ‘She doesn’t have a boyfriend.’
‘Oh. I think she does actually. Khi Panesar saw her with an older guy in the Red.

Lucas shakes his head. They bump through a set of double doors, and into a much darker space, near the humanities block. ‘She told me she didn’t have a boyfriend,’ he says. ‘I mean, why would she lie?’

Iona smiles sympathetically. ‘Hey, I was disappointed, too. I thought, with that hair, broad shoulders sort of pretty, she might . You never know. But it’s always the same old story, isn’t it?’

‘No, it isn’t,’ he says, sharply.

‘Okay.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Lucas says. ‘It’s fucking different. I don’t just let things happen to me, anymore. I choose what happens. I do!’ He can feel himself losing control of the muscles in his throat. Iona’s expression tells him that he is shouting too loudly.

‘Lucas, I said okay. I’m sorry no need to freak out.’

‘Leave me alone!’ he shouts, and then marches back in the direction they’ve come from. He knows from films that Iona is perhaps calling to him, and he feels sorry that he has taken out his frustrations on her. She was kind to him, for no good reason. But it seems to Lucas that friendship is just a game of Pop-up Pirates, and you’re better off getting the shock of the ending over with as soon as possible.

As he emerges into the bright corridor again, he sees Youds and company coming towards him. He stands still, and signs to them.

*Man is wolf to man. So watch out.*
The boys quicken their pace, and he escapes out of a side door, into the open heat of the day.

He turns once to see how many of them are in pursuit. Five. They’ve drawn an anchor tattoo on the shoulder of Youd’s shirt, and a large, green, erect, penis curves out above his belt, spurting its little dashes. They walk slowly, but Lucas knows that if he breaks into a run, they’ll be on him in seconds.

His directional sense is excellent. Cassie told him that. He has also read many accounts of kids being beaten up, so he heads for the changing rooms – that classic venue of bullying literature. His idea is to make them think they’ve got him trapped.

As soon as he gets into the changing rooms, he slips through a concealed ‘staff-only’ door into a storage area full of corner flags and nets and basketballs. He waits for a few moments, keeping his eyes on the light beneath the door – watching for shadows. The place is like an oven, and stinks of leather.

He holds up a finger on his right hand, to represent himself, and a finger on his left, for Cassie. She is there, somewhere within his signing space, but he can’t gauge the distance. He can’t imagine himself into her point of view. And now, because of what Iona said, he has to accept the possibility of a third person, between them. He takes out his Nokia and types a text in capitals, scrolling through each letter.

HELLO. PLEASE TEXT ME. NOT A GOOD DAY HERE. DID I DO SOMETHING WRONG?

He deletes the last sentence, because he is still angry with her, and then he sends it.

Picking up a bandaged hockey stick, he opens a second door, which takes him out behind the changing rooms and onto a path leading to the outdoor swimming pool.
The air smells of cheap chemicals and stale sweat and pine sap. He climbs the small wall, and squeezes through the evergreens. Rows of wooden benches surround the pool. Lucas sits down, and drops the hockey stick. The blue of the pool is gorgeous. Some people think water is blue because it reflects the sky, but Lucas is not an idiot. The sky in England is usually grey, for a start. No, the water is blue because water molecules absorb red light easily, but reflect blue. In a way, Lucas thinks, that begs the question: is water actually red, inside?

In any case, since he’s learned how to sign, Lucas is capable of keeping places within him (a park, a cinema, a living room with horse bells on the wall and sun streaming through the patio doors). He can rebuild those places in the air, whenever he wants to. *This* is a place he should remember, whenever he next feels down.

He doesn’t hear them coming, of course, but it wouldn’t have made any difference. Before he can reach out for the hockey stick, they are all over him. Sam Carder, with his recently shaved head, gets there first, and puts Lucas in a headlock. Youds scales the wrought iron gate and then opens it for the others. Apart from Youds and Carder, Lucas realises that he does not know the surnames of any of the other boys. After five years. It probably isn’t the time to ask.

Youds puts one hand on Lucas’ shoulder, and plunges the other fist into his stomach, as though he’s reaching into a sack. ‘You’re fucking disgusting. Look at you. Where’s bitch, now, retarded.’

They are talking about Cassie.

‘Left you because spastic can’t even talk properly.’

He closes his eyes against the words, and thinks of the pool. If they throw him in, he won’t complain. He’s never been in there, because he does speech therapy
instead: hundreds of hours of mouthing the noises that have led him here, today. God knows he has learned his lines. If the pool is their punishment, he will not struggle. He’ll be inside the space that’s inside him. He’ll be the red within the blue.

They pin him to the bench, and his eyelids fill with liver-coloured sunlight. His fury is not quite spent, and when his arm comes free, he opens his eyes and punches the first dark shape he sees, which turns out to be Youds. Lucas feels a shooting pain in his fingers and his arm, but Youds is hurt, too. His cheekbone is flattened. Lucas takes several blows to the face, for that.

