

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

Innovating from Tradition: Creating an Historical Detective Novel for a Contemporary Audience.

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Doctor of Philosophy

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University of Winchester.

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Abstract:

As a writer seeking to construct a detective text as part of a research study, I looked to the work of previous authors to inform and contextualise the making of a fiction which would both respect and test genre boundaries. A remarkably adaptable genre, detective fiction has, from its early beginnings to the present day, offered the opportunity for writers to create texts which, while introducing changes to the genre and expanding its boundaries, nevertheless remain of the genre.

My thesis is presented in two parts. The first is the creative element: a historical detective novel entitled *Close to Home*, set in the small town of Romsey during World War II. Historically and geographically accurate, the characters and events are entirely fictional. The novel demonstrates how my practice of reading as a writer – a reiterative and multi-layered exploration of the work of authors Allingham, Sayers, Tey and Peters from the twentieth century, and Penney, Griffiths and McPherson from the twenty-first century – has enabled me to create my own text. Patterned on the milieu and tropes of the earlier detective fictions and contextualised by the later works, *Close to Home* presents a fiction in which plot and writing technique express elements of innovation to the classic detective text.

The second part is a commentary reflecting on my research process, tracing the development of my practice of reading as a writer. It explores the way in which reading and writing were inextricably linked: so that my reading influenced and inspired the creation of my novel, while the writing focused my reading practice. In offering an account of how a specific creative writing research study has been undertaken, it suggests how this can illuminate individual practice and be disseminated to other creative writing practitioners.

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UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

ABSTRACT

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My thesis is presented in two parts. The first is the creative element: a historical detective novel entitled *Close to Home*, set in the small town of Romsey during World War II. Historically and geographically accurate, the characters and events are entirely fictional. The novel demonstrates how my practice of reading as a writer – a reiterative and multi-layered exploration of the work of authors Allingham, Sayers, Tey and Peters from the twentieth century, and Penney, Griffiths and McPherson from the twenty-first century – has enabled me to create my own text. Patterned on the milieu and tropes of the earlier detective fictions and contextualised by the later works, *Close to Home* presents a fiction in which plot and writing technique express elements of innovation to the classic detective text.

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LIST OF CONTENTS

Declaration and Copyright Statement	1
Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
List of Contents	5
Close to Home – <i>A detective fiction set in WWII</i>	7
Commentary	229
Introduction	231
Research	240
Reading as a Writer	251
Tropes	259
Structures	267
Narrative Techniques	277
Gender Roles	292
Historical Detective Fiction and Milieu	301
Conclusion	307
References	311
Appendix I	318
Appendix II	324

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Close to Home

A detective fiction set in WWII

Claire Gradidge

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14/15th April 1941

It's midnight when the train leaves London. I'd arrived much too early, had to wait until the carriages filled up and the labyrinthine processes of wartime travel set us on our way. Now, in the blacked-out, blue-lit, third class compartment my fellow travellers are sleeping, stiff upper lip in the face of danger. *If it ain't got your name on it...*

I can't sleep. It isn't the bombs, I've got used to them. It's the thought of what lies ahead.

Romsey.

So long ago.

I'd promised myself I'd never go back. If they didn't want me, I'd show them. I'd never set foot in the place again. That's how you think at fourteen, your life crashing down around you. It's ridiculous to feel the same when you're forty, but I do. I'm nervous, but there's no choice. If I want to know the truth, I have to go back.

I sit peering out through a crack in the blind. Before the war, this moonlit landscape would have seemed perfect, eerily beautiful; but tonight the wail of air-raid sirens shatters the night, dogging our journey and sending us cross-country, miles out of our way. I watch the repeated flare of incendiaries in the distance, see the dark huddled towns spring to light, watch the slow-motion fall of bombs. Glimpses, like at the pictures; except this is life and death.

*

Bombers' moon. From twenty thousand feet, the Solent shines like a mermaid's tail, shows the way to the city so plainly the blackout is useless. There's no mistaking the boatyards, the aircraft factories, the docks. The first Junkers follow the water, set down their payload as simple as laying eggs.

Targets quickly lose their definition as the fires spread. The city answers back, ack-ack guns pouring defiance into the sky. Caught in a stream of tracer, one bomber jinks wildly, turns for home. Engine stuttering smoke, he jettisons his load ten miles off target, sees a dark spot light up like Christmas.

Unknowing, he has seven deaths on his tally sheet when a Beaufighter brings him down barely a minute later. But tomorrow, when the Heavy Rescue Crew digs the last

casualty out of what's left of the little pub on the outskirts of Romsey, they will have an extra body to carry to the makeshift mortuary. Not seven shrouded corpses, but eight: eight unlawful deaths for the town's coroner to investigate.

*

The signs have been taken down from all of the stations, but even though our journey has been roundabout, I start to realise where we are about the same time that the first *all clear* penetrates into our cramped compartment.

Not far now.

As dawn breaks, the train is still stopping more often than it moves. If I didn't have my suitcase, too heavy to carry far, I could easily walk. Arrive quicker, and much more direct.

But I wait, and at last we struggle into Romsey station. All these years, and it's just the same. The stationmaster's still waiting by the exit, alert for tips and fare-dodgers. Old Bunny Burnage studies my ticket, barely glances at my face. I don't think he can possibly recognise me, but I can't help remembering all the times he caught me out.

When we laid pennies on the line for the express to flatten. The whole gang of us, messing about, daring each other to play last across. Getting closer and closer, looking for trouble and finding it.

'Penny'll derail the express,' Billy says.

'Nah. Him'll get cutten in half.' That's Bert.

Abe. 'Bollocks. Look here.' So we look, because Abe is the leader, and what he says, goes. He pulls something from his pocket, shows it off. 'It'll just get flattened, like this. And hot, if it isn't pushed off.'

'That's treason.' Jem fingers the squashed irregular shape. 'My dad says —'

'My dad's a copper, my da-ad is,' we taunt him.

'Dad says you can get yer head chopped off for spoiling a coin. Put in the Tower of London with the spies and shot.'

'Liar, liar, pants on fire,' I chant. 'Can't get shot and beheaded.'

'Can too, Carrotty-head.'

'They can't kill you twice, you bloody chicken.' Spitting mad, I run to where the rail is singing already with the train on its way. As I set down my penny, the rest of the gang scarper. Bunny Burnage is pounding towards me, cutting off my escape as the express screams past in a shawl of smoke; the rush of it nearly knocking me over. Just in time, I

grab the penny. Shove it in my pocket, fingers tingling with heat, ear stinging with the stationmaster's blow as I stumble away.

'Josephine Fox,' he shouts. 'Should have known. Serve you right if you'd been killed. I'd tell your father if anyone knew who he was. Hop it, you little bastard, and don't come back.'

I'd hopped, the penny and the slap cooling before I'd even caught up with the gang, but the stationmaster's contempt stung much longer. In a way the injustice still rankles, so now when he touches his cap and calls me madam, I want to laugh, dare him to call me bastard to my grown-up face. But satisfying as it would be to make him squirm, I'm not ready to declare my hand just yet.

I push my suitcase forward. 'I'd like to leave this here for the time being.'

'No noxious substances, no perishable goods, no livestock.'

'None of those.'

'That'll be thruppence.' He hands me a pink ticket. 'No claim without a ticket.'

He licks the back of the counterfoil, sticks it to the corner of the case. 'Southern Railway wishes to make it clear that the company takes no responsibility for loss or damage caused by war operations.'

I can't help smiling. 'Safe enough in Romsey, surely?'

'Begging your pardon, ma'm, but that's all you know. We had a tip and run raider last night, flattened the Cricketers' Arms. Still digging them out last I heard, dead as doornails, the whole lot.'

'The old place in Green Lane? That's bad.'

'You know it?' He peers more closely at me as I turn away. 'Hang on a minute. You got the look of –'

I pretend not to hear, keep on walking.

*

In all cases of sudden death... it is the duty of those who are about the deceased to give immediate notice to the coroner. If possible, notice should be given while the body is fresh, and while it remains in the same situation as when the death occurred. (*Jervis on Coroners, 1927:24*)

The sun is bright, exposing what had once been hidden. Though most of the Cricketers' Arms has been demolished, one corner stands almost to roof height, private spaces open to the sky. An iron-frame bedstead balances precariously, scraps of dingy wallpaper flutter in the breeze. At the foot of the wall, amongst the heaps of rubble and scattered timbers, a narrow crack pitches into the void beneath.

Sidelined by the Heavy Rescue Crew, Romsey's coroner stands waiting. Bram Nash knows how lucky he is, even if he doesn't feel it. He could easily have been under the rubble himself. Less than twelve hours ago, he was here, sitting in the bar, spinning out a whisky, watching the faces come and go.

He'd known them all. Old Ma Bryall, ferret-faced and vulgar. Fred, never-say-boo-to-a-goose Fred, long-suffering worshipper at Ma's shrine. Henry and Bob with their dominoes, poor daft May on her knees by the fire, brushing out the hearth.

Young Stan Hoskin'd had his call-up papers that morning. Proud and scared, full of the glory of war. Nash remembered how that felt. He'd watched as Stan picked up Sal, or maybe it was Sally, picking up Stan. She'd been old enough to be the boy's mother, but no lad had to go to war a virgin while Sal was around. She'd always do a soldier a favour, no matter what. Young, old, maimed, it'd all been the same to her.

Despite the sunlight, the persistent breeze, Nash feels suffocated by the thought of them, buried beneath the press of earth and debris. No sounds from below, no chat from the rescue crew. They work methodically, stopping now and again to listen. To call.

'Anyone there?'

Nothing.

'Anyone?'

He rubs his face, tries not to remember how it feels to be buried alive.

[gotta be better than buried dead]

The voice in his head might have been Mike's, long ago, or poor Bill Stewart's. Even Sally's, now. But that's a madness too near.

By lunchtime, they're ready to let Alf down on a rope. He's the smallest, the lightest, nerveless with youth.

A voice lifts across the rubble, trying to argue him out of it.

'Leave it, no hope. No point risking it.'

But Alf won't be moved. Everyone waits while he scrabbles over the edge. A flash of torchlight shows against the dark. Then, his voice.

'A girl, just here. Not buried n' nothing.' A pause. 'Nah. She's gone. Cold.'

[yes so cold now ever so cold]

*

As a child, I'd dreamed of walking into Romsey's most respectable hotel. Taking tea and cucumber sandwiches like a lady. But the wartime reality is ersatz coffee and a dry biscuit.

The lounge is gloomy, practically deserted, lamps unlit. The only brightness falls where I sit, close to a window overlooking Market Place. At a safe, English distance, an elderly lawyer-type in a navy pinstripe suit is plumped down, head buried deep in a newspaper. Beyond him, two stalwarts in Harris tweed are engaged in conversation. I can hear the rumble of words, but I'm too far away to make out what they're saying.

I recognise the one facing me. Stout, obnoxious, balding, Mr Maitland used to be our family dentist. As a child, I'd loathed him for the way he appeared to delight in giving pain. He'd seemed older than god to me then, but he can't be more than sixty-something now. The other man's unfamiliar, but I take a good look anyway. Much as I hate to think it, both are the right kind of age for my search.

Disgust sweeps over me as I sip the sweet coffee substitute. Either could be my father. I just don't know.

My mother had been in such distress that last week of her life. Weeping, terrified, she'd used up what was left of her strength. It didn't make sense, because she'd been so stoic till then. But I got it out of her in the end. It wasn't the pain, they had that more or less under control, and it wasn't that she was afraid of dying. It was him. My father. She'd read something about him in the paper, the Romsey Rag Aunt Sylvie sent her each week. It must have happened before, but this time I was there, I saw it. Her longing to go home, the shame that had kept her away.

It was a shock, because it was the first time I'd known he was alive. I'd been brought up to believe he was long gone. And even in her final weakness, my mother wouldn't tell me who he was. All she'd say was *he's there, he's there*, over and over.

We hadn't been close, my mother and I, but her dying was an ugly thing, made a hundred times worse by her fear. So after she'd gone, I promised myself I'd track him down. It was the least I could do.

I listed them all. The men whose names were in the paper. Mourners at funerals, sellers of prize pigs. Appearances in court. There were a lot, but I didn't think it would be too arduous to weed them out. But now I'm here, it doesn't seem so simple. All I know is that he's got to be old enough to have fathered me. He has to have had power, to have frightened her so. Has to have it still, to have kept her away. He must be entrenched in the town, an upright citizen or a complete rogue. But there's one thing I do know. I'm not going to turn out to be the only bastard in this.

*

There are peculiar duties ascribed to [the coroner], more particularly to inquire into the manner in which persons have come to their deaths where there is any reason to suppose that they may not have been by natural means. (*Jervis on Coroners*, 1927:13)

The church rooms are always cold. Stone built, north facing, they're a grim place for wedding breakfasts and christenings, but perfect as a temporary morgue.

Nash keeps his coat on as he moves between the trestles. He's seen his fair share of death. In France in the first lot, and since, as coroner. He's been called upon to inquire into accidents and suicides, sudden fatalities, even a murder or two. He tries to do his job to the best of his ability, give every death a true bill.

He pauses momentarily as he reaches the head of each trestle. Lifts the covering to identify, to confirm, to show respect. It ought to be simple enough, but he's puzzled.

Eight dead. Eight.

Seven, he knows. Names he anticipated. Faces – what's left of them – he watched last night, called to mind this morning. Yet now the seven have been tallied, one more remains. One more shrouded form awaits his inspection.

The girl they'd brought out first has been put on the far side of the room. Laid apart from the others. He turns the sheet back. This one's different from the rest, and not only because no one, so far, has been able to identify her.

So young. A stranger. Her presence in that ruin is stranger still. There's no sign on her of the bomb's blast. She's not been butchered, turned into a blackened tangle of flesh and bone like the rest. She's bloodless, neat, clean. She could almost be a waxwork. Her skin's still plastic, pearl and pink; her clothes are barely dusted with dirt. Her skull's dented, just a little, on the left-hand side. She looks like a doll, played with by a careless child, and abandoned.

[i just wanted to look pretty for a change]

Nash frowns, bends closer. Brighter than the bottle-blond of her hair, a thread of orange silk is tangled round the gold stud in her right ear. He loosens it carefully. Tearing a blank sheet from his pocket diary, he folds the paper into a makeshift envelope for the thread.

Seven from the Cricketers' Arms. Known, identified. Seven certificates, a formality. "*Death by War Operations*".

But the eighth, that's not so simple.

Who is she, this stranger? How did she die?

Silent, he makes her a promise. She may be one death amongst many, but one death matters, or Hitler's blitzkreig is just slum clearance and some bastard he knows, some smart Alec thinks he can use the grave of seven innocent people to hide a crime.

It isn't going to happen. He will find out.

[I'll hold you to that you see if I don't]

*

I sit daydreaming for a while, looking out over Market Place. It seems so peaceful after London. I feel like a stranger, but so little has changed. A couple of shops have got new owners, but I could still buy a bucket from the ironmongers or a lipstick from the chemist across the square if I wanted to. The women with their shopping bags have half-familiar faces, and I feel like a child again, observing from the fringe of things.

Then a man comes hurrying along The Hundred. He's purposeful, middle-aged and sturdy, wearing a dark coat and grey trilby. I catch a glimpse of the heavy glasses masking his face as he crosses towards the Town Hall.

It's as good a cue as any. Time to move on. I get up, go across the room to where the two men sit talking. Maitland looks up, hostile at the interruption.

'Can I help you?'

'Good afternoon, Mr Maitland. I don't know if you remember me? Jo Lester. Josy Fox that was. Joseph's granddaughter.'

As he stands up, I catch the faint urine tang of tweed, the antiseptic overload of mouthwash.

'Ah, yes, Josy Fox. It must be thirty years.'

'Not quite that long.' I smile, a polite nothing to include both men, though Maitland's companion doesn't even bother to look up.

'I hope your grandfather's well?'

'I've no idea.' And even less interest. 'Are you still in practice?'

'Indeed I am. Do you need an appointment?'

'Thankfully not.' He can take that how he chooses. 'I just wanted to make myself known. You won't have forgotten my mother, Nell, of course? Perhaps you heard, she died recently.'

He shakes his head. 'Sorry to hear it.' But there's nothing of sympathy in his face. Nothing else, either. If he has a conscience about her, I haven't caught it yet.

'It's why I've come back,' I say. 'There are things she told me... things I need to sort out.'

Now there's a flash of something, the flicker of a look between the two men.
Perhaps I've touched a nerve after all. I'm glad. It may not have been the best exit line in the world, but it'll do.

Nothing like it has happened here in years. The town has had its share of violence, a drunken temper, a hasty blow, instant regret. Of sudden death: a tramp slipped over the mill, a soldier, a grandmother, a blitzed-out friend in Pompey or London or down in the huddle of Southampton's streets. But this is different. This is murder.

The streets buzz with the murmur of lowered voices. People draw together, earnest, peering over their shoulders to see who's listening, itching to hear the latest. The only ones who hold aloof are batty old Dave on the corner, cap out for pennies, and Miss Waverley, hurrying past the Town Hall, too snooty to gossip with the hoi polloi.

A girl's dead.

A stranger, dead, at the Cricketers'.

No one knows who she is.

It wasn't the bomb, Tin Chops says, it wasn't that old fucker Hitler. It wasn't bad luck, or mischance, or sheer bloody accident.

Murder.

It was murder.

A girl, alone at that pub?

Everyone knows what that means.

Can't have been respectable.

Who could have done it?

Someone we know?

Can't believe that.

Someone we speak to?

Not in Romsey.

Who, then? Who?

An outsider, someone who doesn't belong.

A gyp, a tinker, a townee.

Can't be one of our own.

*

I knew one of the hardest things about coming back to Romsey would be seeing Bram Nash again. And now I'm here, awkward's nothing like. But it has to be done.

I stroll into the square, trying to look as if I haven't a care in the world. Just casual, going nowhere particular, nothing special in mind. It'll be difficult if his business keeps him in the Town Hall long, but I'm lucky, because barely five minutes after I saw him go in, he comes out again. He doesn't notice me at first, turns down into Church Street. I hurry to intercept him.

'Mr Nash?'

He tips his hat. Though I know he recognises me, it's the merest passing gesture. He sidesteps, ready to walk on.

I put out my hand, not quite touching his sleeve. 'We need to talk.'

'Nothing to say.'

'It's not personal. I have to be here. I want to explain.'

'No need.'

'*Bram.*'

'If you must.' He glances around. 'Better get off the street. Standing here's just jam for the gossips.'

It doesn't bother me, I'm ready for people to know I'm back. But it *is* complicated, and I need Nash's goodwill. 'Where shall we go?'

'The Wheatsheaf will be open,' he says, checking his watch. 'I'll buy you a drink.'

*

Across Market Place, a killer watches, attention fixing as recognition dawns.

Josy Fox. Who'd have thought she'd have the brass neck to come back? At least that mother of hers had known better than to show her face again.

Just look at the bitch, strollin' down the street as if she belongs. As if she has a right. Hasn't got her mother's looks, but the family likeness is there.

There's that bugger Nash. Don't know who he thinks he is, makin' a fuss. Standin' in our way.

By God, she's accostin' him.

Right out on the street.

Even Tin Chops looks fed-up. Man like that, face like that, no decent woman....

They're goin' off together. Disgraceful. Can't have that sort of thing.

Ought to be stopped. Got to be stopped.

I'm goin' to stop it.

*

There's been a brewery in the town since the year dot. So many pubs there's a saying, "*So drunk he must have been to Romsey*". They reckon a thirsty man can drink himself into a stupor any time he likes. Cross the right counter with silver and there'll be a pint of best under it.

I feel like a fool, trailing along behind Nash in silence. The Wheatsheaf's a miserable little dive, but in the end I'm glad to get inside. We settle in the dingy back bar, two chairs and a table in front of an unlit fire. The pub's empty, the room shadowy, the only window blacked out. Apart from the gin Nash fetches from the bar, it's a very different meeting from last time.

Outside, sirens wail. Inside, no one bothers to move. The bombers have come every night for more than a month, the alarm has worn off. Not the fear, perhaps, but there's no point in shifting when you know it doesn't matter where you go. They've all heard stories about shelters being hit, the people inside getting trapped; being crushed or burned or boiled alive. Might as well stay and finish your drink.

The bar's lit with a sickly yellow glimmer. Her throat's ragged with smoking, her eyes sting as she lights up another cigarette. The gin's too weak to have much effect, and she's sick of herself, of everything. She'd almost welcome a bomb.

She's ready to quit when her attention's caught by a man in the corner. The briefest glimpse, but recognition jolts. She angles for a better look, but the view's obscure, the tables between them crowded. Touts and tarts, drunken sailors, a Brylcreem boy scarcely out of short trousers. Someone moves, and she gets another glimpse. Swift as before, just a sketch of jaw and mouth, yet she could swear she can smell coal tar soap.

Sitting on a sun-warmed bank. Watching a profile sidelong, content to be close to her hero. Smelling the clean absolute of his skin, aware of her own stink, ashamed of it, one bath a week in water everyone's used, the must and dust of the cottage clinging.

Abe. Leader of the gang.

It is. She's sure of it now. So far out of place and time, yet she's convinced. She gets up, stubs out the remains of her cigarette. She can't let the moment pass.

She's almost too late. There's a blonde who's moved up next to his table. A raucous greeting carries across the room. 'Hello, darling. Looking for a good time?'

She doesn't catch his reply. Whatever he's said to the blonde, the woman huffs away. His head lifts, the shadows slide back, reveal heavy, black-framed spectacles, thick-tinted lenses that obscure his eyes.

She hesitates. She doesn't remember him needing glasses, he could always pick out a dunno from a sparrow at fifty paces. But recognition is strong as sunlight on her skin, and she moves forward, unwilling to let him disappear. Bold with memories, she pulls out a chair, sits down across the table from him.

'Hello, Abe,' she says. 'Remember me? Josy Fox.'

A moment's pause. He leans back into the shadows.

'Hello, Josy.' There's something not right about his voice. It sounds as if he's had something stronger than gin. Now she's close, she can see that something's wrong with his face, too: the left side's blurred, somehow indistinct. She's so nervous she blurts out the first thing that comes into her head.

'What did you say to that woman?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'The tart. You frightened her off.'

'Ah.' A pause. 'Tell me, when were you last in Romsey?'

'What?'

'You heard. When were you last in Romsey?'

'You know as well as I do. July '15, when my grandfather kicked me out.'

'A lot's happened since then. Are you sure you want to pursue it?'

'Are you telling me to bugger off?'

He makes a sound that might be laughter. 'Same old Josy.'

'Same old Abe. But I prefer Jo, these days.'

'And I was never that keen on Abe. It's Bram.'

'Still no answer, same old Bram.'

'I would have been 17 when you went away. The next year, I joined up.' He moves forward into the light, lifts his hand to the wrong side of his face. Outlines what seems at first to be a deep crease on his cheek, but now she can see it's a margin. A place where his flesh stops and something artificial begins. He taps, and the sound is metallic. 'The year after that, I got this.'

Now he's moved closer, she can see the strange demarcation continues above his glasses, bisecting his forehead, vanishing under his hair. The eye beneath the left hand lens doesn't blink. He's wearing a mask, hiding who knows what.

'In Romsey,' he says conversationally, 'they call me Tin Chops.'

'She wouldn't go with you because of that?'

'It's not exactly a first.'

'But you were looking for someone?'

He looks away. 'Perhaps.'

'So was I.'

There's a silence between them, a tiny well of stillness. She watches his face as best she can, refuses to be ashamed. In times like these, even strangers do it. In the street, in air-raid shelters, in full view of other strangers, life asserts itself. As physical, as unstoppable as a sneeze.

'How about it then? Will I do?'

'I suppose – ' he shrugs, meets her gaze. 'Why not?'

Careless, they take their chance. In a top floor room, they see London burn. The city rocks on its foundations around them, the fortieth consecutive night of bombing.

They are ships that pass in the night. Why not live for the moment? It seems fair enough. Tomorrow may never come.

That meeting in London was a coincidence. But I've engineered this, and I know he doesn't like it. But I can't help that.

The silence between us is barbed, unhelpful. I don't blame him for it. Or for making me speak first.

'What happened,' I say at last. 'Can't we forget it?'

'I thought I had.' Grim, he drains his glass in one. 'Seems I was wrong.'

'I didn't mean to come back. Didn't think I ever would. But then my mother died.'

'Ah.' He rubs his face. 'I'm sorry to hear that.'

When he says it, I can believe it.

'I knew what you'd think if you heard I was here. I wanted to explain. There are things I've got to do.'

'I see.'

But he doesn't, not yet. I take a deep breath. 'I may be here some time. I have to find a job, somewhere to live.'

'Your family won't help?'

One small sentence. If my coming back has hurt him, he's had his revenge in full.

'Not likely. You know I'd never ask Grandfather for anything.'

He shrugs, won't meet my eye.

'Bram?'

'What?'

The people at the Labour Exchange say they've no jobs suitable for me. But there's a card in your window. "*Assistant wanted*".'

'You want me to give you a job?' He sounds incredulous, looks as if he wishes he hadn't already finished his drink.

'Why not?'

'You don't think it might be awkward, working together?'

'I think it'll be bloody awkward, but I don't seem to have much choice.'

'I see,' he says again. But the thick glasses hide every expression, and I can't tell what it is he sees.

'It says, "*Confidential work, must be able to type.*" I can do that. I was a doctor's secretary before.' I pause, wondering how to put it. 'I know how to keep secrets.'

He makes an irritable movement of the head, like someone shaking off a persistent fly. 'It's not only that,' he says. 'I don't want a secretary, there are girls in the office who do that. I'm looking for an assistant for my work as coroner.'

'So what?'

'It's not just sitting in an office, typing. The work can be... distressing.'

'You mean I'd have to see dead bodies? You can't think that would worry me after London. You saw what it was like. After a raid, the ARP go round picking up the bits in baskets.'

'It's always been a man who's done the work.'

'There's a war on, you know.'

'So they tell me.' His tone is dry, on the brink of refusal. But he hasn't said no yet. And until he does, there's hope.

'That card in your window looked pretty old. Have you had many applicants?'

'Not even one.'

'And you must be busy now, because of the Cricketers' Arms.'

He's fierce, suddenly. 'What do you know about that?'

I'm taken aback, try not to show it. 'Only what Bunny Burnage told me when I got here. He said there'd been a raid, a lot of deaths.'

'Nothing else?'

'There was a bit of a buzz in the streets just now, but I didn't get close enough to hear what people were saying. You know what it's like when you don't belong.'

'Yes.' That seems to have struck a chord. He seems to be calculating something. 'It's not easy, Jo. I don't know what to say.'

'How about, *"I'll give you a trial, Mrs Lester"*?'

'I take your point. A month's trial, then. But I'm not promising anything.'

'When do you want me to start?'

'How about tomorrow, eight thirty? There's a post mortem, one of the dead from the pub. We haven't identified her yet. Meet me at the hospital and we'll see how you get on.'

'I'll be there.'

He gets up to go. 'The hospital isn't on Greatbridge Street any more. They built us a new one, up on Mile Hill. You can't miss it.'

Mile Hill. That's uncomfortably close to home. To Grandfather. I wonder if Nash is setting me a test. I'd rather not go anywhere near the place, but I can't refuse.

'I'll be there.'

*

SUPERINTENDENT BELL: What were your motives in trying to discover who the unknown victim was, Mr Nash?

NASH: Motives? It's my job to find out.

SB: And you were suspicious from the first that her death was not as a result of the air-raid?

N: I knew it, yes. The condition her body was in, she couldn't have been anywhere near that blast.

SB: And you knew this how? I can't believe there have been many bomb victims in your jurisdiction.

N: Only the seven from the Cricketers' Arms. But of course –

SB: Yes?

N: I had experience before.

SB: Ah, yes. Your service in the Great War. Surely that was very different? The shells there... part of the military machine... the trenches must have been poles apart from a village pub?

N: Only in scale. High Explosive doesn't differentiate between civilians and soldiers. In any case, you know I was right. She hadn't been killed in the air-raid.

I check the scrap of paper I've been given. *"Closeacre, Tadburn Road. May have room to rent"*. I remember all this as open farmland, but now there's a road with a neat row of semi-detached houses on one side. On the other, there's a fenced-in site that seems almost industrial with its rows of huge glasshouses. A couple of girls in Land Army uniform are working on the far side of the site under a sign that reads *"Wills' Nurseries. Established 1926. Finest Tomatoes In The South"*.

I find Closeacre at the top of the road. It's meticulously kept, painfully neat: the gravel path is raked and weedless, the net curtains starchy white. It doesn't look very promising as a prospective lodging house, but it's not as if I have any choice. I'll have to give it a try. I'm just reaching to open the gate when a voice from behind makes me jump.

'What's up, Doc?'

Turning, I see a skinny young man in dusty overalls and a cloth cap.

'You startled me.'

'Sign of a guilty conscience, Dot says.'

His teasing takes me back, familiar as Billy or Jem.

'Cheeky devil.'

"S'right.' He eyes me up and down. 'Have you come about work at the nursery?'

'No.' I'm puzzled. Is this another job I might have had? 'I've been told I might find lodgings at this address.'

He laughs. 'Someone's been pulling your leg. Miss Bailey that lives here does the hiring for the nursery. That's why I thought you was looking for her. But her old mum, she's a proper Tartar. Don't think she'd take lodgers. From what I hear, she don't so much as let fresh air indoors in case it disturbs the cushions.'

'Damn.' Seems like someone's got their wires crossed, and I don't think it's me. First the Labour Exchange, now the Billeting Office. Anyone would think they wanted to get rid of me. But it's probably not personal. *"Stranger? Heave half a brick at 'im"* has always been the town's attitude.

'Have you got somewhere else to try?'

'Not at the moment.'

'No promises, mind, but Dot might be able to help.'

'Who's Dot?'

'Sort of auntie. I'm staying with her while I'm working at the nursery.'

'That's a bit different from taking in a stranger.'

'Oh, Dot's all right. Take in the world, she would. And she's got a spare room since Rosie went home.'

'Would she mind me asking?'

'Give me a minute an' I'll pop over and see.'

'You're sure?'

'Course. Who shall I say?'

'My name's Lester, but – has your aunt lived in Romsey long?'

'Born and bred,' he says.

'You'd better tell her, then. I used to be Josephine Fox.'

'Famous, eh?' Curiosity held in check, but only just.

I shrug. 'More like notorious. Wouldn't want to upset her.'

He wipes his hand on his overalls, holds it out. 'Shake, missus. Alf Smith. Pretty well known about the place myself.'

'Good to meet you, Alf.' He shakes my hand so hard all the muscles in my arm protest. 'What ever do you do over there? Lift weights?'

'Stoking in the boiler house. Got a duff foot, they won't let me join up.' He flexes his biceps at me. 'Arms are OK though.'

'I'm impressed.'

'Get on.' But he seems pleased. 'We're down the end, the one with red tiles. Nothing fancy, but plenty of grub. Look as if you could do with it.'

'You're a fine one to talk.'

'Burn it up,' he says. 'What about you?'

'Something like that.'

Alf's 'sort of auntie' is a soft-featured woman in her sixties who takes me in without a murmur. We settle on terms, and if she recognises me, she doesn't say. She doesn't even ask for references once I tell her I'll be working for Nash. The good scents of cooking are coming from the kitchen, and I'm grateful for her easy acceptance. Alf's crack about food has reminded me how long it is since I last ate.

At supper, we sit six to the table. Alf, who's fetched my suitcase from the station in a wheelbarrow; Dot, watchful at the head, making sure no one's plate is empty for long. The two landgirls I saw earlier are introduced as Joan and Betty, inseparable as Laurel and Hardy. They sleep in a dormitory over at the nursery, Alf says, get their evening meal at Dot's by arrangement. Last is Pa Gray, Dot's ancient father, with the hair and beard of an Old Testament prophet, and so deaf Dot has to communicate with him by chalking messages on a slate.

They put a chair next to Alf for me, and Dot brings in three big bowls: rabbit stew, cabbage, and potatoes boiled in their skins. Pa doesn't need any prompting to bend his head and rattle through a grace.

'For this good grub we thank thee Lord.'

'Amen.' As if they've been starving through an hour-long sermon, the landgirls and Alf grab for the dishes, begin heaping food onto their plates. Joan, the thin one, giggles, casts a sly look my way.

'Not so much the Lord be thankit,' she says. 'Our Alfie with his snares.'

Dot gives the landgirl a cold look. 'Careless talk, Joan. Eat up and shut up. Mrs Lester?' She passes the bowl of potatoes across. 'Help yourself. There's plenty.'

After that, no-one says much until the rabbit is replaced by stewed rhubarb and evaporated milk, and a great brown teapot is put on the table to brew.

'You'll have to make do with the evap. for your tea, Mrs Lester, till I can register your ration book.'

'I drink tea black, thanks. Won't you call me Jo?'

'I'll call you a little miracle if I can have your milk for cooking.'

'Of course.'

'Your teeth'll drop out,' Betty says. It's the first time she's spoken, a surprising mousy whisper coming from her heavy frame. 'Still, prob'ly don't need to worry when you're old.'

I try not to laugh. I don't feel as old as all that. 'Probably not.'

'You haven't been called up, like?'

'She's Missus, stupid,' Joan says. 'They don't call up married women.'

'Yet,' says Betty. 'Anyway, if she's married, where's —'

'Bit of an odd do this morning,' Alf breaks in. He's been pretty quiet till now, and I bless him for drawing the girls' attention away from me.

'How's that, then, Alf?' Dot says.

'Since we've all finished eating, I reckon it's all right to tell you.' He pushes his pudding dish away, settles his elbows comfortably on the table.

'Go on.'

'I went up to the Cricketers' with the ARP. Help with the digging. Such a lot of rubble and stuff, a great pile all anyhow, you'd hardly credit there'd ever been a building there. We didn't think there was a chance, you know, to get anyone out alive, but we had to give it a try. There was this hole went right down into the cellar. We couldn't hear anything, but I said I'd go in on a rope and have a look.'

Joan shivers extravagantly. 'Ooohh, Alfie.'

'They was all dead, I heard.' The mouse whisper.

"S'right," he says. 'Eight of them in the end. They never stood a chance. There was all the regulars, Ma Bryall and the old boys, poor little May. Funny thing was – '

'Funny?' Dot says.

'Strange, then. You know what I mean. There was this one girl, looked just like she was asleep. Hardly a mark on her. But the others – ' He breaks off, swallowing hard. 'Better not say any more about that.'

Dot puts a heaping teaspoon of sugar in his cup, pushes it across. 'Never mind, boy. You did what you could.'

'Yep.' He slurps a great mouthful of tea. 'Sorry. Sort of only just hit me.'

'Off you go, girls,' Dot says. 'You've had all you're going to get.'

I take the prompt too, stand up.

'You needn't go, Mrs Lester. But the girls have got an early start, and we don't want them having nightmares.' She puts her hand on Alf's. 'We've been lucky, had a quiet war till now.'

'I will go out for a few minutes, if you don't mind.'

'Come and go as you like, so long as you're careful with the blackout. I lock up at ten, but there's a key on a hook in the scullery. Under the old tin bath.'

My watch says half past eight, but I'm dog-tired. 'I won't be that long.'

Outside, it's glimmering dark. Ahead, the drift of the girls' voices moves away from me, a shrill chatter of sound that breaks the silence, grows fainter as Betty and Joan return to their billet. I follow as far as the field gate, light a cigarette, careful not to let the match flare. After the day it's been, I need a smoke. I hadn't reckoned how hard it would be, once the memories came creeping back.

'Hurry up, Josy,' Jem says.

'Gi'us a go.' That's Bert.

We're squatting under the hedge, waiting for Abe to turn up. I'm concentrating on the makings of a cigarette: Rizla paper, a few precious shreds of tobacco. Jem's a whiner who'll take one drag and choke and Bert's a hardened smoker at ten, too mean to share the fags he pinches from his brothers.

"S not for you. I got the baccy, didn't I?" One of my jobs is making grandfather's roll-ups, better not come out less than twenty-five to the ounce and a clip round the ear if they aren't filled tight.

'Dad'll skin you if he finds out,' Mike says.

'Don't care. And don't you butt in if he does, neither. It's nothing to do with you.'
I eke out the tobacco into a thin roll. It's taken me a week to save enough for this one cigarette. I'm not going to share it. I lick the edge of the paper carefully, roll the fag paper tight. It's hardly thicker than a match, but it's real fresh tobacco, not dog ends rerolled. I'm just admiring it when Bert leans over and snatches it out of my fingers.

'Hey. Give that back.'

'Finders keepers.' He holds it out of my reach, grinning. A hefty big lad despite the smoking. 'Li'l girls shouldn' smoke.'

'Pig.' I pull at his arm, trying to make him give it back, but he holds me off easily. Somehow, my nails catch his skin and a bloody scratch appears on his wrist.

'Cat.' Deliberately, he crushes the cigarette in his fingers, a pathetic scrap of paper and tobacco. 'Smoke thatten, then.'

I reach to scrabble the pieces together and try again but he stands up, scrapes his boot over the remains so nothing is left but a muddy smear. I get up, hit out at him, ignoring Mike's efforts to come between us.

'You bloody pig.'

'Fight, fight,' Billy and Jem urge.

'Shoulda shared,' Bert gives me a push that sends me reeling into the brambles.

'Rules of the gang.'

I try not to cry as Mike hauls me out of the thorns, thinking that even if grandfather doesn't notice I've cheated his fags, he can't miss the tear in my skirt.

'Rules of the gang?' It's Abe. None of us saw him arrive. 'What's going on?'

Bert and I clam up, because telling tales is against the rules too, but Jem can't leave it alone.

'She wouldn't share her ciggy and Bert pinched it.' Jem glances at Bert's face and then at mine, decides in a second whose side he'd rather be on. 'Just a joke, like, but she went loony, boss.'

Abe looks at us too. Bert's smug, sure boys will stick together. Despite myself, snot and tears are running down my face and I have to wipe it off with the back of my hand.

'If it was a joke, you won't mind giving it back,' Abe says, easy.

But Bert can't, because he's squashed it in the dirt. He makes a face, takes one of his own out of his pocket and hands it over. Abe smacks him on the shoulder like grown men do, mates against the world.

And now I'm really going to cry. I run away, cigarette in hand. It'd choke me to smoke it, even if I had a match. Bert's mean, and Jem's a sneak, and whatever I said to Mike, I am scared to go home.

'Heya, Doc.'

I don't need to look round. 'Hello, Alf.'

'Spare a drag, Mrs Lester?'

'Have one.' I offer him the packet.

'Ta.'

'Light?'

He leans towards me, touching the unlit end of his cigarette to mine.

'Thanks.' He takes a deep lungful of smoke. 'Pfffh. Tipped. Girl's stuff.'

'Beggars can't be choosers.'

'True.' I catch the gleam of teeth as he grins at me. 'You OK with Dot?'

'I'm grateful, Alf.' Yawning, I stub the cigarette out on the gatepost. 'Didn't want to spend the night in the park.'

'I heard you tell Auntie you're gonna be working for Mr Nash.'

'That's right.'

'You won't say anything to him about tonight? That I got shaky, like.'

'Wouldn't dream of it.'

'I was all right back then. They said not to go down, but I knew I could. And she might have been alive. Someone might've.'

'It was a brave thing you did, Alf. Dangerous.'

'Only he was there, see. Watching. 'Cos of being the coroner. He said my evidence would be invaluable.'

'I'm sure.'

'I wouldn't want him to think I'm a coward.'

'Far from it.'

'Bloke like that, you know. Stuff he's been through. Some of the blokes call him Tin Chops, say if he took the mask off you could see his brain. D'you think that it's true?'

I know what lies under the mask. The hollowed out spaces and the scars. I made him show me that night, though he hadn't wanted to. It had seemed important at the time, but I can't forget it.

'Mrs Lester? You all right?'

'What? Oh, yes, just tired, Alf. I ought to get to bed.'

'Sorry if I upset you.'

'Not to worry.'

'Are you coming in?'

'Nah. Gotta see a man about a dog.'

'Tomorrow's supper?'

'Bit of foraging. See what I can see. Pigeon pie, if you're lucky.'

I sleep, dreamless, for most of the night. But towards morning, the images begin.

The shelter's taken a direct hit. The stench is terrible, a raw amalgam of dust and the butcher's shop. There's something sticky, dark as treacle, sliding down the wall. A child's foot, still in its shoe, gleams bone-white in the doorway.

There's a man in deep water, calling my name.

Blood runs down the face of a boy who has to be Abe. But beneath the heavy framed spectacles, he doesn't have eyes, just a pulpy crimson mass.

I wake up swearing. Switch on the light. The clock shows a quarter past five. It's too early to risk waking the household, but there's no hope of more sleep. I lie quiet, trying to shake off the pictures, imagined and remembered; only too glad when I hear someone begin to move around. Putting on my dressing gown and slippers, I creep downstairs.

Dot is dressed, ready for the day. The kettle's humming on the stove. 'Fancy a cuppa?'

'Lovely. Can I do anything to help?'

'Pass me that bowl on the sideboard if you like.'

'This one?' The yeasty smell of proving bread rises from beneath a folded tea towel.

'That's right.' Dot flumps the dough out onto the table top, begins kneading it. 'Sleep well?'

'Not too bad.'

'Alf said you wanted me to know your name from before. Josephine Fox.'

'That's right.'

'Sylvie Fox is in my knitting group.'

'Is she?'

Dot splits the dough into three, shapes each piece into a round loaf. 'Close mouthed, aren't you? A proper little Fox.'

'Not what my grandfather would say.'

'I wondered if you might be Nell's little bit of trouble.'

'Did you know her?'

'Bit younger than me. Real beauty she was, that dark hair and blue eyes.'

It's an evasion, but I don't know her well enough yet to push it. 'I must take after my father, then. Do you know any pasty redheads with ditchwater eyes?'

She takes a knife, slashes the shaped dough decisively. 'I heard your mum died.'

'Yes. Just after Christmas. She wouldn't tell me anything either.'

'This bloody war.'

'It wasn't the war. She had cancer.' If I'd said Nell had died of syphilis, Dot couldn't have looked more embarrassed.

'That's bad.'

'All death's bad, isn't it?'

'Sometimes folk welcome it.'

'Nell didn't. She wanted to come home. But she was too scared.'

'Your grandfather's a hard man.'

'He's all of that. But it wasn't him she was scared of.'

'No?' Dot turns away, sliding the loaves into the oven. 'You'll excuse me if I get on. You can take that kettle for your wash if you like. It's nice and hot.'

I take the hint, go back upstairs. But it leaves me wondering, as I wash and dress, what it is Dot doesn't want to tell me. And how I'm going to find out, and make her change her mind.

*

The coroner may, at any time after he has decided to hold an inquest, request any legally qualified medical practitioner to make a post-mortem examination of the body of the deceased... with a view to ascertaining how the deceased came by his death.
(*Jervis on Coroners*, 1927:145)

Nash is early arriving at the hospital mortuary, half expecting Dr Waverley to be in obstructive mood. Ready with his arguments to persuade the senior man, he's surprised to find a young surgeon alone in the department. The body on the stainless steel table is open, Y-incision gaping. Half a dozen jars are lined up along the bench, filled with the internal organs that have been removed from the girl. Only the brain, a lump of grey matter like a doubled fist, lies exposed on the scales.

'Mr Nash,' the surgeon greets him cheerfully. 'I was expecting you sooner. Job's nearly done.'

'I was told eight thirty.'

'Must have made a mistake. The theatre list starts at nine, and I'm assisting.'

'And Dr Waverley? I asked him to do the PM.'

'He said there was no need. Open and shut case.' He grins, shamefaced.

'Nothing complicated, I mean.'

'I see. So what have you found? Cause of death?'

The surgeon prods a darkened patch on the side of the brain. 'What you'd expect. Bang on the head, bleed in the brain. Lights out.'

His flippant manner sets Nash's teeth on edge. 'Anything else?'

'Perimortem bumps and bruises, no signs of force, no significant injuries apart from the skull fracture. There was semen on the body, but I don't think she'd had full intercourse. She wasn't a virgin, though. She'd had a baby.'

'A baby? She's only a child herself.'

'Not at all. She was sixteen, maybe seventeen. Girls like her start breeding in ankle socks.'

[bloody cheek what do you know about it]

Though he doesn't spell it out, his tone says it all. "*Lower class, no better than she should be*". It sticks in Nash's craw to have her so lightly dismissed, even if her work-worn hands and rough little feet, the cheap finery she was wearing when they pulled her out of the cellar, support the glib assessment.

'Time of death?' He's more abrupt, perhaps, than he need be.

'What time did the bomb drop?'

'You think she was killed in the air-raid?'

'Seems pretty obvious.'

'Too obvious, perhaps. Have you seen the other bodies?'

'Nothing to do with me.' The surgeon laughs nervously. 'More than my life's worth. Between ourselves, Doc Waverley's pretty fed up with you for insisting on having a PM done on this one.'

'Between ourselves,' Nash says, tightly, 'I couldn't care less.' He pauses, holding onto his temper as best he can. 'Tell me, how many post mortems have you done?'

'Enough.'

'And yet you're not surprised at the state of the body? You haven't mentioned any signs of blast.'

'Because I didn't see any.' The young surgeon picks up the brain, slides it into the remaining empty jar. 'The lungs are clear, and there's no blown debris in the wound.'

'Precisely. Then she can hardly be a bomb casualty, can she?'

'Maybe not.' He shrugs. 'Perhaps she was a looter, wandering about in the ruins in the dark. She could have fallen in by accident.'

[me a looter n' all done up in my best not bloody likely]

'Your findings don't seem to support that thesis either,' Nash says. 'No significant injuries, you said. Isn't it more likely she was killed elsewhere and brought to the site, dumped there to be found?' For some fool to make easy assumptions, he thinks. For some killer to get off scot free. He takes a breath, presses down the anger. 'You must see why I'm asking for an approximate time of death. Or don't you feel competent to assess it?'

'There was full rigor at midday when you got her out.' The surgeon's resentful, on his dignity now. 'That's eight hours, minimum. Up to sixteen, maximum. No one thought to take a temperature for comparisons, so I can't be more precise.'

'That would mean she died sometime between eight on Monday night and four yesterday morning?'

'If you insist.'

'What I insist on is doing my duty. Finding out who she was, and how she came by her death.'

'I wish you joy of it.' The surgeon turns his back, pulls off his gloves. 'I suppose you want me to tell Doc Waverley the body has to be kept?'

'I certainly do. When will I get your report?'

'Tomorrow?'

'Make it today. Tell Waverley I'll sign the other certificates. Those deaths are straightforward enough. But this one,' he touches the stiff, icy hand. 'I won't sweep her under the table for anyone's convenience.'

*

Who does Nash think he is, questioning the girl's death? Bloody freak.

She died so easily, one little tap, no more trouble than swatting a fly.

Providential that Jerry had taken out the pub. Almost as if it'd been meant. Perfect for disposal.