He closes his eyes again, and the beating stops. They are preparing, he thinks, to hurt him seriously. But the next sensation is unexpectedly delicate: many blunt ends pressing into his torso. It takes him a moment to understand what is happening. Marker pens. It is over quickly, and afterwards they kick him a few times and roll him onto the warm tiles next to the pool. He lies there, dry, next to his phone.

No messages.

When they have gone, he examines himself briefly. The shirt is very colourful, and they pressed so hard that the ink has penetrated the cotton and marked his skin. Most upsetting to Lucas is the fact that they have scribbled over Iona’s message. The entire shirt is covered with one word, repeated over and over. Yoke, front, cuff, collar, sleeve: COW, COW, COW, COW, COW.
Linda starts preparations early, for she has nothing else to do, and only ladybirds for company. For Lucas’ homecoming dinner, she has bought his favourites: meatballs and root beer. In the morning, she hung balloons outside the door, but they kept
appearing at the window like faces, so she took them inside. Now, she is at the kitchen stove, watching a thin layer of orange grease develop on top of the tomato sauce. Words come to her, unbidden. Sometimes, if I am quiet, I can hear your voice in my head.

All afternoon, she has worried about the sight of Lucas in a blank white shirt, but when he comes round the corner onto Bramble Avenue, there is no shirt at all. He wears a shiny white basketball vest, which looks like he’s dragged it out of the lost property box. From that distance, only the white vest and his white torso stand out. His face and forearms are tanned almost into invisibility. He looks like a ruined statue.

Linda glances at the clock and frowns. He should still be in school. She steps into the hallway and opens the front door. Lucas struggles with the gate; Mike has over-tightened the hinges. Eventually, he flings it open, and Linda sees that his arms and chest are faintly marked with colour. Red, green, blue. The colours are words, but she can’t read them, yet. ‘You did it!’ she shouts, trying to mask her anxiety. ‘It’s all over, Lucas!’

But Lucas will not look at her. His face is cut, and there are bruises mixed in with the words on his skin. ‘Lucas?’ she says. ‘Are you okay?’

He walks into the house, calmly. Linda can feel herself trembling. ‘I bought root beer,’ she says.

Lucas looks at the balloons tied to the illuminating doorbell. He smiles and shakes his head.

‘And I made meatballs…what happened to your face?’ Linda says, but Lucas refuses to make eye-contact.

‘Lucas? Look at me, Love. What are these marks on your arm? Where’s your
shirt?’

Linda studies the marks, and sees now that they are one word, repeated. When she deciphers that word, the cruelty of it takes her breath away. Despite her efforts at restraint, she begins to cry.

Lucas finally looks at her. Then, he signs. Linda can’t understand what he is saying. She forgot the language years ago. She recognises a couple of signs in the whirr of his hands. *Worry. Room.* He walks past her, and down the hall. The word *cow* is printed all across his back and shoulders. What upsets her most is that she can imagine why they call him the name. It’s his voice, and the way his mouth moves. She hates herself for understanding this.

Linda follows him to his bedroom. She watches him sit on his bed and take out his mobile phone. For a moment, he does not know she is in the doorway. ‘God, Lucas, what did they do to you?’ she says. Then she waves at him, and says it again. He signs back at her, and she gets the general idea. *I’m fine, leave me alone.*

‘But these bruises?’ she says. ‘And why are you *signing*? Look, I’m calling the school.’

Lucas hurls his rucksack at the wall. He begins to sign, furiously. Linda is incredulous. It has been years since she’s heard the sounds he makes when he signs – the strains of exclamation. His voice is so much deeper, now.

‘What are you saying?’ she asks.

He opens all of his drawers and shows her the insides, and then he tips the contents of his rucksack onto the carpet. Linda looks down at pens and pencils, a folder with a Latin legend printed in Tipp-ex, and Mike’s shirt, covered in that word. Lucas unzips his beanbag and pulls out three cans of deodorant, and a load of polystyrene balls.
Linda, frightened, attacks him. ‘What have you been doing with these?’ she shouts, now that the solvents are out in the open. ‘You better not have been - ’

Lucas throws the aerosol cans at the wardrobe, one after the other, and Linda cowers. For the first time, she realises how big he has become. He has Mike’s thick strength, and her father’s height. ‘Stop it!’ Linda cries. ‘Please, Lucas – just calm down!’

But he continues to sign. Linda grabs his fingers, and tries to hold his hands down. ‘Talk, Lucas! Talk!’

They struggle for a moment, but he breaks free. He takes a step towards her, and she flinches back. Lucas looks horrified by her fear, and his part in it. Linda knows that he is a gentle boy, really, but perhaps there is a limit to how much frustration someone can tolerate. He strides past her, back through the hall, and out of the front door. Linda catches up with him. She takes hold of his wrist and his body sags. He turns around.

‘Just tell me what happened,’ Linda says. She surveys his skin again. ‘Why did they have to do it, today?’ she says, pitifully. ‘On your last day.’

‘For God’s sake, Mum,’ Lucas says, breaking his silence at last. ‘It’s just another day, like all the others! It’s not a big deal. Life’s not always about how things end!’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Dad’s,’ he says. ‘Do me a favour, Mum. Don’t follow me. Just let me go.’

Linda releases his wrist. He kicks the gate and walks away down Bramble Avenue. Linda can hear the balloons bopping against each other behind her. The thick, sweet smell of burning meat drifts out of the kitchen.

Looking out on the street, she wonders if Lucas will stay at Mike’s, now, if he is leaving for good. Maybe he will be happier there, and safer. Part of her always
knew this would happen. She blames herself. A mother’s place, she thinks, is in the wrong.

* * *

For now, Ringdean is not busy as Lucas runs towards his dad’s flat. The few people out on the streets look at him curiously, but he doesn’t care. He’s had a lifetime of that. The indigo clouds give clarity to the lines of the village: the white windmill to the south, the church hall in the east.

His dad will be at work, but Lucas has a key to the flat. He will wait there. Perhaps his dad will know what to do. At least he won’t make a big deal out of everything. At least Lucas won’t have to look after him.

He takes a rest outside the entrance to the flats. Nearby, someone must be cutting slabs or tiles because an orange dust floats over the parking bays and into his dry lungs.

The inside of the apartment block is dark, and he climbs the stairs, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The place smells of old food, bleach, and the rubber of bicycle tyres. His father’s flat is number nine. As soon as Lucas touches the door with his key, it comes open, and he steps inside. In the entrance hall, vibrations reach up through the laminate flooring. In his aids is the faint crackle of a raised voice. He walks through to the living area, and sees his father standing in the middle of the room, in a suit and bare feet. As Mike turns to Lucas, he seems already to be protesting, his arms spread in apology. But his gestures are meant for Cassie, who sits on the blue sofa, buckling
her sandals. She brushes back the long side of her hair, to reveal that her eyes are swollen from crying.

Lucas’ first thought is that their argument is about him. Cassie and his dad must have been discussing his conduct and failures. Or maybe his dad has hunted Cassie down, because he is angry that she deserted Lucas. As soon as Cassie looks up at him, though, he starts to understand. He sees her guilt. And then his father’s.

An older man, Iona had said.

‘God, Lucas,’ Cassie says, standing. ‘Hi.’ She wipes her nose with the back of her hand.

Lucas has time to register how beautiful she looks in a black vest and denim skirt. He can see her bright, coral-coloured bra strap. She holds a small, frayed fabric case, orange in colour. It looks as though it might contain toiletries or make-up. Something intimate. He does not respond to her greeting.

In his peripheral vision, he sees his father slowly approaching, but he doesn’t acknowledge him. Not yet. Cassie, meanwhile, has felt the anger in his gaze. The blame.

‘Lucas, I’ve been meaning to get in touch. It didn’t seem right to contin    the school, because of what’s been happening. I mean your dad and me. I was mainly just thinking of you. Your feelings.’

‘This is where you’ve been,’ he says.

‘What?’

He switches to sign. *This is where you’ve been. All this time. You’ve been here.*

*With him.*

*Not any more,* she signs.

His dad takes him by the shoulder, but Lucas reels. ‘You just stay away!’ Lucas
'Luke,' Mike says. 'Just calm talk for a minute.'

'I don’t want to talk!' Lucas says. 'It’s all the wrong way round! You should be at fucking home, looking after Mum!'

'Lucas, listen…'

Lucas almost laughs. He turns away, not wishing to witness any more of their language, their excuses. He leaves the flat and bolts down the stairs.

* * *

Linda cleans. She picks up the shirt those kids have defaced, and she bins it, along with the deodorant. She returns to the kitchen to find that the tomato sauce has cooked down into a pockmarked mass, like volcanic rock. Carefully, she scoops the best of it into Tupperware, and then scours the burned remnants off the bottom of the pan.

Looking up from that hard task, she again sees the ladybirds, bright against the darkening clouds outside the window. In some places they are piled on top of each other, three and four high, the little legs slipping on the slick armour of the ones below, the wings sputtering for a second like broken motors.

She remembers a rare time when her father had joined Linda and her mum at the cinema. He’d seen a photograph of Genevieve Bujold in the newspaper and decided he wanted to see *Anne of the Thousand Days*.

Linda was in her early teens. On her father’s insistence, she sat between her parents – out of the reach of prying hands. The early scenes of the film contained
numerous references to adult romance. Her father shifted uncomfortably. Linda’s shame rose, and with it, a perverse desire to laugh. She hoped the sex talk would die down, and for a while, mercifully, it did.

Then, in the middle of the film, Richard Burton, as Henry, let rip:

*I’m mad for you! I dream of you at night, I long for you by day. I think of nothing but you. Of you and me playing dog and bitch, of you and me playing horse and mare, of you and me in every way. I want to fill you up, night after night! I want to fill you up with sons!*

Linda was sure that her stomach would rupture with the effort of containing her laughter. Her father was nose-breathing with rage, so she turned to glance at her mum. And it was then she realised that Daisy was also silently weeping with suppressed mirth.

‘Disgusting,’ Robert hissed.

‘Bastards!’ Anne Boleyn replied.