He'd treated her well. Better than she deserved. And when he'd finished with her, he'd wrapped her in the Indian silk, such pretty colours. Put her in his car. It was fun, driving in the night, knowing she was there. Almost didn't want to get rid of her.

It was so bloody easy. Nothing to her. Light as a feather, he could carry her no trouble. Just a few yards, past the barrier. Bit of rope, handwritten notice, *"Danger, Keep Out"*. No one there to enforce it. He'd have to speak to someone about that.

In the end she'd rolled out of the silk like Cleopatra, hardly a sound as she fell. He didn't want her hidden, didn't need it. Better if she was found. Just another casualty. Jerry could take the blame. Would have done, if Nash hadn't put his oar in.

*

All morning, it feels as if Romsey is claiming me back. Not the people, because this is no prodigal's return. I'm not likely to be taken into the bosom of my family, I'm more of a viper in its breast. But the place knows me, or I know it, and my feet still find the way without conscious direction. Even the scatter of new houses along roads that didn't exist when I was a child don't put me off. Not for me, the long way round. I follow my nose to the fields, find my way across the stream on stepping stones that have been there since the Saxons came.

No one sees me. At the railway line I avoid the farm gate, duck under the wire, listening for the clack of the signal before I cross the track. A few yards more and I'll be on grandfather's doorstep. I go warily, but the cottage seems deserted, door closed and curtains drawn. I breathe more easily once I'm past. The new hospital buildings, raw red brick, loom from the hillside where I remember picking blackberries and making daisy chains. I feel a stranger for the first time today.

I'm early for my meeting with Nash. There's no sign of him, but the porter's lodge has a hatch in the door and a notice which says *"Visiting 2-3pm Wednesdays and Sundays, No Children, Fathers only for Maternity"*. And in much smaller lettering underneath: *"Ring for assistance"*.

I ring. The hatch snaps open, and my grandfather is standing on the other side. I don't know who is the more astonished, but he recovers first.

'Josephine.'

He's a man of almost eighty, looking hardly different from my memory. Stretched thinner perhaps; a little man tough as old boot leather. Face like an axe, expression to match. For a moment I want to run. But I won't give him that satisfaction.

'How are you, Grandfather?'

'None the better for seeing you. What are you doing here?'

'Working for Mr Nash. I'm his new assistant.'

'Tsss. What's your game?'

'Game?'

'Always were sweet on that Jew-boy. You think you'll wheedle him round?'

'It's a job, Grandfather.'

'Lost your man, so I heard.'

Aunt Sylvie must have told him about Richard. But he's not the only one who can play dumb.

'And then my mother died.'

No response.

'Your daughter.'

Still nothing.

'Nell.'

'I lost my daughter, *Ellen*, let me see. How old are you?'

'Surely you remember?' I pretend surprise. 'I'll be forty in July.'

'Forty years ago, then. You think a man can grieve forever?'

'I think he might have regrets.'

He sneers. 'About you?'

'I was talking about my mother.'

'You should never have been born. Spawned.'

'Who are you calling a frog?' I feel cold as a frog. The blood – and it sickens me to think it's his blood too – runs chilly in my veins.

'You, you bastard get of –'

'Go on. Whose get? You know, don't you?'

'And if I do?'

'Why don't you tell me?'

'I'll never tell you.' Full of scorn.

'When you threw me out, I'd done nothing wrong.'

'You'd been born.'

'You cared for me for fourteen years.'

'I put up with you for your grandmother's sake, God rest her. But you shortened her life too, child of sin.'

I won't let him distract me. 'What about my father's sin?'

'A man does what a man must.'

'And the woman he does it with?'

'No sin in a wife.'

'So why didn't he marry her? You don't blame him for that.'

'Not my place.'

'But, Nell?'

'I taught her right from wrong.'

'And here I am.'

'Get out.'

'I'm not going anywhere. I told you, I'm here on business, to meet Mr Nash.

Where will I find him?'

He spits at my feet. I can't help it, I have to step back. It puts the ghost of a smile on his face.

'Nash don't run this hospital, whatever he thinks. I take my orders from Dr Waverley.'

'Then I'll wait here, shall I? In full view of the road. Where anyone passing might see me. The red hair's quite distinctive, I'm told. Who knows who might recognise me?'

'Mortuary,' he says, sour. 'Big black door round the back. Sooner you're there, the better.'

I make myself smile, though I don't make any mistake about what he means.

'Thank you, Grandfather. See you later.'

The hatch slams shut behind me. I'm shaking as I walk away. It's a shock to know he could have told me about my father any time he chose.

So full of hate. My poor mother.

And under it all, there's a thread of discomfort. Why didn't Nash warn me my grandfather would be here?

By the time Nash reaches the office, he's had time to calm down. Get his face in order.

'Morning,' he says, as Miss Haward looks up from her desk. 'Any calls for me?'

'Nothing of consequence, sir.'

'Good. You'll be glad to hear we've got a replacement for PC Dacre.'

'That is pleasing news. Have the police found us someone after all?'

'Her name's Mrs Lester. She'll be coming in to the office later.'

'Mrs?' Miss Haward looks shocked. 'I know we're short-handed, sir, but a woman? Begging your pardon, but that's hardly suitable.'

'She's not a child, Aggie. She's been living in London. Our few deaths won't shock her.'

'Even so. What about Cissie and June? I won't have them upset with gory details.'

'I'm sure she'll be discreet. It's not as if she'll be in the office much. Like Dacre, she'll be out and about most of the time.'

She sniffs. 'You've seen her references?'

'I'll leave all that to you, Aggie. Just give her a chance, eh? I could really do with the help. Be a saint. It's been a long morning. Send someone up with a cup of tea for me, please.'

But the tea's no panacea. Now he's cooled down, he knows he was wrong. He shouldn't have let her walk into it like that. Never mind he was hacked off because she'd made him take her on. He could have said no.

Could have said no, months ago. Should have.

He's kicking himself for a fool.

Bloody cruel, not warning her the old man might be on duty. That old bugger Fox has always been Waverley's toady. Wormed his way back onto staff the minute war was declared. *"Freeing the fit and able for duty, sir. Know what I mean?"* Eyeing him up all the while, the word *cripple* as clear in the old man's face as if he'd said it aloud.

Can't blame her for being angry. He's a bloody fool. It's not as if it'll put her off. But there's nothing he can do about it now. Nothing he can say that won't make it worse.

*

I might have asked for a lift back into town, but I hadn't wanted to squeeze into the rattletrap taxi with Nash. I'd been rude to him, so put out by Grandfather I couldn't think straight. And there'd been no chance to make it better by apologising, because Dr Waverley had come striding down the corridor just at the wrong minute.

Another of Maitland's cronies, another of old bastards who act like they rule the town. Looking at me as if I was dirt. The atmosphere between him and Nash was pure poison, seemed like there was more to it than a simple disagreement about the unknown girl. Didn't make it any easier when Nash introduced me as his new assistant.

Seeing Waverley's expression and hearing the contempt in his voice hadn't done much for my mood. Almost made the mortuary seem welcoming. All white tiles and echoes, its chilly hygiene makes death seem more sinister than when it comes in bloody fragments on London's streets.

And then there's Billy Stewart. Mortuary attendant. It's a shock when Nash introduces him. The Billy I'd known had his name on the war memorial, I'd seen it yesterday.

His son? I say, and Nash says yes, though he's nothing like. Our Billy was irredeemably scruffy, face unwashed, hair uncombed, backside out of his trousers more often than not. This Billy's glossy and colourless as everything around him, starched white coat, scrubbed fingernails, pale hair and slick silent shoes. Stiff and abrupt as a stick insect in a glass tank. When Nash says he'll be grateful if Billy will show me round after he's gone, Billy takes him so precisely at his word that he doesn't move until the sound of Nash's footsteps has died away. Then he rouses himself as if waking, begins to escort me round the premises.

By the time he's finished, I know more than I'd have thought possible about mortuary systems. How everything is logged in and out, how temperature is controlled, the way bodies are tagged and property stored. I've learned the statistics of mortality in my home town, the number of deaths, sudden and otherwise.

'Murders?' I ask him. It's an idle question, born of boredom. I don't expect the answer to be yes.

'One infanticide this year.'

'A baby?' I'm shocked.

'Left on the doorstep of the old hospital. Mother can't have realised the sign was out of date. Might have been all right even then if the rats hadn't got to it. Filthy creatures, eat anything, living or dead.'

[they took it away said it'd be all right poor little scrap]

I've seen some awful things in London, but nothing as bad as rats eating a baby alive. 'That's terrible.'

'Here you are.'

He turns the pages of a big ledger, points to an entry. "12/1/1941: Newborn male. Caucasian, hair reddish, NDM. COD: exposure, dehydration, rat attack. Property: part blanket, wool plaid, (stored). MOI: nil. Disposal: B/CG 32, Romsey Cemetery 3/2/1941."

'These abbreviations,' I say to distract myself. "NDM; COD; MOI". What do they mean?'

'No distinguishing marks, cause of death, means of identification.' He indicates the last, though I haven't asked. "'B/CG". Burial, common grave. They put the babies in the coffin of someone being buried that day.'

'That's – ' I can't say terrible again, although it is. 'Sad. You never found the mother?'

'Nothing to do with me.' He closes the ledger, lays his hands on top as if he's afraid the information might escape. 'There are a lot of strangers around these days. Evacuees and trekkers. Dr Waverley said it was most likely one of them getting rid of an illegitimate child.'

[not me i told you already i never meant him any harm]

Oh, yes, Romsey makes a habit of getting rid of those. But sometimes, the bastards come back.

'Anything else you want to see?' he says. His hands tap restlessly at the book. 'Only I got to get on.'

'I think I've had enough for now.'

More than enough, but I can't let it show if I'm going to keep my job.

The coroner's officer is unknown to the law, although his functions are very important... the position requires more than average tact, discretion, shrewdness. (*Jervis on Coroners, 1927: p28*)

The offices of Nash, Simmons and Bing are tucked away in an alleyway. The firm is well established, even by Romsey standards, and half the town's legal business is done

beneath its mossy slate roof. Discreet, ever so respectable, three brass plates gleam by the black-painted door. Like Goldilocks, a prospective client has plenty of choice.

Will it be “*Mr Simmons, Solicitor*”? Old fashioned script, smoothed by decades of polishing. He and his plate were here as far back as I can remember. No doubting his experience in the law.

Or “*Mr V B Bing, LLB (Cantab)*”? Plate shiny, sharp-edged, fancy border. A newcomer, full of titles and learning. Not afraid to advertise.

Or, “*A Nash*”? Discreet as they come. No indication of his role. An interesting choice.

Inside, a narrow hallway. There are two doors to the left, one marked “*Waiting Room*”, and the other “*Miss A Haward, Senior Secretary*”. Ahead, a precipitous stairway, lit by a low-powered bulb, vanishes into the upper regions of the building.

I choose the secretary’s door, knock and go in. A woman in a sludge-green jumper is sitting at a desk, typing. She looks up as I go in. Her face is almost clownish, made up in an exaggeration of a fashion that was popular in the twenties: skin powdered pale, hair shingled tight into her neck, harsh red lipstick and black-pencilled eyebrows.

‘Yes? Can I help you?’

‘I’m Mrs Lester. I believe you’re expecting me.’

The secretary flashes her teeth in what passes for a smile. ‘Mr Nash did mention it. If you wouldn’t mind waiting a few moments? Take a seat.’

I sit in the only available chair. A curly-backed escapee from a dining set, it’s every bit as uncomfortable as it looks. She makes a show of collecting up papers, opening and shutting various drawers in her desk.

‘I’m afraid Mr Nash isn’t altogether *au fait* with recruitment under wartime conditions, Mrs Lester,’ she says at last. ‘I presume there are no objections to your taking civilian work?’

‘I’m not thinking of enlisting, if that’s what you mean.’

‘And you’re married?’

Her eyes are on my hands, but I stopped wearing my wedding ring months ago. ‘That’s right.’

‘What about your husband? A job like this – many men would be opposed to their wives doing such work.’

‘I haven’t asked him,’ I say. I don’t say, I wouldn’t ask, even if I could.

‘Ah.’ She flushes an unlovely pink. ‘Mmm... might that be a little awkward? If he were to object?’

I wish she would just let it lie, but I can see she won’t. ‘It’s hardly likely. He’s been missing since Dunkirk.’

‘Oh, my dear Mrs Lester, I’m so sorry. Our gallant forces... still, there’s always hope.’

‘He was a civilian,’ I say. ‘Took a boat across, didn’t come back.’

The eager pity on her face makes me want to bite. What Richard did was sheer bloody waste. Bravado. Playing the hero, taking a yacht to Dunkirk against official advice. A doctor, he’d have been so much more use staying home to help the wounded when they came.

‘You must be very worried,’ she prompts me.

I shrug. I’ve nothing to say that she wants to hear.

‘Well.’ She gives up. ‘I presume the Labour Exchange recommended you to Mr Nash?’

‘I saw the card in your window. I happened to meet Mr Nash and asked him about it. We’re old acquaintances.’

‘Really?’ She looks even more clownish, raising those improbable eyebrows at me. ‘You have references?’

I fish out the envelope from my bag and hand it over. She takes out the papers, studies them, sniffing. Perhaps I should have let her exercise her sympathy on me after all.

‘These references are rather old, Mrs Lester. 1929, 1931. We usually expect something a little more recent.’

‘I don’t have anything more recent.’ No references in marriage. Even if there were, I doubt I would have got one from Richard.

‘You confirm the Miss Fox recommended here is you?’

‘My marriage lines.’ I snap the document down. ‘And my identity card.’

‘Thank you.’ She inspects the card, poring over the addresses. Makes notes on a shorthand block. ‘Silverbank, Isle of Wight; 4 Garden Row SE1. You’ve moved around rather a lot.’

‘First registered at my marital home,’ I say, clinging to civility. ‘Then I was looking after my mother who was ill. She died in January.’

'I see.' She scrawls something else on her pad, and I see her decide not to bother with sympathy this time. 'And now?'

'I'm lodging with Dot Gray. Tadburn Road.'

Miss Haward pushes the papers back across the desk towards me. 'You haven't registered your card with the warden.'

'I only got here yesterday.'

Her eyebrows go up again. 'That was quick work.'

I'm saved from having to answer by a voice calling.

'Aggie.' The rattle of footsteps on the stairs. 'Aggie?'

The door opens, and Nash appears.

'Ah, Mrs Lester. You're here at last.'

'Miss Haward was checking me over.'

'Dealing with formalities,' the secretary corrects me primly.

'There's work to be done,' he says. 'Don't fuss.'

Miss Haward looks pained. 'I haven't had a chance to talk to Mrs Lester about conditions of service.'

'Draw up a contract, "*Assistant to Coroner*". You know the sort of thing. I'll discuss terms with Mrs Lester, fill it in later. Oh, and let the Labour Exchange know.' He turns to me. 'Come up to the office.'

There are a lot of stairs that grow increasingly rickety as we climb to the top floor. I'd have expected Nash's office to be in a better position, not shoved away in the attic. But when we finally arrive, I can see why he's chosen it. The room is large, filled with a northern, painter's light. A workman-like desk with a chair on either side of it stands at one end, while at the other there are bookshelves, a low table and a squashy leather armchair.

'Sit down,' he says abruptly, shutting the door. I take my place on the client's side of the desk. He settles across from me, leans earnestly forward, hands steepled together. 'Let me tell you what's worrying me.'

And he does. His concerns about the unknown girl whose body had been found at the pub, his suspicions about her death. His determination to find out who she was, how she'd come by her death. And how he's going to make sure she won't go nameless into her grave.

'And you want me – ?'

'To find out anything you can about her. Everything.'

'As easy as that.'

'I thought you wanted a job.'

'Well, it'll be a challenge, anyway. Like getting past that guard dog.'

'What?' He looks startled. 'I hope you don't mean Aggie?'

I can't help laughing. 'No. I meant the Alsatian in the scrap yard. Don't you remember? I got bitten.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'You think someone killed that girl. You're asking me to go poking around, stirring things up. Causing trouble. People won't like it.'

'Ah.' He rubs his face, a gesture I'm beginning to recognise. 'Perhaps it isn't such a good idea after all.'

I look him full in the face. Eye to eye. 'I think it's an ace idea. I'm sick of stooging along. I can't think of anything I'd like more than to stir things up.'

'I don't want you taking unnecessary risks.'

'No dog bites, I promise.'

'You'll be discreet?'

'Getting cold feet, Cap'n Abe?'

A pause. The first ghost of a smile. 'No.'

I couldn't have asked for anything better. The job's perfect cover, the danger, a bonus. I feel alive in a way I haven't since the Blitz cooled, and London began to sleep at nights. It's the code of the gang: you never refuse a dare.

*

SUPERINTENDENT BELL: So you had your suspicions and sent Mrs Lester to try and verify them. Did you suspect someone particular from the first?

NASH: Of course not. How could I? I just wanted her to find out who the girl was. We had to know that before we could hope to discover who'd killed her.

SB: But Mrs Lester had ideas of her own about what you'd asked her to do?

N: I don't think it would be wise for me to comment.

SB: I think you have to comment, Mr Nash. The situation we're in, only the truth will do. And the truth is important to you, isn't it?

N: Of course.

SB: So, no prevaricating, sir.

N: Later I discovered she did have another reason to accept the job.

SB: And that was?

N: She was looking for her father.

SB: In other words, she used your office as a smoke screen.

N: I wouldn't say that. Though her enquiries did cut across our investigation, you must remember it was Mrs Lester who discovered who the dead girl was.

SB: Even then, she wasn't entirely dedicated to the search for truth and justice, was she, sir? Or at least, not the same truth you were looking for. Nor the same justice.

N: I don't know what you mean.

SB: Oh, I think you do. Were you angry with Mrs Lester for undermining your search for the girl's killer and turning it into a witch hunt for her father?

N: No.

SB: Really?

N: I wish she'd been honest with me. I might have helped sooner, perhaps. Avoided this outcome.

A coroner or his officer is justified in searching the premises where the body is found, if there is reason to think that the search is likely to lead to the discovery of evidence bearing on the cause of death. (*Jervis on Coroners, 1927:268*)

I go up through the fields to the Cricketers' Arms. The path used to be narrow, a foot track only, but it's wider now, the ground rutted with tyre marks. The rough pastures on either side have been ploughed and planted, and a haze of new shoots shows Romsey is taking "Dig for Victory" seriously.

At the wreck of the pub, someone's put up a barrier of rope and a shaky-lettered notice. "Danger, Keep Out". In the green quiet, the bombed-out building seems more shocking than whole streets of blitzed London.

Trouble is, I don't really know what I'm looking for. Clues. Traces, however thin; like walking into cobweb first thing in the morning, seeing nothing but knowing there's a spider creeping somewhere. Nash and Alf said her body had been found deep in the cellar, dead but unburied, and I can see the opening where Alf must have gone in. I stay well clear, though. I don't much fancy poking about in the shadow of that precariously-standing wall.

Here and there, piles of brick and lath show where the Heavy Rescue Crew worked to clear the cellar. There are odd bits of rubbish littered about, a newspaper, an old tin can, the end of a walking stick. Nothing that looks as if it might help identify the girl. They must have taken away everything they thought might belong to the casualties. I need to find out where it was taken.

The rescue crews have trampled the ground round the bomb site into an anonymous stretch of dirt. A rank crop of nettles and alder stands undisturbed behind, and the cut into Green Lane is rutted too deep to show any signs I can read. I can't help but think I've wasted my time. So naïve of me to suppose I'd be able to find some vital clue lying around. Even to imagine I'd recognise one if I saw it. The only sensible thing to do is get back to town. If I go the long way round, there might be someone at the cottages who might have seen something.

Green Lane's tunnelled by trees on either side. If the girl came along here alive, she couldn't have been a stranger. It's too obscure, too far off the beaten track. And if her killer brought her, or brought her body, what had he planned? He might have meant to leave her somewhere out on the common. Unless he'd already known about the bombed-out pub.

But who *had* known?

A regular at the pub? Someone from the neighbourhood? Even with the speed of Romsey gossip, I can't imagine how anyone further afield would have known so soon.

But just as I'm reaching for the thought, a dog begins to bark. The single repeated sound is as steady as a metronome.

'Got you, you little –' An irritated whisper comes from a thicket of brambles. 'Hold still.'

The barking stops, but I can hear heavy breathing, some kind of struggle. A muffled yelp, and then a curse.

'No, dammit, Tizzy, leave it!' A skinny, khaki-clad backside forces its way out of the tangle of briars. It's the back view of a woman in a make-do-and mend striped jumper, tugging at a piece of hairy string. It turns out to be attached to the collar of a white lurcher with a scratched and bleeding nose. I half expect it to bark again, but instead it thrashes its tail in greeting.

'What?' The woman on the other end of the string turns. 'What do you want?'

The dog abases itself at my feet, turns belly up for patting. I crouch down to oblige. Speaking more to the dog than its owner I say, 'Been chasing rabbits?'

'None of your business,' the woman snaps. 'It's nothing to do with you.'

Her aggression is startling.

'I didn't mean –'

'You're not after me about the dogs?'

'Not at all.'

The woman sucks vigorously at her hand where the brambles have drawn blood. 'Nosy parkers keep going on about food regulations. Want me to gas'em. Have to gas me first.'

'I'm not that kind of nosy parker. I've been at the Cricketers' Arms.'

'Sightseeing.' She sounds disgusted.

'Coroner's assistant. I'm new.'

The dog woman looks surprised. 'You're working for Mr Nash?'

'That's right.'

'He was bloody lucky to get away with it.'

Get away with what? Before I can ask, she goes on.

'Saw him last night on his way home. He was really fed-up. Suppose Sal was busy. Just as well for him, though. If he'd stayed, he'd have been a goner with the rest.' The dog woman pulls the little lurcher away from my feet. 'Can't stand here gossiping. Won't buy the baby a new bib.'

Speechless, I watch as the woman and dog lollop off along the hedgerow. Nash was at the pub?

I can't seem to take it in.

Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't he say something? I feel sick.

Had he seen the girl?

Had he...

I don't want to think he might have had something to do with it.

That he might have... hurt the girl.

I don't want to believe it. But what do I really know about him, after all?

My brain's fizzing with conflict. If he was involved, surely he wouldn't have wanted her death to be investigated? A guilty man would have let matters lie.

Could Nash...?

Could he possibly...?

[old tin chops wouldn't never touch]

If he thinks he can buy me, direct me, divert me... It isn't going to happen.

I have to go back to the mortuary. See the girl. I have to know. I have to understand. Till now, I've been thinking of her as a convenience. A smokescreen for me to make my own search. But she's real. Her death is real. I owe her more than that.

I have to face her.

I have to know.

The chill of the tiled room is infinite, sucking at living warmth. There's the smell. Jeyes' fluid and formaldehyde laid over something meatier, more visceral. Billy Stewart, reluctant, opens a drawer, slides out a shrouded shape. Disapproving, he uncovers the body with its long scar.

Her face has a shuttered look, possessed of the ultimate secret. She isn't going to tell me anything after all.

[said i wouldn't tell just wanted a few quid to get out that's all]

'Can I see the ledger?'

Without acknowledging what I've said, he pushes the body back into the cabinet, shuts the door. Back in the office, he takes off his white coat and hangs it on a peg behind the door, adjusts the folds precisely. I'm ready to slap him before he fetches the ledger down from the shelf.

"16/4/1941: Female, approx 17 years. Caucasian, bleached hair, brown eyes. NDM. COD: subdural haematoma. Property: white cotton brassiere and knickers, pink rayon slip, red and white patterned artificial silk dress, red wool cardigan (stored) MOI: nil. Disposal: retain at mortuary until released by coroner."

'Have you got some scrap paper?'

He grunts, hands me a neatly cut strip. Fishing a pen from my bag, I copy down the meagre information.

'No handbag or jewellery?'

'Everything is listed.'

And no shoes either, but I don't say it aloud. 'What would happen to any property that was found near the body?'

He shrugs. 'The ARP warden would have kept it. Unless it was thought to be of value. Sergeant Tilling would take anything like that.'

'Thank you. I know where the police house is, of course, but the ARP post?'

'The Head Warden's usually at the depot in Church Street. You could try there.'

A boy in scout uniform half leans, half squats against a wall outside the ARP post, an old sit-up-and-beg bicycle propped up next to him in the evening sun. I don't need the extra clues, the canvas satchel slung over the handlebars and khaki armband to work out he's the shift messenger, younger even than Alf. For this boy's sake, I can't help being glad it's Romsey, not London; that he's bored, not frightened, by his duty. With any luck, Hitler's lightning won't strike twice.

'Can I help you, miss?'

'I'm looking for the warden.'

'Miss Waverley's gone home,' he says. 'Feeling poorly. And Mr Fox has popped over to the police station. He won't be long if you wanna wait. Or there's Miss Margaret on the telephones.'

Inside, the girl at the telephone has the anxious features and bony limbs of a racing greyhound. 'Yes?'

'Sorry to disturb you. I'm Mrs Lester, Mr Nash's new assistant. I'm trying to find out a bit more about the casualties at the Cricketers' Arms. I've been told you have the property that was retrieved from the bomb site here.'

'There's nothing much.'

'If I could just see what you've got?'

'You're working for Mr Nash, you say?'

'I started today. I have a card if you want to see it.'

She colours, seems embarrassed. Perhaps she's not used to being left in charge. 'That won't be necessary.' She tries a smile. 'I couldn't let you take anything away without authority from Miss Waverley. But I don't see why you can't have a look, if you think it might help.'

'It would be a great help.'

'Hang on a mo.'

The girl gets up from the telephone, goes across to a rickety looking cupboard. There's no lock on the door, so it isn't exactly secure. She picks out a cardboard box that has "Horlicks Tablets" stencilled on the outside, and "Cricketers' Arms 14/15th April" scrawled over the top in purple indelible pencil.

'Here it is.' She puts the box down on top of a card table, shoving aside the assorted papers. She's just begun to unfold the flaps when the telephone rings.

'Excuse me a moment. I must answer that.'

'Of course.' As far as I'm concerned, the interruption couldn't be better timed.

I pull the box open. There's a litter of trivial bits and pieces inside. A grubby child's handkerchief. Half a dozen dominoes, an almost new Tangee lipstick in film-star scarlet. A broken comb. Three pages out of an onionskin Bible, a crumpled slip of pink paper I recognise at once. No time to inspect it, but a glance across at Miss Margaret shows she's intent, copying down a message from the telephone. Fragments of what she's saying float across the room.

'Code PAIGE ... unidentified cylinder...'

Quicker than thinking, I palm the scrap of pink.

'Tuff's field... righto...' The girl puts down the telephone. 'Look, I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you to leave. I have to deal with this and it's confidential. No offence.'

'None taken.' No offence, anyway.

‘Would you like me to give a message to Mr Fox?’ She practically shooes me towards the door.

I’ve no idea which Mr Fox she means. It can’t very well be my grandfather, but I’m not overly keen on the idea of running into one of my uncles, either. Not just yet.

‘There’s no need. As you say, there’s nothing of much significance in the box.’ Not any more, anyway. I do the smiling thing. ‘I’ll let you know if we need to pursue it further.’

It’s surprisingly easy for my first crime. I keep my hand well down in my pocket as I thank her, make my way out into the street. Behind me, in the doorway, Miss Margaret engages the messenger boy in earnest conversation. I peel the scrap of pink paper off my palm, tuck it into my bag as the Abbey clock strikes six. I need to get my skates on. Dot won’t like it if I’m late for tea.

*

Basswood House has been Nash’s home all his life. He’s lived elsewhere: at school, at war, in hospital, at university; but it’s the place he’s always come back to. The tidy Georgian façade fronting The Hundred, the ramble of outbuildings extending behind are not what they once were, before the last war, but then neither is he.

There’s a big walled garden that had begun to run down in his father’s time, lawns growing weedy, fruit trees unpruned, fish pond glossy with lily pads. Nash had liked it that way, the wild encroaching beauty of it. Had left it mostly to itself, only keeping the grass cut, the roses at bay. Even semi-wild, it had been productive. Plums and apples from the old trees, blackberries from head-high thickets of bramble. But now, much of it has been tamed into strict utility with rows of carrots and potatoes, cabbages and onions; as much as he and Fan Stewart and Billy can look after between them.

As he lets himself in through the front door, his housekeeper pops out of the kitchen. Precise as ever, in grey and white like the nuns down the road: dark skirt, spotless apron, salt-and-pepper hair.

‘Evening, Fan.’

‘Mr Nash, sir. How was your day?’

‘Could be worse.’ He takes off his coat, hangs up his hat. ‘And you?’

‘Billy was very late home. He said your new assistant came in just as he getting ready to leave.’

Nash winces inwardly. That won’t have gone down well. ‘Really?’

‘He says he doesn’t think it’s right, a woman looking at dead bodies.’

Nash doesn't answer. So many things Billy doesn't think are right, especially if it puts his routine awry.

'He says old Joe Fox was hopping mad about her being there, too,' Fan persists, following him as he pushes the dining room door open. As usual, his place is laid in chilly state. He'd prefer to eat in the kitchen where it's warm, but Fan won't hear of it. He goes to the sideboard, pours himself a whisky. Thinks about putting water with it. Decides not to bother.

'That's because Joseph Fox is...' he takes a sip of his drink, lets the burn in his throat edit his comments. He wants to say, *an evil old devil, bollocks to him*, but he'd better not. 'He's her grandfather, Fan. You know what he's like, all hell-fire and retribution.'

'I remember her. Josy Fox. Proper little tomboy, always in trouble.'

'Mrs Lester, now. She's going to be a help to me in my job. I'm sure she'll soon settle in.'

'Whatever you say, sir. Shall I serve your dinner straight away?'

'What have we got?'

'Macaroni casserole.'

'Right.' He tries to look enthusiastic. There's probably some bicarb in the cupboard somewhere.

'And a nice little chop,' Fan says, triumphant. 'I've got it under the grill already.'

The stable at Basswood House has been opened up, the partitions that divided it into stalls removed. But Nash has kept the farrier's raised chimney-hearth at the end, added workbenches down one side. Tonight, he has a small charcoal fire burning, just enough to work the silver. A single bulb lights the section of bench nearest to the hearth, picks out a jumble of metalwork pieces. A pair of spectacles, dark framed. And one blue eye, unwinking.

He doesn't use the glasses when no one else is around. He can see well enough, though his depth perception is poor. But by the end of the day the mask is an irritation he's glad to be rid of. It isn't vanity that makes him wear it, but a wish not to shock. A courtesy. He'd no more go out in public without his glasses than he would without his trousers.

He learned to work metal behind the lines. Cutting shapes from shell cases. Twisting salvaged scraps to make things – god help him – in the midst of destruction. Not

souvenirs, though he's heard them called that. No one who was there needs help to remember. Not a gentleman's pastime, he'd been told, but it suited him. There in the mud and terror, the craft had fascinated him, offered a distraction. It still did.

Lately, he's been working on a set of animals. He's beaten out the hoarded scraps, soldered on tails and legs made of wire. He's made a cow and a carthorse, a pig with a curly tail. A five-point stag, fantastically antlered. Now he thinks about a fox. He'll make it on high alert, pricked ears and pointed nose.

Can't help thinking what Aggie said. *In confidence, Mr Nash.* As if anything in the office should ever be anything else. *She's a cold one, sir. So hard, the way she talked. Her poor mother dead, her husband lost. A hero, but she never turned a hair. Are you sure you've done the right thing?*

He's sure. He knows how cold Jo can be.

It's what he wants her for.

*

The water's hot, deep. It's the best bath I've had since war broke out. And blessedly guilt-free, because Alf swears the water I'm using is just the run-off from the nursery's heating system, and will only go to waste otherwise.

It's late, and the lean-to shed abutting the boiler-house isn't exactly glamorous. But the light of my candle flame makes the surface of the water in the zinc tank glitter, choppy reflections silvering the pipework above. The steam rises leisurely, and the fragrance of my last hoarded scrap of English Fern soap blends just right with the assorted earth and oil scents of the shed.

A few of the land army girls use it, Alf said. Just hang a towel over the door handle so no one will come in. He'd been on his way out, another man-and-dog appointment best left unspoken, but he showed me how to turn the water on and how to siphon it out again when I've finished.

Despite the creeping stupor of the hot water, I can't help thinking about Nash.

Why *hadn't* he told me?

I slide down into the water, slowly submerging. It doesn't make sense. He said he wanted me to find out everything about the girl. My heart thumps as pressure builds in my chest. I should breathe, but I stay where I am, eyes open to the fish-eye view, the bright bulging rim of water above me.

He can't have been worried about what I'd think? After what happened in London, he can't possibly have thought I'd be shocked.

I surface, gasping, lungs aching. There's a pulse deep in my groin. I'm hot with adrenalin and steam, the thought of Nash and sex. I simply can't believe he's hiding guilty knowledge. He wouldn't have set me to investigate if he'd been involved.

But he *hadn't* told me the truth. And a one night stand is no guarantee of character.

Shadows leap as my candle gutters. I'm cold, all at once, skin prickling with goosebumps. I step out of the water, dry myself in the flickering dark. Angry as I've ever been, and not just with him.

Possession should not be taken of property... unless there is no trustworthy person in whose charge it can be left, but if no such person is available, it is a convenient course for the coroner's officer to take possession of the property, though this is not strictly any part of his duty. (*Jervis on Coroners, 1927:268*)

Another early morning at Romsey station. Not arriving or departing this time, but waiting. I watch as the down train to Portsmouth Harbour comes and goes, followed a few minutes later by the upline train to Salisbury. A couple of women emerge from the wicket gate and trudge away into town. Should be... just about now.

The time between the early trains and school had always given the gang the best chance to hang around the station. Regular as clockwork, Mr Burnage would go across to the stationmaster's house for his breakfast. All sorts of opportunities then. Grab a few knobs of coal that had fallen from the bunker when a train was refuelling – *never take it from the bunker, that's stealing* – pick up a shovelful of horse manure for Grandfather's roses from where Marsh's carts turn round – *Bunny'll have it otherwise, best display of geraniums on the Southern line*.

I'm hoping the stationmaster still takes the same half hour break. If the war hasn't altered his schedule, it's my best chance to try and redeem the left luggage ticket I pinched out of the ARP box. It won't work if he doesn't leave his post, because he'll remember what I left with him, know that's already been collected. I look at the ticket in my hand again. Number twenty-one. The one I got for my trunk was twenty-three. Whatever it is that's been left – whoever left it – must have been in the last few days. Someone who was in that pub. I have to find out.

Footsteps, ponderous, sound from the platform. In sudden fright I dive into the telephone kiosk beside the ticket office. Pretend to be making a call.

Bunny Burnage goes past without a glance. Crosses the station yard and disappears inside the green front door, just as he always did. I put down the receiver, press button B just as we always did. I'm shocked silly when two pennies rattle into the brass cup as they almost never used to.

I hesitate before scooping them up. Taking the left luggage ticket was fair game, like gleaning coal from the shunt yard. The pennies are different, more like theft. An

impulse from the past. The girl I'd been then wouldn't have thought twice. Josy would've had them in a flash. We all would: any of us, except Abe. He'd never have done it. He'd never needed the money.

He'd been master of the art of lying by omission, though. *Wouldn't dream of picking apples from your trees, Mr Barr, sir. Just a few fallers... you don't mind?* Looking clean, and eager, and decent in the way none of the rest of us could manage. And then, when we got round the corner, collapsing in laughter, all of us crowing at his cleverness. Because of course we'd shaken the apples onto the ground by the bucket load.

Maybe he hadn't changed so much after all.

A boy with a railway uniform two sizes too big and the vacant expression of the not-quite-all-there takes the ticket from me. I'm nervous he won't be able to help me, but he seems capable enough in his own domain. He matches up the ticket without any trouble, hands over a small leather suitcase. I thank him, offload the guilty pennies on him as a tip. He looks around shiftily, gives me a grin as he pockets the coins. I feel pretty shifty myself as I walk away, stifling the urge to take to my heels and run like a rabbit when the fox gets near.

*

'Over there. That's the lady I told you about. The one who came in yesterday.'

'Lady be damned. That's Josephine Fox, trottin' down the street just as if she was anyone.'

'She said she was Mr Nash's new assistant.'

'My brother told me. Nash don't cut any ice in Romsey, my dear. Not quite the thing, you know.'

'Because of his poor face?'

'He don't need you to feel sorry for him. Bad blood there. Thinks he can get away with murder. Father was decent enough, good Hampshire stock, but his mother was an East End Jew.'

'Oh.'

'Artistic. Excuse for all kinds of unpleasantness.'

'He's always very polite to me.'

'Don't let that fool you. As for Fox –'

'She said her name was Mrs Lester.' Miss Margaret is anxious not to mislead.

'Say what she likes, she's still the scullerymaid's byblow. Clever as paint, but it don't do. Keep well clear, my dear. Send her to me if she comes sniffin' round again.'

The abbey's north garth, with its ancient cemetery, had always been one of my places to hide. Between the jumbled gravestones and table-top tombs of long-gone Romsey townsfolk the grass grows lush and flower-studded, and any sense of the dead is a faint, benign presence.

I'd been inconspicuous there as a child, but now I stick out, a curiosity. Visiting the long dead. One Jeremiah Hunton, grandly entombed in 1789, has to accommodate my impatience as I set down the suitcase on his mossy slab. I'm not going to risk taking the case into the office without knowing what's in it, making sure I'm on the right track. I feel sweaty, thinking about it. What will I do if it turns out to be a commercial traveller's samples or someone's leftover sandwiches?

There's nothing to be learned from the outside. No helpful labels, just a few odd scratches and worn places, a bit of nondescript string whipping the handle. It's only just big enough to hold a change of clothes, or a couple of good-sized books. Except I can tell it isn't books, it's far too light for that. And it isn't full. The contents slide from side to side, unbalanced.

I take a breath, try the clasps. I'm not expecting them to open, but they flip up easily and lid opens, releases a faint, musty smell.

Clothes. Of course. A girl's clothes. Some underthings, not new. A darn on the shoulder of a vest, a safety pin reinforcing the shabby elastic of the knickers. A nightdress, pink sprigged cotton, washed grey and thin; a navy handknitted cardigan with a moth hole in the sleeve.

A sponge-bag, flannel and soap. A tiny bottle of *Soir de Paris*, sample size. I pinched one just like it from Woolworth's when I was twelve. And a toy rabbit. Home made, cut from some ancient knitted garment that has long since forgotten its original colour, inexpertly sewn.

I shiver as I turn the clothes over. Such childish things. It feels shameful to be pawing these poor scraps. But I'm in no doubt. These must have belonged to the dead girl.

It's confirmed when I explore the ruched pocket in the lid. There are a couple of dog-eared snapshots, and one smarter postcard-sized portrait of a young man in sailor's uniform. One of the snapshots shows a black and white sheepdog. The other, the dog again, and a girl.

Our girl, the dead girl. Blurry but unmistakable. Laughing. I'd only seen her in chilly, mortuary sleep, but there's no mistake. I turn the snapshot over. Read the pencilled, laborious lettering.

"Paddy and me".

*

SUPERINTENDENT BELL: Forgive me, sir, but it could be said that in the matter of the suitcase both you and Mrs Lester were concealing evidence.

NASH: Bollocks. We were trying to track down a murderer.

S.B: No need for that kind of language, sir. I should remind you, it is a very serious offence to obstruct the police in their enquiries.

N: What enquiries? When I spoke to Sergeant Tilling about my concerns, I was told that he didn't consider any crime had been committed. To quote, she was just some tart caught out, and I should sign the forms and leave well alone.

S.B: An error of judgment on his part, sir. And one for which he has been reprimanded. But the fact remains –

N: The fact remains that as coroner, I am perfectly entitled to retain property which I consider may be evidence to my enquiries into a death. Specifically, my officer may retain it "if no other trustworthy person can be found".

S.B: You're suggesting Sergeant Tilling wasn't to be trusted?

N: I'm saying he wasn't interested, Superintendent. I've no quarrel with his integrity, I just didn't believe he had any intention of pursuing the matter of the girl's death.

*

At five to eight, a depressed-looking man answers my ring on the office doorbell.

'You'll have to come back later. No one here till quarter past.'

I explain who I am. Seeming almost more depressed, he lets me in, shows me to a billet at the back of the building.

'It's yours,' he says. 'It isn't much.'

He's right. Someone has crammed a table and chair into what is obviously a storage area, a dog-leg corridor that seems to go nowhere in particular. A space has been made between two battered filing cabinets, forming a kind of cubbyhole to work in. Every other square inch is packed with stuff: shelves heaped with ancient-looking manila files; stacks of boxes piled on the floor.

'Got a duster?' I ask. The wall behind the table is grey with cobwebs. A film of dust covers the table, where a battered old Remington typewriter has been given pride of place.

The caretaker fishes in the pocket of his brown overall, brings out a grubby rag. 'All right?'

'Thanks.' It should move the dirt, anyway. 'Is this where Mr Nash's last assistant worked?'

'No. He was a copper. He worked over the police station. Used to come in for orders.'

'I'll be a bit of a shock, then?'

'That you will.' He watches me rub over the table and chair, clean down the ghost shapes on the wall. 'Dry work,' he says. 'I've got a cuppa brewing. D'you want some?'

'Love some.' I hand back the rag. My hands are filthy. 'I need a wash first.'

'Cloakroom's next door. I'll be downstairs.'

After he's gone, I look around, wondering what to do with the little suitcase. I don't want to leave it on show, but I don't want to carry it around either. There's no kind of security in this cramped place, not even a door to shut.

A stack of tin deed boxes pokes out from under the table. Just ripe to catch my stockings every time I move, but pretty good as a hiding place. I stoop down, work the case into a narrow gap. When I stand up again, I'm dustier than ever. But it will have to do till Nash arrives.

The thought of him, of what I've got to say to him, makes me queasy. I hope the tea's good and strong.

'Your hours are 8.15 until 5.30,' Miss Haward says. 'Thirty minutes for lunch. Tea is provided at 10am and 3.30pm, one shilling a week for the kitty.' She stares hard at me. 'In advance.'

'OK.' But I'm not offering yet.

'Saccharin only, unless you bring your own sugar. You'll be working under Mr Nash's instruction, but I expect you to maintain office standards. Confidentiality is the watchword. And I won't have Cissie and June distracted with unpleasant details about your work.'

'I wouldn't dream of it. When does Mr Nash come in?'

'That's really none of your business.'

'It's exactly my business.' She's driving me mad already, with her petty rules and power struggle. 'Since I'll be working directly for him. I can't imagine you'll want to be bothered every time I need to speak to him.'

I watch her work it out.

'He's usually here by nine if he doesn't have an appointment on his way in.'

'And does he?'

'I don't know.' It's reluctant, resentful, but at least I've won the first round.

'OK. Have you got a Kelly's directory tucked away somewhere?'

The abbey clock strikes nine, and then half past, and there's still no sign of Nash, though I've been sized up by almost all of the office staff. Miss Haward obviously hasn't told them not to distract me. I know about the caretaker's bad back, Cissie's invalid husband, June's hopes that her boyfriend will propose. Even Mr Simmons, who turns out to be the elderly lawyer-type I saw at the hotel, has dropped by to welcome me to the firm.

Such a poppet, June told me. Should have retired ages ago, but for this beastly war. Mr Nash keeps himself to himself, but you want to watch that Mr Bing. Hands everywhere, and him married with three young kiddies.

Though it isn't hands when Mr Bing comes in, but sitting on the table, leaning over me; asking if I'm not fed-up to be stuck in a dead-and-alive hole like Romsey, and would I like to go for a drink one evening? A proper shark. I hadn't needed June's warning to refuse him.

By quarter to ten, I've tracked down the address I wanted in Kelly's directory, paid over my shilling. Talked a notebook out of Miss Haward's stationery stash, typed a report for Nash, and still he hasn't arrived.

Bloody man. Why can't he get to work on time? I've got places to go, things to do. Things to say. And a sailor to find.

*

His leave is over, and she hasn't come. His best chance, gone. He should've known better. Should've known she wouldn't turn up. She's always been a flighty piece.

All those promises to help, all that guff... *can't tell you, wait till I see you...* He'd always thought there was something fishy going on.

AWOL.

They'll crucify him.

Doesn't matter what they do, he isn't going back. He can still hear the screams, see blokes drowning in oil, burning in the water. They can do what they like, court martial, stick him in the brig, anything's better than that.

Where's she got to?

She's scuppered him, the silly cow. Without her, he's had it. No money, no cover. They'll pick him up the minute he puts his nose out of the door.

Bitch.

He's been wasting his time, waiting for her. He should've got away before, legged it the minute he could. Now he's stuck in this dump. Afraid to breathe in case someone hears him.

What the *hell* is he gonna do?

*

It's ten o'clock before I stand in the bright north light of Nash's office, lift the little suitcase onto his desk.

'I found this.'

I'm expecting him to ask where I got it from straight away, but he doesn't say anything. Doesn't do anything at first, simply stands, hands laid quietly on either side of the scratched leather case. I can't help noticing how many little scars and scrapes he has on his hands. Tiny red marks, like fresh burns. Can't help wondering how he got them. Could it be...

It startles me when he suddenly slips the catches with a snap and opens the case. He empties it, stacking each item methodically on the desk. I can't read his face as he examines the sad cache, lingering longest over the photographs.

'It is her, isn't it?'

'Oh, yes.' He sighs. 'Disappointing there aren't any documents.'

'They'd have been in her handbag, I expect.'

'And we don't have that. You'd better tell me. Where did you find this?'

'The case was in left luggage at the station. I found the ticket in a box they had at the ARP post.'

'They let you take it?'

'Don't ask,' I say. 'Then you can claim ignorance if it comes back to bite me.'

'You think so? Anything else?'

I pretend not to understand. 'Her shoes,' I say. 'She didn't have any. There's nothing logged for her at the hospital, and none lying about at the site, nor in the ARP box. She can't have got to the Cricketers' barefoot.'

'Of course not. I hadn't thought of it, but... it's just as I said from the beginning. Someone must have brought her there, dumped her like so much rubbish.'

'So all we've got to do is find the shoes.' I'm making light of it because I don't want to say what I know I have to. 'Or the bag.'

'He'll have destroyed them the first chance he got.'

'What about the sailor's picture? It was taken at a place in Southampton. I've looked it up. I thought I'd go and see if they've got any records to show who he is.'

'It's a bit of a long shot. Even if they've got something, he'll be at sea.'

'It's worth a try.'

'Where's the studio?'

'College Place.'

'By the Ornanse Survey offices? You'll be lucky. They've had a lot of bombs round there.'

I can't hold it back any longer. 'Don't be so bloody defeatist.'

'What?'

'You heard what I said. I'm beginning to think you don't want me to find out about her after all.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'It doesn't feel ridiculous. Not now I know you were at the pub that night.'

'Ah.' A silence. 'You must have run into Ollie.'

'She said you were lucky not to get caught in the air-raid.'

'Did she.'

It's not a question. But it's not an answer either.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

More silence.

'She said you'd gone to meet someone.'

'I didn't know she was my keeper. Or that you are.' His tone is light, but the words are pitched to sting.

'Don't get all poncy about it. It's not what I meant and you know it. The more you weasel away, the more I wonder what the big secret is.'

'I went to see Sally. The local tart. You know how it is. But she'd got a client already. Though I'm afraid poor Stan probably died a virgin.'

'And the girl?' I try to match his coldness. 'Was she a prostitute too?'

'For all I know. Never saw her before they got her out of that cellar.'

'That's the truth?'

'Of course.'

'What time did you leave the pub?'

'What is this, some kind of third degree?'

The bright morning light is as cruel as a spotlight. I've got him cornered, on the ropes. Another round to me, but it doesn't feel good. 'I'm just trying to find out what happened. It's what you hired me for.'

'I didn't expect to figure as first suspect.'

'Then don't.'

I can see him thinking it out. Making up his mind.

'I knew it was no go as soon as I got there. With Sally, I mean. So I had a drink, just one, you know. Save face.' He pauses, makes a derisory noise in his throat. 'Hah. Left about nine, met Ollie in the lane. We chatted for a while, ten minutes perhaps. Then I came home. Didn't see anyone else, though it was bright enough if there'd been anyone to see.'

'What time did you get back?'

'You're really getting into the swing of this, aren't you?'

'You should have told me.' I hate the way it sounds, like a nagging wife.

'Perhaps I should. But you must see why I didn't want to.'

'You thought I'd judge you?'

'I'm not exactly proud of it.'

'But the point is, it doesn't matter. It's not about your feelings or mine. It's about finding out who killed that girl.'

'Do you seriously believe I might know something about it?'

My turn to be silent.

'You think I'd have been stupid enough to sicc you onto it if I'd done it myself?'

Only in the small hours. In nightmares. He must see it in my face.

'OK. An alibi then. If you insist.' There's resignation in his tone, and whatever I've won, I've lost something too.

'I warn you, it's not a very good one. I was on Mile Hill when I heard the bombs. Didn't bother with finding a shelter, just came on home. Got in, I don't know, perhaps ten to ten? Something like that. Fan might know, she was still up. But after that I've no corroboration. No witnesses. The telephone rang about midnight, woke me up. The ARP warden, to say the pub had been bombed, that there had been fatalities. They told me there was nothing we could do overnight, we had to wait for the Heavy Rescue Crew to come up from Southampton. So I went back to bed. No witnesses to that, either.'

He's right. It's not much of an alibi. But I'm not going to ask any more questions. I don't believe he had anything to do with the girl's death. I never really thought he had. I was angry for all the wrong reasons, let feelings cloud my judgment. Stupid of me. It's going to be tricky if I've alienated Nash with my questions.

*

Bram Nash is kicking himself again. Angry, again. With himself, with her. He wants to yell, swear, slam his fist into the wall.

It's humiliating to be caught in the lie, found out.

Out for a duck. Out for a fuck.

Nash nil while Lester scores two for two. Perhaps he'll have to go celibate. The irony, unmanned by Josy Fox. Shrapnel couldn't manage it, but she's found him out. Should have kept his own rules in the first place. No pity fucks, no sympathy. Pay and stay free.

Once, only once. Once too bloody often. Now she thinks she owns him.

Plenty of reasons to kick himself.

Again.

I get off the bus at Stag Gates. The conductor says a Heinkel got downed in Padwell Road on Saturday, and like Nash said, the offices at the top of Asylum Green have been badly hit. It's a relief to see that College Place seems to be relatively untouched, the businesses open. Bank, furrier, accountant. And there's the photographer's. Not looking so good. A dusty red curtain obscures the window, and there's a notice on the shop door. *Gone to Lunch. Back in Five Minutes*. The faded script and curling edges of paper suggest the writer has been gone much longer, months rather than minutes. I try the handle, but the door is firmly shut.

*

He's been on lookout since first light, even when there was nothing to see through the grimy glass but grey shadows. The bedroom window gives him a good view up and down the street, but he has to be careful. The room's empty, bare boards underfoot. The walls are thin, every blasted move makes a sound. Mustn't twitch the tatty net curtain, shuffle his feet. Just keep watching.

It's bright now, but the day hasn't brought any luck. She still hasn't come. It's hard to stay alert, on the *qui vive*.

Milkman. Postie. A bloke in a blue suit and brown shoes, walking to work. A hard faced blonde, opening up the shop next door. Looks like a tart, and he can smell her cheap scent a mile off.

Two old women, slow as shit. Empty shopping bags, looking for a queue. Coming back slower, bags lumpy, cabbages, a bottle wrapped in newspaper.

Watching. Can't afford to rest.

Nothing to see.

Nothing,

nothing,

nothi... someone new?

He sees her cross the road. Tracks her walk, the sway of her hips. Tidy figure, bit skinny. No tits, nothing to get hold of up top. Red hair. Now she's closer, he can see she's middle aged. He loses interest. There's nothing for him there.

But she doesn't pass by like the others. She's coming straight for the shop, like she knows what she wants. Now she's in the doorway, out of sight. He hears the rattle of the door. What's the nosy bitch doing? Can't she read?

Back in view. She's looking up and down the road. On surveillance, like him. He nearly laughs, but he's too fucking scared.

Official. She looks official. Something on her mind. Does she know about him? Guess?

She moves, brisk; out of sight again.

He hears the ting of the fur shop bell. He crouches, ear to the bare floor boards. The voices come through, the blonde and the other one. Muffled. No words he can hear.

Chit chat.

Chit chat.

The bell again. He stands, quick, sees Ginger cross in front of the shop, stop in front of the window. He sees her arse as she bends, peers in.

Piss off, you nosy cow. Nothing to see.

She's off at a clip, down the side alley, not going away. Footsteps confident, like she'll never give up.

Who does she think she is? Fuckin' cheek, serve her right if...

Squeak of the side gate.

Breathing hard, he sidles along the wall, works his way down the stairs.

Remembers in time to avoid the one that squeals like a pig.

Movement outside, very close. She'll see where he smashed the glass to get in.

He freezes, waiting.

Heart pounding.

He'll kill her before she makes him go back.

*

The woman in the furrier's says Mr Legge moved out of the studio after the big air-raid in November.

'He comes back once or twice a week. Haven't seen him today, mind, but he might be there. I thought I heard someone moving about earlier on.'

I want to ask her more, but a querulous voice sounds from the back room.

‘Norah? Is that a customer?’

‘Just an enquiry, Mr Glass.’ She shakes her head at me, mouths ‘sorry’.

I take the hint and go. If someone is there, it might be my chance. I have to try and find a name.

I can’t see anyone inside, the red curtain blots out every last chance of seeing into the shop. But the latch on the side gate lifts easily, lets me into a miniscule back yard. There’s an air of neglect about the place. Weeds are growing up through the paving and a window beside the back door is broken, hastily repaired with a bit of cardboard shoved into the gap. Something about it makes me feel uneasy, and not just because I’m snooping.

I leave the gate ajar, knock on the back door.

It yields to my touch, swings open.

‘Hello,’ I call. ‘Anyone home?’

Deep in the gloom of the house, something moves.

‘Hello?’

‘Come on, you daft bugger, come on. Come on.’

The raucous greeting takes me aback. I step inside cautiously. It’s dark, stinking of disuse and something animal. I hesitate.

‘Good girlie.’ The voice is wrong, somehow. There’s a rattle, a scrape like fingernails on tin. A squawk. ‘Daft bugger.’

It’s a parrot. I let out a shaky breath, move forward more confidently. I’m not afraid of a parrot.

‘Fuckin’ daft.’ This voice is most definitely human. ‘Live to regret it, maybe.’

A click as the door behind me shuts and every last vestige of light is cut off. Darkness swirls as a fierce hand grips my wrist, forces it up behind my back.

‘Stand still, you bitch,’ the man mutters. Something touches cold at the angle of my jaw. Freezes me mid-struggle. ‘Tell me quick, what you nosing about for? An’ make it quiet.’

I’ve heard people say *the hair stood up on the back of my neck* though I’ve never felt it before. I’ve never had a gun at my throat before either, but I know instinctively that’s what it is. I’ve never felt so afraid, not when Grandfather took his belt to me, not when the telegram came about Richard. Not even in the worst of the Blitz.

‘I’m looking for the photographer.’ My voice shakes. ‘I wanted to ask –’

‘About me?’

'I don't know who you are.'

The cold digs deeper into my throat. 'Where'd you come from?'

I haven't got time to think of a clever answer, calculate what I should say.

'Romsey.'

'Romsey?' I feel him go still. 'Did Ruth send you?'

*

Nash pushes the door to the back room open and is met by a fog of cigarette smoke and stale beer. Three men in Home Guard uniform look up from their pints. Two more at the snooker table pause in their game.

'Watch out,' one of the players says, sour. 'Careless talk costs lives.'

A pint drinker grins. 'Walls have ears, don't you mean?'

'I mean, we got a spy in the room.'

The bald one with the corporal's stripe speaks. 'Come off it, Fred. You know Captain Nash.'

'No captain of mine. Hadn't heard he was in the Guard.'

Nash ignores the hostility. 'Hello, Fred. Same old, eh? Sorry to intrude. I wanted a quick word with Tom, here.'

'What can I do you for, Captain?' The corporal again.

'Wondered if you could help me with a couple of things.' They move away from the snooker table, leaving a thick silence behind them. 'Fred's right, you know. I've no right to rank.'

'You'll always be Captain to me. Can I get you a drink?'

'I won't, thanks. You'll have heard, I'm bothered about this dead girl. No one seems to know anything about her, but I wondered –' He cocks his head to the group behind him, where the mutter of conversation has started up again. 'Is it just me they won't talk to? I know you hear things in the shop.'

Tom Fox laughs. 'You're right about that. Plenty of gossip, not much sense, most of the time. All, where's the bananas? Why can't I get a lemon? Mind you, I did hear –'

'Yes?'

'That you've taken on my niece at your place. They say she's got real posh.'

'Posh? I wouldn't have said that. But it's true, she is working for me.'

'Always was a bright girl. Pity Dad couldn't ever see it. Tell her –'

'Yes?'

'You don't mind? Bit of a cheek.'

'Of course not.'

'Say, Sylvie and me, we'd be glad to see her. Be blowed to Dad, she's welcome to come round to ours any time.'

'I'll tell her. You'll bear in mind what I said? Anything about the dead girl would be a help. Gossip, whatever.'

'Our Sylvie's the one for that. I'll see what she says.' He walks to the door with Nash, steps out into the fresh air. 'That's better. Bit of an atmosphere in there.'

'You mean Fred?' Nash shrugs. 'Can't win them all.'

The hut stands beside the millstream, and they stop, looking down into the water, watching the billow of weed, the spotted flicker of trout.

'You know what I think?' Fox says. 'There's not enough talk for once. Someone's got a-hold of it. Keeping it quiet.'

'I agree.' Nash settles his hat. 'You'll let me know if you hear anything?'

'Course I will, Captain.'

Tom Fox waits while Nash crosses the footbridge over the stream and walks away. His bones ache. Trouble ahead, and he's getting old. Too old, maybe. He spits into the water, watches as a great dark fish darts away.

'What'd old Tin Chops want then? Nosing around when a man's off duty.'

'Doing his job, Fred. Making enquiries about that poor lass who got killed up at the Cricketers.'

'Poor lass, my arse. More like a whore, hanging around in that dump. But he'd know all about that, wouldn't he? Dirty Jew. He'll have to put a knot in it now Sal's gone.'

'You know your trouble, mate? You're so blinking deep in Doc Waverley's pocket you can't see daylight. Captain Nash is all right.'

'Arselick,' Fred sneers. 'Yes, Captain, no, Captain, three bags full, Captain. Man's a conchy.'

'Don't talk daft. You know what's under them glasses. Didn't get that picking his nose.'

'He's a bloody coward, then, isn't he? Not doing his bit this time. Afraid he'll get another dose.'

'If memory serves, Fred Deeds, you never got further than the Remount camp in the last lot. Came home to tea every night. And what's more,' Fox pauses as the abbey

clock strikes the hour, '*that* says you'll be late for your shift over the brewery if you don't get a move on. Don't let me hold you up.'

*

It's midnight, pitchy black. No moon yet. The train hardly pauses at the little halt, stopping just long enough for the guard to step off and pick up a mail bag before it sets off again. There's no one waiting to board, no porter, just the empty platform. Frank lets me go when he sees it, pushes me out of the door at the very last minute.

'Remember what you promised.' He whispers it, hoarse, shoves something cold and heavy into my hand. I stagger with the momentum as the train door swings behind me, bangs, and swings again. Someone on the train calls out, but I shrink into the shadows, hiding instinctively. Turn my face away from the dim glow of the passing guard's van as if I'm the one who's done something criminal.

As now, perhaps, I have. Helping a fugitive to escape capture. And alarmingly, now, in possession of a gun.

Even in the dark, I know. As I did in the stinking kitchen behind the photographer's studio. The object I'd grabbed like a lifeline as I struggled for balance was Frank's gun, pressed into my hand at the last minute. Clever of him to get rid of evidence that would damn him every bit as much as being AWOL, and make it harder for me to report him at the same time. It's going to take an awful lot of explaining if I'm found in possession of a firearm.

Just for a minute, it's almost funny. I can imagine what Nash would say if I were arrested and had to call on him to bail me out.

But I'm sober again just as quick. What am I going to do with it? Wipe my fingerprints off, stash it under the nearest hedge? A child might find it. I can't take that risk. I'll have to hold on to it for now.

I don't like holding it at all. Everything I know about guns comes from films, and while Bogie might know if the safety is on, I've no idea. Frank had been carrying it in his pocket, so I can probably assume it isn't going to go off by accident. I slide it gingerly into my bag. What now?

Sit and wait on the platform till morning, till someone comes along? I've sat, passive, been forced to wait long enough for one day. Frank has cleared out every last penny from my purse so I can't telephone even if I want to.

I could bang on a cottage door, wake up some righteous sleeper. Beg for help.

Never.

I can't face it.

It's not much more than six miles ho... to Romsey. I can walk it in a couple of hours, get some shut-eye before I have to tell my story to Nash in the morning.

The night road is very quiet. In all the time it takes me, only two cars pass, people with a petrol allowance to squander. I hear them in plenty of time to get off the road, the instinct to hide still strong in me. Besides, I gave my word to Frank.

'Ruth sent you?'

I can't even shake my head, the way he's holding me. I'm too scared the gun will go off. 'I did come about a girl.'

'Don't play clever with me.'

'If I could explain?'

'You better bloody explain. And make it quick.'

'Daft bugger,' the bird chimes in. I can't help agreeing.

'I was hoping the photographer might help me. I have a picture, a sailor –'

My breath cuts off. The hand on my wrist tightens, pushing my arm higher up my back. The pressure from the metal at my throat is unbearable. Wise or not, I can't help struggling to free myself, to breathe. My shoulder wrenches painfully and stars explode in my vision, dark curtains flap to extinguish them. I feel myself begin to fall.

'Hold up, you bitch.'

The pressure slackens, but I can't stand. There is time, I don't know how much, when I don't know anything.

When I come to, I can see. The pale outline of a window shows behind ragged red curtains, and a dim light filters into the room where I am. I'm half sitting, half sprawled on a scratchy, uneven surface that stinks of dust. And though I'm awake, it seems as if I'm hallucinating. There's a tree, and a bird, watching me. Shifting beadily from foot to foot.

'Good girlie,' the bird voice says. 'Come on.'

The parrot. The tree's his perch, and the smell's strong enough in here to tell me this is no dream. I'm lying awkwardly on the photographer's chaise longue, pain in my sore shoulder and the place on my neck where the gun has bruised me. I've got just enough sense left to lie doggo.

'Here.' A rough hand nudges me and something cold splashes onto my face.

'Wake up. Got you some water.'

I make a pretence of stirring, struggle upright in my seat. My captor's face swims in the dimness. He looks like the sailor in the picture, but I don't understand how it can be him. I take the water, drink thirstily. Try and think what to say that won't get me killed.

He squats on his haunches in front of me. Wary, he watches me as intently as the bird. He's thin, unkempt. Stubble shadows his face, and his clothes look hand-me-down, worn into all the wrong shapes for his body. He's made sure he's far enough away that I can't reach him, but he's not holding a gun on me anymore. Between us on the floor is my handbag, contents tipped out anyhow. My purse is open, and I guess it's empty, but what takes my attention are the photographs. He's put them centre stage, where we both can see them.

'You do know Ruth,' he says. 'Stupid cow, why didn't you say? What's happened to the little bitch? Why didn't she come herself?'

I don't know where to begin.

'Tell me about her,' I say. 'Tell me about Ruth.' I don't know why, but tears are already running down my face.

The moon comes up as I walk. The night is fine, and the movement soon warms my muscles. But I'm cold inside, chilled by the hours I've been held captive, the long threat of the gun. At least walking eases the feeling of helplessness. I just can't work out whether what I've learned has been worth it.

Ruth. That was her name. He told me she'd been fourteen when she was evacuated to Romsey. 'But small, like. She just slipped in with the kiddies when they shipped them out, said it was all such a bloody muddle no one noticed. She was scared silly, see. Hated being in tight places. Reckoned she'd go mad if she had to be shut up somewhere small if there was bombs.'

He was her brother, Frank. With Ruth's death, he was the only one. The rest of the family was gone. 'Mum an' Ted got caught in a raid last summer. Thought it had saved her, being scared. There I was, out on the convoys and I thought, lucky bitch, she got away with it. Always thought she'd get away with it.' He'd almost cried, then. I hadn't known how to comfort him. 'Dad? Long gone. Did a bunk when Ruth was a baby. It's why I come here. Old Snappy Legge, he's like an uncle, sort of thing. Know what I mean? Mum used to clean for him and that. He had a soft spot for her and I thought he'd be good for a few quid. But there's been no sign of him, just the bloody parrot. Nothing to eat in the cupboards. Can't make it out.'

I told him what the woman in the furrier's had told me. That the photographer only came back a couple of times a week. I said I wouldn't tell anyone if he wanted to wait in the house for Mr Legge. I even offered to go and get him some food to tide him over, but he wasn't having any. He'd been angry, as much as grieving. 'Asked for it, probably. Sly little bitch.'

He hadn't been able to tell me anything much about her after she'd left home. Where she'd been living in Romsey, who she'd been working for. 'Never told me nothing. Had to find out about Mum an' Ted from a telegram. Couldn't hardly be a secret where she was, for Chrissake. But Miss Hoity-toity couldn't let her brother know. Had to write to her care of the Post Office.'

I'd wondered if it was her pregnancy she'd been concealing. I hadn't had the guts to tell him about that. But I felt sorry for him when he told me how his ship had gone down far out in the Atlantic. How he'd been picked out of the sea, while all around him men drowned if they were lucky, or burned in blazing fuel oil if they weren't. The memories had made him jumpy, more dangerous than ever.

He wanted money, and food. He wanted to get to London. Whatever I might feel about him, working out how to help him was a matter of self-preservation, not sympathy. I said I'd go to the bank, draw a cheque for cash, give him the money. We bargained, settled on £30. He'd seen my bankbook, wanted £50, but I persuaded him people would be suspicious, ask too many questions if I tried to draw out everything I had. Though I promised not to betray him, he wouldn't trust me to go alone.

I made him wash, and shave his face with an old blade and cold water. Though he complained, he looked less like a fugitive when he was clean. I brushed him down, combed his hair. Combed mine, and put on fresh lipstick. If he wanted us to get away with this, we both had to look normal. I made him let me have my bag, my empty purse, my documents so I could prove who I was at the bank. He kept the photographs. I'd have liked to think he wanted them as a remembrance of his sister, but when we got to the pub where we killed time till the last train and he drank too much beer, he tore them across and across, set fire to the pieces in the ashtray.

He held me close as a lover all afternoon. In the bank, where the cashier tutted and sighed before releasing my money; in the cafe where he ate and I refused curling fish paste sandwiches; when we got onto the train. I hoped he'd let me go then, but he held me even closer till the train pulled out, the barrel of the gun pressed hard into my side. I didn't know whether he planned to take me all the way to London, or whether he was

going to throw me out on the line somewhere in the dark. I tried to be ready, but I was so exhausted I hardly cared which it was, so long as he let me go. Not surprising, then, that I couldn't believe it when he pushed me out at the halt and I realised I was close to home.

*

SUPERINTENDENT BELL: If I accept you and Mrs Lester were acting within the law in your dealings regarding the murdered girl's property –

NASH: You'd find it damned difficult to do anything else, Superintendent. The law's on my side there.

SB: Do you also expect me to consider that what Mrs Lester told you about the deserter Frank Taylor was privileged information?

N: Of course. In that regard, she was and is entitled to my professional silence.

SB: A very fine line to draw, sir. Between what you knew as her solicitor, and what you knew as her employer.

N: It's not unusual. A solicitor gets to know a great deal about his clients in a professional capacity that he doesn't speak of publicly.

SB: How about privately, sir?

N: Nice try, Superintendent. But no dice.

SB: You're aware your silence doesn't exonerate her? We could charge her with harbouring a deserter, helping him to abscond.

N: I'd remind you, he held her hostage, threatened her life. She had very little choice in the matter of his disappearance.

SB: That's what she tells you. But there was nothing to stop her informing the police when he let her go. She would have saved everyone a lot of trouble. If she'd dialled 999 straight away, we could have picked him up off the train.

'You should have called the police.'

First thing in the morning, in his office, my confession isn't going well.

'I didn't have any money.'

'Don't play the innocent. You don't need it to dial 999. Or you could have asked the operator to put you through to me. You didn't have to let him get clean away.'

'Don't shout at me.' I've had less than three hours sleep, and it feels as if I've got one skin too few to face the world.

'I know he put you in fear.' His voice is gritty with temper. 'But after he let you go, you could have called for help.'

'I don't expect you to understand.'

'Good, because I don't. You must go to the police. I'll come with you if you like.'

'I don't need your help.'

'Fine.' Cold. 'Just so long as you go.'

'No.'

'Then I will.'

'You wouldn't?' I don't really understand why I'm so appalled by the thought.

'Of course I would. It's my civic duty.'

'Oh, don't be such a prick.' I take the half crown out of my pocket that I borrowed from Dot this morning, slap it down on his desk. 'What if I claim privileged information? If you're my solicitor, you can't tell anyone what I've said to you.'

Hands in his pocket, he stares at the coin. 'You're asking me to act for you?'

'I'm asking you not to tell anyone about Frank.' It occurs to me that part of this is purely selfish: I don't want to have to parade my embarrassment for all and sundry. So naïve, walking into the trap. A prisoner of my own foolishness, unable to get away.

A pause. Then he reaches out, pushes the coin back across the desk.

'Keep your money. But I wish I understood what's going on in your head.'

I sit down in the client's chair. I'm tired, and my feet hurt.

'I felt sorry for him.' And I did, I *do* feel sorry for him even though that isn't the only reason. 'He was vile about Ruth, but he was terrified. He's the last of the family, and he's afraid he's going to die too. He says he's doomed if they send him back to sea.'

Nash sits down. I don't know if I've convinced him, but it's an improvement that he's stopped looming over me. 'Had you thought he might be the killer? You say he was angry with his sister.'

'He didn't know where to find her.'

'He says he didn't.'

'I don't believe he's the type to kill. He was angry with me, too. If he'd wanted, he could easily have done me in. But he let me go.'

'He stole your money.'

'The police would say I gave it to him. And I'd be in trouble for that, too.'

'You could at least let them know where he was headed.'

'I could.'

'But you won't?'

'He could be anywhere. He said he was going to London, but he could have got off the train anywhere. He could be just down the road.'

'Is that what you're scared of?'

'I'm not scared.' Not of Frank, anyway. 'There's nothing wrong with me except lack of sleep.'

He rubs his face, the familiar gesture of frustration. 'All right. You win. So what do we do now?'

I'd like to go back to bed and sleep for a week, but it wouldn't be very productive. 'Frank said he sent letters *poste restante* for Ruth. I thought I could ask at the Post Office. See if anyone remembers her picking them up.'

'A pity we haven't still got the photographs.'

'I suppose.' At least he hadn't pointed out it was my fault they'd been lost.

'We've got her name.'

'That's something. If she'd been in Romsey since evacuation, she must be on the ARP register.' He pauses. 'We need the Waverleys for that. The doctor or his sister.'

'You'll be wanting blood from a stone next.'

'They aren't the easiest, it's true. But I'll have a shot at it.'

'Rather you than me.' I stand up. 'I was wondering...' More than wondering. I've been trying to stave off conviction all night. In the waking dream of my walk, in the dead sleep after, Ruth's been at my shoulder, screaming in my ear.

[tell him you got to tell him please you got to get the bugger what done it]

'What?'

'The baby. The postmortem on Ruth said she'd had a baby. Do you think it could've been her child that was abandoned? The one who died of rat bites?'

[i never knew till i heard them pray now i can't get it out of my head]

'Of course. Christ, where are my brains?'

For a minute, I think he's going to be sick. 'Are you OK?'

He brushes it off, brusque. 'You get to the Post Office. I'll see Waverley. If you find out anything more, let me know.'

*

He has a killer headache coming on. It's nothing new. Anything can start it off. Overwork, lack of sleep, strong emotion. Sometimes, nothing at all.

Sometimes he can stop it in its tracks. The doctor's pills, if he takes them soon enough. Physical effort will nip it in the bud, digging the garden or chopping logs. Or sex, if he's lucky.

The sickness comes in waves, and the flashing lights. He's got no time for this now. No time for the weakness. He's got things to do, people to see. He has to get on.

*

'I really cannot help you, Miss – ?'

'Mrs Lester. I'm here on official business for the coroner. Mr Nash.'

'That's as maybe.' The plump little post office official who's been summoned to speak to me puffs himself up to his full five foot nothing. 'But without a police warrant, I cannot release any item. His Majesty's mail is sacrosanct.'

'I'm not asking about the King's mail,' I say, exasperated. 'Just Ruth Taylor's. You know, the girl who was found dead after the Cricketers' was hit. She can't exactly come and get it herself.'

'No need for sarcasm,' he says. 'King or commoner, no one may interfere with the mail.'

'Can you at least tell me if there's anything waiting for her?'

'No.' He turns to go back to his station behind the grille. 'Good day to you, Miss.'

‘Mrs.’ It’s not the title that bothers me, but his attitude. *Run away and play, little girl.* ‘You have to understand. We need to find whatever we can to help us identify her killer.’

He doesn’t even pause, cracks the counter down behind him. ‘Get your employer to ask Sergeant Tilling. It’s police business.’

‘And the coroner’s.’ But I’m speaking to thin air. I stalk off, hoping I don’t look as ridiculous as I feel.

At the bank, a similarly infuriating interview awaits; though at least when it’s over I’m in possession of more funds than the half crown Dot lent me. The bank manager’s the post office official’s twin for disapproval, though he maintains a politer veneer as he sounds me out about my profligate spending. Grudging, he agrees to arrange for money to be transferred from my savings, but he isn’t pleased. By the time he’s finished, I’m ready to explode. I can’t go back to Nash like this. Nothing to tell him, a morning wasted. He’ll only remind me I lost our lead when I let Frank go.

Across the road, the Palmerston tearoom beckons. A cup of tea and whatever the cafe can provide in the way of food might give me a chance to think what I’m going to do next. Inside, the chalked-up menu offers Welsh rabbit or beetroot stew. The rabbit turns out to be mostly leeks gone khaki with cooking, in a sauce that might once have been in the same kitchen as a piece of cheese, but it’s hot, and the toast’s thick, and when I’ve eaten it and drunk a cup of tea I feel better. I’m just beginning to relax when the waitress comes over. She’s uneasy, peering about her as if she expects someone to shout.

‘I’m sorry to trouble you, Miss, but – are you the lady that’s working for Mr Nash?’

‘What can I do for you?’

‘There’s a boy round the back. Says he needs to speak to you. Urgent, he says.’

‘What’s it about, do you know?’

‘It’s the lad that takes telegrams,’ she says. ‘It’s maybe – I hope you’re not expecting bad news?’

If it was, it could only be about Richard. ‘I hope not too.’

‘Please, miss. If you’d just come?’ She’s practically wringing her hands, like a character out of a bad play. ‘It’s only a step. Won’t take a minute.’

I get up, follow her out through a steamed-up kitchen. I can’t think what the message can possibly be. Could Frank have tracked me down? But I don’t see how or, for that matter, why he would.

An alley runs behind the tearooms, a dank narrow passageway that can never get the sun. A boy's waiting, and I recognise him straight away. It's the scout I saw a couple of days ago at the ARP centre. Excited, or perhaps frightened, I can't tell from his expression in the gloom. He moves eagerly towards me as soon as I come out of the door.

'I've got information,' he says hoarsely. 'You were asking at the Post Office about that girl?'

'Yes.'

'An' you were at the wardens' the other day.'

'That's right.'

'What's it worth, then?'

'I see. A businessman.' I take out my cigarettes, light one. Offer the pack to him. 'You old enough to smoke?'

'Course,' he scoffs. But he puts the cigarette behind his ear, unlit.

A cold draught is blowing along the alleyway. 'Do we have to talk out here? If you come inside, I'll buy you a cup of tea and a bun.'

'No, ta. If him at the post sees me that's my job gone. It's worth more than a bun.'

I take the hint, take the half crown out of my bag again. No chance it'll be rejected this time. 'That more like it?'

He grabs for the money but I close my hand. 'Not until you tell me.'

'She used to come in the Post Office on market day to pick up her letters,' he says resentfully.

'I know that already. So why didn't you say something when the body was found?'

'Didn't know it was her, did I? Talk was the girl up the Cricketers' was a tart. Even her own mum wouldn't have known her, then, 'cos when she come in the post office she was dressed up like a nun.'

'What?' Now I'm surprised.

'Big blue mack she always had, right down to her ankles. And one of those white scarf things, covered up her hair. Like a nun, or maybe a nurse. Wouldn't have thought of her, till I heard you asking the boss.'

'OK.' I drop my cigarette end, scuff it out. 'Not sure it's worth half a crown, though.'

'Cor.' He looks askance. 'An' Alf said you were all right.'

'You know Alf Smith?'

'Course I do, he's a good laugh.'

'What's your name?'

'Pete. You ask Alf, he'll tell you –'

'All right. Pete, it's very important we find out everything we can about this girl.'

'They're saying she was done in. That true?'

'You know what they say about careless talk.'

'I want me money.'

I hesitate. I'm pretty certain he knows more than he's said, but I don't want him making something up to get more cash. So I hand the coin over, and he stuffs it in his pocket.

'Are you sure that's everything?'

'Give us another fag.'

'Watch it.' But I hold out the pack. 'What, Pete?'

'Saw her a few times up the Cut. Mooching about. Never spoke to her or nothing.'

'Could she have lived up that way?'

'Dunno. Didn't take much notice.'

The feeling that he's not telling me everything is stronger now. 'Maybe you could show me?'

He edges away. 'Sorry, Miss. Gotta go. Boss'll have my hide.' And then he runs. There's no point trying to stop him. I can find him again if I want to. Or Alf can.

I wonder about Alf. How much he knows. I'm going to have to have a chat with that young man before long.

Back inside the tearoom, I pay my bill. I should go and tell Nash what I've learned, but I'm not ready yet. It doesn't feel as if I've got enough to blot out this morning's fiasco.

*

Edith Waverley is the sort of raw-boned, horse-faced woman the county set breeds so well; a middle-aged spinster more at home with blood sports than knitting. Nash sees her through the veil of jagged, gaudy colours that his migraine imposes.

'Ruth,' he repeats doggedly. 'Ruth Taylor. Are you sure you don't know the name?'

Miss Waverley bridles. 'Are you callin' me a liar, Mr Nash? I've already told you I don't know.'

‘She ought to be on the ARP register,’ he says. ‘And she had a child recently, someone must have attended her.’

She pulls a face, grotesquely magnified by the swirling colours of his vision. ‘As to that,’ she says, ‘I can’t comment. And nor will my brother. You know as well as I do, such matters are confidential.’

‘The girl’s dead,’ he says. ‘Foul play may be involved. I think that trumps any issues of confidentiality. I could probably get a warrant to prove it. But I won’t argue the point if we can find out what we need to know from the ARP registers.’

‘You don’t imagine I keep them in my head?’ If anything, she is colder, more unhelpful than ever. ‘I’ll look at the books the next time I’m on duty.’

‘If it’s too much trouble, I’m sure my assistant would be happy to help.’

‘Your assistant?’ Miss Waverley says. ‘If you mean Josephine Fox... God forbid.’

He ignores the rudeness, ploughs on. ‘I’m sure your brother’s told you how eager he is that I should resolve the matter.’

She sniffs. ‘Ridiculous fuss over a little trollop.’

‘You’ll look at those records for me, Miss Waverley?’ he persists. ‘As soon as possible?’

‘Tomorrow,’ she concedes. ‘Or Sunday. Depends how busy we are. I take it you don’t expect me to go harin’ off right away?’

He expects nothing from her, other than this bristling personal hostility that’s only partly tempered by her recognition of his office as coroner. It’s old news he offends her. Mostly, it’s a matter of his heritage. The corruption, as she sees it, of his father’s unimpeachable Hampshire stock by his mother’s bohemian jewishness. She’s not alone in that, there are plenty like her who think Hitler’s policies have merit. And there’s his face. Such bad form on his part, not to have done the decent thing and hidden away for ever more.

‘Well?’ She snaps the word. ‘You might have time to waste, Mr Nash, but I’m a busy woman. If there’s nothing else, I’ll get Mary to see you out.’

He clamps down on rising sickness, the roaring dislocation of his vision. ‘I’ll expect to hear from you soon, then?’

She nods, though it’s more dismissal than co-operation. But much as he’d like to, he can’t press the point right now. He needs to get out of here every bit as urgently as she wants to see him to go.

When the nuns of Romsey were ousted by Henry VIII, the abbey church was sold to the people of the town for £100. From its place overlooking the market square, it sees all there is to see in the town. But time passes, and the wheel turns. The nuns are back, though not in the Abbey itself.

The church has a hold on me, ingrained in my memory, a pull of faith I feel nowhere else. I'm surprised how much it draws me. How much it makes me want to go back.

Sharp bite of November air. Sunday School kids fight for a place next to the vast Gurney stove. I elbow with the rest, because virtue has no reward but cold feet. Acrid vapours from the burning coke sting my eyes, but at least I'm warm.

From his lofty wooden box, the Vicar drones, sin and the hole-y ghost. I think of sides-to-middle sheets puddled on the floor.

Higher still, in the stained glass window, there's a bright shape. A lamb, like the one in my story book. I talk to him inside my head. Tell him fathers must be as unkind as grandfathers, if a boy had to die because I wet the bed.

The wheel turns.

Some memories are easier to resist than others. I skirt the precinct, cross the road. Gravel crunches underfoot as I walk towards the convent's front door. I know it's a long shot, but I have to find out if anyone here knows about a girl who went to collect her post dressed like a nun.

I ring the bell, not sure what to expect. I imagine a grille being opened, like in the films. But it's nothing so dramatic. The door opens quite ordinarily and reveals a woman in a grey habit.

'Can I help you?' Her attitude seems somewhere between welcome and discouragement, neither one thing nor another.

'I need to speak to someone who can tell me about your household,' I say.

She looks me up and down. 'You wish to join us?'

'Not at all. I'm on official business from the coroner's office.'

A frown flits across the smooth forehead. 'You'd better come in.' She shows me to an anteroom just inside the door. 'Wait,' she says.

There's the smell of beeswax and damp. A narrow, arched window lets in a greenish light. There are fiercely polished benches against two walls, a hard armchair beside an unlit hearth. It reminds me of a station waiting room, except for the crucifix which hangs against the dark paintwork.

I find the room oppressive. The sense of being watched is overwhelming, and I can't stop myself pacing restlessly up and down.

'Good day.' Another nun, older than the first but otherwise much the same, appears in the doorway. 'I am Sister Gervase, the almoner. I believe you wish to speak with me?' Her accent is precise, not-quite-English.

'To someone.' Subtlety deserts me. 'To anyone who can tell me if a girl called Ruth Taylor was ever here.'

Unruffled, she takes a seat in the armchair, folds her hands in her lap. 'Won't you sit down?'

'I'd rather not.' I regret it almost at once. Standing in front of her isn't making me feel more powerful, quite the reverse. It's like being called to the headmistress's study for an appointment with the cane. My hands tingle with the memory.

'So,' she says. 'Who am I speaking to, please? Sister Luke said you were here from the coroner.'

'My name's Lester,' I say, holding out one of the cards Nash has written for me. She makes no move to take it. 'Do you know anything about Ruth?'

'I ask myself why you would wish to know?'

I'm rattled by her air of detachment. It makes me want to bite. 'Yours isn't an enclosed order, Sister?'

'No,' she concedes.

'Then you must have heard about the air-raid on the pub? That there were casualties? One of them, a young woman, hasn't been officially identified.'

'You think it is Ruth?'

It feels like an admission. There's colour in her face that wasn't present a moment ago.

'Did you know her?'

She considers for what feels like far too long. Then, 'Why are you here, Miss Lester?'

Why is everyone determined to make me into a spinster? 'The coroner –'

She shakes her head. 'No. Why are *you* here?'

I want to say it's what I'm paid for, but it feels rather cheap. 'I don't like the way someone – threw her away.' I'm suddenly aware where my anger's coming from. It's not this nun, however infuriatingly calm. Words spill out of me. 'Killing her was bad enough. There's too much death already and her family –' But that's not my story to tell, and I veer away. 'She was so young. She'd had a baby, did you know that? And they dumped her like rubbish. Got rid of her. They're good at that in Romsey. Good at frightening little girls and getting them pregnant and –'

'You?' she says.

'Not me.' With one part of my brain, I'm sober again, wishing I hadn't said anything. But the words won't stop. 'My mother.'

'She died?'

'Three months ago. But they killed her spirit years ago. When they drove her out, threatened her so she never dared come home.'

Though it's just me being stupid, nothing whatever to do with Ruth, somehow the spate of words seems to have softened her attitude.

'Ruth *was* here,' she admits. 'She came to us in the new year, asked for our help. She was weak still from the baby, she shouldn't have been out. We took care of her, of course, but she refused to tell about the child. Only that it had been taken away. We hoped she would come to trust us, to tell us, perhaps even to join us, but she stayed as a guest, nothing more.'

'She didn't say where she'd been till she came to you?'

'Not at all. She seemed to be entirely without friends or family. We were much surprised when she told us her brother had written to offer her a home.'

'When was that?'

'Sunday morning.'

The answer's a surprise. The first one, really. Because if she'd left the convent on Sunday, where had she been until someone killed her on Tuesday night?

'You're sure it was Sunday?'

‘Of course. It was Easter morning, I could not forget that. She came to tell us just after first Mass. Perhaps we did not take the care we might have done to examine her about it because of the festival.’

Easter Sunday. She can’t have had a letter that morning. She must have waited to tell them, knowing they’d be preoccupied.

‘Did she leave straight away?’

Colour rises in Sister Gervase’s face again. ‘I regret, I cannot tell you. She was not at our evening repast, but I could not say for certain when she left the convent.’

‘And you didn’t think it might be her when you heard about the girl who’d been found dead?’

She shakes her head. ‘Our little mouse? The description was nothing like her. She’d left of her own accord, we had no reason to suppose harm had come to her.’

‘You heard a description?’

‘Blonde, fashionably dressed.’ She hesitates. Then, ‘no better than she should be, they are saying. But despite the baby, there was nothing of that while she was here.’

Sometime between Sunday and Tuesday, Ruth must have bleached her hair, changed her whole self from mouse to good time girl. I can’t see why she’d do that for her brother’s sake. Much more likely she’d been going to meet someone else. Her killer...? But though I’m convinced the nun’s mousy child and Frank’s sister are one and the same, I have to be sure. If only he hadn’t destroyed the photographs.

‘I’m afraid it must be Ruth,’ I say. ‘But we won’t be certain unless we can formally identify the body.’

‘But surely, her brother will do that?’

I shake my head. ‘He’s had to go away. Could someone here do it?’

She pulls herself to her feet. ‘In that case, it must be me. Though I fear...’ She pauses. ‘Not death, you understand. Only that it is Ruth.’

*

They’re having a good run for their money in Romsey this week. Plenty to gossip about. The air-raid, the deaths. And a murder. It’s all grist to the mill. Now it’s one of the old French nuns from the convent, stepping up the street with a face pale and harsh as one of her own stone saints. But it’s no saint walking along beside her.

Whispers shuffle behind hands, mouth to ear.

Josy Fox. Coroner’s assistant. It’s a man’s job, everybody knows that.

Always was a tomboy.

Hard as nails.

Wonder what she gave him to get the job? You know what they say, like mother like daughter.

Bit long in the tooth for that.

Nah. I'd be in it for a biscuit. Nothing like dunking a gingernut.

Dirty devil.

They snigger, speculate, while on the fringes, sober, a killer watches. Alert for danger. There's too much talk going on. Looks bad, the nun and that red haired bitch together. Feels dangerous.

What does the nun know? Dammit, the little tart swore she'd never breathe a word.

[no more i did was you told the lies]

Should never have believed her. Should have got rid of her straight away, her and the brat together. Only safe way, no matter what he said.

[didn't make no difference did it you got rid of us anyway]

Rubber soles make no noise. Good for followin'. For watching.

They're not stopping at the solicitor's office.

So far so good.

They pass the police station.

Even better.

They keep going, past the undertaker's, the cinema, straight on up the hill. Fewer people around now. Harder not to stand out.

The hospital.

They're turning in at the hospital.

The mortuary.

That's what it's all about. They're goin' to view the little tart.

Much good may it do them.

But the Fox creature's gone too far. She's a nuisance, sniffin' around in other people's business. Vermin, like all her sort. Should've been put down at birth like the other.

Too soft altogether.

Always been too soft, too trustin'.

Well, not any more.

*

If he sits very still, in the dark, in silence, eventually he'll feel better. He'll start to believe he can survive this time. But while it lasts, death would be a blessed relief. The nausea, the dizzy spinning of every sense, the tearing pain is as bad as the shrapnel that sheared away half his face.

Lying in no-man's-land, listening to the groans and screams around him, listening to the whistle of shells overhead, sprayed with earth and blood. Growing dark, vision fading, growing cold. Listening to the sound of his own breathing, the bubble of it, feeling the numbness creep, blessed and fearful, so he curses the brave chaps when they come to fetch back what's left of him. He screams at them *take my pal over there*. It's not courage, it's cowardice. He wants to die. But it's too late. The silence tells him. His pals have gone already.

He's empty now, but the retching goes on. Pain blinds him, but he doesn't call out. All he wants is to be left alone.

*

By the time I get back to the office, I'm so tired I can hardly think. I feel grey all over, pulled down by knowing who the dead girl is for sure. I should be pleased we've got a positive identification, but somehow it doesn't work like that.

Sister Gervase was certain, despite the bleached hair, the traces of nail and face paint. She'd never seen Ruth wear anything like the red flirty dress. It had to have been hidden, or bought specially on the Tuesday, because Monday was a Bank Holiday.

The nun couldn't throw any light on what might have happened to Ruth's documents. As far as she knew, the girl had never had a handbag. She'd carried her possessions round in a gas mask case covered with a scrap of fabric. 'A pattern,' Sister Gervase said before we parted. 'Cherries, I think. Pretty, but faded. As it might have been a dress, once upon a time.' I promise to look out for it, but we both know it must be long gone. It, and everything in it.

*

Romsey, Rumsey, Rūm's ēg.

Placename, Rūm, personal name, Old English

Ēg, an island, most often refers to dry ground surrounded by marsh. In late Old English, a well-watered land.

Fire is a quick destroyer, but in time water will wear down stone. And Romsey is better supplied with water than fire. Its river, the Test: clear running, lively with trout. Its many braids, darting, meandering, busy with mills. The Barge canal: abandoned, heavy, slow; mud and minnows nibbling. Tadburn, *Toad stream*: rising in bog to the east, cutting

downhill by secret ways to the Test. Into this network of waterways many things are subsumed: the careless, the lost, the deliberate. The discarded, the cunningly thrown. Somewhere, in the deep curve pool of a stream, half submerged already in silt, lies a clot of paper, a knot of cloth. The waters fret at the unravelling edges, current fraying the fibres, wearing away words. Fish find nothing to engage them, but a questing leech briefly samples the marks, the smudge of blood. Proof of identity, traces of guilt.

*

I should see Nash. I don't want to, after this morning, but I ought to tell him what I've found out. I'd rather not have to track him down at home, the boundaries are too muddled already. But I don't hold out much hope that he'll still be working this late.

It's no surprise that when I get to the office Miss Haward is coming out, keys in hand ready to lock up.

'I don't know what you're thinking of, turning up at this time of day,' she says, before I have a chance to say anything. 'I'm closing the office up now. I'm already half an hour late.'

'I'm looking for Mr Nash,' I tell her.

'I gather you had a row with him this morning,' she snaps.

'It wasn't a row. If it's any of your business, he bawled me out.'

'Whatever you call it. It won't do, Mrs Lester. I warned him, but he wouldn't listen. Nothing but trouble ever since you came. He didn't even bother to let me know when he left the office. I expect he went home with one of his heads.'

It's probably only because I'm tired that I get a picture of Nash taking his pick from a cupboard full of heads. It isn't funny, but I can't help smiling. If he had a choice, I know he wouldn't wear the one he does.

'Don't know what you're laughing at,' she says tartly. 'All this upset. I knew it wouldn't work, having a woman for his assistant.' She turns the key viciously in the lock, clatters down the steps towards me. Just as she reaches pavement level, a lorry backfires in the street beyond, and she startles, stumbles, almost falls. I put out my hand to steady her but she shakes me off, flounces off down the street without a backward glance. She hasn't noticed she's dropped the fob with the office key in her haste. I pick it up, call out to her, but she doesn't hear, or doesn't choose to. My better self thinks I should go after her, but I'm so sick of her supercilious attitude I can't be bothered. Not to mention the fact I'm just plain tired. It occurs to me that I have a golden opportunity to do my own

research for once. An office full of records, all impeccably indexed, and me with a list in my bag, and no one to ask what the hell I'm doing.

I wait a minute, to be sure she's not coming back. But there's no sign of her, no sign of anyone, so I make my way up the steps and open the door unchallenged. Inside, the office is unlit, dusky and warm. The building is silent around me. There's a delicious feeling of trespass as I turn the key in the door to lock myself in.

Habit takes me first to the back corridor and my desk. There are no windows, so there's no black out to worry about. It's safe enough to put on the light down here. I flip the switch and the dim bulb glimmers to life overhead. It's so feeble it scarcely counts as light. I put down my bag, loosen my coat, flop down in the rickety chair. No need to rush, for the first time today I've plenty of time. So nice, not to be moving, talking, trying to work things out. I don't have to deal with Nash or Miss Haward. I don't have to make conversation with Dot and the girls, or worry about what I'm going to say to Alf, though there are definitely things I need to ask him. I can just put my head down for a minute, rest my eyes.