And that was it. Linda and Daisy erupted, abandoning themselves to screams of laughter which had the audience swivelling in their seats.

Linda laughs, now, alone in her kitchen. She thinks of what her son had told her: *it’s not always about how it ends.* She sees the truth of those words, now. Her mother had died horribly, unjustly, but by God she had lived first. With Paul, she had found a way to survive. It might not have measured up to the grand fantasies on the screens before them, but for a few hours a week, she had escaped. She had lived.

Linda picks up the kitchen phone, and calls Mike’s flat. There is no answer, and she knows that Mike will have taken Lucas to a restaurant. She imagines some sort of American-style diner with a juke-box and rib racks and gigantic milkshakes.
So she calls Paul Landry, and invites him for dinner. Unexpectedly, she says, she is eating alone and would welcome his company. She tells him she is fine, now. Much better. No, she doesn’t blame him, and anyway, there are other things to talk about.

After the phone call, she goes back into Lucas’ room, and takes down an encyclopaedia from the shelf. *Coccinella Septumpunctata.* The name ‘ladybird’ comes from the fact that the Virgin Mary was depicted, in early paintings, wearing a red cloak. The seven spots symbolize the seven sorrows. In Polish, the name translates as ‘God’s Little Cow’.

According to Lucas’ book, the foul smell comes from a fluid secreted by the leg joints. To warn off predators, ladybirds play dead. They pretend to rot. From experience, Linda knows that only works for so long.

**TWENTY**

Lucas runs.

He tries to outstrip his thoughts, but his memory dredges up the signs of their betrayal: Cassie’s changes in mood, the new lamps in his father’s flat. He remembers standing outside school in the rain, waiting for his dad, his t-shirt
changing colour. It is all so clear to him, now.

He realises that they didn't even notice the bedraggled state of him, in the flat. Did they even care? But as he leaves the street on which his father lives, he gets the sense that he is being followed. However angry he is with her, there is still a part of Lucas that wants it to be Cassie. But when he looks over his shoulder, he sees his dad. Mike wears trainers with his suit, like a kid who has PE last period. Lucas picks up his pace.

In Ringdean, infants pile out of the primary school, and families crowd the newsagent’s or head for the park. They look up, bemused by the sight of a man in a suit chasing a boy covered in writing. Lucas cuts down the alleyway overlooking suburban backyards. Deckchairs, lawnmowers, England flags and water features flash through his vision. By the time he emerges from the alley, his dad is gaining on him.

Lucas looks over to where Ringdean’s residential streets fade into fields. Behind the white windmill that stands above the village, the sky is dark and smoky, and he heads in that direction. The rain is already falling as he reaches the wheat field. The rolling contours of the field make it moon-like. Lucas glances back, and sees his father crossing the wet road towards the gate. Mike’s stride has shortened, and he is grimacing, but Lucas feels strong. He pushes on. His clothes are quickly sodden. Flecks of wheat stick to his grey trousers and the stalks whip his hands and arms.

When he crests the field, the green sea comes into view in the distance. The white coastal houses are bright against that background. He keeps running, though he is red-lining now, sucking shallow breaths. As he negotiates the lumpy downslope, he looks back three times. The first time, he sees his dad reach the top of the hill; the second time, Mike is bent over, panting; the third time, he is gone.
Lucas feels a glimmer of victory, although he cannot say what he has won. He slows to a walk, eyes half-closed against the rain, and then he realises where he is. He has arrived behind his grandmother’s old house, and he can see the fence which separates the garden from the fields. This afternoon, he found Cassie, but now he understands that he’s been looking for the wrong person.

He has a stitch, and bends over from the hips. The rain is cool on his shoulders, and he remembers sheltering from a downpour in a dark seafront café with Nanna. They had entered the Odeon in bright sunlight, to watch *Aristocats*, but they’d only lasted ten minutes, because it’s impossible to read animated feline lips. They emerged into a storm, and found beach pebbles washed up onto West Street, and a live fish writhing in the middle of the road. They ducked into the nearest place – an otherwise empty café. The waiter lit a candle. Nanna signed to Lucas. *The sea is noisy. I’m sorry about the film.*

He had to lean around the clutter of table decorations to see her hands. Nanna called to the waiter. When he came, she placed upon his tray the two menus, the candle, the vase of flowers, the bowl of sugar, salt and pepper pots, and a wooden container filled with cutlery. Then she spoke to him, briefly, before he left.

Lucas frowned at Nanna as she removed her coat and fixed her hair. *Wait,* she signed. A few seconds later, an ugly striplight flickered on, picking out the grime on the table and the damp on the walls, but allowing them, finally, to communicate.

*There,* she signed. *Better. Now, which cat did you like best?* She made the sign for cat with one hand, because the other was pressed deep into her midriff, which seemed to be a source of pain.