When I wake, I'm so stiff I'm almost paralysed. My face is smooshed sideways against the desk, and there's dribble on my cheek. As I creak upright, unsure what has woken me, my neck and back protest. I know where I am, but for a moment I can't remember why or how I got here. And then it floods back. The key, the records. How much time have I wasted?

My feet and hands buzz with pins and needles as I move. A glance at my watch shows I've slept a long time. It's after midnight.

I make use of the facilities, splash my face with cold water, begin to revive. I'd no intention of staying this late, but if I go back to Dot's now, I'll miss my chance. Another hour or two can't matter to anyone but me. I begin to prowl, pent-up with a savage kind of energy which seems to seep into me from the very fabric of the place. There's a feeling, visceral, not butterflies, something more crude in my guts from being here, in a place I shouldn't be, a place where no one comes outside the working day. It shivers through me, the potential of it, fuels the conspirator in me, the spy.

Time to consult my list.

The list of men I made after Nell died. The ones in the paper. My potential fathers, my mother's seducer. The search for Ruth's identity hasn't made me forget my original search. It's just put it off, and for too long. Now I need to make good.

Miss Haward's indexing is so thorough I have to forgive all the flounces and snottiness she's treated me to, and send up a silent vote of thanks to her efficiency. Beginning with the names that I can't put a face to, I track down three candidates straight away. Eliminate them just as quickly. A deed of Conveyance shows Harry Wilks didn't come to Romsey till after the war, a blow-in from South Africa in 1926. A partnership Agreement reveals Antony Bond, the vet, is no older than I am. And Robert Lisle has had a Trust fund since a riding accident put him in a wheelchair, aged twelve.

I start again.

Bing, senior partner here. No papers in the general filing for him, but I'd hardly expect it. Maitland, the dentist. Nothing at all in the records. He must do business with some other firm. I'll need to make enquiries elsewhere if I want to chase up either of them.

Waverley. A drawer full of stuff, though nothing recent. Oxley of Ramillies Hall, a drawer and a half, but most of that looks ages old. I'll have to move on, come back to it later. I can't wade through that lot now.

George Redfern, water bailiff. He's got a thickish file, but there's nothing that seems helpful in my search until a letter grey with age catches my eye. *'...the unfortunate circumstance of a childhood infection with mumps... apply to adopt...'* Not George, then.

Ted Hudson. Newsagent. Like Redfern, a thick folder. I stop, paper in hand. A paternity order, dated 1923. My heart beats quick in my chest, but it's too late for me. Some other poor bastard.

Joseph Fox. Grandfather. I can't bring myself to look in these records for him. Not that I'd exclude him from shameful behaviour, even incest, despite his holier-than-thou attitudes, but I'm pretty sure he'd never commit anything to paper if he had. And he's far too mean to pay for a lawyer.

Alec Humphries. Lay preacher. A single sheet in his file. *Papers in deed box EAH/Bing/QS05*. I make a note to find out what the annotation means.

Outside, the abbey clock strikes two. It's taken me longer than I thought. I'm shivering, sick with tiredness and cold. I can't do any more tonight. I feel like I'm moving through treacle, some substance much darker, more viscous than air, weighing down movement and thought. I look around, wipe the drawers I've touched. Can't afford to leave evidence.

No sound from outside, Romsey's at peace. I unlock the front door, slip outside, lock up again. Hesitate. What to do with the key? Drop it for someone to find, let them

assume it's been there all along? Not very responsible, if the someone doesn't happen to be an employee of Nash, Simmons and Bing. I could post it through the door, anonymous. I could use it as an excuse to beard Nash in his den at a respectable hour today, or give it to Miss Haward on Monday.

I could keep it.

Lucky chances aren't really a matter of chance, and there's plenty I still need to find out. There's that deedbox to explore, those drawers of filing. It's no choice, really. I put the key safely away in my bag with the list. I'll decide what to do with it later.

*

The dust betrays her. In the dim bulb's light, motes dance as thick as Vallombrosa. There's a shine on drawers that haven't been opened in years, that haven't seen polish since god knows when. There's a fragment of colour, a wisp of frayed red tape on the floor. Nash opens a drawer and a crumpled slip of paper is dislodged. *Rex v Humphries*. Nothing to do with the case in hand.

There's only one possible conclusion.

She's been snooping.

The question is, what has she been looking for?

It isn't the sun pouring through the window because I've forgotten to draw the blackouts that wakes me. It isn't because I've slept long enough, or I've got to get up and pee. It's because someone's knocking, not particularly loudly, but very persistently, on my bedroom door.

I come reluctantly out of sleep, a sick taste in my mouth.

'What is it?'

'Mrs Lester?' Dot's voice. 'I want a word with you.'

I sit up, struggle to get my thoughts in order. 'Come in.'

As soon as she comes through the door I can see she's offended. A glance at my watch shows it's late, almost ten, but it's Saturday. Surely she can't mind? I don't have to work. I try a smile.

'Good morning, Dot.'

'That's as maybe.'

I feel vulnerable, in my night things, not properly awake, while she's fully armed and waiting to explode. 'Is something wrong?'

'Don't play the innocent with me,' she says. 'What do you think this house is, coming home with the milk twice in a row? I should cocoa.'

'Look, Dot –'

'Don't you *look Dot* me. This is a decent household.'

It's too much. This again: this, always. As if I can't be decent because of who I am. All the stresses of the past few days rise up in me, pitch me straight into a mood every bit as black as Dot's.

'Oh, I see. Too good for the likes of me, I suppose.' I throw the covers back, swing my legs out of bed. 'I'll get out, shall I? Give me half an hour.'

I stand up. The room cavorts around me like the Walzer at a fair. 'Whoa.' I have to sit down again. Not even pride can keep me on my feet.

Dot comes further into the room, stands over me. 'Looks like drink,' she says, almost conversationally, but I'm not sure it's me she's talking to. 'Don't smell like it though.'

'Not drink.' After Richard, the way he was, it's the last thing I want. 'Just not enough sleep.' Sitting down, the room steadies and I rally a bit. 'But there, you know all about that.'

'No call to be rude,' Dot says. Her attitude seems to have softened a little. 'You look bloomin' rough.'

'I feel it.'

'What's wrong with you? What've you been doing?'

'Didn't think you wanted to hear.'

She frowns. 'Never mind about that,' she says. 'Get on.'

So I tell her. All I can tell her, anyway. And some things I probably shouldn't. By the time I'm finished, she's sitting on the bed, tutting sympathetically.

'Sounds like you better get back to sleep then,' she says at last. 'I'm a silly old fool and I never should have believed...' She breaks off, looking embarrassed.

'What?' I say. 'Who shouldn't you have believed?'

'Never you mind.' But there's no conviction in it.

'Dot?' I say, but she shakes her head. I try again. 'Please?'

She shrugs. Pretends not to care, but it doesn't work very well. 'Miss Waverley came round. Wasn't too happy to hear I'd taken you in.'

A flood of questions rise up in my mind. But the one that comes out of my mouth is 'What's it got to do with her?'

'Nothing really,' Dot says. 'But you know what it's like. She's got her finger in every pie. President of the WI, Knitting Circle, flower rota at church. Evacuee welfare, land girl billeting, the lot. Places I go, stuff I do. Nothing she can do to stop me, but she can make life awkward if she doesn't like you.'

'And she doesn't like me?'

'You could say that. Whatever did you do to her?'

'Nothing, except being born in the first place. Haven't even seen her since I came back. But you know what it's like. People like her don't approve of people like me.'

'She certainly doesn't approve of you working for Mr Nash,' Dot says. 'Wanted to know how you got the job. I never let on about you not coming home but... she said maybe you were, well...'

‘Sleeping with him?’ That night in London has nothing to do with guilt, nothing to do with anyone but ourselves and the war, but I’m painfully conscious of how it would look if anyone in this small-minded town ever found out.

‘I shouldn’t have taken any notice,’ Dot goes on. ‘But she said she might have to reconsider about letting Betty and Joan come here for their meals.’

‘She could do that?’

‘I don’t know. Those girls – I get a consideration for feeding them. And there’s the extra rations.’

‘If it’s going to make it difficult for you, I will go.’ Not that I’ve any idea where.

‘Never you mind for now,’ she says, standing up. ‘Sleep on it.’

And because I can’t keep awake any longer, I do.

*

It’s a beautiful spring morning. After the headaches, Nash always feels purged, threadbare, in urgent need of solitude. He’s ferociously thirsty, still. Even his skin seems to drink as he bathes. He hurries through his ablutions, eager to get out into the fresh air. He can’t bear to frowse indoors another moment.

He needs to be able to think.

No. That’s not it. First, he needs *not* to think. He wants to be where the sunlight can burn off the memory of weakness, out in the fresh air where the breeze can carry away the taint of sickness. Somewhere that’s quiet, and death is a simple matter of killing to eat. Foxes versus rabbits, no malice intended. No secrets and dust, no shut doors. In his present mood, he’d be happy if he never had to see a human face again. Never had to think about the things people do, why they do them.

He walks for hours, out onto the edge of the New Forest, open heath land that offers a great arc of uninterrupted sky above him, only a pony or two for company. By lunchtime, he’s ready for more than spring water to drink, and he finds himself a dour little public house where the landlord serves him Strong’s bitter and a hunk of bread and cheese with taciturn courtesy. He’s not let his mind dwell on anything but the walking: sunshine and birdsong, the breeze through the grass. But now, refreshed, once more fully in command of his own body and its functions, he’s ready to reconsider the problem of the dead girl.

*

When I wake again, it’s almost quarter to three. I can’t believe it at first. I’m out of bed on a reflex before I remember. It’s Saturday, and I was up half the night and most of the

night before, and I've identified Ruth and had a row with Nash and one with Dot but it's ok with Dot now so I can relax. Except Dot's in trouble with Miss Waverley because of me so maybe I can't. And I still haven't reported to Nash.

It's afternoon, but my body feels like midnight. I wash hastily, get dressed. Go downstairs almost at a run, though I'm not sure why I feel such a need to hurry. Gran would have laughed at me, all behind like a cow's tail.

In the kitchen, Dot and the land army girls are getting ready to go out. The girls have got their coats on, and Dot's just reaching for hers. There's the big teapot in the middle of the table, and three used cups on the draining board, and I feel absurdly disappointed that I've missed the party.

'Back in the land of the living, then?' Dot says. 'You're just in time.'

'I am? What for?'

'The jumble,' Joan says. 'There's a sale on at the Parish Rooms. Got to get there when the doors open or all the good stuff'll be gone.'

'Um...'

'Come on if you're coming.' Joan's practically dancing with impatience.

Dot hands me my coat. 'Change of scene will do you good.'

Before I know it, I'm hustling down the road with Dot and the girls, listening to Joan's excited chatter. Whatever Betty's saying in return is inaudible, but I get the impression she's not quite as eager as Joan. Dot tucks her arm through mine, as if to make sure I don't duck out.

'Might be the last chance,' she says to me.

'What?' I'm still reeling from the after effects of my daytime sleep and the haste of our departure. My brain doesn't seem to be working at all.

'There's rumours they'll be rationing clothes before long. People won't want to chuck stuff out then. It'll be coupons for everything.'

'I suppose.' It's a long time since I was last at a jumble sale. That was at Romsey, too.

The Hospital Garden Party Fete. Held at The Briars, first Saturday in June. The doctor's posh house. Gates open at two o'clock sharp, highlight of our summer social life. Hoarding pennies for weeks, anticipating the heady delights of candy floss and guess the name of the doll, sleeping in her cardboard box. She has gold hair, lace on her knickers, bright blue eyes that open when they stand the box up. A mauve dress this year, last year

it was yellow, but it could just as easily be the same doll over and over again. I've never known any child win her.

Bowling for the pig, my uncles have go at that. Sweet little piglet pink as a doll, screaming in its run. Tom won it once. Fatten it up, don't give it a name 'cos there'll be screaming again come Christmas.

Manicured lawns, roses in serried ranks. Ladies in summer dresses and white gloves, kids tidy as Sunday school, hair plaited tight or slicked down, getting bored, money spent, getting loose, playing tag and goosie goosie behind the asparagus beds.

Over by the greenhouse, the jumble stalls. One for clothes, piled high, women with prams rummaging through. They pack up when there's only a pair of grubby white jodphurs (who'd ever wear those?) and a couple of odd socks left. The other stall's bric a brac. One year my heart sets on a china dog with its ear knocked off, and I wait all afternoon, turning up my nose at Lucky Straws and the fortune telling fish, hoping against hope that the dog won't sell and I can carry it home to Gran in triumph, reduced to tuppence at the end of the day.

It's a scrimmage in the Parish Rooms. There's the smell of fresh disinfectant and old clothes. Loaded trestles are arranged in a hollow square around the room. Jumpers on one table, shoes on another. Skirts and trousers and hats and bags, a table of washed-out, yellow-grey undies. Joan dives into a billowy heap of cotton stuff that might be summer blouses or frocks. Dot's deep into the woollies, looking for things to unravel and knit up again, while Betty goes fossicking through the shoes and bags. I wander past an array of battered china, cups without saucers, odd plates, to a table where there are boxes of books, scruffy for the most part, but irresistible to someone whose books are all in store. I pick out a thin, leather bound copy of Shakespeare's sonnets, and a nearly new Allingham, and I'm just paying my sixpence to the woman behind the boxes when a rumpus breaks out over by the shoes.

There's Betty with one red shoe in her hand, while another girl has its obvious pair in hers. I've never heard Betty talk loudly before, but she's hissing like a kettle now, sibilant with fury.

'Saw it first,' she says, 'it's mine.'

'Liar,' the other girl says, almost as red in the face as the shoes. 'I got mine first. Just couldn't find the other one.'

"Cos it's mine," Betty semi-whispers.

I look around, but though the girls are drawing a crowd, Dot and Joan are nowhere to be seen. It's really nothing to do with me, but somebody's going to have to intervene a bit sharpish or it'll turn into a proper fight.

Reluctantly, I go across to them.

'Mrs Lester,' Betty practically shrieks, if it's possible to shriek in a whisper. 'Tell this cow...'

'Cow yourself,' the other girl says. 'I'm not the one standing out in the fields all day.'

'All right, that's enough.' Their childishness makes me feel older than Methuselah's granny.

'I saw them first,' Betty insists. 'They're mine.'

'Not unless you've paid for them,' I say. 'Have you?'

'No.' She pouts. 'Nor's she, though. You ask her.'

I turn to her rival, who's clinging like death to the other shoe. I can see the attraction, they're everything the growing drabness of war and uniforms isn't. Red suede, with a high heel and peep toes.

'Have you?' I ask her.

She shakes her head. 'Not had a chance.'

'Do they fit you?' It seems like a reasonable question.

'Dunno.' The girl shrugs.

Betty looks triumphant. She reaches out to grab at the other shoe again, but I stop her.

'Do they fit you?'

'Course they will.' But she doesn't look sure.

'Try it on,' I say. 'Both of you, try on the one you've got. Whoever it fits gets them. That's fair, surely?' I don't allow myself to consider the possibility that the shoes will fit them both. To my eyes, they look pretty small, and neither girl is particularly petite. It seems unlikely either of them will turn out to be Cinderella today.

The minute Betty's rival tries to put her shoe on, it's obvious it's far too narrow. For all her efforts, her toes just won't fit in. But she's not going to give up easily. 'I could cut it along the top. Put a bow on, I've got some red ribbon. It wouldn't show.'

'You're not cutting my shoes.' Betty snatches the shoe away from her and slides it on. 'There, you see. Perfect.'

“Cept your clodhopper’s hanging an inch off the back,” the other girl says. “No good to you neither.”

And she’s right. Betty’s toes go into the shoe, but her foot’s far too long and she can’t cram in her heel. She kicks the shoe off, looking mutinous. I gather it up quickly, before the other girl can grab it. Hold out my hand. “Give me the other one,” I say. “It’s no good.”

“You just want ’em for yourself,” she mutters, but she hands it over.

“Not me. What is it, a two?” I look inside. “Two and a half. I take a five.”

Betty makes a face at me. “If you put them back, she’ll have them. Cow.”

“Mare.” The other girl tosses her head. “Keep the rotten shoes,” she says.

“Wouldn’t have them for a gift after they’ve been on your dirty hooves.” She stomps off into the crowd.

I have every intention of putting them back, but as the light turns on the inner curve of the leather, something catches my eye. It brings me up short. Though I might not be able to wear them, I’m not about to let them go now. I shake my head at Betty, turn to the woman behind the stall who’s watched the whole business without saying a word.

“How much?” I ask.

“Shoes like that? Everybody wants them.” She smirks at me. “Five bob.” It’s daylight robbery, and we both know it, but I stump up the cash, make her give me a paper bag so I can put the shoes away out of sight. If we go on like this, Nash will have to pay me expenses. Because though it’s far too late for any kind of evidence a policeman might be able to find, fingerprints or blood stains, there’s a mark inside the shoes that tells me who they might have belonged to. Someone’s written in them, like a schoolchild, identifying precious property. Untidy capitals that have been rubbed out, though the indentation still shows on the soft inner leather. I make out an R, and a T.

The transaction’s made, but I hang on. The crowd moves off, finding better things to do now the fun’s over.

“Do you know who donated the shoes?” I ask the stallkeeper when we’re alone.

She shakes her head. “Couldn’t tell you. They’ve been collecting stuff for weeks. You could ask Miss Waverley, she’s the organiser. She might know.”

Miss Waverley again. She gets everywhere, but the chances of her telling me anything are pretty remote. I’ll have to think what to do about that. The stallkeeper’s

watching me, curious. I'm aware I've been standing here too long. Drawing attention to myself.

'Fair enough. Thanks.' I let myself drift away, as if I'm not all that interested. Dot's turned up again, and she comes over with a string bag bulging with old cardigans and jumpers. 'Better be off,' she says.

We round up the girls. Joan's empty handed, but Betty's consoled herself with a bright orange headsquare printed with horseshoes and riding crops. They're whispering together again as we walk back to Dot's, and from the sideways looks they treat me to, the story's growing fresh embellishments with every step. I don't think I'm very popular with Betty today.

*

In Romsey, gossip has wings. Can't sneeze in the town without people speculating about where you caught the cold. It's not long before the man who dumped the red shoes hears about the fight at the jumble sale. He frowns, pretends not to be interested. Such things are beneath him. But inside, he's seething. Who'd have guessed that shoes would cause such a fuss? Bloody women.

In the heat of the moment, he'd overlooked her shoes. Hadn't given them a thought. Wasn't as if the stupid girl was going to want them again. It had been house rules, right from Mother's time. Outdoor shoes off, indoor pumps on. No excuses, down on hands and knees with a toothbrush if there was so much as a smudge on the parquet, and six of the best to make it sting. He hadn't seen her arrive, that was the trouble. Hadn't thought. Last thing on his mind. It was only afterwards he realised what had happened, when he found the bloody things staring out of the hall cupboard at him. Flaunting, scarlet. Couldn't exactly pass them off. Dead giveaway if anyone saw them.

Dead, anyway. Hah. Pretty good joke. Pity he couldn't share it.

He'd had to think about how to get rid of them. By the time they turned up, he'd got rid of the rest of the stuff. Too late to chuck them after the girl. Too much of a risk to throw them out with so many nosey parkers about, yattering about war waste, make do and mend. Eye to every bloody thing. They went on about salvaging everything, bones for explosives, rags and paper for god knows what. Wouldn't put it past 'em to sort through the dustbins.

The Jumble Sale had seemed like a good idea, perfect. Hide 'em in plain sight, some chappie'd put that in a story once. Like a leaf in a forest.

Like the pub.

It should have worked out. If it hadn't been for that interfering bastard Nash. Should have known he wouldn't keep quiet. And that damned assistant of his, sticking her nose in. Breaking up the fight, bloody spoilsport. Nothing like a good cat fight.

Heard she'd been asking where they'd come from.

Good luck to her. She'll never trace them back. She'll find it's a dead end.

Hah.

Another good one. Crack a smile. She won't get anywhere, ask all she likes. No one's going to tell her anything.

[if] by... an unlawful and wilful act (or omission) aforesaid caused the death of her newly born child but at the time of the act (or omission) she had not fully recovered from the effect of giving birth to such child... she was guilty of infanticide. (*Jervis on Coroners, 1927:306*)

Bram Nash is trying to read. What with one thing and another, he's behind with his regular work. But he can't concentrate. All he can think about is the dead girl.

Perhaps he's being over zealous? A knee-jerk reaction to Waverley's don't-rock-the-boat conservatism? He's got to admit, the man brings out the worst in him. It's always a temptation to do anything he can to resist the old devil's steam-roller tactics.

But he's not just being awkward. Not this time. He can't forget the dead girl's face. So young. Unmarked. Ready for a life that's been denied her. He can't brush her aside.

Ruth. He must call her by name. There's no room for doubt that's who she is. Not any girl, *this* girl, unique and singular. It makes him sad to think how lonely in death she is. It seems no one cares enough to miss her. Even her brother couldn't be bothered.

[bloody frank]

Nash still doesn't understand why Jo let him run off. He must have been able to tell them something more.

Such a pity.

And pity brings him back full circle. To the girl, to Ruth. Death of the young is a fact of war. He's been there, seen it. But this, this is different. Not war, it's a private killing. Whatever anyone says, he won't look the other way. It's his job to bring justice to the murdered.

It feels personal. So close to home, it's as if Death is laughing at him.

The bombs, falling minutes after he left.

The girl, practically dropped on his doorstep.

And the baby. He doesn't want to think about that, but he must. What Jo said opened his eyes to the the possibility – the probability – that Ruth was the mother of the abandoned baby. They'd never found anyone else they could link to him.

He doesn't want to think about what happened when she abandoned the child.

[it wasn't me i never knew]

She couldn't have known what would happen. She wasn't exactly the first unsupported girl to take the route of leaving her baby on a doorstep. She probably didn't mean him to die.

[course i never]

With a sign still identifying the redundant building as a hospital, she might have thought it was the best place, the safest. Believed he would be found, and cared for.

[i was told he would be]

But where had she been from January to this week? Where had she been hiding? Had she known what had happened to the child?

[no you bugger i never... why won't you LISTEN

all that stuff about dreams

dream come true

kind of dreams i have

nobody wants them

scrabble n' squeak

feet scurry

claws on the cobbles

at first it's only one

one's nothing

one's home n' the snap of a trap in the scullery

three am or five

but the night goes on

n' the dream gets deeper

n' now it's not one but two, three

many

more

too many

feet scurrying

scratching

searching

it's cold

such hard nights

*no light anywhere
n' they're hungry
seeking
i should never've let them
they said it'd be all right
said they'd take care of him*

*frank would've killed me if he'd've known
didn't wanna live in a rathole all my life*

*so bloody smug
filthy old fucker
takes two dunnit
n' he had his
had me where he wanted
till he didn't no more
two minutes grunting
didn't know it could happen like that
didn't know it had till too late*

*told me it was all for the best
give the poor scrap a better chance
n' i believed them
never thought they'd do something evil like that
's nothing
what they done to me
's what they done to him*

*thought he was all right
till i heard the nuns pray for his soul in church on Sunday
abandoned baby known to god*

n' then the snap of the trap

*it was food they was after
i've heard about cats in a cradle
but never no rats*

*he was sleeping when they took him
didn't cry
not like i did when they went out the door
n' i knew
i'd never see him again
could've lived with that
but when i heard*

*had to try n' make them pay
had to try
wipe the look off...
smug git*

*in my dreams he don't cry
even with the rats frenzy*

*dreams
who needs them
not s'posed to be dreams where i am]*

*

Dot's not one to let the grass grow under her feet. Or to let wool go to waste either. By eight o' clock she's got me pressed into service, helping her skein wool from the knitteds she bought at the jumble. She's unravelled a green pullover and made a start on a fluffy shawl while I'm still struggling with a huge cardigan in lurid orange.

'It's very bright,' I venture as I wind my aching hands to and fro across the interminable knit.

'Lovely for ducks,' she says. 'Or teddy bears.'

'You could just cut out the shapes as if was cloth. That'd save time.'

'That's the lazy way. Wastes too much wool.'

'I saw a rabbit that had been made like that the other day.'

‘Hmmpf.’

I was hoping for a clue, but she doesn’t bite, doesn’t offer an opinion about who might have made it.

She looks across at me. ‘How are you getting on?’

‘Not too bad.’

‘You’ll need a hand in a minute. That sleeve’s got the moth, it’ll be all little ends.’

Working together like this feels comfortable. Almost as if we’re friends. I take a chance.

‘Dot?’

‘What?’

‘Won’t you tell me about Nell?’

The ball of fluffy pink wool jumps out of her hand, unwinds itself onto the hearth.

‘Datted thing.’

‘You did know her, didn’t you?’ She avoided the question so carefully last time that I’m sure I must be right.

‘I can’t tell you anything you don’t know already.’

It’s another evasion, but this time I won’t let it go. ‘Don’t you believe it. Pretty much anything you can tell me is going to be news to me. I didn’t know her when I was growing up. Didn’t really meet her till I was fourteen.’

She stops what she’s doing, looks over the top of her glasses at me. ‘You’re having me on.’

‘I’m not. It was Granny and my grandfather who brought me up. Nell was banished. We weren’t even supposed to talk about her.’ I do that thing, a huff of sound that comes out almost as a laugh, but it’s not, not really. It’s exasperation and sadness, a good bit of anger. ‘Oh, my grandfather made sure I knew my birth had brought shame to the family. But as for details, I wasn’t told anything.’

‘We heard you’d gone to live with her when you left Romsey. That was the story.’

‘That’s all it was. A story. When my grandfather kicked me out, Nell couldn’t look after me. She had a living-in place in London, more than her job was worth to tell them about me. I never spent any time at all with her until the last few months of her life.’

‘Blimey,’ she says. ‘That’s rough. How did you manage up in the Smoke all on your own?’

It’s supposed to be her, telling me things. I weigh it up. Perhaps it’ll help if I tell her.

'It wasn't hard. Like now, with the war, there were plenty of jobs. I got a place in a munitions factory. Bed and board, and the pay was all right. And after, when the men came home, and they didn't want us any more I had enough savings so I could train as a shorthand typist. Got a job, worked my way up.'

She smiles. 'Married the boss?'

'How did you know?'

'Romsey rumour. Said you'd done well for yourself.'

I shrug. 'It wasn't a success.'

'Divorced?'

'Not so far. He's been missing since Dunkirk.'

She's silent for a minute, seemingly intent on unravelling a stubborn tangle in the wool.

'Nell and me,' she says at last, 'we worked together. In the same spot, anyway. Like I said, she was younger than me and we never did get to know each other all that well. She was a scullery maid, and I'm sorry to say that in those days I thought I was a cut above. Head nursery maid, I was. Used to give myself such airs. Then when she got caught with you...'

'You knew about that?'

'Not to say *knew*. But it was the usual reason a girl had to leave without notice. It was all hushed up, you were supposed to pretend she'd never even been there.'

I can hardly bring myself to ask. 'Did you know...? Were there rumours about who my father was?'

'Ask me no questions,' she says, 'and I'll tell you no lies.'

Disappointment is like a weight on my chest. 'But you do know.'

She shakes her head. 'No.'

'Guess?'

'Look, deary, there's always rumours. If you believed them, it could have been anyone from the stable lad to the Prince of Wales. But I'm pretty sure it wasn't either of them.'

'Please, Dot?'

'Someone about the house, I suppose.' She shrugs. 'We had lots of visitors in those days, coming and going. I told you, she was a lovely looking girl, couldn't help but attract attention. And I'm sorry, but if you must know she had a bit of a reputation.'

Flirting, that sort of thing. After she went, people started to say she'd been having it off with all sorts.'

I know it can't have been a visitor, because of my list. 'But she was only fifteen.'

'You'd be surprised,' Dot says darkly. 'It doesn't signify. Now, that's enough of that. I'm going to make us both a cup of cocoa. Got a little bit of sugar put by, we'll have it nice and sweet. Help you get to sleep.'

Nash is asleep by the fire when his housekeeper knocks at the study door. The papers he's been trying to read have spilled onto the floor, and it takes him a moment to compose himself. Night looks in through the windows, and apart from the glimmer of the coals, it's dark in the room.

'Come in,' he calls.

Fan Stewart bustles in, tutting at the uncurtained windows. She moves to draw the blackouts, speaks to him over her shoulder.

'You can put that light on now, sir,' she says. 'All shut up tight.'

He turns on the lamp beside his chair. 'Thank you, Fan. What time is it?'

'Nine o'clock, sir. I was just going to go up to my rooms.'

'Fine by me. I shan't want anything more.'

'No, sir. I didn't expect you would. But there's someone wanting to see you.' Her tone expresses deep disapproval.

'Really?' He can't think of anyone who might call at this time of night. 'Who is it?'

'Couple of nippers. That Alf Smith from over the nursery and a messenger boy from the Post Office. But it's Alf with the mouth and *gotta see him urgent and can't wait till morning.*'

'He didn't say –'

'He did not.' She sniffs. 'Says it's highly confidential. Would you credit it? The likes of him. Came to the front door, just like anyone.'

'Better show them up, Fan.' He catches the look on her face. 'No, tell you what, I'll come down. I'll see them in the morning room, and you can get off to bed.'

She sniffs again. 'I don't mind if you want me to wait till they go.'

'No need.' He ushers her out of the room, shuts the door behind him. 'You get on, I'll lock up when they go.'

The boys are waiting in the hallway, obviously ill-at-ease. Alf's shamefaced but determined, while the other lad won't look up as Nash comes down, but stands scuffing his boot moodily against the doormat.

‘What can I do for you, lads?’

‘There’s something I’ve got to show you, sir,’ Alf says. ‘It’s not very nice.’ He eyes Fan as she crosses the hall to the kitchen door. ‘Not for the ladies.’

Inwardly, Nash is amused at the boy’s cloak-and-dagger manner. But he keeps a straight face as he opens the morning room door. ‘Come in,’ he says. ‘Sit down. Make yourselves comfortable.’

They obey, but it’s clear that neither of them does feel comfortable. They choose to sit at opposite ends of the table, Alf settling doggedly into his seat while the other boy perches precariously, looking as if he’s ready to bolt.

Nash positions himself between them, where he can see both their faces. ‘So,’ he says, ‘what’s it all about?’

‘It’s like this, sir,’ Alf says. ‘Pete got hold of something he shouldn’t have. He says he didn’t think anything about it except the obvious, and then when your Mrs Lester came round asking, he didn’t like to say anything about it.’ Alf casts a bitter look at the other boy, who’s worrying at the skin around his thumbnail, carefully avoiding eye contact.

It’s news to Nash that Mrs Lester has done anything of the sort, and he thinks, fleetingly, that it sounds as if it’s her who should have been knocking at his door with things to say. He makes a mental note to track her down.

‘I see,’ he says, though of course, he doesn’t. Not yet. ‘So what was this something?’

‘He claims he got shy,’ Alf says with disgust. He takes a square of card from his pocket, scoots it across the table to Nash. ‘Bit late if you ask me, but there you go. It’s a dirty picture, see. Horrible stuff.’

The scrap of pasteboard reaches him face down. Expecting something commonplace, Nash turns it over. He’s about to say something, ask what it’s got to do with his enquiries when the picture registers. Steals the words from his mouth and turns his belly sour.

The picture is dog-eared, tatty with recent handling, and it has a sepia, last-century look. Even so, it’s clear enough. Too clear for comfort. It shows a girl on the cusp between child and adult. She lies on a padded couch with one raised end and twisty legs that finish in animal paws. The girl’s semi-naked, barefoot and dressed in rags. Her flesh is streaked with dirt, like a child who’s been living in the gutter. Her body, the budding breasts and half-developed genitalia are not hidden. With a wantonness that belies her

childish looks, she seems deliberately to offer herself to the viewer, one knee raised and a hand parting the grubby rags to display her sex.

Nash shivers, but it's nothing to do with the chill of the morning room and its unlit fire. 'What's all this about?' he says harshly, addressing Pete directly for the first time. 'Where did you get this?' He holds up a hand to stop Alf speaking. He doesn't need an interpreter, he wants the truth.

'It's like Alf says,' the boy whines. 'I found it. Didn't think it'd do any harm.' He gnaws at his thumbnail again. 'Well, I knew it was wrong, but I never thought – I never meant –'

'Don't bother with excuses,' Nash says, banking down his anger. 'Just tell me what you know. What's it got to do with me or Mrs Lester?'

'It's 'cos of the girl,' Pete says. 'I told the lady what I knew about her, voluntary like, but I couldn't say anything about that to her, now could I?'

'Voluntary,' Alf butts in, 'my eye. Took her money, didn't you? Now just stop mucking about and tell Mr Nash straight or you'll get another clip round the ear.'

Pete cringes. 'She was asking about a girl in the Post Office, but the boss, he wouldn't tell her nothing. So I followed her and told her about how she used to come an' pick up her post. Like a nun, I told her, 'cos she was. Butter wouldn't hardly melt. But she said she was the same as the tart up at the Cricketers' an' she gave me half a crown. I never asked,' he adds virtuously. 'She offered, said it was business.'

'All right.' Nash is still trying to work out which she is which from the muddle of Pete's story. 'So, you told Mrs Lester the girl who picked up the mail was dressed like a nun, and Mrs Lester gave you half a crown?'

'That's right,' Pete says. 'An' a couple of ciggies, if you must know.'

'Never mind about that,' Nash says. He glances at the photograph. He doesn't want to have to look at it again, but he must. There's nothing he can see that would definitely identify it or the girl. But he doesn't see how it can be Ruth. The picture's far too old for that. He frowns. 'I still don't understand what you think this has got to do with the girl.'

'I was telling you, wasn't I?' Pete says indignantly. 'I told that Mrs Lester, I'd seen the girl up the Cut a few times. She'd kind of slink along like she was trying to hide an' I got to wondering what the big secret was. So I followed her, tracking, you know, like a Red Indian. See if I could find out where she was going. But I never thought, I swear it, didn't know she was the same as the tart –'

He grinds to a halt, and Nash is aware that the heart of the story is close now, hovering behind the boy's reluctance to continue. It's got to be something discreditable, something Pete thinks will get him into even more trouble.

'Don't worry about that for the moment,' Nash says. 'Tell me what happened when you followed her.'

There's a silence. Alf shifts impatiently in his seat.

With an apprehensive glance at his friend, Pete says 'I found her hidey-hole, didn't I? Went in one evening when she wasn't about. Stuff in there, girl's stuff, didn't take any notice of that. Didn't touch any of it, honest.' He looks straight at Nash, and there is appeal in his glance.

'I see,' Nash says, and this time, he thinks he does. 'So what *did* you touch?'

'There was a ciggy tin,' Pete bursts out. 'One of the big ones, Gold Flake, fifty cigarettes. Thought maybe if there was a lot I could have one or two, no one would notice. It's not like stealing, everyone knows ciggies are fair game. So I opened the tin but it wasn't fags, it was pictures.' He goes red. 'There was a lot, but I only took the one. And it was ages ago, nothing to do with the air-raid. Not 'cos she was dead 'cos I didn't know about that, did I? Not till the lady said.'

'You think they were her photographs?'

'Gotta be,' the boy says. 'It was her den for certain. I saw her going in and out.'

'And the tin?'

'I put it back where I found it.'

'In full view, was it?'

If possible, Pete face grows even redder. He squirms. 'Not exactly. It was in a sort of cupboard. It wasn't locked or anything.'

'A cupboard?' Nash is astonished. He's been imagining a hole in a hedge somewhere. 'What kind of place is this den?'

'It's a sort of hut. Full of junk an' falling down. Nothing in it but spiders mostly.'

'OK,' Nash says. 'And where is it?'

'You go up the Cut, nothing wrong in that, anyone can go up to the bridge. There's a path just there, goes into the woods.'

'Onto Ramillies estate?'

Pete looks sheepish. 'Suppose so.'

'There's an old summerhouse,' Alf breaks in. 'Just about lost in the brambles. It's not far from the big house but the woods haven't been cut back for donkey's years.'

'That's it,' Pete says. 'You been in there?'

Alf shrugs, nonchalant. 'Seen it,' he says. 'All in a night's work. But you gotta watch out for old Mingers.'

Pete shudders.

'Mingers?' Nash asks, trying to get control of the conversation.

'A big bloke with a ginger beard,' Pete says. 'An' a gun.'

'That's the one.' Alf's irrepressible. 'You don't want to go tangling with him.'

Pete draws a quivering breath, lets it all out in a barely coherent flood of words. 'I've bin up there loads of times, never seen him before. But I thought, after what the lady said today, Mrs Lester, I thought I'd – Hadn't even gone in when this bloke shows up an' tells me to bugger off quick or he'd shoot I.'

'That's Mingers,' Alf says again. 'Outdoor man at Ramillies. Proper bastard, he is.'

'Ah.' Nash finally makes sense of Alf's version of the name Menzies. He's seen Ramillies' gamekeeper around town occasionally, though he's had nothing to do with the man personally. But he can imagine why Pete might have been scared. He picks out the salient point from the boy's information. 'You say you've been to the place often, Pete? What were you doing?'

'Nothing,' Pete says sullenly. 'Just looking.'

'At the pictures?'

'Yeah. Gonna make something of it?'

Nash ignores the comment, picks his words carefully. 'So today, because what Mrs Lester told you meant the girl wouldn't be going back, you thought you'd go and see if the pictures were still there?'

'I thought I could have them. She don't want them any more.'

'Were they all like this, Pete? As – rude?'

The boy nods.

'The same girl? Old pictures, like this?'

'Dunno,' he says. 'Wasn't looking at the faces.' A pause, then in a burst of confiding he says 'Wasn't many pictures that were brown, like that. Most of them were all right. New, sort of shiny. I took an old one 'cos I though she wouldn't notice so much.' Another pause. 'Dunno what a girl wants with pictures like that anyway.'

It's a question that's occurred to Nash. But it won't be solved by sitting here. He'll have to try and get hold of them himself. Part of him wants to set out now, find the place before anyone else does. But it would be foolish, at night, with the "outdoor man"

prowling. There'd be no excuse if he were caught. The man Menzies would be justified in shooting anyone out and about on private land so late.

'All right, lads,' he says. 'I want you to promise me, both of you, that you'll leave it with me now.'

Pete nods enthusiastically. 'Sure thing, Mr Nash,' he says. 'I never meant nothing bad. You won't – you won't have to tell anyone, will you? My Dad would skin me alive if he found out.'

'There's no need to tell your father. But I don't want you going back there again.'

'No fear,' Pete says. 'Can I go home now? It's getting late.'

Nash glances at the clock. The boy's got a point. It's almost ten. 'Yes, you'd better cut along. Your parents will be worried.'

Nash goes with them to the door. Pete's chatty now, relaxed. 'Not them. They'll be down the Wheatsheaf. Won't even know so long as I'm home by half past.' He grins at Nash and dashes off into the dark. Slower off the mark, Alf hesitates at the top of the steps.

'Was there something else?' Nash says.

'Not exactly.'

'I notice you didn't make any promises.'

'It's not that.' Alf takes a dog end out of his pocket, lights it with a match swiped against the brickwork beside the door. 'I won't go butting in, I'm not that daft. And I hope you'll go careful yourself, sir. That Mingers is a nasty bit of work.'

'I appreciate your concern. But somehow I don't think that's what's on your mind.'

'Shook me up a bit, that picture. Made me think.'

'You do know something.' Nash makes it a statement, not a question.

The spark of the cigarette glows fiercely for a moment as Alf takes a deep drag on the dog end. 'Like I said before, not exactly. And, well, you know what it's like. It don't do to jump in.'

'We're talking about murder, Alf. If you think you know something, you must tell someone. If you won't talk to me, you should go to the police.'

'Pah.' The boy spits a fragment of tobacco into the dark. 'I'd tell you, sir, if I reckoned there was anything to tell. I made Pete come and see you, didn't I?'

'Yes.' He has to concede that much. He can't force the boy, but he remembers what Jo said about the Alsatian in the scrapyards. 'Look, I'm pretty certain there's

somebody out there who's got a lot to lose if we can bring the girl's death home to them. If you go meddling and get too close, don't imagine they won't be prepared to hurt you too. There's no telling what they might do if they think you're a danger to them.'

'I get it, Mr Nash, sir. I do, really. But, well, careless talk, you know. It's not right to go tittle-tattling like a girl.'

'Alf –' Nash reaches out but the boy's gone, sliding away into the dark like the expert poacher he's reputed to be. 'Damn.'

*

My Uncle Tom Fox and his wife live in a flat above the greengrocery Tom runs. I don't know Sylvie, the Frenchwoman Tom met and married in the first war, and I've never been to the flat. I only know where it is from my mother's address book. Even then, it takes a bit of finding.

The shop's offset to the street, and this evening, with the shop shut up, the unmarked, matte-black painted door in the narrow snicket is not so much unobtrusive as positively hidden away. I'm relieved to see there's a bell, and I press it before I can lose my nerve. There's no answering sound audible from this side of the door, so I wait, unsure whether the thing's functioning or not. Shall I ring again, or just thank my lucky stars no one's home and leave?

I wait for what feels like an age, but no one comes. I've either got to try again or walk away. I'm about to take my cowardly retreat when the door opens cautiously.

Uncle Tom is standing on the doorstep, a newspaper in hand, his glasses pushed up on his forehead. The look on his face is pitched somewhere between *I'm sorry, the shop's closed* and *bugger off*, but when he sees me, the look clears and he smiles such a welcome I have to believe it's genuine.

'Josy,' he says. 'We were hoping you'd call.' He throws the door wide open. 'Come on in.'

'If you're sure I'm not interrupting?'

'Don't be daft.' He pulls me inside, closes the door smartly behind me. 'Up you go, up you go. Sylvie'll be delighted.'

I climb the steep stairway into a space glowing with light. Whatever I might have expected from the gloomy lower entrance, it wasn't this. The upper hallway has five or six spotlights high in the arch of the roof space which shine down on white walls and a black-and-white chequer-tiled floor. In front of me, a scarlet door stands ajar, and as Tom reaches the landing, he calls out.

'It's ok, Syl, no need to hide. It's Josy come to see us.'

He pushes the door open, and ushers me inside.

In daylight, the big windows must let in enough light to rival the hallway outside with its powerful spots. Like the hallway, there's no ceiling, only the timbered roof space, white painted, brilliantly lit. Black blinds are pulled down between white curtains with black geometric designs. The floor is highly polished parquet, the furniture angular, all creamy-white upholstery and black lacquered wood. No knick-knacks, nothing cluttered. Three cushions – scarlet, mustard yellow and peacock blue – provide the only splashes of colour. Everything is pared to the minimum, perfectly ordered, like something from a high fashion magazine of the 1920s.

I'm shocked. Almost shocked. Anything further from the cottage where Tom and I were brought up is hard to imagine.

'Wow.' The gauche exclamation leaves my mouth before I can stop it.

'Like it?' Tom says.

'It's great.'

'Admit it,' he says. 'You didn't expect this above a veg shop.'

I shake my head. 'I certainly didn't.'

'Sit down,' he says. 'Go on, the chairs don't bite. You'll find they're quite comfortable.'

I do as he tells me, find he's right. Despite its sharp angles, the chair I've chosen is pleasant to sit in, even if it does make me feel as if I've been built somehow to the wrong scale.

He laughs at my confusion. 'Get you a drink? Tea, something stronger?'

I can't imagine drinking tea in this amazing room. It's a space designed for cocktails. And like magic, another voice breaks in, echoing my thoughts.

'I can recommend the martinis.'

Even before I turn round, I know it must be Sylvie, because there's still the lilt of her native tongue in her speech. I scramble to my feet, all elbows and angles. The woman who's come into the room is as bright and birdlike as Little Trotty Wagtail in her black skirt and white blouse, her precipitous high heeled shoes pattering on the polished floor.

'Aunt Sylvie,' I say, holding out my hand to her.

'Just Sylvie,' she answers, drawing me into the Frenchwoman's two kiss salute. 'I beg you, don't make me feel any older than I do already.'

I like her straight away. I like her for her sharp, clever eyes and her immaculate coiffure. I like her for the knitting she pulls out from under the peacock blue cushion, coarse, khaki wool for servicemen's socks; and for the way the flash and chatter of her needles punctuates our talk for the rest of the evening.

But most of all I like her for the imagination that conceived of, and the steadiness of purpose which carried out the gesture of sending the local paper to my mother in her long exile, a woman she'd never met, yet for whom she had compassion. And for good or ill, it's the consequences of that long good deed which have brought me home. Without that paper, I'd never have come back.

I can't imagine what Grandfather must make of her, or she of him. That's she's not cowed by him as my other aunts are, is obvious. She'd never have made the effort to be in touch with Nell if she was. And if Grandfather could see her now, could see them both, welcoming me into their home, he'd be apoplectic.

Tom settles us all with martinis. As Sylvie said, they are excellent, but strong. The alcohol goes straight into my blood and despite the spiky decor of this avant garde room, I feel more relaxed than I have in ages.

'You got my message then,' Tom says. 'I'm glad Captain Nash remembered to pass it on. He's a good bloke.'

Before I can reply, Sylvie says, 'You could have come to stay with us, you know. No need to turn to strangers.'

That's two difficult responses I owe them. Bram Nash hasn't said anything to me that might be construed as a message from Tom, so I don't know what I can reply to that. And after all this time, both of them, family as they may be, are strangers to me every bit as much as Dot is. So instead of saying anything, I smile and hold out my glass for a top up from the cocktail shaker Tom offers.

'What we are curious about,' Sylvie says, eagerly transparent, 'is why you have come back after so long. It was some last request from Nell, perhaps?'

'Quite the reverse, really. She'd have hated to know I was coming back. But it is because of her all the same.'

I tell them how it was that Nell let slip my father was still alive and living in Romsey. I gloss over her distress when she found his name in the paper, because it wouldn't be fair to upset Sylvie when she'd only meant well. I tell them that until that moment I'd believed my father had died before I was born. I'd always thought that was why he'd never married my mother.

Tom grins uneasily. 'That was Mum,' he says. 'My mum, I mean. Your gran. Dad was a right bugger about it, but Mum, she never wanted you to think bad of *your* mum. Poor little Nell –' He breaks off. 'We were all too frightened of Dad in them days.'

'But you still are,' Sylvie says quietly. 'He has cast a blight on you all.'

Tom shrugs. 'He doesn't have a lot to do with us any more,' he says. 'Doesn't trouble you and me much.'

'That is because I will not stand for his nonsense. If your brother and sisters –'

It seems like the beginning of a well-worn discussion, and I don't feel too guilty for interrupting them.

'Did you ever – do you know about my father, Tom? Did you ever hear who he was?' Almost five years Nell's senior, and the older of my surviving uncles, there's just a chance he might have been in on the secret.

But he shakes his head. 'Our Nell,' he says, 'was close as an oyster. Didn't matter how much Dad blustered, she wouldn't say.'

'But he knows,' I say in surprise. 'I'm sure he does. The other day –'

'You've seen him?' Tom says. 'How did that work out?'

'About as well as you'd expect. I ran into him up at the hospital. I didn't know he worked there.' Another thing good old Captain Nash hadn't told me.

'And yet you see, she survived.' That's Sylvie, making her point to Tom. 'He's not so fearsome after all.'

'I wouldn't go that far. He was... horrible.' Inadequate as it is, I can't think of a better word.

'You are mad,' Sylvie says. 'All of you. One old man –'

'Leave it, Syl.' Tom pours the last of the martini into her glass.

'I know, *chèri*. It does no good. But it relieves my feelings. And so, Josy, what do you do next? If your grandfather will not help?'

'I don't expect him to.' If I never speak to him again, it'll be too soon. 'I'll just have to do it the hard way. Eliminate the impossible.'

'And what remains, however improbable, must be the truth.' Sylvie caps my quotation with glee. 'Tom will tell you, I adore detective stories. I shall follow with great interest as you look for the clues. And of course it is not just the one mystery you have to solve.'

'Pardon?' For a moment, I can't think what she means.

'The murdered girl,' she says. 'You are searching for information about her, too.'

‘Ye-es.’ I’m not sure how much I’m supposed to say about that.

Tom laughs at my expression. ‘It’s all right, gal. Captain Nash told me all about it. Asked me and Syl to keep our ears open for any gossip going about. Syl here is the one for that. If there’s anything to know, she knows it. Nothing gets past her.’

‘Now who is horrible,’ Sylvie says. ‘I am not a gossip.’

‘But you do get to hear an awful lot.’

His look for her is so affectionate it makes me envious. How tranquil it must be, how comfortable, to be married twenty years, and find yourself still in love.

‘And – have you heard anything?’ I venture. This is not a mood that is as easy to break into as their earlier banter.

She shakes her head. ‘Unfortunately for me, I have heard nothing but speculation. Who is she, they all ask. But no one knows. Or no one will admit it if they do. They all say, that place, that time, she must be a whore. A blow-in, looking for trade.’

If Sylvie is looking for information from me, I can’t oblige. I feel mean, when she has been so generous, but it wouldn’t be right to tell her things I haven’t yet told Nash. Even if he isn’t quite so scrupulous in return.

‘I don’t think so,’ I say. ‘I can’t be explicit, but she wasn’t a stranger. Not altogether, anyway. And I don’t believe she was a prostitute either.’

Sylvie looks intrigued. ‘Ah, you have been the good detective, then. Finding things out. I would love to know more, but I understand you cannot. But I hope you will tell me, when you can.’

It’s no hardship to assure her I will. Though I’ve learned nothing I didn’t already know in my search for my father, the idea that I have an invitation to come back to this room and this company is very appealing. But it’s getting late, and the martinis are catching up with me. If I don’t go now, I shall fall asleep where I sit. Reluctantly, I make my excuses, get up, take my leave. Tom offers to walk me home, but I refuse, despite Sylvie’s urging. I need time on my own to make the transition between their glittering showcase and Dot’s homely back bedroom.

RAMILLIES HALL

COMPRISING A CAPITAL & CONVENIENT GEORGIAN MANSION HOUSE CONSTRUCTED 1829. APPROACHED OVER A METALLED CARRIAGEWAY BORDERED BY A FINE AVENUE OF POPLARS. CLASSICAL GREEK PORTICO ON THE NORTH SIDE.

GROUND FLOOR FRONT: VESTIBULE AND HALL, FINE MARBLE FLOORING, PLASTER-WORK MOULDINGS, ETC., ETC. GRAND OAK STAIRCASE TO UPPER FLOOR.

GARDEN FRONT: DINING ROOM, SALON, WITHDRAWING ROOM. GUN ROOM, LIBRARY WITH EXTENSIVE COLLECTION OF INCUNABULA.

FIRST FLOOR: LONG GALLERY IN THE CLASSICAL STYLE , MUSIC ROOM & PARLOUR. STAIR TO: AIRY APARTMENTS AND BEDROOMS. ATTICS OVER SAME.

DOMESTIC OFFICES: SPACIOUS & WELL FITTED-UP; ALL MODERN & CONVENIENT.

GATE HOUSE, DETACHED STABLES, WALLED GARDEN, LAWNS ETC., ETC.; ABOUNDING WITH CHOICE PLANTS & SHRUBS. PARKLAND & WOODLANDS EXTENDING TO SOME THREE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY ACRES.

*

Since the call of the Abbey bells has been silenced, Sunday mornings seem like any other. Though Nash is not a churchgoer, he misses them. In their absence, it's the very quietness of the streets which marks the day out as different from the rest of the working week.

It's still early when he lets himself out of the side gate. Barely half past seven, but he's impatient to check up on the boys' information. His first impulse is to go alone, a touch of something grudging in the preference that he doesn't want to examine too closely, a petty desire to make a find of his own. Jo's had it all her own way so far with the ticket and the suitcase, even her experiences with Frank. But he knows it wouldn't be a mature way to behave. If he succumbs, it'll be just one more cost to the relationship between his assistant and himself. Not that he's about to let personal issues sway his decisions, but it's clear their working partnership, the trust between them, is already stretched uncomfortably thin.

That foolish night in London's to blame. He should have known better. He discovered long ago that there's no such thing as *no strings* in human relationships. There's always a bill to pay. If it's not cash for services rendered, then it's emotional

entanglement. And he's chosen the road he'd rather travel. He saw too much in France. The trenches taught him all the lessons he ever needed to know about detachment. Maimed more than his face. He can't help it. He can't subscribe to the soft belief that love will conquer all. The truth is, it makes you vulnerable and the ripples of destruction spread out wider. For every son or husband or father killed, how many more deaths in the hearts of families who'd loved them? How much more pain felt and caused? He won't do it. He won't risk that terrible responsibility for someone else's happiness.

Not that he flatters himself that Jo Lester harbours any tenderness for him on account of one shared night. If she had, she'd never have turned up on his doorstep demanding a job. He knows he should have turned her down, knew it then, but somehow he couldn't. A strand, insubstantial as cobweb, had tugged at his sense – at his feeling, god help him – that he owed her something.

And at the back of all his self-justifications, the feeling remains.

He should have known better. He's read it somewhere. Strand for strand, cobweb is stronger than steel.

He's got to make up his mind.

He should go alone. Have the satisfaction of making his own discoveries. Gloat a little, perhaps. He's the boss, after all.

He should find Jo. Tell her what Pete told him. Take her with him to investigate Ruth Taylor's reputed hideout. Weave another gossamer strand?

He puts off the decision. Picks up a paper from the newsagent, drops in at the tearooms for whatever they can offer by way of breakfast. He'll do the crossword if he can, make up his mind after that.

*

I'm in the kitchen, peeling potatoes, when there's a knock at the front door. Dot looks up from her task.

'D'you mind answering that?' she says. She's plucking pigeons, and there are tiny feathers all over the sack she's using as an apron. If she moves, they'll fly around everywhere.

'Of course.' I wipe my hands, make my way into the hall. The caller's bound to be a stranger, because no one who knows Dot uses the front door. The door's bolted top and bottom, and the bolts are stiff. I call out, 'Just coming, hang on,' but there's no response. The bottom bolt yields suddenly, catches my thumb. Cursing under my breath,

I drag the door open. When I see who's standing on the doorstep, you could, as Granny would have said, knock me down with the very least of Dot's pesky pigeon feathers.

Bram Nash. What in the world is he doing here?

He tips his hat to me. I'm instantly hot with guilt, thinking about all the irregularities of what I've done in his name in the last day or so. Then I notice how uncomfortable he looks himself. Perhaps he's not here to bawl me out after all.

'Who is it?' Dot shouts through from the kitchen.

'Mr Nash,' I call back.

'What does he want?'

'I don't – ' I start to answer, and then the absurdity of it hits me. 'Is it me you want?' I ask him at normal volume. 'Or did you come to see Alf or Dot?'

'You,' he says. 'If it's not inconvenient.'

'Will you come in?'

He shakes his head. 'Can you come out? It's about Ruth. There's something I need to show you.'

I glance down at myself. I'd planned to spend the day doing chores, so I'm in my oldest clothes. My slacks and blouse have seen better days, and Romsey's not the sort of place which takes kindly to women in trousers, especially on a Sunday. With nothing on my feet and no makeup on my face, my hair tied up factory-style in a faded old scarf, I'm not fit to be seen.

'I'll have to get changed,' I say, though he can probably see that for himself. 'Will you come in and wait?'

'Show him into the parlour,' Dot shouts, making it clear she's been listening.

'No need to change,' Nash says. 'You'll do as you are. Where we're going, no one's going to see you.'

'Sure?'

'Positive.'

'I'll just put on some shoes, then.'

Back in the kitchen, I apologise to Dot for leaving her in the lurch. I can't tell her where I'm going or how long I'll be, because I don't know. She waves me away. 'Just as long as you don't let him inside this kitchen,' she says.

Shoes on, gas mask case over my shoulder, I let myself out of the front door where Nash is waiting. He holds the gate open for me, and then, as soon as we're in the street, he strides off without a word. He's going so fast, anyone would think he's got all

the hounds of hell following him, rather than one out-of-breath woman. I do my best to keep up, but I'm soon trailing behind, torn between feeling ridiculous and affronted.

'Wait for me.'

'Got to keep up, Josy,' Mike calls back, the only one with any sense of responsibility towards me, and that only because we're family.

The boys are way ahead, tearing along the tow path Indian file. The way's overgrown, and as they rush through, the brambles whip back to catch me on the rebound, slashing at my arms and face. Before long we're in the woods, and though I can hear the boys crashing through the trees, I can't see them any more. Soon, I can't hear them either.

I don't like it. I have nightmares about being lost in these woods. Parts of it are all right, where the little trees let in the light and bluebells grow and bees buzz and butterflies bask in the sunlight. But I don't like it where the trees grow tangled together, dark twisty paths threading between them. There are roots that seem to heave up deliberately to trip you, and the gnarly old branches reach down to scrabble and tap.

My aunts Lizzie and Mags tell stories about the goblins who live in here, how they go hunting to catch little girls so they can fatten them up to eat for tea. Once, they even showed me the leftover bones. I don't really believe in goblins any more. Not now I'm eight. But I'm still scared. The birds don't sing in this part of the wood, and now the boys have disappeared it's so quiet all I can hear is my own jerky breathing.

I stand still, not sure which way to go. I can't remember how to get home. If they've left me here, I'm lost. But I know I mustn't panic. It's my first time out with the gang, and they won't let me stay if I'm a cry baby.

A voice calls from somewhere up ahead. It's Jem, I think, or it might be Billy.

'Finders, seekers. You first, Josy. You're It.'

'Don't want to be It.'

'Hard cheese, it's the rules. Hide your eyes. Count to a hundred, now, no cheating.'

I start the count, gabbling through the numbers as fast as I can. I'm grown up enough to play with the boys, I am, but all I can think about is goblins in their pine cone hats and spiky shoes, with their strong twiggy fingers and sharp pointed teeth.

By the time I've counted to 30, I'm shaking. There's a rustle in the leaves, the crack of a stick. I freeze, lose count. I know brittle fingers are reaching for me. A long moment passes. I dare to take a peep through screwed-up eyelids, but there's nothing.

'Can't hear you counting, Josy.' A faraway voice. I think it's Mike this time, and I feel a bit braver. I don't shut my eyes, but I start counting again, this time in chunks. 51,52,56, 60. Gulping the numbers out, calling them into a silence that isn't quite silence. There are noises all around me now, spiky little footsteps. By the time I get to 99, 100, I can almost feel the teeth.

A crash of sound as I call the last number. Hoots and howls. I turn and turn, this way and that. Blundering like a bug in a jam jar, helpless. No escape from the sting of teasing.

A giggle, running feet. 'Can't catch us.'

A flash of red behind me.

'Bert?'

'Scaredy cat.'

'Jem?' I fall, graze my knees. There's tree sap sticky on my hands, and mud on the hem of my dress.

'This way.' Cap'n Abe.

'Over here.' Mike again.

'Follow me.'

The voices fade as they run, the sound of their feet deadened by the thick litter of brash beneath the trees.

'Where are we going?' I try not to sound peevish, but I've trailed along behind him all the way to the Cut, and I'm still none the wiser. The tow path's deserted, there's no one about. There's no reason for him not to tell me what's going on. 'Can't you slow down a bit?'

'Sorry.' He lets me catch up, but he doesn't answer my question.

I try another one. 'What's this all about?'

'Hang on a minute and I'll tell you.'

I bite back an ill-tempered response. While I was curious and just a little bit irritated before, now I'm really fed up. A minute, I think. That's all I'll give him. Sixty seconds more, and if he hasn't coughed up by then there'll be a mutiny.

We reach the humpbacked bridge where the towpath crosses, and he stops. It's just about the minute later, and I feel oddly deprived of the rebellion I'd planned. Now I'm here, I recognise the place. I don't suppose I'd thought about it since we were kids, but I should have remembered. It was one of our regular places for a pow-wow, out of the way of adults and eavesdroppers. Mischief was safely hatched here, exploits got planned and boasted about and spoils were shared. Now it seems old habits die hard, because straight away Nash hoists himself up on the parapet, the way he always used to, sits with his back to the water. I, a scaredy cat even then about heights, prefer to lean against the rough stone, watch the sluggish flow of the canal beneath in relative safety.

I don't know whether this is the destination he had in mind, but the impatience of his manner getting here has fallen away. He seems more at ease in this secluded spot than I've seen him since I came back to Romsey, and I let myself relax too. Not a good move. As soon as he opens his mouth, he hits me with a sucker punch.

'I had a visit from Alf Smith last night,' he says, looking sideways at me. 'He came with a friend of yours. Pete, he said his name was.'

'Ah.' Whole chasms of information I haven't yet shared with him rise up to accuse me. 'I wouldn't exactly describe him as a friend. I was going to tell you about it on Monday.'

He raises an eyebrow. 'You show me yours –' he starts to say. And then, as I stare at him, incredulous, 'Sorry, not a good idea.'

You show me yours and I'll show you mine was common playground barter back in the day. Jem was the worst, always pestering me to let him see what a girl was made of. I never would, not because of any particular virtue on my part, but because he was a sneak who'd just as likely peek and tell as keep his bargain. In any case, I knew pretty much all there was to know about the difference between the sexes from living in a two bedroom cottage with four teenage uncles and two young aunts. My breath takes a hitch. I'm closer to Nash than I've been at any time since that night in the Blitz and the unintended image – if it was unintended – that his words conjure up confuses me all over again. What *is* it he wants?

I ask the same question I've asked before. Perhaps this time I'll get an answer. 'What's this about?'

'Pete gave you some information about the girl.'

'Yes.' As quickly as I can, I put him in the picture. I sketch out what Pete said, how I went to visit Sister Gervase and how she'd identified the body. I can tell he's

shocked, though whether it's by the sheer volume of what I've learned, or the fact I didn't come to tell him about it at once, I don't know. Heroically, he doesn't say anything, doesn't interrupt me at all. But it still seems like a good idea to distract him from whatever reproaches he might have in store, so I finish up by saying 'So what did Pete tell you? I was pretty sure he was hiding something from me.'

'Yes.' Nash reaches into his inside jacket pocket, takes out a square of card. 'He was.' He hands it to me. 'It was this. He said he didn't want to shock you.'

What I feel when I see what he's given me goes beyond shock. It's like a blow to the solar plexus, and I barely have time to turn away before I'm vomiting. All I can do is thrust the picture back at Nash and wait for the spasm to pass.

'God, Jo, I'm sorry,' he says. 'I should have warned you.'

Warned me about what? I think. Because I'm pretty sure he can't know the picture's significance.

But the minute I saw it, I knew.

It's my mother.

It wasn't her face I recognised, how could it be? No one's ever shown me a photograph of her as a girl. But after her death, I was the one who laid her out. And the patch on the girl's inner thigh that might almost be dirt, a shape like a dog's head, is unmistakably the same as the birthmark on my mother's leg.

My thoughts go round and round. Dot's voice saying *she had a bit of a reputation... flirting... having it off with all sorts.*

What am I going to do?

I can't tell Nash.

I'm shaking as I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

'Here.' He hands me that gentleman's standby, a clean white handkerchief.

'Thanks.' Though I feel better when I've mopped up, the vile taste in my mouth remains. 'Sorry to make a fool of myself.'

'Not at all.'

I look at his handkerchief, cringe inwardly. 'I'll wash it before I give it back,' I say, folding the soiled part over before stuffing into my pocket.

'Just as you like.'

Something inside me flares up at the polite meaninglessness of the exchange. 'Did you drag me all the way out here just to show me this?' I say, and I can hear the accusation in my tone. It's not his fault, but somebody's got to take the flak.

'Of course not. I brought you here because of where Pete got the picture. He didn't like to tell you yesterday, but he knew where Ruth was going when she came up here. He tracked her to her hideout one day. He found this there. He told me there was a tinfu of them. I thought we'd better take a look.'

'More like this?' I'm horrified.

'He said they were similar.'

What would Ruth be doing with pictures like this? How could she possibly have come by this humiliating image of my mother? I think about the photographs we found in her case. Frank talking about their sort of uncle, "Snappy" Legge. Was he the one who'd taken them?

'Can I see it again?' I say.

He hands it over. It's not a standard size, and there's no marking on the back to suggest that it's been produced commercially. No photographer's stamp, nothing so obvious or so helpful. I steel myself to look closely at the picture. Even with her face averted, I can see what Dot meant. Nell had been a lovely looking girl.

Had she exploited it? Revelled in the wanton posing? Another numbing thought hits me. Whoever took this picture might be my father. I look again, but I can't see that there's any kind of flirtation in her pose. Perhaps I'm fooling myself, but it looks more like resignation.

I don't want to see any more like this, but I have to know. If there are more, I have to know the worst. Bile rises in my throat and I spit to one side. I slide the photograph into my pocket, hope Nash won't think to ask for it back. 'We'd better get on.' My voice is hoarse with vomiting. With tears I won't shed. Can't, in front of him.

*

'I thought I'd better report it to someone, sir. Didn't like to worry the master with it, not when he's been so poorly.'

'Quite right. What's the problem?'

'I caught a lad up in the woods late yesterday afternoon.'

'Poaching? Surely that's your business? No need to come running to me about it.'

'No more I would, sir, in the general run of things. It was just... well, it wasn't the right time of day for poaching. And he didn't have anything in his pockets. No snares or that. Little devil had something else in mind, I reckon.'

‘Well? Out with it, man, if you think you know. I’ve got no time to waste in guessing games.’

‘He was up near the old summerhouse. I had a peep inside after he’d run off. By the look of it, someone’s been using it regular like.’

‘Using it? Not bloody gyppos, I hope? We can do without their sort.’

‘It’s not gypsies, sir, I’ll take my oath on that. Kids, I should think, mebbe just the lad. I gave him a good fright, don’t think he’ll be coming back.’

‘I should hope not. Perhaps I’d better see for myself.’

‘The quickest way is across the park, but the grass is awful long. Spoil the polish on those shoes, sir.’

‘Never mind about that. Get on with it, man. I haven’t got all day.’

*

It’s many years since there were ladies at Ramillies who might take a fancy to visit the once-elegant little summerhouse in its artful woodland setting. The days of sketchbooks and chatter, of lapdogs and tiny cakes and silver tea services died with the old Queen. After them, only the young men came with their shotguns and hipflasks, stopping by on cold October mornings, taking a break between drives to count their epic bags of game. Then they too were gone, vanishing into the mud of Flanders.

These days, the old summerhouse is half lost in brambles. The raised dais it rests on, that once concealed the mechanism which let it to turn to follow the sun, has collapsed, and the only movement the place sees now is as it crumbles and falls, piece by piece into the ground. In its heyday it was painted pale green, with fancy white gingerbread mouldings. These days it blends with the woods that surround it, the mouldings grey with mildew, the walls invaded by lichen and fungi. Almost all the windows have lost their glass, but the lack has been made up by generations of spiders’ webs which veil the openings.

For so many years no one came. A wanderer might pass by now and then: a badger, looking for hedgehogs. A hedgehog, looking for slugs, somewhere safe to hibernate. And there were owls by night, a persistent blackbird by day.

[and me don’t forget me i came here]

*

The two men arrive first.

‘This? What would anyone want with this old wreck of a place? It should have been torn down years ago.’

'I agree with you, sir, it's danger to life and limb, but the master won't hear of it. Go careful, now, that floor's rotten. It might give way any minute.'

'Nonsense. You'd better stay outside, though. It might not take your weight. Now, let's see. What's been going on here? You're right. Kids. Not mucky enough for gyppos. What's this? Blast, too dark in here. Have to come out.'

'Find something, sir? Cigarettes?'

'It's an old tin. Good God. What's this?'

'Can I see, sir? Oh – dirty pictures, is it? That's lads for you.'

'Get out of the way, man. Didn't ask you to poke your nose in. Have you got a match?'

'Yes, sir. You don't think we should – ?'

'Destroy them, it's the only course. If this should come to my uncle's ears – '

'He wouldn't like it, sir.'

'Good God, man, it would kill him. There. That's got – ow, damn, that's my fingers. Stamp it out now, make sure there's nothing left.'

*

'Do you really think there'll be anything to find?' We're skirting the darker parts of the wood, and I'm glad. I don't know where the boundaries of Ramillies land run, but it's obvious that it's a very long time since anyone's done anything to maintain the woodland. There are fallen branches underfoot and scrubby undergrowth everywhere, all hazards to quiet progress.

'I suppose so, if Pete's telling the truth. He said he'd been back to look at the other pictures, but he only ever took the one. And then yesterday, after you'd spoken to him and he knew the girl wouldn't be coming back, he thought he'd take a chance to get hold of the rest. He didn't make it, because he was spotted going through the woods. A man called Menzies, the gamekeeper, chased him off. Threatened him with a gun.'

'That's a bit heavy-headed, surely?'

'Not if he thought he was poaching. But Alf did say he was a nasty type.'

'I expect Alf would know.'

'There have been rumours to that effect.' It sounds as if he's smiling.

'He calls it foraging. For personal use only, Dot won't stand for black market. But it's why she didn't want you to see inside the kitchen. It was only pigeons, today, but it could just as easily have been pheasants or a trout. I haven't eaten so well since the beginning of the war.'

‘I’ll have to make an excuse to come round at supper time. Fan’s an excellent housekeeper, but her cooking’s awful. Even without the excuse of rationing. Now.’ He stops short, waits till I come level with him. ‘We need to go quiet from here on. Just in case Mr Menzies is out with his gun this bright Sunday morning. Follow me, and try and remember what I taught you.’

‘What – ?’ But he’s away, a middle aged man in an overcoat and hat who ought to be out of place in the wild wood. Yet somehow, the ease of his silent progress through the trees reminds me irresistibly of the boy who was leader of the gang. Time was, he’d have made a pretty good poacher himself.

We’re right on the edge of the wood, with glimpses of parkland showing to the left. It’s harder to stay under cover, but if Pete hasn’t sent us on a wild goose chase, we should be getting close. A few paces ahead of me, Nash suddenly gestures *stop*, ducks behind the trunk of an ancient oak. I catch a glimpse of movement through the trees. There are voices ahead, and the faint whiff of smoke carries on the breeze towards us. Mindful of the gamekeeper’s gun, I crouch quick and painful into a tall clump of nettles, wishing I’d chosen a more substantial hiding place. My heart is beating so loud, I’m afraid someone will hear it.

‘Not a word to my uncle, now.’ A posh, public school voice. It’s not distinctive enough for me to identify it.

‘Sir.’

They must be moving away, because I only catch part of the next sentence.

‘ – rely on you. Keep a good eye – ’

Unconscious of our presence, the men make quite a lot of noise as they move off. But even after the sound of their passage has died away, neither Nash nor I dare move. At last, so cramped I have to get up or topple helplessly into the nettles, I raise myself from my uncomfortable squatting position and sidle towards Nash.

‘Who were they?’ I whisper cautiously.

‘Gamekeeper and Waverley.’

‘Dr Waverley? What’s he doing here?’

‘Tell you later,’ he says. ‘Take too long to explain now.’

‘Do you think they’d been in the summerhouse?’

‘Where else? It’s only just there.’

Then I see that a dense tangle of brambles barely ten yards ahead has a wooden structure at its heart. 'Oh.' If that's where they were, we'd had a closer encounter than I realised.

'Catching Pete yesterday must have alerted Menzies,' Nash says. 'Wait here a minute.' He moves cautiously out of cover. I lose sight of him as he circles behind the structure. After a moment or two I hear him call. A low voice, but not a whisper. 'Jo.'

In front of the summerhouse, the grass is lank, men's footsteps outlined in dew. Beside them, Nash is stooping over something. He pushes at it with a cautious finger, turns it over so I can see it's the bright yellow lid of a Gold Flake cigarette tin.

'Too late,' he says. Next to the lid there's a black greasy mark where someone has ground his foot into the grass, stamped out the ashes of something made of paper. One tiny unburned scrap confirms it.

'The photographs.'

'Afraid so,' Nash says, getting to his feet. 'Now we'll never know.'

I don't have anything to say to that. Part of me – not the part that is supposed to be solving this mystery about Ruth – is glad.

I step up into the summerhouse. The floorboards creak, and in places they've collapsed completely. It's dim inside, light blocked by the overgrowth of brambles and general filth, and I have to feel my way with care. It's clear the place has been used, though perhaps not recently. There's a dusty ginger beer bottle in one corner, where a heaping pile of dry bracken suggests someone has made a bed. On the nearest windowsill, there's an old fish paste jar holding a few withered stems of what might once have been wild flowers. Daisies, at a guess. But there's nothing that explicitly suggests Ruth was here. I sweep away a festoon of cobwebs, peer through the opening of what was once a window. The first shock is how close across the parkland Ramillies Hall is. The second, that I'm in view of two men standing by the portiere. I freeze.

'What is it?' Nash says, close to my ear.

'Over there. Surely they must have seen us.'

'No,' he murmurs. 'We're in the shadows here. Should be all right if we keep still.'

It's like watching a spider in the corner of a room. Much as I might want to, I can't tear my eyes away. One of the men is wearing a dark suit, and I presume it must be Waverley. I don't know him well enough to be sure. The other, the gamekeeper if Nash is right, is a big man, taller and bulkier than Waverley. He's carrying a shotgun broken over

his arm. Even at this distance, he stands out, one of a kind. No hiding away for him. The russet coloured jacket he's wearing is almost a perfect match for his wild red hair and beard.

Waverley takes something from an inside pocket. Hands it to the big man who tugs his forelock in respect, a gesture I haven't seen anyone perform since I was a child. Waverley must have given him a stupendous tip.

The doctor disappears into the Hall, but the red man stands staring across the park for a long moment, apparently looking straight at the summerhouse. It's all I can do not to bolt, convinced he can see me whatever Nash might think. But I hold my nerve and my place until he, too, moves away.

'We'd better get on,' Nash says. 'Before he decides to take a closer look.'

I don't think either of us is exactly soundless, going back through the woods, but no one follows. Even so, I'm relieved when we reach the bridge safely.

'Now what?' I say, as we pause to catch our breath.

'Back to square one, I suppose. Though perhaps it's not as bad as that. Unpleasant as they might have been, I'm not sure what the pictures could have told us.'

I would have discovered how many more there might have been of Nell, I think. But it's not something I'm going to share with him. The morning's been full enough of shocks already. 'I don't understand why Ruth would have had something like that in her possession. What was she doing with them, Bram?'

[thought they might be useful get me a couple of quid]

He blinks, and I wonder if I've surprised him by using his name. But he's already called me Jo, and I'm not going to say *Mr Nash* out here.

'I don't know,' he says. 'It wants thinking about.'

[dirty old devil didn't know i got them]

'And Waverley? You said you'd tell me what he was doing out here.'

'Old Mr Oxley's rumoured to be very ill. Despite everything, Waverley's a good doctor.' He pauses, as if he's weighing something up. Wondering whether to pass information on. If he chooses not, I can hardly complain. 'And of course, he's family. The old man's nephew and heir to Ramillies, by all accounts.'

Every unlawful entry onto another's property is trespass, even if no harm is done to the property.
(*English Tort Law*)

SUPERINTENDENT BELL: So we come to serious matters, sir. You began to be involved in illegality yourself, regarding your search for Ruth Taylor's... history, shall we call it?

NASH: I'm not aware of any illegality in my actions, Superintendent.

SB: Come now, sir. What about the report that on Sunday morning, you and Mrs Lester knowingly entered onto Ramillies land without authority?

N: Oh, that's feeble. Even if I were to admit it, trespass is a civil offence, not a matter for the criminal law.

SB: *Do* you admit it, sir?

N: What do you take me for? I'm not a fool.

SB: Yet Menzies is sure it was you he saw.

N: I don't see where you're going with this, Superintendent. Unless you have something concrete to charge myself or Mrs Lester with, I suggest this is simple harassment.

SB: Interesting you should use that word, Mr Nash. All I'm trying to do is get at the truth. To establish whether what happened was the result of a campaign of harassment carried out by Mrs Lester upon various individuals. You must remember, there was an official complaint made to the police.

N: Oh, I don't forget it. But subsequent events have surely proved how little that complaint was worth. It was entirely malicious, intended to intimidate Mrs Lester, and prevent her carrying out her searches.

SB: With cause, sir. Her conduct in the matter had dreadful consequences. You must concede that much, at least.

N: The consequences, as you call them, followed the murders of Ruth Taylor and her baby. Mrs Lester was not responsible in any way for those.

SB: You approved her actions?

N: That's not what I said.

SB: Ah, so you didn't approve?

N: No comment.

SB: Really, sir, you're not helping anyone by being obstructive.

N: No comment.

*

After the potatoes, there are carrots to peel, a whole heap of them. And one prized, if rather wizened, parsnip out of the sand clamp in the back yard to add sweetness to the pie. The clan who eat at Dot's take a lot of feeding.

It's been a relief to get back to domesticity after the morning's tensions. But my brain's as busy as my hands. I can't forget any of what I've seen. There's one question above all the rest that I need an answer for. And Dot's the one who can answer it, if she will.

Interrogation in the course of household tasks worked last night. It's worth another try. While it's pastry this time rather than wool, Dot's equally tied, carefully spooning dripping into a bowl. Hands floury, she can't walk away.

'One thing you didn't tell me last night,' I say, 'is where you and Nell worked.'

'Didn't I?'

'No. So where was it?'

'Does it matter, deary?'

'The more you avoid telling me, the more I think it does.'

'Oh, well, if you're going to be like that. It was Ramillies Hall. Had a big staff in those days, everything beautifully kept. Sad to see it like it is now, everything going to rack and ruin. Old Mr Oxley rattles around in that great place, with only a manservant indoors and that chap Menzies to take care of the estate.'

That chap Menzies. There's the rub. With a name like that, perhaps it's no surprise he has the red hair of the Celts. His is not a polite, almost-subdued auburn, but flaming red, unmissably vulgar. Just like mine.

The question is, did I get it from him? He wasn't on my list of possibles from the paper, though old Mr Oxley was. *'As usual, our generous benefactor, Mr Paul Oxley, kindly donated the prizes for the Candlemas Fatstock market.'*

'I don't remember a Menzies,' I say. 'Has he been at Ramillies Hall a long time?'

'Oh, donkey's years,' Dot says. 'If I remember rightly, he came just after the war. I think they said he'd known the master somewhere abroad. Mind, he doesn't have a lot to do with the town. Keeps himself *to* himself, as the saying goes.'

Not my father then, if she *does* remember rightly. But I have to be sure.

After lunch, I go back to Ramillies openly. I've changed into my tidy clothes, put up my hair. Put on lipstick, a hat. Smartened myself up enough for Sunday visiting. No sneaking through the woods for me this time, but straight up to the main gates. Except when I get there, I discover there aren't any gates any more. The entrance stands gaping wide, unguarded. I suppose the ornate ironwork was sacrificed for the war effort. The gatehouse is boarded up, and by the look of it, has been much longer than current hostilities would account for. I prop the bicycle I borrowed from Dot against the wall, set off up the driveway. Another change. The poplars are gone and now I see it clearly, the park, only glimpsed this morning, shows its true state; no longer a vista of perfectly manicured lawns, but pastureland, rough grazing for cattle and sheep.

Most of the windows of Ramillies Hall are blank, the blinds pulled down, lending the place an air of abandonment. It's like Dot said, no one seems to care for it any more. It's surprising it hasn't been requisitioned for the war. Someone's pulled some strings, perhaps. Saved it from War Office bureaucracy.

In the old days, I'd have gone round the back to the servants' entrance. But despite my nerves – perhaps even because of them – this afternoon I march straight up to the front door, grand portico, greek pillars and all. It's starting to rain as I ring the bell. At least the roof keeps me dry while I wait. I stare across the park. There are more than a few clumps of brambles in the woodseaves, and I'm not sure, if I didn't know where to look, that I'd be able to identify the place where the summerhouse stands. But I do, now, and I can. And I'm shaken to discover it wouldn't have been all that difficult for Menzies, who must be much more familiar with the landscape than me, to have seen us this morning.

But perhaps we were lucky. He didn't follow us, or try to intercept us. I'm trying to puzzle it out when the door opens. I assume it's Oxley's manservant, but I'm surprised how decrepit he seems. Though he's pin neat in a black suit, he's old, gaunt of feature. Sparse white hair is brushed severely back from his forehead, and he's breathing hard, as if he's had to come a long way.

'I've come to see Mr Oxley.'

I'm expecting him to fob me off, tell me the master isn't available, but he pulls the door wider, steps to one side. He doesn't even ask my name.

'Better... come in.'

I step inside. Follow as he shuffles across the hallway and into a room at the back of the house. The blinds are firmly shut here too, and a table lamp illuminates a patch of

floor where there's a wing chair, and a side table piled with books. He lowers himself into the chair. He's not a servant then. This must be the master himself. He looks at me, head cocked, fingers steeped precisely together. Fails to invite me to sit down too.

'I'm... Oxley,' he says. His breathing's bad and his words come out in little jabs. 'What... can I do... for you?'

'My name's Josephine Lester,' I say. I could beat around the bush, but I don't. There's no point. 'Born Fox, here in Romsey. My mother wasn't married, so I'm a bastard. I've come looking for my father. He's one too, but a different kind.'

'And... this concerns me... how?'

My attempt to shock him doesn't seem to have worked. 'I came to ask if it was you.'

'What?' he croaks. It's not clear whether it's his breath or his manners which have failed him.

'She was working here, in this house, when she got pregnant.'

A frown as he looks me up and down. 'Her name?'

'My mother was Ellen. Nell. Nell Fox.'

'Doesn't... ring a bell.'

'She was a scullery maid.'

He makes a face. Fastidious disapproval. 'Never... had anything... to do with... that sort.'

The supercilious reply is everything I hate most about Romsey. Never mind he's half dead, he's still snooty enough to look down his nose at Nell.

'Oh, pardon me. I didn't realise that *droit de seigneur* didn't extend to scullery maids. I suppose even the pretty ones are just too lowly to fuck.'

He blinks. This time, I have shaken his condescending calm.

'Out... *rageous*.' He struggles a moment. 'I insist... you leave.'

Instead, I go closer. Lean in. 'Insist all you like. I'm not leaving till I know the truth.'

He shrinks back in his chair, panting, putting what distance he can between us. Even so, I don't think it's because he's afraid of me. It's more as if he can't bear my common flesh to be so close.

'Godsake... sit down. Talk... this through.'

He looks so bad, so helpless, that despite everything, I can't help feeling sorry for him. I step back, my hands shaking. I push them into my pockets, feel a square of

cardboard. The photograph. The thought of it stiffens my spine, nips compassion in the bud.

‘I’d just as soon stand, thank you.’

With the distance I’ve put between us, he relaxes a little in his chair. Not too much, I think. Not too far. I’m not finished yet.

After a pause, he says, ‘Forgive me but... when... were you born? Some... time ago?’

I laugh, I can’t help it. With all that’s been said, he thinks I might be insulted if he asks how old I am? ‘I was born in July 1901. My mother was barely fifteen. She’d been working here for a year when she got pregnant.’

‘Ah.’ He looks strangely relieved. ‘In that case... if she told you... I... might be your father... she, ah... she was... spinning... a yarn.’

I’m not letting him off the hook as easily as that. He doesn’t need to know Nell never told me anything at all about my father.

‘Are you calling her a liar?’

‘No, but... impossible, you see. I was... away. Three years... Switzerland. TB, ’99 to ’02.’

Speechless, I stare at him.

‘Have you... considered... the other...servants? There were... quite a number... in those days. Young... men, you know.’

‘Menzies?’ I pull off my hat so he can see the colour of my hair.

He seems somehow to shrink even more than when I was looming over him. I know red hair is not to everyone’s taste, but it seems like an overreaction. His voice, when it comes, is full of regret, though I’ve no idea why. ‘No. Not him... He... didn’t come here... till after the war. 1920.’

‘If it wasn’t him,’ I say, ‘and it wasn’t you, it was someone here or hereabouts. Someone who frightened my mother so much she didn’t dare to come back to Romsey however much she might have wanted to. It was someone who took disgusting photographs of her.’ I don’t know that that’s the truth, of course. But it’s the only card I have left to play.

I pull the photograph out of my pocket, hold it in front of him. He reaches out a trembling hand, but I draw it back so he can’t take it away from me. After one long look he slumps, grey in the face, exhausted. He’s not sick, as I was, but the shock on his face is plain enough. I slide the picture away, out of sight, safely back in my pocket.

‘God,’ he mutters. ‘God... god...’ Matters of flesh and blood seem more than he can bear to think about.

‘I don’t know if you’ve ever come across my grandfather,’ I say, ‘but he’s a hard man. Yet it isn’t my father he blames for my birth. And he knows who it was, he as good as told me so himself. I don’t believe it was a servant. He’d have thrashed someone of our class within an inch of his life, made him marry my mother afterwards. It had to be someone grandfather respected. That’s why I thought of you.’

I’ve been over and over it in my mind, and I’m sure my logic holds. Though now I’m here, confronting the fabled Oxley of Ramillies Hall, I can’t believe my grandfather would ever have felt respect for this timid little man, despite his family name.

‘I understand,’ he says. ‘But I... can’t help you.’ He clears his throat. ‘Please, sit down.’

I perch on the edge of the chair opposite, which stands half in gloom. But if I lean forward I can stay within the circle of lamplight. I don’t feel angry with him any more. He’s too old, too tired, too sick. He’s got the arrogance of his caste, but even if I didn’t believe what he says about being away, I can’t imagine him seducing anyone. I can’t imagine him having enough red blood in him for that, or for frightening Nell enough to keep her in exile for life.

But here I am, so there has to have been someone.

‘A minute,’ he gasps.

I wait. There’s a long pause. He sits with his eyes shut. His breathing is noisy, so I know he’s still alive, but so erratic I begin to wonder if something awful has happened to him. I’m trying to decide what to do, wondering if he’s slipped into unconsciousness or simply fallen asleep when he speaks again.

‘Ah?’

‘What is it?’

‘If you would... be so kind? Fetch me... a little nip. On the... sideboard.’

Glad to get up again, I make my way through the shadows to where a vast piece of furniture stands, find a half empty decanter and a sticky glass. It should be washed, but I don’t like to waste time looking for a place to do it. In any case, I don’t think he’s in any state to notice. That grey look has got worse. I pour a good three fingers of spirit into the glass, carry it over. ‘Here you are.’

He takes the glass in both hands, brings the drink shakily to his mouth.

‘Are you alone here?’ I say. ‘Surely you need somebody with you?’

'Baxter's... half day... Since the girl left... someone... looks in.' He hands me the glass, goes very still.

'Are you all right?' I can't help feeling guilty about the way I've tackled him.

'Go... please. Find your own... way out. Get in touch... a day or two. Might have... something to tell you.'

I stand for a minute, irresolute. If he's thought of something, of someone, I want him to tell me. But I've gone too far down the road of pity to force him. A little snore of breath, and I see he's asleep. I turn, make for the door. No choice but to do what he says, come back another day.

*

The killer watches as she leaves. Josephine Fox. *Again*. What's she doin' here? Too close for comfort.

Inside, the old man is asleep in his chair. Take it quietly, don't want to wake him. But he's well away, don't even stir.

The brandy glass at his elbow shows why he's sleepin' so deep. These days, he takes the stuff like medicine, any time he's in pain or upset.

Such a miserable existence.

What can Fox have done to upset him?

His breathin's as bad as ever. Such a little thread of air to keep a man alive.

The idea comes stealthily, but it's not new. It's been waiting a long time, ready for opportunity and circumstance to come together.

Who would ever know?

Who'd guess?

So sick, already. So near death. It'd be a mercy if he never woke up.

And if anyone should raise suspicion – ? That bastard Nash?

There's the beauty of it. If anyone's suspected, the Fox bitch can take the blame. Whether she knows it or not, she's played herself into the game.

Into our hands.

Knowledge is a wonderful thing. So easy. Too easy. Who could resist?

Hateful as it may be to touch the elderly flesh, all it needs is a hand. Palm across dry lips, occluding. Thumb pinching the bony nose closed. Sealing off the little thread.

A moment's struggle, nothing more. No real fight for life. It's a kindness, he'll be glad to give up.

Be patient. Make sure. Hold on long enough. Then –

– release. Step away.

The feelin' of power is extraordinary.

The rush that only this act can engender.

Even better than last time.

Savour it.

Last time was half an accident, entirely a nuisance.

This time – this time, it's all to the good.

*

Bram Nash is not happy. It hasn't been a good day. In fact, on the whole, it's been a lousy day. What's the phrase the Yanks use? SNAFU. Situation normal, all fucked up. And it is. Or he has.

His timing's been off all day. He's annoyed. Frustrated. If he hadn't held off from exploring the old summerhouse, if he'd gone without delay, he might know a lot more now than he does. SNAFU.

He'll have to do the best he can with what he has. The photograph. Sickening as it is, he'll have to study it. Get what information he can from it. He searches his pockets, comes up empty. What's he done with it? Then he remembers. Jo asked to look at it again, never gave it back.

He curses. Not for the first time. Not even for the first time today.

Her reaction was so extreme. The picture is vile, it's true, but she's not exactly an innocent abroad. He'd never have guessed it would shock her so much.

He thinks about it. The sepia tint suggests it must be old. Twenty years, perhaps even more. Thirty. It can't be Ruth.

But why else would she have had it?

Perhaps he's missing the obvious. Perhaps it's not old, has just been printed like that to meet some warped artistic notion. All bets would be off then.

Deep in his thoughts, there's a worm of disquiet. Reluctant, he brings it out into the light.

Jo's reaction. It was so immediate, so strong.

Is he missing the obvious?

Could it be, could it possibly be Jo herself? Thirty years ago?

It's enough to make anyone sick.

*

The Chronicle, London, May 1816.

It has come to the attention of your correspondant that the most peculiar case has been brought before the King's Bench for settlement.

The will of one Sir M— O— , lately deceased, was challenged by his older son, Mr M— O— . The deceased, having to mind to family tradition (and by rumour, other considerations not to be repeated in a public forum) hath entailed his estate, a sizeable parcel of land and ancient dwelling place in the county of Southamptonshire, to the heirs and assigns of his body, legitimate and illegitimate, male and female, by precedent of eldest before youngest, male before female, legitimate before illegitimate providing the said heir should be of good reputation and have the red hair which is considered 'the veritable mark of the O-'s'.

Mr M— O— , being a dark-haired man, petitioned that his father's will was mischievous and made with malice aforethought. Evidence given sub rosa, however, convinced their Lordships of the validity of Sir M— O— 's intention.

Captain P— O— , the plaintiff's younger brother, therefore inherits and the will is proved howsomever.

Captain P— O— (who perfectly fulfils the conditions of his father's will) was gracious enough to grant your correspondant an interview after the hearing. A man with an outstanding record of service in His Majesty's Navy during the late wars with France, he regrets his long absence from So'tonshire and proposes to rectify his former omission by settling in the property to which he has been confirmed heir. He shall put all he has into the restoration of his father's estate, the same to include the construction of a new house to replace that which was partly destroyed by fire around the time of his father's sad demise.

Mr M— O— , it is believed, will shortly be departing for the Cape Colony.

SUPERINTENDENT BELL: Between you and me, sir, this woman's turned out to be a bit of a liability one way and another. Don't you think you'd be better to get rid of her?

NASH: Between ourselves, Superintendent, don't you think there's been rather too much getting rid of inconvenient young women in this town already?

SB: You will have your joke, sir.

N: I wasn't joking.

S B: That's as maybe. But you must see that Mrs Lester has proved herself a dangerous sort of employee. You have every reason to dismiss her. People will expect it.

N: Ah, people. Which sort of people do you mean, Superintendent? The ones with old school ties and strange handshakes who have quiet words in the right ears?

S B: I'm sure there's no need for that, sir. We're doing our best. In times like this, it's no good to upset folk. When they're fighting Hitler, they don't want to think there's mischief going on at home. It's bad for morale.

N: I can't think my dismissing Mrs Lester would have an effect on anyone's morale but hers or mine.

SB: You must be aware it's highly irregular for a woman to be employed as coroner's officer. It's a man's job. A police officer's job.

N: Then you should have found me a replacement when Dacre joined up. You had no one to spare, or so you told me. So I had to deal with it as I saw fit.

S B: Yes, well, in the light of circumstances perhaps we might review that decision.

N: You mean, if I dismiss Mrs Lester?

S B: I didn't say that, sir.

N: You didn't have to. But the answer's no, just the same. Let's be clear about it, I don't employ Mrs Lester as coroner's officer. She's my personal assistant. While I'll admit that her methods have been rather unorthodox at times, I would remind you she's got results your own officers seemed unable or unwilling to achieve.

SB: Ah, yes, sir. Unorthodox methods. You mean, like breaking into a mortuary?

*

Early on Monday morning, I know what I must do. I've tried the ugly sisters, now it's time for a macabre Cinderella. It has to be early, before I go into the office and see Nash. If I ask him, he won't let me. But I have to know. Unorthodox as it may be, I have to establish the chain of evidence.

Like it or not, the rhythm of my life has become a thing of shadows. I feel as if I'm living like a thief or a spy, creeping around in the half light, never quite legitimate. Even as I'm circling the hospital, looking for a way in that won't take me past the porters' lodge, the thought makes me grin. Nothing, really, has ever been legitimate about me. I've always been put – or put myself – on the fringes. A bastard. The only girl in Abe's gang. Outcast from my home town, against my will in the first place and then by choice. The affair with Richard. I was so much more successful as his mistress than I ever was as his wife. Long before he set sail for Dunkirk it was over, and we both knew it. I should have expected that what he'd done *with* me to his first wife, he'd soon do *to* me, with someone else. A lot of someones, as it turned out. And while he seemed happy enough to take his distractions in drinking and girls, I could only withdraw, reject everything we'd ever shared. And whether he's dead – though I don't hate him enough to want that – or alive, and a prisoner somewhere, my mind's made up. Even if he comes home, we'll never be a couple again.