Now, his Nanna’s old house looks oddly tilted with the rule of the sea behind it. Lucas gets a foothold on a rain-softened fence slat and hoists himself up enough to
see into the garden. The crab-coloured patio slabs are still there, and the shed, but there are white plastic chairs, now, and a fancy barbecue with a hood and a mains lead. Fake torch lights rise from gravel borders. Down the side of the house, broken pots and tools are piled on top of Nanna’s old wrought iron table, the paint flaking to reveal the grey beneath. Lucas’ muscles shake. He closes his eyes and sees the garden as it had been: the snap-dragons, the tassles of the swing chair, the afternoon shadow.

His fingers burn as he re-grips the fence. Behind the patio doors, there is a woman – perhaps Spanish or Latin American – with a baby pressed to the hollow of her neck. She wears a blue kimono.

Lucas remembers stalking his grandmother, hiding in the flapping leaves of a big plant now dead and gone. She said he was a brilliant animal, best as a big cat with his dipping shoulder blades. He used to savage her.

The woman in the kimono takes her baby back into the darkness of the living room. When she returns to the patio doors, alone, she stares straight at Lucas. There is no judgment in her look, and she is not afraid. Lucas loses his grip on the fence and falls into the damp dirt of the field. He closes his eyes against the tears. His head hurts. In his mind, he sees again his grandfather, standing by the shed, peering up at the house, that look on his face. Lucas scrambles to his feet and squeezes his skull, trying to rid himself of the image, the feeling.

Quickly, he walks down the side of the house and onto the pavement in front of it. He crosses the coast road in the rain. On the other side of the road there is a bus shelter, a strip of grass and a two-wire fence at the edge of the cliff. Lucas walks past the shelter, takes hold of the top wire of the fence, and looks down the cliff face to the grey rock pools below. The tide is out. As a child, Lucas used to go down
there, looking for crabs. A woman strolls past on the undercliff path with her dog. The figures look miniature from here. Lucas can feel the house behind him, its staring face tipped in sympathy.

He leans out, allowing the wire to take some of his weight. He thinks of his old orange bucket, full of seaweed, cuttlebone, blue crab legs with springiness still in the joints, mussel shells, and smashed green bottle glass. He thinks of the shadows of his mother and his grandmother, which stretched out over the rocks towards the tide. The wire gives a little. Lucas loses his footing, and drops to his knees. He grabs the wooden fence post, and steadies himself. Carefully, he crawls back through the slick grass, away from the edge.

* * *

Through the kitchen window, Linda sees Paul outside, backed by the dripping larches. He looks at the house, and then down at a folded piece of paper in his hand. He wears a hat, and a light-coloured jacket, the shoulders of which are damp from the rain.

Linda opens the front door and waves. Paul smiles tentatively, and walks through the open gate. Linda puts her arms around him. ‘Thank you,’ she says. ‘Thanks for coming. I wanted to say sorry. About before.’

‘Me too,’ Paul says.

As they enter the house, Paul gestures to the balloons in the hall. ‘Really,’ he says. ‘You shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble.’

‘They were supposed to be for my son,’ Linda says.
‘Lucas,’ Paul says.

She turns to him. ‘Mum told you about him?’

‘I feel strange, saying this, but I actually met him once, very briefly.’

‘Did you?’ Linda says. She is learning to let go of the idea that she knows anything about the past.

‘Only once,’ says Paul. ‘He was very young. I bumped into Daisy in a park around here, and they were together, and…how is he?’

Linda thinks of Lucas leaving the house, insisting that she didn’t follow him. She thinks of him slamming his rucksack against the wall. ‘Oh, he’s fine, thank you.’

‘Daisy taught me the…err…alphabet. In sign language. I could never get my hands around it.’

‘Yes, we don’t sign, anymore.’

‘Okay. So, how do you…communicate?’

‘Oh, we don’t,’ Linda says. ‘I just slowly crush him with anxiety and guilt.’

Paul smiles, and Linda takes his jacket. They go into the kitchen, and Linda makes tea. The weather exacerbates Paul’s injury, and so he takes a seat at the table. ‘He found them, didn’t he?’ Paul says. ‘In the paper, it said that your boy found the bodies.’

Linda is pouring milk at the counter. She nods, without turning.

‘That must have been…’

Linda brings the drinks to the table and sits across from Paul. ‘Yes,’ she says.

‘And he missed her terribly. But the real problem for Lucas was that I went missing. I checked-out of life, for years, after Mum died. I wasn’t there for him.’

‘Mothers always blame themselves,’ Paul says. ‘That’s if they’re lucky enough to get there first.’
The rain stops, and that brings silence, and then birdsong. Cars hiss along the wet road, outside. When Linda and Paul look out of the window, they see that the tarmac is steaming in the sun, like a cooling pie.

‘How is your husband?’ Paul asks. ‘I’m sorry, I forget his name.’

‘Oh, me too,’ Linda says.

‘Daisy always spoke well of him.’

‘Did she?’

‘Yeah,’ said Paul. ‘She liked him. I mean, unless you remarried.’

‘No, no. It’s the same one.’

Linda acknowledges that they did like each other. Her mother had the upper-hand on Mike, and they both knew it. *A wily old bird*, Mike used to call her. She was cleverer than him, and he accepted it graciously.