Enough. Concentrate.

I come to a place where a snicket of path leads round to the rear of the wards. A nurse scurries out of a door, wrestling with a large bag of what looks like laundry. She disappears round a corner, and I follow cautiously. It's pretty much the right direction for the mortuary. As I turn the corner myself, I can see an open sided store where a heap of linen bags is stacked. The nurse heaves the one she's carrying on top of the others. If she comes back this way, she'll see me. I'm trying to think of an excuse for being there when a bell rings somewhere in the front part of the hospital and she hurries off towards the sound without looking back.

Time for breakfast? I can only hope so. It'll keep them all busy. Beyond the linen store I can see the jut of the mortuary porch. When grandfather sent me to meet Nash, the door was unlocked, and Billy Stewart was already on duty, but I've no idea what time he comes to work.

I can't hang around. Get on with it, or get out.

I cross to the black door. Lift the latch. The door's hard to open, but it isn't secured. It yields, and a waft of cold air rushes out to meet me. It's dim inside, the only

illumination filtering through a high window in the far wall, but I can't risk switching on the light. I stand still, listening, but there's nothing moving inside, nothing to suggest there's any presence here but my own. After that first draught of air, it's all as still as... well, a grave. What else?

The insidious smell I noticed before makes me feel queasy. Everywhere's gleaming clean, but there's a disquieting something that won't be denied, a kind of chemical bleed-through that's worse than outright decay.

I know where to find the room where the bodies are stored, which compartment Billy Stewart rolled Ruth's body into the last time I was here. Just so long as they haven't moved her.

[i'm here still here]

I open the drawer, pull out the stretcher. It is Ruth, there's the tag on her toe. I don't have to see her face, I don't have to do anything except try the shoe.

I fumble it out of my bag.

[my shoes my pretty red shoes]

I really don't want to do this. But I can't turn back now, even though I've got cold feet.

Not as cold as hers, though. In fact, I don't think I've ever felt anything so cold in all my life. The corpses I've been acquainted with till now have been soft, still warm, recognisably made of the same flesh as my own. Even meat from the butcher doesn't have this icy chill, this absolute deadness.

The first glancing contact makes me want to draw back, run away. But I won't. I'll play the grim fairy tale through to the end.

It's not a matter of her identity any more. Sister Gervase made sure of that. But the shoes, if they are hers, are proof not of who but where she was. Whoever gave them to the jumble sale is linked to her death.

I have to know.

Shoe in one hand, I grasp the stony flesh in the other. Her foot is inflexible, the shoe equally stiff and intractable. At first it seems impossible. And to force her foot would be more wrong than I want to think about. A sacrilege against the dignity of the dead.

[i don't mind if it helps]

One last try.

And I get something right, the pressure, the twist of the shoe as I offer it up to her foot. It slides on. A fit.

Enough.

I slip it off again. Her foot is so small, so cold. So forlorn. Somewhere, deep inside, it feels like abandonment to cover her foot over again without trying to chafe it warm, the way Granny used to do for me when I was little. But with the reasoning part of my brain I know it's ridiculous to feel that way. The only thing I can do for this girl is find her killer, bring them to justice.

[please oh please]

I straighten the sheet. Push the stretcher back, shut the door. Time to go.

Outside, relieved to be free and clear in the air again, I turn to shut the door behind me. But my luck's run out and there's someone approaching. Billy.

'Hey, what are you doing there?'

I abandon my attempt to shut the door and dive for the path. Race to the corner, bump into a nurse, knock another of those awkward laundry bags out of her arms. Imperfectly tied, it scatters its burden across the path.

'Sorry.'

No time to stop. A stained sheet tangles round my feet. Tripping, I put out a hand to steady myself, pull free. Push off and away. Breathless.

I run on, round the next corner. Out of her sight, out of Billy's, if he's following. Pull up to a walk, fast as I can but not running, not screaming my fugitive presence. Round by the outpatients' entrance, onto the road. Brisk, now, trying to seem unconcerned, not looking behind though I'm desperate to.

Past the porters' lodge, nothing furtive to draw their attention. Businesslike, a blameless woman on her way to work.

Cupernham Lane on the right, turn that way. A glance behind now, irresistible.

No one following. Relief.

Perhaps I've got away with it.

*

That you did enter into an enclosed property viz the mortuary, Romsey Hospital, at 0650 hours on Monday 21st April 1941 – (which offence shall be deemed to be larceny inasmuch as entry was achieved by force, to wit, by pushing open a door) – without authorisation and with intent to commit an offence. And that you did leave the said property having committed said offence which is a felony and liable upon conviction to penal servitude for any term not exceeding fourteen years. *Housebreaking with intent to commit felony - Larceny Act 1916.*

You have the right to remain silent... *(Police caution)*

'Sit down.'

Blimey, he's looking grim. Better keep quiet till I know how this is going to go.

'I've had a telephone call from the hospital.'

Ah, that.

'From Billy Stewart. He's very upset.'

He's easily rattled.

'You're not going to ask me why?'

Not going to say anything that might incriminate me.

'He says you were at the hospital this morning. He thinks you may have gone into the mortuary without permission.'

He's not sure, then?

'I defended you. Said it couldn't possibly have been you. Said I knew you wouldn't do anything underhand.'

Underhand? Is that what you think? Mr Magnanimous himself. Specially when I was doing your dirty work.

'But he said he was sure he hadn't been mistaken. He noticed your hair.'

My bloody Judas hair.

'Don't play games with me, Jo. You were there?'

I play games to win. And if that means not talking...

'Still nothing to say? That's not like you.'

You'd be surprised.

'What were you doing?'

I was going to tell you, but not like this. I'm not going to be interrogated.

'Very well. Then how about this? You were in the office on Friday night.'

Oh my god.

'You looked at a number of files.'

How can you possibly know?

'I don't know how you got in –'

Aggie hasn't peached, then?

'Though Miss Haward has mislaid her key –'

Misjudged her. She has. Mislaid it, my arse.

'She said she saw you as she left.'

That makes me the obvious suspect?

'Level with me, Jo.'

Incriminate myself?

'Talk to me. We're supposed to be in this together.'

Not in this, we're not.

'You probably didn't realise. On Friday night, I was in the office myself. Had a headache, didn't want to go home to a lot of fuss, so I decided to sleep it off in peace and quiet.'

Oh... my... god.

'By midnight, I was feeling better. I was thirsty, I came downstairs to get some water. Imagine my surprise when I found a light was on. And there you were. Sleeping at your desk.'

So that's what woke me.

'I should have woken you then. Don't know why I didn't. I suppose –'

Yes, what?

'You could put it down to a kind of fellow feeling. I didn't think it'd do any harm to leave you alone. To let you sleep.'

Big of you.

'And then in the morning –'

Yes?

'You'd gone.'

Good job too. If I'd known...

'But I could see you'd been looking at the files. The drawers were clean where you'd wiped them.'

Hawkshaw the eagle-eyed detective.

'You know how seriously we take client confidentiality. It's a breach of trust.'

So's what happened to Nell.

'I trusted you.'

And now you don't? Doesn't take much, does it?

'I need to know, Jo. Why were you there?'

None of your business.

'Was it anything to do with the business I hired you for?'

That'd be telling.

'Tell me.'

Oh, why not. 'Because...'

'She speaks. Three cheers.'

If you're going to be sarky...

'All right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.'

No.

'Don't clam up on me again, Jo.'

I don't want to abandon the safety of silence, but I think I must. I take a deep breath. It's going to be hard to explain. 'I was trying to find out about my father –'

I break off. There's the sound of raised voices coming from somewhere outside. Whatever next? Raised voices in the hallowed spaces of Nash, Simmons and Bing. What can Miss Haward be thinking of? But one of the voices is Miss Haward's. The other's a very angry man. There's the stomp and clatter of feet on the stairs. By the sound of it, they're coming this way.

The door bursts open. Dr Waverley. He's the angry man.

'Nash.' A bellow.

Miss Haward edges into the room behind him. 'Mr Nash, I'm sorry –'

For a moment I'm almost amused.

Then Waverley's gaze lights on me. 'You, you bitch. Do you know what you've done?' He starts towards me, menacing, but I'm so shocked I can't seem to move.

Miss Haward squawks outrage. 'Dr Waverley –'

Bram Nash moves to block the doctor's path. It's mayhem, but I sit like a lemon, mouth open, not knowing what to do.

'Enough.' Nash's voice is quiet, but it cuts through the bluster and outrage. 'Jo, my chair, now. Miss Haward, tea. Waverley, sit down.'

Like a set of squabbling children responding to teacher, we do as we are told. Gobbling at the unseemliness of it, Miss Haward disappears downstairs. I slide into Nash's chair behind the desk, a protective width of polished mahogany between me and the irate doctor. He, though he takes his seat as directed, certainly looks ready to murder someone.

Nash stays standing, the position of power. I envy him.

'Now, Waverley, what's all this about? Calmly, please.'

'That bitch –'

'I said, calmly. Without the language, please.'

'That woman there,' Waverley speaks as if through gritted teeth, 'your assistant, killed my uncle.'

'What?' It's my turn to gobble with astonishment.

'Shut up, Jo. Not another word.'

My mind skitters inconsequentially. *That's a turn up for the books.* After the last half hour of him trying to get me to talk, now he's telling me to shut up.

'Now, Waverley, let's be clear. What exactly are you accusing Mrs Lester of?

Waverley stares malevolantly at me. 'Late yesterday afternoon, that – *woman* there was seen leaving Ramillies Hall. Shortly after, I was called to attend my uncle. I was told he had collapsed. But by the time I got there, it was too late. There was nothing I could do. He was dead.'

I can feel the blood drain from my face. I open my mouth to speak, but Nash holds up his hand in warning. 'No,' he says, and it would take a braver person than I am to challenge him. My hands and feet have gone icy cold, and there's a tremor in my gut.

'I'm sorry to hear that Mr Oxley is dead,' Nash says. 'But what can his death possibly have to do with my assistant? Surely his health has been fragile for years.'

'Fragile in the extreme,' Waverley spits out. 'I had forbidden him to put himself in any situation of stress or anxiety. Then *she* visits and –' he breaks off, begins again, directed at me. 'What did you say to him, you –?'

'Careful.'

I don't know if the warning is for me or Waverley. I look to Nash, get a curt nod. Permission to speak. But my brain has kicked in and I'm cautious on my own account now. 'It was a private matter,' I say. 'He was sleeping peacefully in his chair when I left.'

'Where I found him,' Waverley says. 'And by all accounts, scarcely an hour after you left.'

'You're reporting the case to me as coroner, then?' Nash says coolly. 'Sudden unexpected death?'

'Ghoul,' Waverley snaps. Turns the evil eye on Nash. 'Utterly obscene suggestion. You're not getting your claws into my uncle. Not unexpected, it's been on the cards for years. Respiratory failure, cardiac failure. As his physician, I'm perfectly within my rights to sign the certificate.'

'Indeed,' Nash says. 'So you're not actually accusing Mrs Lester of any crime?'

I don't know who's the more surprised at the mention of crime. Waverley looks as taken aback as I feel. He recovers quickest.

'I hold her morally responsible,' he says. But some of the wind has obviously gone out of his sails. 'I demand that you dismiss her.'

Nash raises his eyebrow. 'Do you just? But I haven't heard her side of the story.'

‘Puh. She doesn’t deny it, does she? *Private matter. Left him sleeping in his chair.* Look at her. She knows what she did. She frightened an old man to death.’

Nash does look at me. I think my face must be a perfect blank. I certainly hope it is, because I’m so numb with what Waverley’s said, I haven’t had time to work out what I feel. But there is guilt, coiling around somewhere, waiting to surface.

‘Peacefully,’ Nash reminds him. I bless the lawyer’s habit of mind that has kept him logical, despite everything. But his eye on me is thoughtful, almost wary. He’s not defending me, simply stating the case. ‘She said he was sleeping peacefully. Can your witness say as much?’

Waverley bounces up from the chair. Confronts Nash with renewed belligerence. Though he must be the elder by nearly twenty years, he’s still a powerful man. There is such a feeling of threat in the room that I find myself rising from my chair, though what I could do if it actually came to blows, I can’t imagine. The desk top is unhelpfully bare, there’s nothing I could use as a weapon.

Miss Haward saves the day, if there is a day to be saved, and it’s not just my imagination running away with me. She comes in with a tray loaded with teapot and cups, milk jug and sugar bowl, even a plate of biscuits. I’m vaguely surprised she’s brought it herself instead of delegating the job to Cissy or June.

‘Tea?’ she says brightly.

The tension snaps.

Waverley makes another noise of disgust. ‘Puh.’ Breaking the confrontation with Nash, he barges past Miss Haward so the cups rattle in their saucers. At the door he turns like a proper pantomime villain. ‘I won’t forget this in a hurry, Nash,’ he says. ‘Keep that woman out of my way. And you, too, if you know what’s good for you.’

‘Well,’ Aggie Haward says, putting the tray down on Nash’s desk. ‘Well, how rude. See what he’s made me do. The milk’s slopped all over the biscuits.’

Bram Nash has an envelope in his hand. Though it's almost forty years old, it hasn't reached the archive. It's always been kept in his private safe. In the circumstances, it's just as well. God knows what Jo would have done if she'd come across it in her searches. What kind of confrontation she'd have initiated. He imagines this morning's little scene would have been sweetness and light in comparison.

On the outside of the envelope, in his father's beautiful copperplate, is written: *Deposited by Mrs Rose Fox, 25th July 1901. For safekeeping.* Inside, there are two sheets of paper. Plain, no heading, no salutation. Each is handwritten, but not his father's writing. Each is signed, but it's not the same signature on each, because these are parallel documents, not duplicate copies. The first reads:

I acknowledge that the female infant born to Ellen Fox on 5th July 1901 is my child. In respect of this (and so long as the matter remains secret between us) I undertake to pay Mrs Rose Fox the sum of £12 per annum until she or the child shall die or the child attains independence.

The signature is illegible, but unmistakeable. In this context, it's dynamite. The second sheet of paper is even briefer in content.

*I swear not to reveal the name of the father of Ellen Fox's baby born 5th July 1901. In return, he will give me £1 a month for the child's upkeep, paid privately to me and to me only.
R. Fox (Mrs)*

Nash had inherited the envelope when his father retired from business. Like a number of other records, it's always been considered too sensitive to entrust to the archive. He presumes the other party to this agreement may have his own copies of the letters, though he doesn't know that for certain. He's never discussed it with anyone, it's never seemed necessary. Or relevant, till now. When he took over his father's practice, Rose Fox had been dead for years. If he'd thought about it at all, it was only as a sort of curiosity, an oddity of no particular importance. But now he has to reconsider. Though the documents were obviously been drawn up naïvely by the parties involved – he can imagine how his father might have deplored the vagueness of the language – he doesn't

doubt the letters would stand as proof of paternity in a court of law. In so many ways, they are no longer harmless relics. They have... explosive potential.

He wonders about Joseph Fox. Was this why the old man threw Jo out when her grandmother died? When the money had dried up, and he couldn't access it any longer. It makes him angry on Jo's behalf to think her care had been dependent on cold cash. And so little of it. Yet it doesn't seem as if the old man held a grudge against the father. Just against Nell and her daughter.

He looks at the documents again. Should he tell her? There'd be no question about it if it had been her father who had deposited the documents. His first duty of confidentiality is always to the client. But it wasn't her father, it was Rose Fox. So he can't ask her what she'd want him to do, now that her granddaughter is looking for her father.

What'd Jo been going to say? Waverley's interruption had put paid to her telling him what she'd been doing. And after, he'd been more concerned to hear her story about her visit to Oxley.

She'd been unwise. Dreadfully unwise, but he doesn't think she has a case to answer. By signing the certificate, Waverley's put himself in a position where he can't accuse Jo of wrongdoing without calling his own professional judgment into question. It could even lay him open to a counter-charge of slander.

No. Nash rubs his face. That would definitely be a step too far. But though the lawyer in him is satisfied she's in the clear, it doesn't stop him feeling uneasy. While not everyone in Romsey worships at Waverley's door, the man has it in him to make things pretty unpleasant for her.

Nash slides the letters back into the envelope. There might be something to be done about that. Just so long as she doesn't find out.

He'll keep her on, of course. It wouldn't be a good idea to dismiss her. That would just be a signal he thinks she's guilty. On the other hand, what's he going to do with her now? How's he going to keep her out of trouble?

*

I don't know what to do. When Nash told me to go home after the scene with Waverley I was feeling shaky, and glad to go. But now, I want something to do. Dot's out, and there's only so much nodding and smiling one can do with deaf old Pa Gray before he drifts off to sleep in the sun. And I don't want to disturb him. I'm feeling pretty sensitive about the comfort of old men right now.

Did I kill Oxley? Not literally, because he was alive when I left, but... I did shock him? Especially with the picture. It was almost as if he knew something about it.

He could have done. He said he might have something for me in a day or two.

Why didn't I persuade him to tell me? Now I'll never know what he might have said.

But I won't give up. If one person knew, or could guess, then so can others. Dot, for instance. I'm sure she knows more than she's admitted.

She'd been at Ramillies like Nell. She'd worked for Oxley.

Thinking about him makes me cringe inside. I can't escape my part of the blame. I was there. I upset him and he died.

I can't stay here, guilt and justification winding round and round in my head. I have to get out.

I set off without any real aim in mind. I'm not sure where I'm going. Just as long as it's nowhere near Ramillies. If I could just do something useful. Something that might help Nash work out who killed Ruth.

And there is something. The cottages along Green Lane. I never did get round to asking there about the night of the air-raid. That's got to be worth doing.

I turn uphill, towards the Cricketer's Arms. Now I've got a goal, I step out with a lighter heart. If I can accomplish something today on Ruth's behalf, I'll feel better.

But by the time I've asked everywhere from Highwood to Crampmoor, the only thing I've found out is that Pete lives in one of the cottages between the level crossing and the school. He's embarrassed when he sees me, but sixpence soon settles that. And when I ask him about that night, he's obviously disappointed he can't help me. He's not hiding anything this time. I have to accept it. Apart from the excitement of the bombs, no one heard or saw anything.

I'm about to turn back when I hear the distant sound of dogs barking and remember the woman I met the first time I came this way. What was it Nash called the woman? The dog was Tizzy, but... Ollie, that was her name. I haven't come across her yet, but if she saw Nash that night, who's to say she might not have seen someone else as well?

Pete's still loitering on the corner. I beckon him over.

'The lady with the dogs. Do you know where she lives, Pete? Is it somewhere round here?'

‘Just down the track,’ he says. ‘But you don’t want to go there. She’s got a load of dogs. She’ll set them on you if you go hanging round.’

‘I’ll risk it. If I can find where it is. I didn’t see anywhere as I was coming along.’

‘No, well, you wouldn’t. It’s not easy.’

‘And?’

He sighs. ‘Don’t say I never warned you. You gotta go back along the road to the corner. There’s a turning, just past the farm. Can’t miss it if you know. There’s a box on the gate for post an’ that. Says “*Private, Keep out*”, but you gotta go through there, and then it’s about half a mile down the track.’

‘OK.’ But my heart sinks at the thought of it. Is it really worth the trek if she lives so far from the road?

‘There is a short cut.’ He grins at me, calculating. ‘I could show you.’

He’s worse than Danegeld. ‘You’ve had all the cash I can spare, Pete. I’ll just have to go the long way round.’ I turn away, start to retrace my steps.

‘Nah.’ He patters after me. ‘Reckon I’ll show you anyway. I pretty much owe you.’

I pat him on the shoulder, relieved. ‘I think you pretty much do.’

I couldn’t have found the short cut myself, though once he points it out, there is a faint path leading through the trees that tunnel the lane. Out on the far side side, there’s open grazing, a field full of cows.

‘Go down the field,’ he says. ‘Along the hedge. It’s not far. The dogs don’t come into the field, but when you get near the cottage, make sure you holler out so she can tie ‘em up.’

‘I’ll remember.’

I skirt along the hedgerow, the way Pete pointed out. It’s downhill, easy walking, pleasant in the sun. So quiet I can hear the cows munching grass half a field away. Every now and then a dog barks, a bit closer each time but not threatening. I can’t see any sign of habitation and I’m beginning to wonder just how long this short cut might turn out to be, when I come to a place where the slope of the land turns steeper. At the foot of the incline, there’s a cottage.

It’s not very big, and it sits the landscape as if it has grown here. Well-weathered red brick and a tiled roof that’s thick with moss, a double, barley-twist chimney. Windows glazed with tiny diamond panes of glass glitter in the sunshine like insect eyes. A narrow, green painted door stands open to the day.

I pause on the field side of the hedge where there's a rickety stile. Call 'Hello.'

A fusillade of barks. A pack of dogs come charging round the side of the house towards me. Five or six. No, seven. I recognise the white lurcher, can identify an Alsatian and a terrier type, but the rest are mongrels of various sizes and shapes. Their barking doesn't strike me as particularly threatening, but I stay on my side of the hedge just the same. It might be different if I invade their territory.

I call again. 'Hello. Ollie?' It's a bit of a cheek, really, because I don't know her well enough to make free with her name, but I'm hoping it will be a signal that I'm friendly.

The dogs mill about, tails wagging. I take a chance, hold out my hand to the lurcher. 'Good dog, Tizzy. Where's your mistress, then?'

'Hey, you.' A shout. I recognise the voice, the same suspicious tone as when we met before. 'Whatchamacallit. Nash's assistant. What do you want?'

There's the shape of a person in the doorway, but the woman doesn't come any closer. I shade my eyes, see she's holding herself up with one hand on the door frame, while on the other side she's leaning heavily on a stick.

'It's Jo Lester,' I remind her. 'Are you all right?'

'Damn fool question.' She's right, it is.

'Can I come through?'

'If you must. Dogs. Leave it.'

They don't exactly rush to obey her, but when I climb cautiously over the stile they don't attack me either.

'What happened?' I say as I get up close to her. I can see that she's got her ankle bound up in strips of cloth, and she's not putting any weight on that foot.

'Sprained my blooming ankle,' she says. 'Tripped over Bluebell, silly bitch.'

I'm not sure if she means the dog or herself. But if Bluebell's the terrier, I can see how easy it would be. It winds round my feet excitedly so I have to take care myself not to fall.

'Is there anything I can do?' I say. 'Do you need a doctor?' I think of Waverley. If she says yes, I'll have to get someone else to call him.

'You didn't come to ask me about my health,' she says. 'What do you want?'

'Can't we go inside? You'd be better sitting down.'

'Long job, is it? All right.'

She hobbles inside, surrounded by a swirl of dogs, and I follow. I find myself in a low-ceilinged, stone-flagged kitchen. The windows don't let in much light and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. A big range dominates the room, but it doesn't appear to be lit, because the room's cool to the point of chill. The smell of paraffin from a little Aladdin stove competes with the smell of damp and dogs. There are rugs and pieces of sacking on the floor, so many fresh hazards to trip over. An airing rack festooned with washing takes up the ceiling space, while a cluttered table, three bentwood chairs and a broken-down armchair next to the range complete the inventory. Ollie lowers herself into the armchair with a groan. The dogs settle on the rugs, leave me stranded uneasily in the middle of the room.

'Sit down,' Ollie says brusquely. 'Chuck something on the floor.'

I take a large basket of cabbages and rhubarb off one of the bentwood chairs, and do as I'm told.

'So what do you want?' Ollie says for the third time.

'I came to ask if there was anything you could tell us about the night of the air-raid.'

She eases herself in her chair, flinching as she shifts her foot. 'Like what?'

'Like, did you see anyone hanging around that evening?'

She grins at me. 'Apart from Mr Nash?'

It's a fair point.

'Apart from him. We're really interested in anyone who might have been around later in the night.'

'Can't say I saw anything. Dogs were a bit jumpy, barking on and off. Had a bit of a go about half past three, four o'clock. Thought it was because the bombs had got them worked up. They're strays from Southampton, most of them. They've been through the raids, can't blame them if they don't like bangs.' She shifts again, and I can see she's in a lot of pain.

'Why don't you let me look at that?' I say. 'I might be able to make you a bit more comfortable.'

'Have at it. Don't suppose you can do any harm.'

I unwind the strips of cloth she's used to bind up the ankle. Underneath, the joint is puffy and swollen, black from her toes to well above the joint.

'I could put a cold compress on it,' I say, 'that might help. But really, don't you think you ought to see a doctor?'

'No doctors,' she says. 'Don't trust 'em. Do what you can. Appreciate it.'

'Cold water?'

'Pump it up outside,' she says. 'There's a bucket.'

'You've none inside?'

She shakes her head. 'Only what I bring in. Hadn't got round to it when I crocked the ankle. You could fill the big jug if you like. Dogs probably need water too.'

I take the jug she points out, go outside. There's a paved yard where a bucket stands under a pump. The water that comes up as I work the handle is clear and icy cold. I gulp down a handful and it's pure and sweet. I was a child the last time I tasted water so good, clean out of the gravel. I use the first bucketful to fill a trough which stands near the house wall. The dogs come out as soon as they hear the water being poured, and drink eagerly. I fill the jug, take it indoors. 'When did you last have something to drink?' I ask her.

'Not thirsty. Don't bother about me.'

'Rubbish. Would you like some tea?'

'Have to light the Aladdin,' she says. 'Only have the range lit on high days and holidays.'

While the kettle's boiling, I soak the strips of cloth in a bowl of cold water, wring them out and bind her ankle up again. When I'm done, and she's warming her hands on the mug of tea I've made her, I turn the empty woodbasket over and make a footstool of it.

'Keep it up all you can,' I say. 'You don't have to take the bandages off, just soak them again if they dry out.'

'You've put them on tight,' she says. 'But it does feel better. You a nurse or something?'

'No, but I was married to a doctor once. Well, I suppose I still am. But we're separated.'

'Snap. Me too.'

I'm astonished, and I suppose it shows. I don't know why, but I'd imagined her the perfect spinster with her dogs and her brusque attitudes.

She laughs, but it's not a happy sound. 'Haven't always been the mad dog woman,' she says. 'I made a bad choice. Picked the wrong man.'

'Me too.' It's my turn to play echo. 'It's easily done.'

'Hard to put right, though,' she says. 'You don't want to hear about that.'

'I'm not in a hurry if you want to tell me.'

'No. But one good turn deserves another. Steer clear of Edward Waverley.'

'You're married to Dr Waverley?'

'Sadly. Won't give me a divorce. Dreadful man.'

'Oh.' I can't manage anything else.

'Can see by your face you know him.'

'Not really.' I can't work it out. 'But I did have a bit of a run in with him this morning.'

'Yes?' She blows on her tea, takes a noisy swallow.

'I went to see his uncle yesterday. Mr Oxley, you know? But... he died last night, and Dr Waverley says it was my fault because I upset him.'

'No.' She's white as paper.

'What's wrong? Is your foot worse?'

'No.' She's not looking at me, not focused on anything in the room. There's pain in her expression that doesn't seem to have anything to do with the injury to her foot.

'No.'

'Ollie?' I'm frightened now. I don't know what's going on.

'Paul Oxley?' she says slowly. 'He's my father.'

'Mr Oxley is?' My flesh prickles with goosebumps. I'm the last person in the world who should have brought her the news.

'Yes.'

'You didn't know?'

She shakes her head. A tear slides down her cheek, and the little lurcher comes rushing up to her, whining. She pats it absent mindedly.

'I'm so sorry.' I'm not sure what it is I'm apologising for. For being the one to tell her, for the way I told it. For his death, and my part in it. I stand up, feeling the weight of gravity on my bones. 'You won't want me here,' I say. 'Can I fetch someone to come and stay with you?'

'What?' There's still only one solitary tear tracking down her face. The dog leaps up to lick it off. 'No. It's all right. Don't go.'

'Dr Waverley said he'd been ill for a long time.'

'All my life,' she says. 'He had TB as a young man. Never really got over it.'

I don't know what to do. What to say. What is there to say except what I've said before? 'I'm so sorry. I didn't mean...'

...to upset you?

...to upset him?

She reaches out a hand, pats my arm the way she patted the lurcher. 'It's all right,' she says again. 'It's Eddie. Why didn't he tell me?'

*

'This changes everything.'

'My dear.'

'Don't you see? Ramillies. You're the heir.'

'There's still Olivia.'

'Pfff. The mad woman. What can she do?'

'She's his daughter.'

'She's nothing. You haven't even told her. Have you?'

'Not yet. I needed to think about it. Get things sorted out in my own mind first.'

'Don't leave it too long. You know what gossip's like.'

'It can wait. She never comes into town. Hardly ever.'

'Oh, but... Ramillies. Our birthright. We've waited so long. Aren't you excited?'

'If I am, I know better than to show it. Don't want people thinking we're lacking in family feeling.'

'That's what it's about. Family feelin'. Think of it, goin' back to Ramillies.'

'Get it out of your system, my dear. You'll need a sober face for the town.'

'Don't worry, I can play my part.'

'I'll have to go up to London and see Struther as soon as I can. As soon as he can give me an appointment.'

'I'll telephone for you in the morning. Will he be able to advise you about Ollie?'

'Don't you worry about Olivia, my dear. I'll see to her.'

*

The basket of vegetables is heavy. I have to shift it from arm to arm every hundred yards or so. I tell myself, if Ollie can carry this into town, so can I. Only, of course, she can't, because of her ankle. It's not some kind of weird penance, I volunteered, since my Uncle Tom is expecting it for the shop. She tells me he sells whatever fruit and vegetables she can produce, and I get the impression that the proceeds are pretty much her only income. It must be hard, especially so early in the season when there's so little to be harvested. It's not as if she can afford to let the stuff go to waste.

It's odd, but this woman who's got every right to hate me, to blame me as much as I blame myself for her father's death, hasn't. Didn't. Instead, she's... absolved me. And we're friends, just like that. Instinctive. On my part, it's instant. I'm like one of her strays, I know I can trust her.

In the end, I told her almost everything about my visit to her father. The only thing I left out was the photograph. Like Pete, I couldn't bring myself to show it to a lady. She takes it calmly, all of it. After that first moment of grief, she'd seemed remarkably resigned.

'I haven't seen him for years,' she said. 'He didn't approve of me living separately from Eddie. He was very straight-laced, you know.'

It makes me feel worse, thinking of what I said. 'He was? Ollie, I said some things...'

'Words didn't kill him. His lungs were shot. Might have happened any time in the last twenty years.'

'But Dr Waverley said –'

'Don't believe a word that man says. I wouldn't sully your ears with some of the things he's done. He's a bastard, plain and simple. For starters, hasn't even come to tell me my father's dead.'

I hadn't liked leaving her, but in the end she said I'd be more help if I'd take the vegetables to Tom. There were a few bits and pieces she wanted me to get for her in town, and there was a message for me to give to Nash.

'Ask him to come and see me if he will. Wouldn't ask him to call, but with this blessed ankle might be a few days before I can get about. Think I need his professional advice as soon as.'

'I'm sure he'll come straight away.' He will, if I have to drag him.

'Not tonight. Now you've sorted me and the dogs out,' (a sandwich for her, a gory supper of sheep's head for the dogs) 'I'll get some shut-eye if I can.'

She wouldn't let me help her to bed. 'Comfortable enough here.'

'Will you be warm enough? Shall I light the range? Or I could get the Aladdin going again.'

'No need for that. Don't want to waste fuel. Getting a bit low on paraffin, in any case. Just chuck me a blanket. The afghan over there. Now, off you go.'

So I left and here I am, flogging down the road to town in the last of the afternoon sun. And while the basket may be heavy, my heart is a lot lighter than it was when I arrived at her door.

Romsey wakes to fog. In town, the greyed-out streets turn early risers into ghosts. Sounds distort, voices boom disembodied in the gloom. A door shuts with the noise of a rifle shot as a dark shape plunges into the roiling damp. The coroner's abroad early again today. His step is purposeful, he knows his way well enough not to let a little weather discourage him.

She sleeps all right, better than she expected. Wakes early, but that's OK. She has a job to do, so she begs the loan of Dot's bicycle once more, straps Ollie's basket to the front and sets out.

His shoes have rubber soles, silent on the slick pavements, though from time to time he seems to hear an echo, a faint patter of feet that tracks his progress. Nudged into suspicion, he pauses under the railway arch. Listens a moment as the tricky sound runs on. Like water dripping, or soft wings beating, it seems to come from everywhere and nowhere in particular. The fog billows around him but no one emerges. He shakes himself, moves on. He has work to do, an appointment to keep.

The bicycle wobbles as the wheel hits a stone. It's full light now, but for all she can see, she might as well be riding with her eyes closed. The fog surrounds her, as dense and clinging as wet muslin curtains. For a while, the chatter of the stream lets her know she is still on the path. But as her route brings her out of the valley, she can only feel her way, hope she is still going in the right direction.

He strikes off uphill. Sometimes he regrets his incapacity to drive, but on a morning like this it's no disadvantage. No point in calling a taxi, he wouldn't reach his destination any quicker. What little traffic there is on the road can go no faster than he does on foot.

Birds are busy in the hedgerows when she reaches the lane. The light is growing stronger, though the fog clings on around her. She has seen no one on her travels, but a steaming trail of manure shows where the cows have been let out after milking. Somewhere, a dog is howling. The sound swirls and bellies, refuses to be located. Without knowing why, she pedals faster.

On the northern side of the railway, the fog grows thinner, more patchy, as his route climbs out of the river valley. He begins to pick out landmarks. A cottage, a wall, a public house.

Not far now to the turning into the lane. Almost there. The sound of a dog howling reaches him through the damp air. Feeds the feeling of unease that has accompanied him from the town. He quickens his pace.

Think of it as a dance. A sarabande. Purposeful, intent. The participants draw near, move apart, come teasingly close together once more. Though they dance without touching, without even being aware that the other is there, their movements mirror each other. Their ways trace a leaf shape across the landscape, a spearhead pointing east into the morning light. An aerial photograph would show it, though no pilot could fly this white-out morning. So think of it like this: imagine a series of pictures, mapping their paths as they converge.

At the apex of their journeys, the cottage stands.

Nothing stirs.

There is only the dog, howling.

He will get there a little before she does. The first shock will be his. But the dance has brought them both, and both will be needed if the figure is to be completed without error.

*

As soon as Nash comes within sight of the cottage, he sees the white dog by the front door. Ollie's lurcher, Tilly or Dizzy, some name like that. It's the one making all the noise, scrabbling at the door, standing up on its hind legs and crying.

He opens the gate, walks to the door. The dog takes no notice of him, but now he's close he can see how distressed it is, shivering in the chilly morning light.

He knocks and calls out, but there's no reply. Knocks again.

‘Anyone home?’

No response. Another time, he would have thought nothing of it. Imagined Ollie might be out, or sleeping. But the message Jo relayed last night was quite clear. Ollie wants to see him about her father’s death. Needs his advice. And she can’t get in to town because she’s hurt her foot. So here he is.

Surely she must be here? He can’t imagine she could have slept through the dog’s howling, but if she’s awake, why hasn’t she called out to him?

His anxiety mounts. There’s more wrong here than a sprained ankle. She’d never ignore one of her dogs in trouble.

No point in knocking again. He tries the latch. The door opens readily.

‘Hello?’

It’s dark inside, very cold. There’s the smell of dog and something else, oily, pungent. He calls again, but the stillness of the place is absolute.

The dog darts ahead to an inner door. This one is stiff, reluctant, but he wrestles it open, stumbles into the room. It’s dark, the only light coming in from behind him, filtering through the open front door. There’s the suffocating reek of paraffin, the choke of soot. He coughs, trying to get his breath. The little lurcher is whining somewhere in the depths of the room, but he can’t deal with that now. He’s got to get some fresh air in here. Blundering across the darkened room, he pushes the back door open, takes a grateful breath of the clean air that rushes in.

The white dog is a pale blur beside the bulky shape of a chair. He thinks someone might be sitting there, but he can’t be sure in this murk. And if there is someone, they are utterly, ominously still.

‘Ollie?’ He calls her name again. A blanket hangs as a blackout over the window. He tears it down, and the light elbows in, lets him see the huddled figure in the chair.

‘Ollie.’ He’s at her side, fearing the worst. He tries to rouse her, but there’s no flicker of response. He searches for a pulse at her wrist, in her neck. His hand is unsteady. He can feel nothing.

Her flesh is cold, so cold. Her face is flaccid, unhealthily pink. Almost, he could howl like the dog, but then he hears it.

The faintest whisper of sound.

A mouse might snore louder, but this isn’t a mouse. The dog renews its whining, and he hushes it impatiently. He’s sure it was a breath, but he can’t hear another. The draught through the room is not enough. He has to get her out into the air.

He throws off his hat and glasses, picks her up in his arms. She's an awkward burden, not heavy but tall, and he struggles to manhandle her through the narrow back door. He sets her down on the paving stones beside the pump, less gently perhaps than he should, but he's rewarded by one more ragged breath.

He knows the theory of artificial respiration. He learned it in the trenches. There'd been a night when four young soldiers barricaded themselves up in a dugout, lit a makeshift stove because it was so cold. In the morning, they'd all been dead. Not a mark on them, only the cherry red of their faces to show they'd suffocated. Such senseless deaths. The medico had shown him the Silvester method, but it hadn't worked then.

Now, it has to.

He bundles up his coat, pushes it under her shoulders. Begins the manoeuvre. Chest compressions and arm extensions. It's hard work, but he doesn't give up, even though he's heard nothing since those two random breaths. But he can't give up. He won't.

*

I must be quite close to Ollie's cottage when the dog stops howling. I'm trying to find the gate in the lane Pete told me about, because I can't take Dot's bike across the fields. I grope along, ridiculously slow, convinced I've missed the place in the fog. Then, suddenly, there it is. The relief gives me wings. I rattle along the track, cursing the potholes. The cottage comes into view. Alarmed, I see the front door's wide open. There's no welcome committee of dogs to inspect me as I prop up Dot's bike and open the gate.

I call out, not sure whether I should go straight in. 'Ollie?'

'Here.' The voice is strained, strange, but it isn't Ollie. 'Quick.'

I follow the sound through the hallway. Trip over a scuffed-up mat by the door into the kitchen. The smell of paraffin catches my throat.

'Here.' The voice comes again, and I recognise it this time. Nash.

Outside in the yard, he's down on his knees, working feverishly over a still figure. I recognise the rhythmic effort of artificial respiration, and my heart clenches. Though I can't see her face, I know it's got to be Ollie because of the bandaged foot.

'What...?' My mind is teeming with questions, but now's not the time to ask them. 'What do you want me to do?'

'She's – cold,' he says between movements. 'Something – to cover her – would be good.'

Inside, the blanket I hung up as a blackout for Ollie last night is lying on the floor. There's her afghan on the chair and I grab both, head out into the yard as quickly as I can. Though I'm only in the room for a split second, details seem to print themselves on my brain. The still shapes of the dogs on their rugs. Two glasses on the table cosied up to the unblinking painted eye that looks out from Nash's discarded spectacles. The paraffin heater by the armchair, a curl of rolled-up sacking by the back door.

Outside, Nash is still working over Ollie's motionless form. The white dog is tucked in close to her legs, and when I try to shift her to cover Ollie, she shows her teeth. I hesitate a moment, then tuck the blankets around them both. At least she'll give Ollie some warmth.

Nash is sweating with effort.

'Do you want me to take over? I know what to do.'

'Can – if you like.' He sits back on his heels, and I take his place. 'Not sure it's doing any good.'

Of course it is. I won't contemplate anything else. 'How long – ?

'Ten minutes,' he says. 'Maybe a bit more. She was breathing when I got here.'

'What?' It's all I've got breath for myself.

'Don't know. Bloody stove, I suppose. No ventilation. It's lethal. She should have known better.'

'It wasn't lit – when I left.' Though I'd offered to light it. I feel a shiver of something that might almost be fear. 'She said she was – low on fuel.' As I speak, Ollie shifts suddenly under my hands. Gasps, groans. Retches. 'Quick. Help me roll her.'

We turn her onto her side as she brings up a stream of yellow bile.

'Thank Christ for that,' Nash says, though the vomit has run all over the coat under her shoulders, which I guess must be his.

Ollie groans again, struggles to sit up. 'Wha – a?'

'You're going to be all right,' Nash says. 'Nothing to worry about, Ollie. Let's just get you to bed.'

He scoops her up, speaks to me. 'If you could go ahead?'

I go back through the kitchen, kicking aside the snarled-up rugs so he won't trip. The stair opens out of the hallway by the front door, steep steps that wind up to a tiny landing. There's a raised threshold to step over, a low beam to duck under, but somehow Nash manages to get Ollie through without either of them suffering major injury.

We get her between the covers of a bed whose mattress and covers are so soft and puffy they must be goosedown. She's already starting to warm up. Her breathing is better too, though her colour is still high.

'Aah,' she says as we settle her. 's good.' She's half asleep, but when the dog hops onto the bed, she reaches out to pat it.

'We should get a doctor to look at her,' Nash says.

'No doctor,' she says, with surprising strength.

It doesn't seem right after such a close call. 'But, Ollie –'

'No. No fuss.'

I look at Nash. He shrugs.

'Are you sure?' I ask her.

'Be a'right.' And then, abruptly, she falls asleep.

I'm at a loss. 'Do you think it's safe to let her sleep?'

'No idea,' he says. 'Maybe we'd better open a window.' He suits action to words, and a wraith of fog drifts in through the casement.

As far as I can tell, Ollie's sleep seems natural. 'I suppose it's OK.'

Nash rubs his face. For the first time, he seems to realise that he hasn't got the mask of his spectacles to hide his scars. 'Sorry, I'll –'

He ducks out of the room, clatters downstairs. I hear him stumble, curse. I don't know whether to stay here, watching, or to follow him downstairs.

After a moment, Nash's voice comes softly up the stairs. 'Jo. Can you come?'

I step closer to the bed for another look at the sleeping woman. I don't like to leave her, but she seems peaceful enough. The dog raises its head, watchful. 'All right, Tizzy,' I say. 'You look after her for me.'

The kitchen is a charnel house. The smell, the dead dogs on their rugs. But at least Nash has put his glasses on again.

'What do you want?' I say.

'Awkward about a doctor. You know she's Waverley's wife? They don't get on. Suppose that's why she doesn't want him barging in.'

'She told me yesterday. But – surely we could get someone else?'

'They're tight as ticks, these medicos. It might do more harm than good if it gets back to him.'

'I could stay with her if you don't want me at work.' As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I regret them, because I'm not sure he'll want me to work for him ever

again, after yesterday. I'll be sorry if I've given him the perfect opening to say I've got to go.

'I daresay we can manage without you for today.' His tone is dry, there's no clue to what he's thinking. 'If you're sure you don't mind?'

'Well, we can't leave her alone like this.'

He sighs. 'Jo, do you think she tried to – ?'

The words *kill herself* hang in the air between us.

'Why should she?'

'Her father?'

'No. I'm sure she was all right when I left her.' I remember the tear, but it wasn't despair. She'd been resigned to her father's death.

He kicks the mat by the door. 'But there was this. And sacks by the back door.'

'I know.' But I'm already wondering. 'I can't believe she'd have done anything to hurt the dogs.'

He looks round, as if for the first time. 'I suppose not. An accident, then?'

My turn to shrug. I don't want to discuss it until I've had time to think.

'What a mess,' he says. 'I don't like to leave you with it.'

'You need to get back.'

He looks at his watch. 'God, yes.'

We go out through the front door together. The bicycle is still propped by the gate. 'You could take Dot's bike.'

'I could?'

'Drop it off for me. I said I wouldn't keep it long.'

'Haven't ridden a bike for ages. Don't know if I still can.'

'They say you never forget.'

'We'll soon see about that.' He hands me Ollie's basket, steps through the frame. 'Just as well it's still foggy. Might cover my blushes.'

I watch as he pushes off. The proverb seems to be true, because he's away without a wobble. He's almost out of sight in the fog before I realise he's forgotten his coat, but then I remember the vomit. It's probably just as well.

*

No one will know.

Mad as a hat. No one will guess.

Bloody dogs too.

A nice lot of birds all with one stone if it works.

If it works.

No fun, havin' to walk away. No buzz in that. But needs must. Have to keep it discreet. Keep up the pretence.

Like to go and see. Eight little corpses, the dogs and the bitch.

Splendid.

Better not.

Keep it low key. News soon gets round.

Put on my face. *So sad, double tragedy. Of course, we're all heart-broken.*

*

It's mid morning before the sun breaks through the mist. I'm more than glad of the light, the lift of spirits it brings. I've lost count of the times I've run up and down the stairs to check on Ollie's breathing. Mostly she sleeps through my anxious visits, but sometimes she stirs, responds to my voice. Once she even asks me for a glass of water, but by the time I bring it, she's asleep again.

Downstairs, I don't need to be idle. There's plenty I can get on with. The kitchen and yard need a major clean up. And something will have to be done about the bodies of the dogs. The stiffening corpses make me feel bad enough, I can't let Ollie come downstairs and see them. But at the same time, I mustn't rush in. I shouldn't do anything until I've had a good look round, seen what there is to be seen. That snapshot of the room that burned itself on my brain when I arrived is ringing bells. Warning bells. I don't believe this was an accident. I don't want to think it was an attempt at suicide, either.

But if it wasn't an accident, and it wasn't deliberate on Ollie's part, what's left?

What if someone saw me at the cottage yesterday? Someone who was afraid of what Ollie might be able to tell about the night of the air-raid? What if I'd brought danger to her with my enquiries? With her damaged ankle, Ollie had been so vulnerable last night. I should never have left her alone. If she'd died...

If she'd died, and I was right.

If someone had tried to kill her.

It would have been my fault. My responsibility.

Another death on my conscience.

I have to know.

When I left last evening, the Aladdin was out, I'm sure of that. After I'd boiled the kettle, I'd turned down the wick till the flame died. I'd left it where I'd found it, a long

way from the armchair. And when I asked her, she'd been quite clear. She didn't want it relit.

Now, it's tilted on the rough flagstones right next to her chair. A sooty deposit on one side of the chimney shows where it's burned unevenly. Though it isn't even faintly warm, I use a cloth to touch it, mindful of fingerprints. Mine will be on it already, of course, but I'm not worried about that. I'm more concerned about whoever else might have handled it. There's a tiny slosh of paraffin left in the reservoir, but the way it was tilted means the wick's burned itself out. Just as well. If every last drop of oil had been used, we'd have come too late for sure.

The rugs. The rolled-up sacking had been put down inside the back door to keep out the draughts, but the rug by the door from the hall is a different matter. While Nash and I must have kicked it or tripped over it half a dozen times, it's still defiantly trapped by one corner. Stuck on the *outside* of the door. The hall side. Whoever put it there, put it there after the door was closed.

Yesterday, I'd arrived by the back door, left the same way. I can't rule out the possibility that the rug had been there all the time. But what I am sure of is that Ollie wouldn't have got up after I'd gone, hobbled out through the door, arranged the rug on the outside, gone out through the front door and round to the back before blocking the draught there. Her ankle was sore, and if she'd wanted to kill herself she only had to put the rug on the inside of the door, and spare herself the effort of walking.

The dogs. I make myself look at the sad little shapes on the floor. However bad she might have felt, I don't believe she would have hurt the dogs. I remember our first meeting, her hostility when she thought I might have come to complain about them. How she'd said *Nosy parkers... want me to gas them. Have to gas me first.* A woman who'd said that couldn't have done this.

But someone had tried.

Those glasses on the table. Two of them. Though the whole tabletop is a muddle of stuff, I'm pretty certain they weren't there when I left. I washed up the mugs we'd used for tea, put them back on the dresser. I look more closely. Both the glasses have been used. One seems to have a sticky residue in the bottom. I sniff without touching. Brandy in both. But the white grains don't look like anything I'd expect to find in brandy. Could be sugar, I suppose. A toddy.

Carefully, so as not to smudge the glass, I dip my finger in the residue, taste. It's bitter, not sugar. Aspirin, perhaps. It could be that Ollie took an aspirin for the pain in her

foot. But she wouldn't use two glasses for that, and anyway, they're on the table, several steps away from the chair she'd been settled in when I left.

It's suspicious, but not conclusive. None of it's conclusive. None of it proves anything against anyone. Except, possibly, me. I'd been alone here with Ollie last night, and I'm alone again here this morning. At best, it could be said I've had the opportunity to plant evidence. At worst, that it was me in the first place. That I was the one who'd tried to harm Ollie. It's a horrible thought, it leaves me shivering. I know I did nothing wrong, but who's going to believe me? After Oxley, I could so easily be suspected.

'Miss Waverley wants to see you, sir. She hasn't got an appointment.' Miss Haward looks reproachful. Unexpected visitors are not in her line at all.

'Really?' Nash is every bit as surprised. Has she come to rant, like her brother?

'Did she say what it was about?'

'Something about a register.' She sniffs with disapproval, a habit that's beginning to drive him mad.

'Right, well, show her in.' Perhaps he'll give her handkerchiefs at Christmas. That might give her the hint.

'Mr Hollis is due. His appointment's at half past.'

'That'll be all right, Aggie. I don't suppose Miss Waverley will be here long, and he's always late.'

'Very well.' She leaves the office, her stiff back view eloquent of indignant retreat.

He knows she blames Jo for the kerfuffle yesterday, and she hasn't forgiven him for not doing as Waverley asked and giving Jo notice. It's lucky Jo's still over at Ollie's, out of harm's way.

'There you are.'

'Good morning, Miss Waverley.' He stands as the woman strides into the room. Sighs inwardly. It's been a long morning already, and he could do without another fractious female on his case. 'Won't you take a seat?'

'I brought you this,' she says, ignoring the invitation. She bangs a large red ledger down in front of him. 'To show you. There's no record of any Ruth Taylor living in our district.'

'I see.' He sits down, pulls the book towards him, opens it. He's not going to let her intimidate him. 'How is it arranged?'

'By household,' she says. 'I've checked all the way through.'

'And if someone has arrived or left the town since the register was drawn up?'

'They've been added, of course. Or deleted.'

He flicks through the pages. It would take a good while to be sure a particular name wasn't included. 'Could you spare it for a few hours? I'd like to look through it myself.'

'You don't trust me?'

'It's not a matter of that,' he says, but it is. She's been so unhelpful until now, he can't imagine she would have carried out the task with the attention it deserves.

'Have to have it back by nightfall,' she snaps. 'Sooner, if the sirens go.'

'Of course.'

'You won't find anything.'

The way she's phrased it makes him think that there is something to find. Or has been. The question is what, and why Edith Waverley should want to hide it. Her tone makes it a challenge, and as Jo said once, the code is never to refuse a dare.

'I don't suppose I will,' he says, but he doesn't mean it. If there's something, he will find it.

She smiles, a gleam of satisfaction that makes him even more determined. It's just to be hoped old man Hollis won't blether on too long about the latest codicil to his will.

*

I get myself under control eventually. Find things to do to keep busy, occupy my nerves. I sponge Nash's coat, hang it in the sun to dry. Drag the dogs' bodies out into the yard, cover them with sacks. Wipe the layer of oily soot from all the surfaces I can get to without interfering with Ollie's arrangements, set and light the range. When I've finished, I look round. The kitchen is clean and warm, and I've stopped shivering. But I'm not stupid, I know what I've done. In restoring order, I've got rid of every trace of evidence that anyone else was here. All except for the glasses. I handle them carefully, hide them unwashed on a high shelf in Ollie's larder. It's not much, but it's the best I can do. There might be a chance of fingerprints, or perhaps finding out what the bitter white residue might be.

Upstairs, Ollie sleeps on, the little white lurcher on guard at her side. I'm just steeling myself for the last job, the one I least want to tackle, when I hear the distant hum of an engine. It comes closer, grows to a buzz. Closer still, it settles to a steady, familiar beat. There's a tractor approaching. There's someone coming up the track to the cottage.

I go out to the front gate. At first, I think the grey tractor and trailer must be something to do with the farm. Then I see that it's Alf who's driving. He pulls up at the gate, jumps down. I'm pleased to see him, but puzzled. Even more so when he goes round to the back of the trailer and helps someone down. Dot.

'What are you doing here?' I say, but I expect she can tell how relieved I am.

'Mr Nash told us what happened. He thought you might need some help.' She gets a series of bags and baskets out of the trailer. 'I brought a few things along.'

Between us, we manage to get the assorted baggage into the cottage. Amongst other things, there's a marketing basket like Ollie's that looks as if it's full of hay, and a straw shopper that seems to have some of my clothes in it. 'What is all this?'

'Ah, well, now,' she says. 'Let's tell the story the right way round. First things first. How's Miss Olivia doing?'

'She's been sleeping most of the morning. I think she's all right, but I wish she'd let us call a doctor.'

'Don't you worry about that. I'll take care of her. I'll pop upstairs and see how she's getting on. You show Alf where to bury the dogs. We don't want her seeing that.'

It's such a relief, not having to explain. Not being on my own any more, and not having to manage that last worst job by myself. As if on cue, Alf appears in the doorway with a spade. 'Brought me own,' he says. 'Best be about it.'

Outside, I don't know where we can bury them. The front of the cottage is narrow, the little space there taken up with beds of spring bulbs and rosebushes just coming into bud. At the back, beyond the yard, there's more space, but all of it is busily in cultivation. The half-cut bed of cabbage, the stand of rhubarb and rows of over-wintering onions are testament to Ollie's industry. There's a row of fruit trees, a cold frame crammed with seedling plants, several dug-over beds ready for planting. None of them seem like the right place for a mass grave.

I look at Alf. 'I don't know what to suggest.'

'Awkward,' he says. 'Tell you what. We'll borrow a corner of the field. Just beyond the hedge there. Cows aren't going to mind.'

'What about the farmer?'

'Nah. Long as we put the grass back careful, it'll soon grow over.' He hops over the stile and starts to mark an oblong in the greensward.

'What do you want me to do?'

'Reckon you can bring the bodies, like?'

'I'll try.'

It's heartbreaking. They weren't my dogs, but the pathetic little bodies, stiff already, the half-open eyes and mouths, the cold fur, wiry or coarse or soft as velvet, were dear to Ollie, survivors of war she'd done her best to protect. It'll be such a shock for her. I just hope she won't ask about them till she's well enough to hear the answer.

One at a time, I manage them all but the Alsatian. Such a beautiful dog, but heavy. I can't get him over the stile. I have to call Alf away from his digging to give me a hand.

'How are you getting on?'

'Nearly done,' he says. 'Good soil in that corner. Easy digging.'

'You'll make it deep enough?'

'Don't fret.' He looks into my face. I'm not sure what he sees, but he gives me a half-hearted grin. 'Tell you what. You go and make us a cuppa. This is thirsty work. And I bet you could do with one yourself.'

He's right. There have been so many shocks this morning. I know I'm not functioning well. Part of me is ashamed to leave a boy to do work I can't face myself. But for the rest, I'm just glad of the excuse.

I make the tea, not hurrying. Take cups up to Dot and Ollie, who seems to be stirring from her sleep at last. Finally, I pour a mug each for Alf and myself, take them outside.

He's finished the job of burying the dogs. I can't say I'm sorry to have arrived too late to see that. He's trodden the earth down, smooth and firm. There's only the turf to put back.

He blows on his tea to cool it. 'What d'you reckon then?' he says. 'How did it happen?'

I shrug. 'I don't know.'

'Reckon it was an accident?'

'I don't know.' What else can I say?

'S all right,' he says. 'If you think she did it herself, I won't peach on her to the coppers.'

'Never.' It comes out fiercer than I expected. 'She wouldn't, Alf. Not and hurt the dogs. Not and leave them either.'

'Makes sense.' He drinks his tea in two mighty swallows while it's still too hot for me even to sip mine. 'You make a nice cuppa.' He hands the empty mug back to me. Starts to replace the turf.

'Alf –'

'Yep?'

'What if –'

'Yep?'

He's absorbed in his task, doesn't look at me. It makes it easier for me to say what's on my mind. Too easy, perhaps.

'What if someone did it to her?'

He looks sideways at me. 'That's what I was thinking.'

I'm astounded. 'You were?'

'Mmm.' He's putting the pieces of turf back as carefully as if they're pieces of a jigsaw. 'What if she knows too much?'

'About Ruth, you mean?'

'That an' all.' He stamps down a stray tussock of grass. Looks me full in the face. 'Stuff that happens round here, it's not right. People think if you're a kid, you don't notice. Or else they just think it don't matter if you do see. I could tell you stuff –'

'Go on.'

'Did Mr Nash show you that photo?'

'Yes.'

'I bet I know who took it.'

It feels as if everything has come to a halt around me. As if the wind has stopped blowing, the sunshine lost its heat. Breathing, even my heartbeat seems like hard work. Every sense has stopped functioning, except to register what he's said.

'You do?' It comes out a croak. It's so long ago, I don't see how he can, but...

'Yep. That couch thing. Reckon I recognise it.'

If he can tell me who took the picture...

'Mrs Lester?' Dot's standing in the doorway, calling. 'Can you come?'

'Alf –'

'You better go,' he says. He seems almost relieved. 'Tell you later.'

'Mrs Lester.' Dot's calling again, beckoning me over. Urgent. What can I do? Alf's resolutely avoiding my eye. I go to her.

*

Page after page. Names he knows. Names he doesn't. A snapshot of the town. It's like walking down the street at dusk when the lights have been lit, before the curtains are drawn. Like a stage set, looking in through windows at the assembled company. Here's Basswood House. *Abraham Nash, Frances Stewart, William Stewart*. The evacuee family that came to them in September '39 is there too. *Freda Collyer, Alice Collyer, Stanley Collyer, Maisie Collyer*. The names carefully crossed through, annotated. *Returned to London January 1940*.

It doesn't say what he knows, though. What he'd gone to London last autumn to find out, the day he met Jo. He'd wanted to persuade them to come back to Romsey. Never mind that the children drove Billy mad. Never mind that Fan grumbled about bedwetting and lice. But he'd been too late. Freda, pregnant with her fourth child, had been killed in the Blitz. Maisie, the two year old, with her. Stanley and Alice had survived, but no one seemed to know where they'd gone. Miss Waverley didn't have that marked down in her careful accounting.

He pushes on. Page after page. Household after household. Name after name. No Ruth Taylor.

*

'It's about Miss Olivia. Sit down.'

'Is she worse?' A pang of anxiety overlays my irritation at being interrupted.

'No, it's not that. We need to talk, deary.'

Talk...? With relief comes impatience. If it's just talk, surely it could have waited?

But I do as she asks and sit down.

'What's it about, Dot?'

'Got a sort of a favour to ask you. And, well, it might do you a bit of good, too.'

'Go on.'

'I want to take Miss Olivia back to our place for a day or two. Take care of her.

Don't think she should be on her own all out here.'

'Seems fair enough.' And it does, though I'm not sure what it has to do with me.

'Thing is – ' She seems uncomfortable.

'Yes?'

'Only place we've got is your room.'

'Oh.'

'I talked about it to Mr Nash.'

You what...?

Now she's got going, Dot talks on through my silence. 'He thought it was a good idea.'

Did he indeed?

'He said maybe it would be good for you to keep your head down for a day or two. Out of Dr Waverley's way. We thought you could stay here at the cottage.'

'What if Dr Waverley comes here?'

She shakes her head emphatically. 'Not a chance. Him and Miss Olivia, they've been estranged for years. He never comes here.'

'I know, but what if he hears she's... ill?'

'Who's he going to hear it from? It won't be Alf or me, nor yet Mr Nash. And I don't suppose you'll go running off to tell him either.'

'But –'

'We thought,' she goes on, 'if we could tell Miss Olivia you'll be here, we wouldn't have to say anything about the dogs till she's a bit stronger. We can tell her you'll look after things till she's better.'

Great. What if she thinks it's my fault they died?

'Course, we'll tell her the truth in the end but... see, she's... well, she's never been exactly strong.'

'Oh, come on, Dot. Have you seen her garden?'

'I don't mean... Look, promise you won't tell anyone.'

'OK.' I don't know what I'm promising, but I agree. Anything to stop hedging around and find out what's on her mind. Anything, so I can get back to Alf.

'It's not the first time,' she says. 'Something like this. It's in the family. She's tried... well, she's tried to do away with herself before.'

I open my mouth to repeat the things I said to Nash and Alf. *She wouldn't, she was all right last night, she wouldn't hurt the dogs.* I close it again. I'll learn more if I keep quiet.

'Years ago,' Dot says. 'She had a breakdown. Sssh.'

The creak of a floorboard. Dot holds up a warning hand, but I've no intention of speaking. We both sit listening, but there are no more sounds from upstairs.

'She had a little girl,' Dot goes on at last, almost in a whisper. 'Adelle. Sweet little thing, pretty, but not altogether... well, a bit young for her age, always. You know. They said it was because Miss Olivia and Dr Waverley were cousins. But they doted on her, the

pair of them. Reckon she was the only thing kept them together. Then when they lost her...'

'Lost?' I can't help myself. 'Do you mean – ?'

Dot sighs. 'Adelle was ten when she died. She drowned. Hushed up, see, because... she'd done it herself, hadn't she? No doubt about it. She'd put great stones in her pockets, gone into the pond up at Ramillies. When she heard, Miss Olivia tried to do the same. Dr Waverley wanted to have her put away, but Mr Oxley wouldn't let him. But she and the doctor, well, that was the end of them. She moved out of Ramillies, came here. Dr Waverley went back to that sister of his in town. Left poor old Mr Oxley up there on his own. Terrible bad luck the old man had. All his sons gone in the war, and then his granddaughter.'

'That's awful, Dot.' A child of ten. What could have driven her to it? Unless Dot's *not altogether* means something more than just being a bit simple. For the first time I doubt my own judgement about what happened to Ollie last night. Maybe the welfare of the dogs wouldn't have weighed more heavily on her mind than the death of her father. 'Of course I understand. If you think it'll help, I'll stay here.'

Not that I've got much choice. If Ollie's got my room, I'm homeless.

'Good girl. I knew you'd see sense. I brought along some of your things.' She stands up, starts to bustle about with the various bags and bundles she brought with her. 'Think you'll find everything you need. There's a pan of stew in the hay. I'll pop it in the range, it'll do you all right for your tea.'

'I'll look forward to it.'

'You keep the range in, now. Keep warm. Alf can fetch in some more wood.'

'No. It's fine. But how will you get Ollie back with you?' Somehow my brain can't deal with the ramifications of what I've learned. It's only the most mundane stuff that keeps rising to the surface of my thoughts like scum on soup.

'Same way I got here,' she says. 'The trailer. It's a soft ride, we can wrap her up nice and warm. There's plenty of blankets, there'll still be enough for your bed. You won't mind making it up yourself?'

Somehow, I get caught up by her sudden bustle of activity. Before I know it, there's a stack of my things piled on the chair, and Dot's set me to pack a similar selection of Ollie's belongings into the emptied bag. I've hardly got my breath back, it seems, before she's hustled Alf into helping Ollie downstairs, half leaning, half carrying her on his shoulder. She protests all the way, 'I can do it, I can manage,' gives me half a smile as she

passes. I don't know how she feels, but it makes me much happier to see her up and conscious.

And then, after all the flurry and fuss, they're gone, and I'm left staring at a diminishing view of the trailer, with Dot waving merrily as they pass out of sight. It's barely three o'clock in the afternoon and I'm stranded here, nothing to do. Nowhere to go, if I have to keep out of sight. Not even the dog for company: it wouldn't leave Ollie's side for a moment. And there's a part of me, a paranoid voice in the back of my brain, that wonders if I've been suckered. Perhaps it isn't just Dr Waverley who wants me out of the way. Most frustrating of all, Alf's gone off and I still don't know who he thinks took that picture of my mother.

SUPERINTENDENT BELL: Well, now, sir. This is a bit awkward –

NASH: Don't let that hold you back, Superintendent.

SB: The thing is, they're saying around town you've got a personal reason for protecting Mrs Lester.

N: They are? And what might that be?

SB: You want me to spell it out?

N: Oh, I think so, don't you?

SB: They're saying you have an illicit relationship with the woman.

N: Illicit? I suppose you mean sexual?

SB: Well, sir –

N: I don't think that's anyone's business but our own.

SB: She's a married woman.

N: I didn't know you were my father confessor.

SB: Depends if you feel you have something to confess.

N: Don't be ridiculous.

SB: Really, Mr Nash, it's no laughing matter.

N: You're right. There's nothing remotely funny about this. For the last time, I'm making no admissions, tacit or open. No confessions, not in any sense of the word.

SB: Nevertheless, the situation leaves you open to an accusation of conflict of interest.

N: And are you accusing me of it?

SB: N...no, sir. Not at present.

N: Fair enough. When you do, *if* you do, I'll deal with the matter as it deserves. But for the present, if that's the best you can do...?

*

Pete brings me the letter with a triumphant sheepish air. He shouldn't have it, of course. He shouldn't have brought it to me. Come to that, he shouldn't even have known where to bring it. I thought Dot said nobody would. It's must be some kind of Romsey definition of a secret. I just wish that the ones I'm looking into were half as easy to penetrate.

'Saw it this morning,' he says. 'With all that stuff on the envelope, it looked like it was important. Sort of urgent, maybe, 'n it's been all over the place. I thought you maybe didn't know about it to collect it yourself. So I thought, quickest thing, pinch it when the boss wasn't looking.'

I look at the envelope. I see Pete's point. It does look important with that printed origin across the top and the way it's been redirected from one address to another, following me. I should be grateful for his efforts.

'Thanks, Pete.' I put it in my pocket. I can see he's disappointed I don't open it straight away. 'If you hang on I might be able to dredge up a copper or two for your trouble.'

'Nah.' He looks embarrassed. 'We're mates now, aren't we?'

'If you like.' The thought makes me smile. It's nice to have someone on my side. 'You're not going to get into bother for taking it?'

He shakes his head. 'Who's gonna know?'

'Now there's a question.' Mates or not, I have to ask. 'Here's another one for you. How did you know I was here?'

'Easy. Took the letter round to Alf's. He told me.'

'He did?' So much for that, then.

'He didn't want to, but after I showed him he thought he'd better. Said he wouldn't have told me if he could've brought it himself but he was just going to work. Like I said, we thought it was important.'

'Yes, you're right, Pete, it is. It was good of you to fetch it. I just don't want to open it.'

'Oh. I should've thought.' He reddens, embarrassed. He must take telegrams that bring bad news all the time. 'Sorry.'

'Never mind.'

He looks around, makes an obvious effort to change the subject. 'You staying here then?'

'For a little while.'

'Coo. What's happened to the dog lady then?'

I tap my nose. 'You know what they say. *Be like Dad, keep Mum.*'

'N' the dogs?'

'Sorry, mate, can't tell you. Careless talk.' In this case, it might just be true.

'Look, Pete, I mean it. I'd rather you didn't tell anyone I'm here.'

He draws a finger across his throat. 'Never.'

He's so serious, I want to laugh. But I don't. Instead, I have an idea. It might be some kind of reward for him, and it would be company for me. 'Are you hungry?'

'Am I ever?'

'I've got a bowl of stew with your name on it then. Come on in. If it won't spoil your tea.'

'Nah.'

He eats, and chatters, and I watch him and listen, but I don't really take in much of what he says. It's Boys' Own stuff, war and Nazi spies and how he hopes the fighting won't be over before he can join up. And I hear that, and ask him how old he is, and he tells me nearly fourteen, and I think, god, four years, surely it won't last that long? But he's chattering on, saying he thinks that by next year if he's lucky he'll look old enough to pass because his brother did and he's in the navy already. And I think of Frank and wish I hadn't fed Pete the stew after all. As far as I can see, the longer he stays small, the better. So when he finishes the helping I've given him I don't offer him more though there's plenty, and after a while he says he'd better get home for tea and scampers off. I watch him go with mixed feelings. It's getting on for dark, and though I don't mind being alone, never have, I'm acutely conscious of how out-of-the-way this place is. I see him notice the spot where Alf buried the dogs and wonder if he'll work it out. Whether curiosity will get the better of him and he'll talk, or whether he'll keep his promise not to tell anyone I'm here. I hope so, because it's finally dawned on me that if I'm right and someone did try to kill Ollie, I'm not exactly safe here myself. If I'm not just letting my imagination run away with me about that, and whoever it is comes back to see if the job's been done, I'm in trouble. Because if it was about Ollie knowing too much, I'm in the same boat. Slap bang in the firing line, the minute I see them. Because then I'll know too.

There's part of me that's fired up by the thought. I'll *know*. But mostly, I wish I hadn't let Nash and Dot strand me here. I'm bait, a tethered goat waiting for the tiger to arrive.

I shake myself out of it. I'm being ridiculous. If I'm nervous, all I've got to do is go indoors, lock myself in. Put up the blackouts, avoid answering the door to brandy drinkers and purveyors of white powder. If I use common sense, I'll be perfectly safe inside.

*

Nash has been right through the register. It's taken him most of the day. He's got to the stage where the more he tries to concentrate, the more his vision blurs. Miss Waverley has proved right, up to a point. There's no obvious listing for Ruth Taylor.

It's possible the girl was using an assumed name, in which case it's anyone's guess what he should be looking for. But against that is the fact the nuns knew her as Ruth. In any case, he can't see any reason why she'd have wanted to hide her identity. She didn't know she was going to be a victim. And it's strange that there's no entry for her at the convent. She should at least have been listed there after her arrival in the new year.

It's the first thing that makes him wonder.

As he works through the book, he takes careful note of every anomaly. The register has page numbers, top centre, as printed by the manufacturer. So he can see that page 14/15 is missing, a tag of paper showing where it has been razored out. That's the second thing. Before and after the missing leaf, the households seem to run consecutively, with nothing left out. But there are blank pages at irregular intervals throughout the book, so it's possible one could have been removed to suppress the name, and the whole page rewritten afterwards. He makes a note of the road and the affected households, but it's a street of terraced houses that are crammed together, close to the centre of town. It doesn't seem likely Ruth could have stayed there unnoticed, though it can't be ruled out. There's always the possibility of a conspiracy of silence, solidarity against authority.

And there's the third thing. In places, whoever has made corrections in the register hasn't been satisfied by simply crossing out or annotating information. Here and there, the lists have been amended with strips of stamp paper, stuck on top of an offending line and overwritten. His attempts to peel one off to see what lies underneath are unsuccessful. The paper is glued down so firmly that it rips away the page underneath, and he has to stop before he does real damage. Instead, all he can do is list each household where a correction has been made. There are – he counts them as he goes along – eighteen in total. Plenty of avenues to explore.

But there are three addresses that really stand out, though he forces himself consider the whole list dispassionately. Some of the rest, like those on the missing page, are in streets where there is little privacy. Some are in more secluded neighbourhoods, and might perhaps have harboured Ruth unseen. He won't discount them, but they're not at the top of his list. That leaves the three that are. One is the convent, where Ruth's name *doesn't* appear. The other two attract his attention for different reasons.

Common Farm is right on the outskirts of Romsey, isolated from the rest of the town. The list of names here is chaotic, multiple strips of stamp paper used to cram in four names onto three lines. It's a community in itself, insular, the sort of place where people pride themselves on keeping themselves *to* themselves. They might not have felt the need to offer information if they had any. It might be worth a visit.

And last, but by no means least, there's Ramillies Hall, where a name that looks like *Mattie Raglan* has been written on a pasted strip and crossed out; annotated with the message *Relocated 29th November 1940*.

The hair on the back of his neck bristles. Ramillies Hall. Where Ruth, when she was living at the convent, nevertheless had a hideout.

*

*Mrs R Lester
Silverbank
~~Isle of Wight~~*

*~~4 Garden Row
London, S.E.1.~~*

*Post Restante
Romsey, Hants.*

**THE WAR OFFICE CASUALTY BRANCH
BLUE COAT ~~HOSPITAL~~ School
LIVERPOOL**

23rd March 1941

Madam,
With reference to your enquiry of 29th July 1940, which was forwarded to me, I am directed to inform you that it has been announced on the German wireless that Richard Marshall Lester, born 30th November 1894, has been interned in Germany as an enemy alien. The report did not give further information regarding his status or location. The usual practice of the German Government is not to report the address of a ~~prisoner of war~~ internee until he has been placed in a permanent camp.

I am,

Madam,

Your obedient Servant,

F Algar.

I can't cry, that would be a hypocrite's trick. But I did love him once. It's appalling, to think of him consigned to some Nazi hell-hole, status unknown. And so pointedly, not a prisoner of war. What on earth does that mean?

*

He goes to the ARP post first. His quarry is there.

'Your register.'

She smirks, secures it under her hands as if it's holy writ. 'I hope you're satisfied.'

'I think so, yes. It makes interesting reading.'

'You didn't find the name, of course.'

'You made sure of that.'

'What d'you mean?' The smirk has been replaced by something like outrage. Or, it would be satisfying to think, with alarm.

He smiles. He's beginning to enjoy himself. 'Didn't you tell me you'd checked all through the register?'

'Yes, yes, I did.'

'So I wouldn't find anything, would I?'

'No. No, of course not.'

'I just wondered –'

'Yes?'

'Didn't you find it strange that her name doesn't appear at all? We know, for instance, that she was at the convent for several weeks. Sister Gervase identified the body, and she knew her as Ruth.'

Miss Waverley blusters about the difficulty of keeping the registers up to date, about how some people won't cooperate in telling the wardens about changes in household. About how there's nothing more she can help him with. He lets her talk herself dry without comment, doesn't push his advantage, though he knows he has one. He keeps his suspicions about Ramillies to himself. No point in showing his hand too early.

When she runs out of steam, he lets the silence settle a moment, then says 'I quite understand, Miss Waverley. I don't expect you to do anything further. In fact, you've helped me a great deal already. More than you realise, perhaps. I don't think it'll be long before I can say for certain where Ruth Taylor was staying when she first came to Romsey.'

‘I wish you joy of it,’ she says. But the expression on her face says something else. Now it’s definitely alarm. Confirmation, if he still needed it, that she knows more than she’s telling. ‘It’s really of no interest to me whatsoever. Now, please, I’m a busy woman. I’d be glad if you’d let me get on with my work.’

He tips his hat to her and leaves. Even now he’s sure he knows where to look, it’s not going to be easy. With Oxley dead, and the Waverleys so hostile, he’ll have to tread lightly, work out a way to go roundabout and find the information he needs.

The kitchen is warm. Dim, with the blackouts up and just one oil lamp lit. It's been a long day, full of emotion, so it's probably inevitable I should fall asleep in the armchair as soon as I've eaten my meal.

I dream I'm standing in front of a huge iron door. Around it, there's nothing, only a wilderness of barren, empty plains as far as the eye can see. It's growing dark, and though I don't want to, though I could easily avoid it, I know I have to go in through the door. I raise my hand, bang on the door. The sound echoes and echoes, as if there is some vast edifice behind the door, invisible to me. A babble of voices begins to call to me out of the twilight, but I can't make out what they're saying. A hot wind blows out of the void, bringing the smell of burning. The echo of my knock grows like the thrumming of some monstrous church bell, threatening, sinister.

'Jo.' I wake with a start. There's a knocking on the door, insistent, and a fug of smoke is rising from the enamel dish I've carelessly left on the range.

'Jo.'

'Who is it?' But I know, of course. It's Bram Nash. I just don't know what he's doing here at... a glance at my watch. Ten o'clock in the evening.

'Nash,' he says. 'Let me in.'

I go to the back door, unbolt it. Open it cautiously. Smoke rushes out, replaced by cold air coming in.

'For god's sake,' Nash says as he steps through the door. 'What happened? I was afraid – I could smell the smoke. I thought –'

'Come in.'

I turn away, go to the range where the dish is still smoking, pick it up thoughtlessly. 'Ow.' Drop it again, put my burned fingers to my mouth. 'I left my supper dish on the heat.'

He comes across the room. Takes my hand in his, looks at it. Frowns in the dim light. 'Get some cold water on that. Now.'

The tall jug by the washbasin is still half full. He pours water into the sink, a shallow puddle of cool liquid, pushes my hand down into it.

'Five minutes,' he says. 'Don't take your hand out for at least five minutes.'

With my back to the room, I can only follow what he's doing by craning over my shoulder. He picks up the jug, and so much more sensible than I, uses a cloth to pick up the fumey dish. He carries them both outside without further comment. The wind whisks into the room as he shoulders the door wide, sets my letter fluttering from the table onto the floor. I'm torn between retrieving it and keeping my stinging fingers in the water. I can hear him operating the pump out in the yard, and then he's back again, carrying the full jug of water. I notice that this time he shuts the door securely, pushes the bolt home.

'I'm glad you made the place secure,' he says as he pours more water into the bowl. It's so icy cold it makes me wince. 'Sensible of you,' he goes on. 'I discovered some things. I was concerned. I thought I'd better come and talk it over with you. See you were OK.'

'What things?'

'I think I know where Ruth must have been when she first came to Romsey. And I think I know who knew it.'

'Ramillies,' I say. 'She was there, wasn't she?'

He can't hide his surprise. 'I think so, yes. How did you know?'

'I was thinking about it today. I had plenty of time just to think. And I remembered, when I asked old Mr Oxley who looked after him, he said something about a girl who had left. Then there was the summerhouse. I can't believe a stranger to Romsey would have found that place by chance. She had to have been at Ramillies. What about you? How did you find out?'

'Like you, there was the hideout. I know we've only Pete's word for it, but I believe him. She was there. And no, she couldn't have found it by chance. And then there's the ARP register. Miss Waverley finally delivered it. She wasn't keen, but I insisted that she let me check it for myself. There's an alteration in the list for Ramillies Hall. It's not the only one, but I thought it was significant.' His voice turns musing. 'Pity. I was so sure there wouldn't be a real Mattie Raglan.'

'Mattie who?'

'Raglan. I thought it must be a made-up name to conceal Ruth's, but if Paul Oxley told you there was a girl –'

'Yes, but don't you see? It could still have been Ruth. Bram, I'm sorry, but I never thought to ask him about her. It didn't occur to me he might know. I was only thinking about Nell, trying to get him to tell me who my father was.'

'Ahh.' He sighs. 'You weren't to know. We don't seem to be very lucky with hard evidence, do we?'

'But we're not any worse off,' I say. 'It could be what you said. A cover for Ruth's name.'

'And there's the matter of who could have made alterations in the register.'

'Don't tease. Who could? Can I take my fingers out of the water now?'

'Another minute. What's this?' Over my shoulder, I see him stoop to pick up the letter.

'Don't – ' but it's too late. 'Who did have the opportunity?' I persist. Perhaps I'll be able to distract him. But it's no good. He's looking at the letter, I can see he can't help himself. He's reading it.

'Any of the people at the ARP post,' he says, abstractedly. He looks up, sees me watching. 'I'm sorry, Jo, I shouldn't have – ' He puts the letter back on the table.

'Unforgiveable,' he says, coming towards me. 'Reading your letter.'

'It doesn't matter.' But of course, it does. I take my hand out of the water, turn towards him. I didn't want him to know. I didn't want anyone to know. But now the dam's breached, it feels as if I have to explain. 'I haven't loved him for years. But you hear things... you wouldn't wish them on your worst enemy.'

He reaches out, touches my face so gently that if I'd had my eyes closed, I'd hardly have known he'd done it. 'So sorry, Jo.'

Somehow the touch, the soft words threaten my composure in a way that my brutal imaginings of the last few hours has not.

'Don't.' But when he would take his hand away, I don't let him. I grab it in icy wet fingers, crush it against my face. 'I don't want gentle,' I say. 'Bram, I can't bear it.'

It happens so fast. I'm clawing at him, dragging his face to mine for a savage kiss. I want to feel... something, anything. Even pain, so long as I'm not alone any more, not left in the dark with my thoughts. The dream, the plain, the iron door. I can't go back to that. I don't want to be shut out, helpless. Dimly, I'm aware he's not trying to fight me off, just to slow me down. His voice travels blurred through the coursing blood in my head.

'Steady, steady.'

But I can't be steady. I want everything I can take from him. I want it now, I can't wait.

There's a moment of impossible striving. When I still think he will refuse. Then I feel how my urgency lights his and he's not trying to slow me any more, he's not trying to stop me and the fire eats us both.

We don't make it upstairs. We don't even get our clothes off. Only what is urgent. What is necessary. It's over so soon and I'm sated, sore, gasping for breath.

He turns half away, straightening the disarray of his clothes. There's blood on his lip where I've bitten him. He wipes it away, stares at the smear of red on his hand. There's a look of... I don't know... shame? on his face.

'I'm sorry,' I start to say.

He shakes his head. 'No, Jo.' Another dab at his lip. He moves away, wary. To the door. His hand on the door. He reaches to draw the bolt.

He's leaving.

'Bram.'

'Lock up after me,' he says, his voice rough. 'Keep safe.'

'Bram.'

But he's gone. He's left in such a hurry there's his hat on the floor where it rolled in the frenzy of that first kiss I forced on him. I pick it up gently, as gentle as he began, lay it down on the table. My knees fail, and I sink into the bentwood chair. Touch the hat, a fingertip stroke of the brim. I want to crush it, to tear it to shreds. I want to hug it to my breast as tender as a new born babe. I lay my head down on the table, the cool surface against my cheek. Simply look, breathe in the scent of him it bears. I can't bring myself to move. To get up, to lock myself in as he suggested. Who cares what happens now? One more fingertip touch and it's over. That's all there is.

*

'What are we going to do?'

'No need to do anything.'

'But what if – he said, he could track down where that girl was.'

'Bluffing, my dear. He doesn't know anything.'

'What if he finds out?'

'How's he going to do that? The old man's dead, he's the only one who could have told him for sure.'

'Baxter?'

'Hah, Baxter. He's worse than the old man was. Can't remember his own name half the time. We'll pack him off *tout suite*, no trouble.'

'But – '

'Enough buts. It'll be all right. Have I ever failed you?'

'No, but – '

'Sssh. Enough. Go to sleep now.'

*

In the stables at Basswood House, a light burns all night. Under blackout regulations, it is carefully shielded so no one sees it, no one knows. Fan Stewart and her son sleep undisturbed in their neat quarters at the top of the house, the ARP warden fails to catch even a glimmer as he passes. Nash, in the throes of his white night, rages unseen. He has had plenty of nights without sleep before now, but none like this. There's an energy in him that burns as fierce as his forge-fire, prohibiting rest. In the morning, he knows he will be as grey as ash, but the fury that drives him is relentless. There is nothing in him that remembers how to sleep. He can't bring his mind to bear on anything. He needs to think about what he's discovered, but all he can think of is Jo.

He fingers the little silver fox he made. Was it only last week? He made it as he planned it, eager, alert. He knows it's one of the best things he's ever done, but he's tempted to hammer it flat, to break it to shreds, to put it to the fire and melt it down.

It's on his workbench, the hammer's in his hands. The fire's ready, hot. He has so little metal left, the fabric of this would give him enough to make something new.

What a fool he's been.

So determined not to get entangled.

After London, he told himself nothing significant had happened. No more than if he'd paid for his pleasure. One gaudy night would soon be forgotten.

But he was wrong.

This is payment. One night has bred its own repeat, a cobweb thread hauling him in. Not the sex, that's nothing. It's need, that destroyer of distance and perspective, that maker of fetters of steel.

The scraps run soft in the crucible. He pours molten metal into a makeshift mould. He's never done this before, he doesn't have the tools. It's all put and take.

Wait for the blank to be cool enough to work. It takes patience for that, no more burned fingers. Then, the painstaking shaping. But the time it takes has the virtue of making him calmer. When he arrives at the moment for chisel and point, his hands are steady enough to work the fine detail.

It's morning by the time he finishes. In his cloistered space feels the dawn as if he could see it. He stretches, eases his back from the work. The fire has burned right down, he can put out the light and open the blinds, let the day in.

In daylight, he can see the thing he has made is clumsier than he would have wished. Not his best piece. The metal is not perfectly circular, but he's pleased with the chased design of brambles. The silver is red with firescale, but it seems right like that. He won't pickle this piece to clean it. He turns it once more in his fingers, drops it over the little fox's head. In the end, he couldn't destroy it.

The ring slips down, rests on the animal's toes. Encircles it.

Contained, he thinks, in that dazed state that lack of sleep brings. Safely held in check.

I sleep surprisingly well. Some kind of fugue, perhaps. The dreams don't come back, but in the morning, I can't pretend it didn't happen. I'm uncomfortable, body and mind, and there's his hat on the table next to my letter. The range is out and it's chilly in the kitchen, but once I've got the blackout down and the door open, the sunshine leaching in makes me feel less dismal.

Unless I light the range, there's only cold water to wash in, and to drink. I make my ablutions, tidy the armchair where I slept. Somehow, it hadn't seemed right to use Ollie's bed. When I'm done, it's still early, and I can't face the prospect of a day wasted here, doing nothing, seeing no one. There are things to do, information still to be found.

What makes them all so sure I'll just tamely do as I'm told? I'm cold, and I'm hungry. I'm angry I've been left on the sidelines here. I don't need permission to leave. Hang Dr Waverley and his hysterics. Why should I give him the satisfaction of knowing he's driven me out? And hang Bram Nash and his scruples, too. It was sex, nothing more. Not all that much to write home about, either.

There's no key for the back door, so all I can do is shoot the bolt, go out through the front. The key's a monster, and I have to wrestle it out of the keyhole. I'll take it to Dot's, for Ollie, and she can do what she likes about explaining that her unwilling guest has flown. I don't know where I'll sleep tonight, but I really don't care. I sling the basket of my belongings over my shoulder, and set off for town.

*

'You'll let me know what Struther says as soon as you can?'

'Of course. Don't worry, my dear.'

'But I do. Must you stay in London tonight? What if there's a raid?'

'The hotel's got good deep cellars, my dear. And the raids are nothing like so bad as they were in the autumn. I'll be back by midday tomorrow, we can go across to the house together then.'

'If Struther says it's all right.'

'It will be. Now, here's the train.'

'I still think – what about Ollie? I could go and see her today.'

'I don't want you to do that. I don't want you to go anywhere near her. I told you, I'll take care of her. Now, promise me?'

'Oh –'

'Promise?'

'Yes, all right. If I must.'

'Good girl. I'll telephone tonight.'

*

At Dot's, I find breakfast is over, my sometime landlady busy washing up. She takes one look at my face and abandons the sink. 'Blimey, girl, what's wrong with you?'

I'm not cold any more, the walk's seen to that, but I'm hungrier and crosser than when I set out. 'Nothing to eat,' I say. With any luck she'll take it as an acceptable excuse. 'I let the range go out at the cottage, I couldn't even have a cup of tea.'

'Easy remedied,' she says, pulling the kettle over the range. 'Sit down a minute.'

It's a relief being here. I hadn't realised how anxious the isolation of the cottage had made me feel. It's warm and friendly here, and in what seems like moments there's a cup of tea in front of me, and she's reheating a pan of porridge. 'Just needs a bit of milk,' she says. That'll loosen it up.'

'How's Ollie?' I ask.

'She's doing all right. She's in the parlour with Pa. Fine pair they make, dozing in front of the fire with that dratted dog.'

'I'm glad.'

'I don't want you to disturb her,' she says. 'So long as you don't go through, she won't know you're here. We still haven't told her –'

'It's all right, I won't go and upset her. Has she said anything about what happened?'

Dot shakes her head. 'Says she can't remember.' She passes me a bowl. 'You'll feel better with that inside you.'

I already feel better, but it's good to eat. 'Do you think –'

'I don't think anything,' she says. 'I leave that to you and Mr Nash. I just get on with picking up the pieces.'

Which pretty much tells me where to get off. Chastened, I eat my porridge in silence while she finishes the washing up. When I'm done, I take the bowl across to her.

'Dot, look, I'm – I didn't mean to – I'm sorry. I'll get out of your hair.'

She turns towards me. Smiles, though it's a bit forced. 'It's all right, Mrs Lester. Not your fault. Just, well, Miss Olivia's special to me. First job I had was looking after her. Never had one of my own, so it's hard to see her like she was yesterday.'

There's the unexpected prick of tears behind my eyelids. What's happening to me? It's ridiculous to feel so sentimental.

Dot pats my arm. 'Never mind,' she says. 'Don't you worry. Give it a couple of days and you can come back to us. If I know her, she'll want to be back at her cottage as soon as she's feeling up to the mark. You get on and I'll put a few things ready for you. Alf can drop them over later, light the range for you and that.'

'There's no need for that. I can manage. But I'd like a word with Alf if he's around.'

'He's out in the shed,' she says. There's a knock at the front door. 'Now, who's that?' She hesitates. 'You'll see yourself out?'

'Yes. Thanks for the breakfast, Dot.'

'No trouble.' She waves my thanks away as the knock comes again. 'Excuse me.' She bustles off.

I suppose it's curiosity that keeps me in the empty kitchen. Or perhaps I know who it will be, coming to Dot's front door. I don't want to see him, but I do want to know what he's doing here.

A murmur of voices. I can't hear the words, but I know it's Nash. I don't think Dot's likely to bring him into the kitchen, but I'm not going to take the risk. I go to the outside door, stand with it ajar, ready to leave.

Dot seems to be arguing with him, but I don't think she'll get far if he's made up his mind. No, that's the parlour door opening and closing. He's come for that appointment with Ollie. Let him sort it out. I've got other things to do. I slip out into the back garden before Dot comes back to the kitchen. Now to tackle Alf.

*

A tenant in tail of full age shall have power to dispose by will, by means of a devise or bequest referring specifically either to the property or to the instrument under which it was acquired or to entailed property generally – (a) of all property of which he is tenant in tail in possession at his death (*Law of Property Act 1925; Part X:176,1*)

Nash takes no notice of Dot's black look. He's come to see Ollie, and see her he will. Dammit, it's what she wanted.

When he's made it clear he's not budging, Dot shows him grudgingly into the parlour.

‘Miss Olivia.’ Dot speaks gently, as if to a child. ‘Wake up. Mr Nash is here to see you.’

‘Oh.’ Ollie opens her eyes. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. Can’t think what’s wrong with me. I keep dropping off.’

‘You wanted to see me,’ Nash says. ‘I’m here, if you feel up to it.’

‘Of course.’ She looks at Dot and the old man. ‘I’m afraid it’s rather confidential.’

‘I’ll go, Miss Olivia. No need to worry about Pa, he won’t wake up till lunch time. Besides, he can’t hear what you’re saying.’

Nash cocks his eyebrow at Ollie.

She nods. ‘Thank you, Dot. If you wouldn’t mind?’

He thinks it’s poor grace that takes the older woman out of the room, but she does go. ‘What can I do for you, Ollie? How can I help?’

‘It’s hazy,’ she says, ‘after yesterday. I hardly know – Dot is being so protective. But I seem to think you must have saved my life.’

What can he say to that? ‘Your little heater,’ he says. ‘It’s not wise to have it burning in a closed-up room.’

‘I know.’ Her face is troubled. ‘I thought... I was *sure*... oh, I can’t remember. Never mind. I wanted to see you, I told Jo.’

‘That’s right. She asked me to call. That’s why I turned up yesterday morning.’

‘Lucky for me that you did. I wanted to talk to you... She told me my father died?’

‘I’m afraid so, yes. It must have been a shock.’

‘She didn’t know he was my father.’

‘No. Not till you told her.’

‘I want you to break the entail, Mr Nash. If it’s possible, if there’s any way. I don’t want to inherit Ramillies.’

‘Are you referring to the conditions of the first Sir Paul’s will?’

‘Well, yes. Of course.’

‘That was a very mischievous document. And in fact, since the Property Act of 1925 its conditions cannot stand. The act means a testator cannot bind property in perpetuity. What happens to Ramillies will depend on how your father left the property.’

‘And that was?’

‘I don’t know. Whatever testamentary provisions he made, they weren’t made with Nash, Simmons and Bing.’

‘You haven’t got his will?’

'I'm afraid not. After my father died, your father took his business elsewhere. Your – Dr Waverley changed his solicitor around the same time, I believe. I heard the name Struther mentioned. It's a London firm.'

'Oh. I see. But you could act for me?'

'Of course. But I'm surprised you haven't heard from your father's solicitors already. Would Dr Waverley not have told them?'

She seems to shrink in on herself, and for the first time since he arrived, Nash wonders if she really is well enough to deal with this.

'I don't know.' She shivers, despite the warmth of the room and her blanket. 'I haven't... I haven't seen him. I told you, if it hadn't been for Jo I wouldn't have known. He hasn't... he hasn't... I don't know, I don't...'

'Please, don't distress yourself,' Nash says. 'Time enough to think about all of this when you're better. I'll act for you in whatever way I can.'

'I won't have to see Eddie?'

'Not if you don't want to. Or at least – ' He doesn't like to tell a client outright lies. 'I promise, whatever happens, you won't have to see him alone.'

*

Inside the shed, there's the sound of metal on metal. Something being filed? I tap on the door. 'Alf?'

The noise stops. The door opens, just a crack, and Alf peers out. 'Mrs Lester.'

'Can I have a word?'

'Sure thing.' He comes out, carefully not letting me see inside the shed.

'Busy?' I ask, mock innocent.

'Never you mind.' He laughs. 'What you don't know won't hurt you.'

'That's what I want to talk about. Something you know and I don't.'

His turn to look innocent. 'What's that then?'

'Yesterday, at the cottage, you said you thought you knew who might have taken that photograph Pete found.'

'Yep, I did. Probably shouldnt've said anything, but I was upset about the dogs and that.'

Feeling my way cautiously, I say, 'The picture's old. It must have been taken a long time ago. But you still think – ?'

'I told you,' he says. 'I recognised the thing she was lying on.'

'And will you tell me? Who took it, Alf?'