Linda examines the generosity of that thought. She allows herself this moment of charity towards her husband.

‘Are you hungry?’ she asks Paul.

Paul does not reply. He has noticed the letters – the originals, along with her transcriptions, inside plastic wallets – badly hidden beneath a pile of newspapers on the kitchen table. Paul tilts his head, and stares at the words. Linda thinks about how you can make something – a letter, a child – and send it out into the world, not knowing what it might do. Such creations are soon beyond one’s control.

‘Maybe you should get rid of those, now,’ he says, finally.

Linda shakes her head. ‘No. They’re too beautiful.’

‘They killed her.’

‘From where I’m standing, they brought her back to life,’ Linda says.

‘It’s dangerous to pick at these old wounds. It can destroy a family.’
Linda understands that he is wondering what she intends to do, now she knows what really happened to her parents. ‘You don’t have to worry,’ she says.

‘Are you close? You and…Caroline? I never saw you together very much, at the hospice.’

‘It’s fine. It’s all fine.’

‘Daisy talked about you all the time, you know,’ he says, smiling.

‘Really?’

‘Sure! She thought you were so clever. She was always telling me what you thought of the movies. God, she was proud of you kids. If there’s one thing I can do, today, it’s tell you that, before there’s nobody left who knows it. She thought you were the bee’s knees.’

Linda does not believe in the afterlife, but here is Paul, recovering those lost words. This, she realises, is the closest she will get to hearing her mother’s voice again, her thoughts. She allows herself to cry, quietly.

Paul pats himself down, looking for a handkerchief. When he can’t find one, he holds out his saucer beneath her chin, to catch the tears.

Linda laughs.

‘You okay?’ Paul says.

‘Paul, would you like to see a film, this evening?’ Linda asks.

‘I never go, these days.’

‘Me neither,’ Linda says. ‘But it seems a shame.’

‘Is the Electric still running? On the seafront?’

‘Sort of,’ Linda says. ‘I think it’s called the ABC, now. It’s on its last legs.’

‘That’s where we first met,’ Paul says. ‘She told me to be quiet.’

Linda laughs. ‘She told me to shut up plenty of times in the Electric, too.’ Linda
takes a newspaper, to check the listings. ‘I’m not sure what’s on.’

‘There’s always something,’ says Paul.

* * *

Lucas sits at the bus shelter for a long time. With the rain, snails appeared on the outside of the fake glass, and now they strain in the sun. Lucas has decided that he will get on the next bus, and leave. He’ll go anywhere. It doesn’t matter. The storm moves out over the sea, and a shadow scarpers from the cliff-face in the east, leaving it yellow. An old Ford Escort, lovingly restored in bright blue, pulls into the bus-stop. The hazards come on.

A man climbs out, his long dark hair swept back. He towers over the car. It is Dan, Cassie’s brother. He steps onto the kerb in his cowboy boots, his leather jacket. Lucas stands from the plastic bench.

_It’s okay_, Dan signs. _Don’t get up on my behalf_.

Lucas stoops to look into the car. _Is Cassie with you_?

_No_.

Lucas sighs. _Right. Fine_.

Dan breathes deeply, and looks out on the view, as though he’s on holiday. _You forget about all this, when you work in a basement in town_, he signs.

_She sent you, though_, Lucas signs. _Cassie sent you_.

Dan nods. _She told me what happened. She was worried you’d do something stupid_. He gestures to the cliff-edge.
I bet it’s been going on for ages, Lucas signs. My dad and Cassie. They must have thought I was a fool.

Dan grins. That’s an old sign.

What?

“Fool”. Nobody uses that sign anymore.

I don’t care.

Your signing has improved, though. It’s still a bit “hearing” in style, but it’s much better when you’re angry.

Lucas sits back on the plastic bench, and Dan steps towards him, standing just back from the dripping edge of the shelter.

They’re finished, Dan signs.

Who?

Your dad. My sister. They split up.

Lucas thinks of Cassie’s tears, in the flat. I don’t want to know.

It means you and I will never be family, Dan signs, pretending to weep.

Lucas smiles. Dan examines Lucas’ arms, and the grubby basketball vest. The marker pen on his skin has smudged in the rain.

What’s all this?

Nothing, Lucas signs. Bad day. Shit day. I just don’t understand...

It’s your own fault. This is what happens. You shouldn’t be chasing hearing girls.

What? You have a hearing girlfriend.

I didn’t chase her, though. She chased me.

Fuck off! You don’t know what you’re talking about! I’ll chase who I like.

I do know what I’m talking about. You’re Deaf. Accept it. When Deaf boys chase hearing girls, they fall into the big hole between. Dan opens the rift with his hands,
and shows Lucas plummeting into the void. *You end up being neither.*

* I’ll be both! Lucas replies. *Leave me alone. I’ll be both!*

Dan laughs. *Much better. You’re much better when you’re angry. More flow. You should come to the pub sometimes. For Deaf night.*

*Maybe I will,* Lucas signs.

Dan stretches, flexing his shoulders. *You’ll be both, eh?*

A bus pulls awkwardly into the layby, behind Dan’s escort. Faintly, Lucas can hear the horn through his hearing aids. Over Dan’s shoulder, he sees the driver gesticulating angrily. But Dan does not move. He looks at Lucas, and Lucas returns his stare. Eventually, the bus leaves.

Dan takes off his leather jacket, which is more like a blazer – slim-fitting, with lapels. He hands it to Lucas.

*I’m not cold,* Lucas signs.

*To cover you up. Your arms.*

Lucas takes the jacket, and shrugs it on. It is a little big, but the silk lining feels cool.

*Your dad wants to talk to you,* Dan signs. *Cassie wants to talk to you. You are very popular all of a sudden. I won’t leave you here, dangling over the cliff. But I will take you wherever you want to go. It’s your decision.*

Lucas glances at his Nanna’s house. *I want to see my mum.*

*Excellent choice.*

The seats of Dan’s car are the sort of soft black leather they had in the 1980s. As they drive up past the golf course and through the satellite villages, Lucas thinks of the flaky sausage rolls his Nanna used to buy him. He thinks of the blue and white –
or maybe red and white – stripes of his folding push-chair.

The bungalow is dripping wet. The sun blasts bright in the windows. His mother is inside, and he sees another shadow, too. He hesitates, but the other figure is not his father. Lucas gets out of the car. He begins to remove Dan’s jacket, but Dan waves him away. *Keep it for a while. Give it me back when you come to the pub.*

*Thanks,* Lucas replies.

He enters his home, the walls of which are coloured with that mournful post-storm light. In the kitchen, his mother is eating meatballs with an old man, who now dabs his mouth with a napkin.

Linda stands. ‘Lucas,’ she says. ‘Are you okay?’

He nods.

Linda looks carefully between Lucas and the old man. ‘This is Paul,’ she says. ‘Paul, this is my son, Lucas.’

Paul presses down on the table and stands, slowly. ‘Pleased to meet you, Lucas,’ he says. They shake hands. ‘I knew your grandmother.’

‘So did I,’ Lucas says.

Linda waves at him. ‘There’s plenty left ’

‘Pardon?’

‘Food.’

Lucas shakes his head.

‘Paul and I thought we might go . At the cinema.’

‘What? The cinema?’

‘Yes. It’s been a while. Would you like to come?’

‘Sounds good,’ he says. ‘Mum?’

‘Yes, Love?’
Lucas makes a fist and rubs his chest in a circular motion.

Linda frowns for a moment, trying to remember. Then, she smiles. ‘Me too,’ she says.

TWENTY-ONE

As soon as they step off the bus, outside the ABC, Linda realises that Paul is struggling. She had worried she would not be able to walk into the cinema, but now she knows she will have to help her companion. ‘Is it coming back to you?’ she says, softly, as they stand outside.

‘Some of it, I guess,’ Paul says.

Linda, Paul and Lucas approach the cinema from the seafront side. The ABC is a
big, deep building. The façade remains as it had been: bulbous lamps either side of the steps, the tiny tiles like milk teeth on the canopy. Above the readagraph, there are grill-strips of blacked-out glass. Down the alleyway, Linda sees overflowing bins, the huge silver pipes of the air-conditioning, and the beautiful old wooden side-doors in the art-deco style, with ‘EXIT’ elegantly lettered above. Some of the tiles have been dislodged by the recent summer storms, and lie in a puddle at their feet.

‘A souvenir?’ Linda says, pointing to the tiles.

‘I can’t bend down that far,’ Paul says.

Lucas, still wearing the oversized leather jacket, seems to follow the conversation. He crouches to retrieve a couple of tiles from the puddle, and holds them out for Linda and Paul, on the palm of his hand.

Linda takes Paul’s arm as they climb the steps. He is unsteady on his feet, and she bears a good deal of his weight. Looking across, she sees that Lucas bears some, too.

Inside, Linda watches their shadows on the carpet. She feels that familiar warmth, and smells butter from the popcorn machine. She sees how the evening light comes through the glass doors in blocks. When cloud covers the sun, their shadows disappear, but the shapes of light are still visible, bleached into the carpet.

She recognises the old woman in the ticket booth. Mrs Stallard wears the uniform: a white blouse and burgundy waistcoat. She peers over her spectacles, and speaks into a small microphone. ‘Welcome to the ABC.’

Her name badge reads ‘JEAN’. She looks carefully at Linda. ‘I know you,’ she says.

‘Hello, Mrs Stallard,’ Linda says.

‘That’s it! You’re Daisy Seacombe’s girl!’

‘Linda,’ she says.
‘*Linda.* I haven’t seen you for how long?’

‘Eleven years.’

‘Yes. Of course.’

‘This is my son, Lucas, and this is…’ Linda turns around and sees that Paul has stepped back, and is leaning against the wall. ‘That’s Paul, who used to come here when it was the Electric Theatre.’

Mrs Stallard squints, and then smiles. Paul manages a quick nod before turning away. Mrs Stallard looks at them all. ‘Welcome back,’ she says.

The tickets are half-price, and the stubs advertise the ABC’s sister cinema, on the Marina. They go through a curtained entrance and proceed to screen two, passing a notice that the air-conditioning is broke. The place is practically empty, and Linda sits between Paul and Lucas in the centre of the middle row. Paul slides down in his seat. Lucas wipes the sweat from his face.

Linda flinches when the lights dim. ‘Ah,’ says Paul, grimly. ‘Now I recognise the place.’

‘Yes, pretty much the same, wherever you go,’ Linda says.

When the curtains go back, there is a burst of what looks like dust. Soon, it becomes clear that the dust is in fact a shoal of small, pale moths who have been gnawing at the velvet and now wheel into the room in panic. They swim up the light beam towards the projection booth in the balcony above.

The film is fine. It is about a jovial man who discovers that his life is a television programme. Linda can’t concentrate, in any case, because the memories are coming in, now. She wonders if it is happening to Paul, too, because his hand is shaking on the armrest. It is as if he has done what he had to do, and now he is falling to pieces.
Linda remembers watching a desert war film with her mum, and seeing the screen melt away from the top corner, a blue fire erasing the image. They thought it was a special effect, and held their ground until the usher dragged them out through the smoke. She remembers her mum feeling for Lucas, who was kicking through Linda’s belly during *The Empire Strikes Back*. She sees the three of them, in her mind, baking together, chatting away in the glow of the oven, a cloud of flour rising from their talking fingers.

She is crying, but tries to stay still and quiet. Nevertheless, she feels Lucas stir beside her. He does not look away from the screen, but absent-mindedly reaches across to stroke her cheek. It is a gesture Linda recognises. He did the same thing to his Nanna, more than a decade before, in a different language. She knows that he is searching for tears. Finally, he finds them.

* * *

Lucas is sweltering under Dan’s jacket. In the silk lining, he can smell tobacco, and the delicate scent of a woman’s perfume, but his skin prickles and he feels dizzy with the heat. Halfway through the film, he stands up and climbs over the rows of empty seats to the exit. As he walks through the corridors, he sees no-one, and that suits him fine.

The men’s toilet is a cool, bright room with fancy high-ceilings, shining tiles, and a sharp tang of lemon disinfectant. There is a high thin window, propped open, and a huge mirror with spotlights, like in the dressing room of a movie star. Lucas regards himself in the glass. The jacket looks good on him, but not good enough to die from
heat exhaustion. He takes it off and hangs it carefully on the edge of a cubicle door, savouring the feeling of the air from the open window on his bare arms. In the basketball vest, he is confronted again by the hazy words on his skin.

He takes a big, cupped handful of the swirling, rosy soap from the dispenser and slops it onto his left arm. He does the same with the right. Adding water, he begins to scrub. The poor quality of the soap makes it difficult to work up much of a lather, but it feels good to dig into the marks with his fingernails.

In his peripheral vision, he sees the door open just a crack. His mother puts her head round. ‘make sure you were okay.’

He rolls his eyes. ‘I can almost manage the toilet on my own, these days,’ he says, but a string of pink soap stretches down from his hand to the floor. Linda looks at the streaks and bubbles on his arms, and then comes fully into the room.

‘Whoa!’ Lucas says. ‘What are you doing, Mum? This is the men’s.’

‘Well. You’ll need someone to do your back, won’t you?’

Lucas laughs. His mum’s eye make-up is smudged from crying, but that looks good on her. She pulls some green paper towels from the dispenser, loads them with soap and starts working on the back of his neck.

‘Mum,’ he protests.

‘What?’ she says, watching him in the mirror.

He shakes his head. ‘You don’t have to.’

‘Stubborn stains,’ she says.

They work together happily and mechanically for a couple of minutes, as if his body is a car, or a living room window. On his arms, the thin lather takes on the colours it erases, and Lucas rinses it all down the sink. They dab his skin dry, and examine their efforts.
‘Not perfect,’ Lucas says, rubbing at the ‘Co’ on his shoulder, and the ‘ow’ on his chest.

‘The green out nicely,’ his mum says. ‘The other colours are tricky, though. shower when you get home.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ he says. ‘Go back in. You’re missing the film.’

Linda doesn’t move. ‘Lucas,’ she says. ‘You can go where you want, you know. You can live with your dad, if it suits you. But let me tell this. I am not going to leave you. Not ever. It’s important you know that. I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Well, you should,’ Lucas says, with a smile. ‘You should go places, sometimes.’

She reaches up and kisses him on the cheek, and then she leaves.

Lucas looks in the mirror again. The words on his body are still visible, and for a moment he thinks he might weaken. But he realises it doesn’t matter anymore. This is what he is made of: the things that have happened to him, the people who have bullied and befriended him, the people who left him when he needed them, whether they wanted to, or not. The people who have stayed. He is made of memories, and of the things he can’t remember, of the language they forced into his mouth, and the one they tried to rip out of his hands. He is made of the words scrawled all over his body, and the words that fade in the air. He is made of the red light, and the blue.