A pause. He doesn't look at me. And then, 'He's a dirty old man, that's what he is. Takes pictures of all the kids. Line up, stand against a screen, one at a time, just in your knickers. Says it's a study. Medical records. That's bad enough, makes you feel dirty, ashamed. But there's some, you hear he gets them back in his consulting room. Gives them sweeties, dresses them up for pictures. Dirty stuff.'

I feel as if I've swallowed a brick of ice. I know already, but I need him to say it. 'Tell me, Alf. You have to give me his name.'

'Dr Waverley,' he spits out. 'I hate him. Everyone thinks he's so good, but he's a bastard. Look what he did to her.' He jerks his head towards the house.

I didn't think I could feel any colder, but I do. 'What do you mean?'

'Dot told me he tried to have her put away. She lives out there in that cottage hand to mouth, while he swans around like Lord Muck. Bloody bastard.'

'Yes.' It feels like an effort to speak. 'Thank you for telling me.'

He looks at me properly, now he's said it. Now the pressure of what he knows has been shared, he seems relieved.

'You don't look so hot, missus.'

'I'm all right. Just... cross, Alf. Like you.' Worse than that, much worse. But I don't want him to know it. I can't stand it. I can't... the bastard I've been looking for... I don't...

I start to move away, round the side of the house.

'What are you going to do?' Even through the haze of my thoughts, I hear the anxiety in Alf's voice.

I don't know. 'I don't know.'

I don't know.

*

They meet at the front gate, each with their preoccupations, their own thoughts to think. And embarrassed. Each, in their own way, embarrassed. So much to say, and no words for it, meeting unexpectedly like this. The dance is broken, there's no stately sarabande to guide their steps. It's all impromptu now.

'Jo,' he says. His hand was first on the gate, he can stop her leaving. 'We need to talk.'

Her face averted, 'not now,' she says, through gritted teeth. 'Let me pass.'

He stands firm. 'Not yet.'

She turns her face to him. Her pale skin is as white as milk, as marble, as snow. Her gaze is hard, such an intensity of pain he can't help himself. He steps back, leaves the way open. She's through the gate in a flash.

'Jo.'

'Later,' she says. 'I'll come in to the office later.'

*

The pain comes in waves. Like childbirth, I suppose, though I've never given birth to a child. Like a stone in the kidney, gripping, a blockage that won't be dislodged, a useless warning, functionality destroyed.

Waverley took the picture.

Waverley might be –

Even in my own head, I can't complete the thought.

Waverley, the bastard –

The bastard I've been looking for?

I don't know what I'll say when I get there, but I'm determined to confront him.

Make him admit –

The photograph.

My mother.

Ruth. How did Ruth get the photograph of my mother?

I know the doctor's house, The Briars. The summer fetes

My... fate?

No, not mine, his. He has to answer, he has to tell.

Beard the old lion in his den, the bastard

I'm a bastard.

His bastard...?

The pain convulses me. I think of what Alf said. What you don't know won't hurt you.

I think of Nash's face, so shocked as I passed.

What will I tell them after this?

Nash is late again at the office. Two days in a row, and nothing in the diary. No wonder Miss Haward looks shocked.

‘Mr Hollis called, sir.’

‘What did he want this time?’

‘He wanted to know if the codicil was ready.’

‘And is it?’

‘On your desk, sir. Waiting with some other papers for your approval.’ Which she obviously doesn’t. Approve, that is.

‘You didn’t give him an appointment, I hope?’

‘No, sir. I didn’t like to, the way things have been.’ She sniffs, prim and repressive. ‘I told him I’d have to wait until I’d spoken to you. He was rather annoyed. I should think he’ll telephone again later.’

‘I’m sure he will. Tell him – oh, I don’t know. What about Monday? That should be all right. He can come and sign it in the morning, if he hasn’t changed his mind again by then.’

‘I’m afraid he won’t like that. He told me this morning he was having palpitations. He’s concerned he might die before he can sign.’

‘The old devil’s as strong as an ox, he’ll see us all out. If he insists, you could suggest that Mr Bing might be able to see him before the weekend.’

‘Very well, sir. I assume you’ll want to check the insertion yourself?’

The emphasis on *sir*, her insistence on peppering every other phrase with it tells him, if he needed to be told, just how annoyed she is with him. Like Mr Hollis, she’ll have to put up with it. ‘I’ll see to it, Aggie. Anything else?’

‘A Superintendent Bell telephoned. He wants to speak to you. He left a number. I said I’d ask you to call him back.’

‘Did he say what he wanted?’

‘He offered no information at all, sir. Except that it was confidential.’

'Well, I'll be in my office, Aggie. I'm not to be disturbed unless Mrs Lester calls or comes into the office. I want to see her as soon as possible.'

'Very well, sir. Shall I get Cissie to bring you coffee?'

'Thank you.'

'And a biscuit?'

'Aggie...'

'Sir.'

It'll be arrowroot today, for sure. He hasn't earned anything nicer.

*

The Briars is a nice house. When I was a child, its position near the hospital gave it importance, a role to play. Like the Rectory close to the Abbey, its incumbent was always at hand, ready for any emergency. Now, with the hospital moved to higher ground, it seems ordinary, somehow, any special significance lost.

I still don't know what I'm going to say, but my anger carries me up to the front door without a pause. I ring the bell, knock, ring again, but no one comes.

I won't go away just like that. There must be someone home. I crunch across gravel to a brick arch at the side of the house, where a gate leads through to the back. I'm expecting someone to challenge me as I pass in front of the bay windows, but nothing happens. The gate has a black iron latch, but no lock. From the garden beyond I can hear a rhythmic noise, like chopping wood. The sound of a voice, cheerfully vigorous, singing *Onward, Christian Soldiers*, is punctuated by the strokes of sound. I'm puzzled for a moment, and then it comes to me. It's a woman beating a carpet.

I lift the latch, go through. The singing and the flogging beat get louder as I walk along the side of the house to the back garden. The glorious space, site of those summer garden parties, is the same as it ever was, except that today there are no stalls or coconut shies. Only red-cheeked girl in the uniform of a maid, and a pile of rugs. There's a carpet already hung over the washing line: bright with sumptuous colours, orange and gold. The maid, rattan carpet beater in hand, falters when she sees me, hits the rug a glancing blow. It slips from the line, slithers onto the grass below.

'Oh bother.' And then, 'What do you want? See what you've made me do.'

'I'm sorry to disturb you,' I say. 'I'm looking for Dr Waverley.'

'He's not here,' she says sullenly. 'Neither of them are. Went out first thing. Give me a hand, can't you? If it hadn't been for you...'

She's trying to get the golden carpet back onto the line. I move forward, help her wrestle it back. It's a beautiful thing, with a long silky fringe that blows in the breeze, but it's awkward to lift.

'Ta,' the maid mutters, picking up the beater again.

'Do you know when the doctor will be back? Or Miss Waverley?'

'He's gone to London. Not coming back till tomorrer.' *Bang*. She hits the rug a hefty blow, and a cloud of dust rises from it. 'Dirty old thing. Picks up the dust something chronic. Only did it last week.'

'And Miss Waverley?'

'Gone over the big house. Measuring up, shouldn't wonder, and the poor old bloke not even cold.'

Can she mean Mr Oxley? 'She's gone to Ramillies?'

'That's right.' *Bang*. Another hammer blow. 'Can't wait, can she? Get the rugs done, Mary, we'll want them fresh at the Hall. Polish the silver, Mary, we'll take it up to the Hall. Says it's for the funeral, but that's all my eye. They'll have their feet under the table before sexton gets the hole filled in.'

She's being remarkably indiscreet, but I don't mind taking advantage of it.

'They're moving to Ramillies Hall?' I know Nash said the Waverleys were related to Oxley, and of course he's married to Ollie, but surely she must be the heir? It doesn't seem likely she'd agree to live with him again

'It's what they seem to think.' *Bang*. Another vicious thump of the beater, another cloud of dust. 'Oh, Eddie, it's our birthright. *Bang*. Make a cat spit, she would. But if she thinks – *bang* – I'm going – *bang* – with them – *bang* – to that ruddy great – *bang* draughty old – *bang* – falling down dump – *bang* – they got another – *bang* – think coming.'

At the last *bang* of the carpet beater, the rug falls off the line again.

'Drat it,' she says. 'It'll have to do.'

'Would you like me to give you a hand?'

'Wouldn't I?' she says. 'Heavy blimmin' thing. If you just grab that side?'

We lift it between us, shuffle our way indoors. I catch fleeting glimpses of a scullery as we pass through, get an impression of a chilly cold kitchen that reeks of bacon fat. Then we're through the green baize door and into the hallway beyond, an altogether different kind of space. From the flashes of brass and gloomy oil paintings I get as we

struggle past, everything is perfectly in keeping with the status of the town's senior doctor.

'Last door on the end,' the maid pants. 'Study.'

Like the hallway, the study's fitted up to suit a man of substance. Everywhere I look, there's the solid gleam of polished wood and metal. Oak panelling, a magnificent fireplace, fire irons that wouldn't disgrace a medieval knight's equipage. Silver-framed diplomas on the walls, testifying to the achievements of the Great Man. But I'm past being impressed by Waverley. The stink of him, stale tobacco and musty tweed, fills the room. Makes me feel sick.

Arms aching, I'm about to drop the rug onto the floor, when the maid stops me.

'Doesn't go on the floor,' the maid says. 'Blimey, whatever next? Gotta put it over the ottoman.'

So we drape it to her satisfaction and all the while I'm wondering if he keeps the photographs here, or if they're in his consulting rooms up at the hospital. What wouldn't I give for a minute alone in here to search. But it's not going to happen. The maid might be indiscreet, but she's not daft enough to let me go rummaging about in her master's things.

'Fancy a cuppa?' the girl says. 'The missus won't be back for ages yet.'

I look at my watch. 'I'd better not.' If Waverley and his sister are out, there's nothing I can do here. I might as well get the meeting with Nash over and done with. It'll only get worse, the longer I leave it.

'If you don't mind me saying,' she says, as she sees me out through the back door, 'you don't seem like one of the missus's friends. Wouldn't catch any of them helping out. Not if I was drowning.'

I smile. 'No. I'm not a friend.'

'Won't go telling on me, then?' She giggles. 'Not that I care. Soon as the funeral's over, I'm off. Got a job up Winchester way. War stuff, hush hush. Better pay'n this and no bloody rugs. Ain't half looking forward to seeing her face when I tell her.'

'Sounds like fun.' I'm at the gate, ready to go.

'I'll tell them you called, shall I?'

I shrug. 'If you like.' I'm out through the gate now.

'Hey. You never told me your name.'

I wave, walk away.

'Hey.'

*

‘Can we start by not saying sorry to each other?’

‘What?’ Nash is startled. This isn’t what he expected.

‘Oh, you know. I’m sorry for having coerced you, you’re sorry I was ever born.’

Her tone is brittle enough to break them both.

‘That’s not – ’

‘These things happen. Maybe it’ll happen again, maybe it won’t. We’re adults, if there’s a spark, if sometimes there’s a spark and we choose to... it’s no one’s business but ours who we choose to shag.’

‘That’s such an ugly word.’

‘You prefer fuck?’

‘As it happens, I do.’

‘Ugly word for an ugly deed – ’

‘Shut up, Jo.’ He closes the distance between them. ‘We have to thrash it out, but...’ His gaze falls on something glittering and fine on her arm. He reaches to pick it off. ‘What’s this?’

She peers at the orange fibre. ‘A hair, I suppose. One of mine. Looks the right colour.’

‘This isn’t a hair. Oh, I grant you, it’s not far off your colour, but – I’ve seen one like this before.’

He moves to his desk, lays the thread down on the blotting pad. ‘See. It’s too fine for a hair. It’s silk. Careful now, don’t make a draught or it’ll blow away.’

She pulls out a hair, lays it beside the other. ‘You’re right, it isn’t mine. I suppose it must have come off Waverley’s rug.’

[now you’re getting there]

‘What?’

‘It’s a long story. I was helping Waverley’s maid with a rug from his study. Why does it matter?’

‘Because of this.’ He pulls an envelope from a drawer, opens it. Takes out a folded piece of paper. It’s dated, “15th April 1941”. Underneath, “*Fibre retrieved from body of unknown girl*”. It’s signed with his name. He unfolds the paper, discloses what’s inside. An orange–golden thread that shifts in the slightest movement of air. A perfect twin of the one on his blotting pad.

[warm]

'You got this –'

'From Ruth Taylor's body.'

[getting warmer]

'It came from Waverley's rug.'

He folds the paper away, puts it back in the envelope. Picks up another blank scrap and writes on it. *"23rd April. Fibre retrieved from Mrs Lester's sleeve. Possible origin, rug in Dr Waverley's study"*. Signs it. Folds the filament from his blotting pad into it, puts it in a separate envelope. Sticks down the flap.

'Sign across here,' he says. 'Date it.'

She does. 'Possible? It's got to be that.'

[boiling]

'To stand up in court,' he says, 'we'd need a proper sample. Taken by an independent witness. A policeman, for preference.'

'So you'll take it to the police?'

'I don't know, Jo. At this stage, it's just supposition.'

[cold]

'You can tie her body to his study, and it's supposition? What the hell does it take to convince you?'

'I'm convinced,' he says. 'But I'm a lawyer too. Think how this looks. He'd only have to say there were two threads on your sleeve, and we used them to fabricate evidence against him.'

[getting colder]

'He'll get away with it.'

[freezing]

He hears the anguish in her voice, but he feels none. Only a steely determination. 'Oh, no. Not now we know where to look. It all comes back to Waverley. We just have to get evidence he can't contest.'

She paces. 'What can we do?'

'It wants thinking through. Carefully thinking through. It won't help if we go off at half-cock.'

*

So much stuff going round in my head I can't make sense of it all. I can't keep track of what Nash is saying.

My father, identified. Relationship, shelved. Evidence found. Murderer...

murderer...

evidence, conclusive evidence that that man,

that my father...

that Dr Waverley is the man who...

Ruth was in Waverley's study the night she died.

Waverley...

Why don't I tell Nash what Alf told me about the photograph, that Waverley probably took it?

Why don't I just tell him...

I don't want to say it.

I don't want to admit

that man's my father.

With half my brain, I'm conscious Nash is laying out the sensible course. I nod and agree as he explains about chains of evidence, building a case. It's all so dreary. So horribly likely to go wrong. He talks about interviewing Baxter, Oxley's manservant, so I tell him what the maid told me, that Miss Waverley's gone to measure up at Ramillies, ready to move in.

'Has she just?' The light of battle gleams in his eye. 'We'll see about that.' And he gives me some footling task to do, something about Ruth's ration book, and he's off up to Ramillies in Mercer's taxi before I've had time to draw breath.

After he's gone, I think he's not the only one who can go on a quest. With Waverley away and his sister fully occupied, the field's clear for me to investigate. Forget ration books, I'm starting with Waverley's consulting room.

[now you're getting warm again]

It's raining, it's pouring, the old man's snoring...

When it's wet outside the boys get restless. No one wants to go home, me least of all. Grandfather hates the rain, it makes him more bad tempered than usual. Cooped up in the cottage, nine of us sometimes if Tom's home. Better stay out of the way.

Can't play at Jem's. His dad's a policeman, his dad is. He was on duty last night, he'll be sleeping today. We'll have to creep like little mice if we're there.

Can't play at Billy's. His house is smaller than ours.

Bert's. We can get lost on the farm, outhouses and barns all over the place. There's no one to bother us there.

It's just that Bert's so mean. Scrumping flaked maize from the grain store. 'It'll swell up inside till you burst,' Bert says. Billy, who just ate a handful, looks like he's gonna cry.

Chopping up wizened-up sugar beet in the mangle chopper. Pieces come out juicy and sweet but you gotta play fast and loose with your fingers when the blade goes round.

Sliding down the hay in the hay barn, till the cowman shouts 'Scram!' 'cos we're spoiling the cattle's fodder.

Looking for kittens in the stacks of baled straw. The black cat Fluffy has given birth, and if Bert finds them, he'll drown them in a bucket. 'Give you a penny if you can find them,' he says. His dad'll give him thruppence. Smallest of all, I wriggle deep into the stacks. Straw down my neck, straw scratching my legs, nose running with dust. One false move and I'd be squashed like a beetle. The nest's deep in, Fluffy purring over three blind kittens.

I wouldn't tell on her for a thousand quid.

The boys run off to play in the tractor shed, pretending to fire up the old Burrell steam engine, climbing up through the big iron wheels to the cab. Bert says girls aren't allowed on the engine, but I don't care. I just wonder if I could get a saucer of milk to the cat without being found out.

Dropping stones down the old well in the pighouse. Counting till you hear the splash. 'Three hundred foot deep,' Bert says, but that's another lie. You can smell the iron tang of the water, see it splash as the stone goes in.

There's an art to theft, going unnoticed in a place you're not supposed to be. I've spent a lot of time in hospitals, one way or another, and so long as you look as if you know where you're going, no one challenges you. It's quarter to three, almost visiting hour. Hair tucked into a snood to hide the tell-tale colour, I try to look anonymous, vaguely official. So long as I don't bump into Grandfather, I should be all right. I know Waverley's safely out of the way, and the woman on the front desk said his secretary only works mornings. She apologised for the inconvenience, but I couldn't be happier.

I step into the corridor leading to Waverley's office. If someone asks what I'm doing, I can make an excuse about getting lost. But it's deserted, there's no one to ask me anything. For form's sake, I knock on Waverley's door.

No answer. I turn the handle and go inside.

There's a desk where Waverley's secretary must sit, a door beyond which leads to the inner sanctum. I knock on that door too, but no one answers. Not that I'm going to go in straight away. I need to make sure I can get away if I need to. There's a small window at the far side of the room. I open the sash, poke my head out. A blank wall to the right, windows that must be Waverley's inner office close by on the left. Ahead, there's nothing overlooking the window. It's only a short drop to the ground, where a narrow bank skirts the building, then there's an overgrown cutting falling thirty foot or more to a rough piece of ground beside the railway. I could go that way if I need to. I draw back, leave the window wide.

There's a key on the inside of the outer office door and I turn it, lock myself in. Put the key safe in my pocket. Another minute gained if I need it. I take a deep breath, open the consulting room door. The room smells so strongly of Waverley's mix of cigarettes and tweed it's almost a physical presence. Though I know he's far away, I half expect him to rise up out of the shadows like the Demon King.

But he doesn't, and I steel myself to go on. It's dark in here, the windows I noticed before blocked by fixed shutters. I leave the door to the secretary's room open so I can see what I'm doing without having to put on a light.

After the institutional green-and-cream of the corridors, this room is amazingly opulent, fitted out like a grand drawing room. There's a red turkey carpet, an impressive desk and chair. A Chinese lacquer screen cuts off one corner, shields whatever's behind it from view. The only sign that this is a consulting room is a stainless steel trolley which stands to one side of the screen, stethoscope laid ready on the top.

I try the desk first. There's only one drawer that will open. Waverley obviously doesn't think it's worth locking up this jumble of accumulated stuff. Rusty paperclips, a broken leather bootlace, the stub of a lipstick. A jar of aniseed balls.

A thermometer, some surgical gloves. The gloves make me think of fingerprints. I've been careless so far, but it isn't too late. I put on a pair. Rub over the surfaces I can remember touching.

Now for the dragon in the corner.

I cross the room, pull the screen aside. I'm ready for it, expecting it, but even so my heart clutches when I see the couch behind. All very proper with its starched linen drawsheet, but unmistakeable. The twisty legs, the animal feet. Alf was right. It is the one from the picture of my mother.

At the foot of the couch, right in the corner, there's another door. A red light bulb is fixed to the wall beside it. A notice says "*Dark Room. Do not enter.*"

As I open the door, there's a whoosh of stale air, a chemical reek. It's absolutely black inside, but a switch turns on another red light bulb hanging unshaded from the ceiling. Though it's not much bigger than a cupboard, the little room's been nattily fitted out. There's a bench, a sink, a pile of stacked trays. A drying line overhead, pegs twisting at angles along its length, an array of iodine-brown bottles lined up on top of two narrow filing cabinets.

I try the drawer of the nearest one. It opens.

To start with, it doesn't seem as if Waverley's got anything to hide after all. The files crammed in these drawers are all patient records. Some of the paperwork seems to date back as far as the last war. There are photographs, but they're of wounds and amputations, stomach-churning, but not illicit. My courage begins to fail. The only crime here is paper-hoarding.

I try the second cabinet. It's locked.

That's more like it.

I take the bottles off the top, stand them on the floor. Drag the cabinet just far enough out from the wall to tip it. It makes an unholy racket, but once it's tilted, it's easy enough to reach underneath and release the lever that locks the cabinet. I ease it down, breath catching. Has anyone heard?

Far off, there's the sound of a bell, doors banging, voices. Visiting hour. With luck, the noise I made will be put down to that.

I open the top drawer. Like the other, it's crammed. Folders labelled "Board School". Pictures of children in their underwear. These are what Alf was talking about. The children look cowed, miserable, but however exposing, they seem to be official. Year by year, the pictures show each child standing against a yardstick. On the back of the photographs, there are details of age and weight, some kind of percentile calculation. The next drawer's the same. Folder after folder, records of growth and development. There's a set of pictures of faces gridded with lines and measurements. They make me feel uneasy, but their purpose, outwardly at least, is scientific.

But when I get to the bottom drawer, I hit gold. Gold Flake tins, the kind that hold fifty cigarettes. Two neat stacks of them, the same as the lid we found at the summerhouse. I pick up the top one, open it.

Photographs. Anything but official. Not my mother this time, but the same. A girl in early adolescence. Wearing, or mostly not wearing, rags. Hand and face dirty, bare feet. Traces of tears and bruises. I don't recognise her, but that doesn't make it any better.

Tin after tin the same. Oh, different girls, different poses, but the same intent. Inside each lid there's a bit of tape with initials. C.H; I.W; L.D.

Crouched on the floor, surrounded by open tins, I have to fight not to be sick all over again. No time for that. I pick two photographs, shove them in my pocket. Shut and stack the tins. I don't know if I've kept them in the same places. I don't care. Let him make a fuss if he dares. Forgetting, I bang the drawer shut. Regret it at once. The echo is as loud as a gunshot. Much more cautiously, but not much more quietly, I wrench the cabinet back against the wall.

My hand's on the light switch when I hear footsteps outside. Purposeful this time. A hand rattles the outer door.

'Is there anyone there?'

I hold my breath. The rattle comes again.

'It's all right, Joe. It's locked.'

Slower steps, halting.

'You sure?' My grandfather's voice. I think my heart has stopped.

'See for yourself.'

The rattle again, more determined.

'It's gotta be the pipes. You know what they're like. It'll be another airlock.'

A pause. The footsteps move off.

No time to tidy up. Waverley will know someone has been in here as soon as he comes inside, but it's just too bad. I switch out the light, close the door, push the screen back in place. In the secretary's office, I pause, draw breath. Everything seems quiet. I've got the key in my hand, ready to unlock the door, when I hear a cough.

Grandfather. As if I can see him, I know. The old devil is lying in wait.

Lightning fast, I turn back. Drop the key into a jar on the secretary's desk. At the window, it's a struggle to squeeze through. I don't want to land on my head, and my legs scrape as I twist to drop feet first. On the ground, I stumble and lurch to the top of the slope. I should've thought to close the window behind me, but it's too late now. Someone's shouting, the door's rattling determinedly beyond. I can't go back.

I launch myself into the undergrowth, worming my way into the empty spaces beneath the bushes. Brambles tear my skin. Never mind the scratches, just get under cover.

My hands and knees shred, but I don't stop. My hair catches on thorns as I leave dignity and my snood behind. But it doesn't matter, I've got the pictures safe.

While it's still daylight out there, deep in the bushes it's pretty much dark. I don't think anyone will be able to see me hunkered down in here. But my pursuers have thought of that. Someone's brought a torch. A light stabs down through the bushes, searching into the hidden spaces. I make myself as small as possible, turn my face away from the light. Freeze as the beam searches along the slope. There are voices, too close for comfort. The hunt is up.

'There's someone out there, I tell you.'

'Can't see anything.'

'Something moving.'

'You're imagining it, man.'

'Listen, you fools.'

I hear it myself. Movement in the bushes beside me. I put my head right down as the torch beam moves closer. There's the sudden musk reek of dog fox, the sense of a presence going past.

A shout of laughter goes up. The light withdraws.

'It's your namesake, Joe.'

'You've woken Brer Fox.'

'Come away, man. Get in out of the damp. There's a cuppa going cold inside.'

I wait a long time, cramped and stiffening. A train goes by and the fox comes back but still I wait. I'm locked into my hiding place. I'll have to move eventually, but I don't know where to go, who to go to.

Nash has had a frustrating afternoon. Oxley's manservant, Baxter, is almost senile. He couldn't seem to understand that his master was dead, and as for remembering the girl – it was hopeless. If she'd given birth in front of the old man, he wouldn't have remembered. Not unless it had happened fifty years ago.

His encounter with Edith Waverley was equally strange. He'd found her in the dining room, blinds drawn but all the lights on. She was emptying a china cabinet, making stacks of dusty cups and saucers on an even dustier table. She'd greeted him with open hostility. *What do you want now? Things to do. Uncle's funeral.* He'd taken a certain amount of satisfaction from telling her he would be acting on behalf of Mrs Olivia Waverley in the matter of her father's will. Edith was shocked, he could see that. There'd been the gleam of something desperate, almost hunted in her eyes as she looked around the room. He might have felt sorry for her, until she snapped that Ollie was mad, unfit to live in a place like this. But it was Edith, he thought, who looked mad, clutching a precious Minton teacup so tightly in her hands he was surprised it didn't break.

It's getting late when Jo comes in. He hadn't been expecting her. He certainly wasn't expecting her like this, hair dishevelled, scratches on her face and legs. Even a tear in her skirt.

'What's happened?' he says. 'You look as if –'

'I've been dragged through a hedge backwards?' she finishes for him. 'Well, I have, in a manner of speaking.'

She tells him. He tries not to shout at her. Hasn't she understood anything? About evidence, about what is admissible? The photographs are terrible, but out of context, they prove nothing. And as soon as Waverley hears there's been an intruder, sees someone's been in his darkroom, he'll get rid of the rest. Destroy the evidence.

'But he's away till tomorrow,' I say. 'Can't you get someone to go in now? Sergeant Tilling? Surely he'll listen now?'

‘Indecent photographs?’ Nash says. He almost spits it. I’ve never seen him so angry. ‘It’s bad, of course it’s bad, but we want Waverley for Ruth’s death. For her murder.’

‘That’s her,’ I say, pointing to one of the photographs I stole. Given Waverley’s predilection for young girls, it’s not surprising he chose her. She looks much younger than the sixteen we know she was. Like my mother, who always looked young for her age. ‘She’s pregnant, you can see it. He knew. He must have...’

‘It’s still not proof.’

‘What about this one?’ I say. It’s different from the others. An outdoor scene. A girl in water, floating like Millais’ Ophelia, flowers all around. She’s naked, and she can’t be more than ten. I never knew her, but I know who she is. I’ve seen the portrait in Ollie’s cottage.

‘Incest’s a crime,’ I say. ‘Don’t you see? Ruth had a tin of his photographs. If he was afraid she’d expose him, it’s a motive for him to kill her.’

‘I don’t deny it,’ he says, and the heavy patience in his tone is worse by far than his anger. ‘But we can’t prove it, can we? None of it. Not incest, not murder. There’s no real evidence, just our word against his.’

‘You’re scared,’ I say. I’m blind with anger, so much I don’t care what I say. ‘Just like the others. Scared of Mr-I-am. Just like she was.’ Like trumps in a card game, I slap the original photograph down on the table. ‘My mother. It makes me sick to think of, but – he’s my father.’

There’s a long, long, pause. Nash rubs his face in his hands. ‘I know,’ he says.

‘You – know?’

He hands a piece of paper across the desk to me. It’s a letter.

I acknowledge that the female infant born to Ellen Fox on 5th July 1901 is my child. In respect of this (and so long as the matter remains secret between us) I undertake to pay Mrs Rose Fox the sum of £12 per annum until she or the child shall die or the child attains independence.

It’s signed by Edward Waverley.

I drop the letter back on Nash’s desk. If I say anything, I’ll say too much. I turn on my heel and walk out.

*

In the candlelight, the barrel of the gun gleams. Tucked into the shed roof in its wrappings, the steam from a succession of baths doesn’t seem to have damaged it. Its hour is coming. It will serve.

*

I shadow Miss Waverley from first light. Follow as she moves from The Briars to Ramillies Hall and back to The Briars again. Watch as Mary comes storming out of the house a little while later, hat rammed skew-whiff on her head, coat dragged half over her shoulders, suitcase in hand. Looks as if she's leaving before the funeral after all.

When she's gone, I venture closer. The side gate swings free, and the back door is open. It's careless of Miss Waverley, not to have locked up after the girl. But I'm glad I won't have to break in.

There's nowhere to hide in the scullery, but a big cupboard door opens to reveal a spidery space full of mops and brooms, a pail of dirty water. Definitely below stairs territory. I can't imagine Miss Waverley ever comes in here. It will do. I squeeze inside. All I have to do is wait.

Just before midday, someone comes into the kitchen.

'Dratted girl. What will Eddie say?' Miss Waverley, I presume. Alone, as far as I can make out, and talking to herself. She rattles around the room, clattering doors, drawers. 'Now, where did she put the – ?'

'Eddie? Where are you?'

'I'm here.' Her voice is loud, so close to cupboard door I freeze. 'Just looking for a knife.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Trying to find something for your lunch. Stupid girl walked out on us this morning. I told her she wouldn't get a reference, but –'

'Never mind.' It's him. It's my father's voice. It's all I can do not to shout.

'What news, Eddie? What did Struther say?'

'Didn't you listen to what I told you last night?'

'Oh, the telephone. It's not the same. Tell me.'

'You just want to gloat. Ramillies will pass to Olivia. After her, to whomever she leaves it to. Or of course, if she were to die intestate, to me.'

'Such a good job you didn't divorce her.'

'Isn't it?'

'She's not at the cottage, Eddie.'

'I told you not to go there again.'

'I couldn't help it. I had to know.'

'And?'

'I don't know.'

He laughs. 'Silly girl.'

'What if she won't let us live at Ramillies?'

'She can't stop us. She's my wife, we're one flesh. It's the law. And with her history –'

'But the old will? The conditions said –'

'Void,' he says. 'Utterly void. Struther was clear about that.'

'And what that bugger Nash said?'

'Nothing he can do. Now, give me that knife. I'd better cut the bread.'

'I'm worried, Eddie.'

'Don't be. I've told you, I'll take care of Olivia myself.'

It's as if a cold wind has blown down my spine. A cold, gas-haunted breeze. I miss what he says next, something about sandwiches.

'There's only cheese,' Miss Waverley says.

'We'll go out for dinner tonight. A small celebration.'

'I'm on duty till six.'

'I'll come and pick you up. Now, bring the tray.'

The door closes.

If I had any doubts before, they've gone. What I'm doing may not be right, but it's the only thing. I owe it to Nell, to Ollie. I owe it to old man Oxley. I don't know whether he must have worked it out too. That it was his nephew who was my mother's seducer. Perhaps that's why he died. The shock of it.

It's certainly killing me.

Dr Waverley, my father.

My father, who takes disgusting pictures of girls. Who uses his status to frighten them, to dress them up in rags and dirt.

[yes]

Who uses them, makes them pregnant. Disposes of them.

[yes]

Because whatever Nash says, I know. It's not just about photographs. Ruth died in this house.

[yes yes i did]

My mother was lucky to survive.

Perhaps I was luckier still. I can't bear to think about what happened to Adelle.
Dressed up, humiliated, drowned.

I can't bear to think about Ruth's baby, left on a doorstep to die.

[told me he would be all right]

The rage is hot inside me. For Nell, for Ruth, for Adelle. For all the little girls.

I don't care what Nash said. The only chance we had was to catch Waverley red handed. But that won't happen, if he gets a look inside his filthy darkroom.

I don't care about the chain of evidence. I just want the bastard locked up in cell, all his precious status ripped away.

I want to hear him say it. I want to make him confess. I want to hear him admit he seduced my mother, frightened her, drove her away. I want to hear him confess he killed Ruth and her baby.

I feel in my pocket for reassurance. The photographs?

Still there.

The gun?

That too.

Frank's gun isn't loaded, it never has been. But my father won't know that, any more than I did when Frank held it to my throat. It's the fact of it, unmistakeable against the flesh. The unique threat of it. One doesn't take chances, just in case.

The kitchen door again. I tense. Miss Waverley. A rattle of crockery. Their lunch tray. 'I'll be off then,' she calls.

Footsteps come close. Closer. Right outside. Surely she can't want anything in here? I hold my breath. My heart's beating so loud I'm afraid she'll hear. But the footsteps fade as she passes by. I can breathe again.

Now he's all alone.

I wait, ears straining for sounds. The hop and step of Miss Waverley, as she gets onto her bicycle. The side gate banging. Inside, very faintly, a door opens and shuts.

I wait.

I wait.

When my breathing settles, I open the cupboard door. Creep through the kitchen. Push the baize door open a fraction. Listen again. Nothing. I'll have to guess where he is. Begin with the study.

I take out the gun, make sure I'm holding it as if I know what I'm doing. If Waverley's at his desk, he'll be facing the door when I go in, so I need to be ready.

I turn the handle, open the door. Step inside. Dr Waverley is sitting by the fire, his back towards me. He doesn't even turn.

'Did you forget something, Edie?' he says.

I'm behind him, the gun pressed into his neck before he can wonder why his sister doesn't answer him.

'It's not Edie,' I say. 'You've probably realised that by now. Sit still, Doctor, and I'll try not to kill you by mistake.'

'Who are you? What do you want?' His voice is steadier than mine was, when Frank ambushed me. But he's tense as a wire, I can feel it through the barrel of the gun. It's not safe for me to stand like this, vulnerable to a physical attack I can't hope to counter.

'I warn you, Doctor. Don't move, or I will shoot.' I take the gun away from his neck. Step back far enough so he can see me and the gun, but not reach me.

'You?' he says. 'What the hell – ?'

'Put your hands where I can see them.' It's such a cliché. Words from every gangster film I've ever seen. It almost makes me laugh to hear them coming out of my own mouth. 'That's right, on the armrests of the chair.'

He does as he's told, and I feel – just a little bit – of satisfaction. Dr Waverley, self-appointed Mr Romsey, doing what his bastard daughter tells him. Who'd have thought it?

'What do you want?' he says again. 'What's this about, Mrs Lester?'

'It's about finding out you're my father,' I say. 'It's about some horrible photographs. And it's about Ruth Taylor and her baby.'

'This is ridiculous,' he says. 'Why don't you put that gun away and sit down? Talk it through like civilised people.'

'You wouldn't give me the time of day if I didn't have a gun. I'm not stupid, *Father*. I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you.'

'Look –'

'No, you look. Admit it. You seduced my mother.'

'Nell? Nothing to do with seduction. She was asking for it. Ripe for the plucking.'

'Liar.' I cock the revolver, watch him flinch. But I have to be careful. If he suspects I can't or won't shoot, I'm done for. 'You know that's not true.'

He laughs. 'If she told you anything different, she's the liar.'

'She never said a word, not even on her death bed. She was always too scared to say anything. What did you threaten her with, you bastard?'

'Careful, my dear. It doesn't become you to throw that word around.'

'It's what you made me.'

He shrugs. 'If you say so.'

'You admit it?'

'Why not? You can call me Daddy, if you like.'

'I don't like. It disgusts me to think that you're my father. A pervert like you.'

'That's a bit rich. I was hardly more than a boy when Nell and I –'

'A boy with a camera,' I say.

He smiles, reminiscent, as if he's enjoying himself. 'Pretty little figure, she had. You won't be offended if I say you haven't taken after her, my dear?'

My hand shakes. 'You won't be offended if I blow your head off?'

'Whoa,' he says. 'Touchy, aren't we?'

'Never mind that.' I do my best to stay calm. 'Photographs. That's the thing. I've seen them. Not the official ones, the others, the dirty ones. The little girls in rags.' I free one hand from the gun, reach into my pocket. Bring out the pictures. Hold them carefully, well out of his reach. 'Recognise these?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' he blusters. But he's not enjoying himself quite so much now. His skin looks yellow, sagging as if the flesh beneath has suddenly shrunk.

'You haven't been to your office today, of course, or you'd have noticed. I had to leave in a bit of a hurry. Didn't quite put everything back where it should have been.'

'You broke into my office?'

'The door was open. I had to... explore a little bit of course. But it was easy to find your dirty little hoard.'

'It's – Nothing to do with me. Someone must have –'

'So many,' I say. 'I bet an expert could tell if the pictures were all taken with the same camera. What do you think? Will you risk it? I bet they were, and it was yours. That natty little darkroom, all kitted out so you can develop your own prints. You think no one knows, no one tells? I've only been in Romsey a week and I've heard it already. *Don't go into the darkroom with Doc Waverley, the sweets aren't worth it.* I'm not very impressed by aniseed balls myself.'

'Harmless fun,' he says. 'Nothing more. Never did any harm. You can't prove anything.'

'You think your reputation will survive if I publish the pictures? Tell people where I got them? This one of my mother, for instance. Even though it's so old, you can see she's weeping. And this one of Ruth. The bruises show up really well on her. And this one. What would people say about this, do you think? Your other daughter, little Adelle. Posing like Ophelia. You call that art? What did you think when she drowned herself for real?'

'Don't you dare speak to me of her. She's nothing to do with you.'

'Of course she is. She was my half sister. It's natural to care about a sister, you must know that.'

'What are you suggesting, you bitch?'

I hadn't been suggesting anything in particular, but it gives me pause. I've touched a nerve, that much is obvious. The look on his face is pure hatred.

'Careful,' I say. 'Remember, I'm the one holding the gun. And if you don't want to talk about Adelle, we can always go back to Ruth. I know you killed her. You abandoned her baby, left it to be eaten by rats.'

'Wrong, on every count.' The voice, not Waverley's, comes from behind me.

Edith Waverley is in the doorway, a shotgun in her hands. I've been so intent on watching my father's every move, I've let myself be blindsided.

'Put the gun down, Mrs Lester.'

There's only one thing to do, and I do it. I'm back at Waverley's side in a flash, the revolver pressed against his neck.

'I don't think so.'

'You won't shoot,' she says. 'But I will.'

'You want to risk it? Go on. But my father will get hurt too.'

'Your father?' She almost spits it. 'Two minutes with a whore? That's not fatherhood.'

'Nor's what he did with Adelle,' I say. 'Did you know about that?'

'Silly little girl,' she says. 'She was goin' to get us all into trouble. I had to put her away.'

The jolt that runs through Waverley would have got him killed if there had been a bullet in my gun. But he doesn't seem to notice his lucky escape.

'Eddie,' he says. 'Eddie. What are you saying?'

'I had to do it, Eddie. You must see that. Just like this girl they're makin' all the fuss about. I couldn't let them tell what you'd done. Then they'd never have let us have the Hall.'

'You killed Adelle?'

Something comes into her eyes, something horrible. A kind of cunning malevolence. 'It's no good blaming me, Eddie. I wouldn't have had to do it if you hadn't fiddled about with her. Never could help yourself, could you?'

I've been forgotten. My father and his sister are locked together in mortal combat. The only thing missing is the blood. He stands, ignoring my gun. Brushes me aside.

'You killed Adelle.' He says it again, but this time it's not a question. He advances towards her.

She steps back, levels the gun. 'Stay back, Eddie. I warn you, I'll shoot.'

'My daughter. You killed her.'

I'm just in time to pull him away as the shotgun goes off. There's a rush of hot air as the main blast passes between Waverley and myself, the stinging of innumerable wasps in my shoulder. My arm is instantly numb, and Frank's revolver drops to the floor.

Waverley's caught the edge of the shot too. There *is* blood now, running down his face.

In the doorway, Edith brings the shotgun round to bear full on me. Stupidly, I'm rooted to the spot. I can't seem to make myself move.

'One last little mess of yours to clear up, Eddie. Should have done it ages ago.'

'No.' His voice is strange, choking. 'No more killing, Edie.'

'Don't be so namby-pamby,' she says. 'I'm not askin' you to do it. Just stand out of the way.'

'I can't do that.' His movements are jerky as he goes towards her. He must have been hurt worse than I thought.

'We'll tell them she broke in,' she says. 'It's the truth, after all. And she brought a gun with her. It's self-defence, pure and simple.'

He's got his hand over the gun, pushing it away. From me, from himself, even from her. She doesn't seem to be resisting. 'No, Edie,' he says. 'It's too late.'

And then he goes down, falling in slow motion, and the gun goes with him, and as he falls it fires again and there's a huge spatter of blood across the wall. He writhes.

Edith Waverley screams, drops to her knees beside him. She's calling his name, *Eddie*, *Eddie*, over and over, but he's not answering.

At last I can move. I'm almost calm when I get to the table where the telephone sits. The operator comes on the line straight away.

'There's been a shooting,' I say. I manage to say. 'The Briars. We need an ambulance, quick as you like. And then call Mr Nash.'

*

SUPERINTENDENT BELL: Your client, Mrs Lester, took the gun she had stolen –

NASH: She hadn't stolen the gun, Superintendent. You know that as well as I do. She had taken it from Frank Taylor, who had stolen it, and held it in safekeeping.

SB: She should have handed it in.

N: Fair enough. She should.

SB: She broke into The Briars –

N: She didn't have to break in. The house was open to her.

SB: She walked in uninvited, armed –

N: The gun wasn't loaded.

SB: She went to Dr Waverley's property uninvited, with a gun, with the intent to threaten and intimidate –

N: You've no evidence of what she intended. Neither Dr Waverley nor his sister have made any charge.

SB: It's an offence to possess an unregistered firearm.

N: Edith Waverley's gun was registered?

SB: Look, Mr Nash –

N: Yes?

SB: Your client admits –

N: What she might have said in the heat of the moment is not admissible. You know that as well as I do. She was injured, in shock. She'd witnessed traumatic events. I remind you, Dr Waverley was bleeding extensively from the brachial artery. He would have died long before the ambulance arrived if she hadn't stopped the bleeding.

SB: He lost the arm.

N: That isn't my client's fault. She did what she could.

SB: And if we ask her to repeat her statement?

N: I'm sure she'll tell you what she can. But not before I've advised her.

SB: She'd better not do a bunk.

N: She won't. She'll make a voluntary statement. When they release her from the hospital. I'll bring her in myself.

*

Miss Edith Waverley's confession.

Of course I killed her the little whore you think only a man can kill? I should have killed them all all the sluts and their red headed get I wanted to kill them all my baby my baby had the true red hair all over him like a monkey face like a little monkey somethin' wrong with his brain said it was heredity thought they could trick me make me tell but I never have Eddie and his photographs those stupid photographs told him not to keep them here should never have brought her here found out what I'd done with her baby thought she could blackmail us little fool she was mad and stupid stupid and greedy they're all so greedy turned her back on me turned her back on me bang just like swattin' a fly Eddie had to help me then too soft to kill always too soft didn't want to know didn't like to have to know so soft but he had to help me this time his little weakness no matter of that none of them mattered those girls all those girls I hated them all if I couldn't have him why should they? Fox played into my hands visitin' Uncle Paul like that had him thinkin' about Eddie easy so easy fast asleep he'd had his little nip didn't struggle blessin' for him really ill for too long put him out of his misery blessin' for us all for Eddie and me Ramillies our home always our home always our place they should never have sent us away tell him I'll wait I'll be waiting tell Eddie poor Eddie not my fault tell him it was her nothing to him just another whore's daughter always too soft her fault tell him always too soft.

[Here, Miss Waverley became overwrought. It was necessary to call the police surgeon to sedate her. She has been taken to the County Asylum for assessment. Interview suspended at 10.30pm, 24/4/1941]

Dr Edward Waverley's statement. [Incomplete]

I've always had a weakness. Nothing strange about that, young flesh is bound to call to a man. Must see it all the time in your line of work. Right from the start, years ago. At Ramillies, there was my twin. My other half. That's what they say, your other half. They talk about marriage, but we were joined closer than that. Why not? We began as one, two halves of a whole. A unit, even our names. Eddie and Edie, right from the off. No one to worry us, no one to bother us. No one to bother about us. Our mother, deep in widowhood. Didn't miss a father, never had one we knew of. Only our mother, weeping. Of course we were curious, of course we experimented. What child doesn't? There we

were, the two of us. Eating together, playing together. Sleeping together. Every minute of the day till Uncle Paul got married and we had to go. Sent me away to school, I hated the place. Comfortless, cold stone buildings by the sea, wind never stopped blowing. Like a snail out of its shell, naked without my other self. And Edie, too, exiled. Lost and angry, as I was. Longing for home. For Ramillies, for the time before everything changed. In the holidays, we clung together, homesick for what we'd lost.

We were innocent before, but prep school taught me what a boy can do. It was all different then. Edie was willing, more than willing. It was all the comfort we had.

We'd just turned fifteen when she kindled. Didn't realise at first, hadn't thought about consequences. It was comfort, I tell you. Just comfort and being one.

I was at school when Mother realised. Different school by then of course, but just as bad. Couldn't understand why Edie didn't write. They tried to make her tell who she'd acted the slut with. They beat her, but she wouldn't say. No one would tell me what had happened. Christmas came, and Edie wasn't there. Later she told me. The school for bad girls where the child was born. Deformed, dead. They made her look at it, told her it was her sin caused it, made her believe it.

Didn't see each other again for a year. She was a stranger, my sister in a woman's body. Made me feel sick, but I owed her. I'd had a year to look around me. To look at the girls around me. Young girls, young bodies. Take my pick, my fill. Girls who couldn't say no, servants. I loved them in their dirt, especially if it came from Ramillies. If they got pregnant, it was nothing to me. They were nothing to me, no better than they should be. Get rid of them, all part of the game. No one ever suspected I'd been Edie's lover.

But I promised her. I'd play, but I'd never leave her. She'd always be my other self. All she wanted was Ramillies. Our childhood home. Possession was all she dreamed of. It grew on her, year by year. Obsessed her.

So I married Olivia. My cousin, not much to look at, but she was young. Naïve. Childish, really, about her pets. It wasn't such a hardship in the beginning, giving up my dirty girls. With her brothers dead on the Somme, she held the key to Ramillies.

I had my career, my position. I had opportunities. The Hall was mine in all but name, Edie was happy. My sister was happy. But by then, my wife was not. It didn't really matter, because she disgusted me anyway, as Edie had disgusted me after the birth of her child. And now I had a child of my own. A daughter, with the pretty red hair of the Oxleys. The true mark of the family.

[Here, Doctor Waverley broke down. Interview suspended at 11.15am, 25/4/1941, pending further assessment.]

*

‘Sorry to disturb you.’

‘I wasn’t asleep.’

The room’s dim blue bulb bleaches out all the colours from the room. A lunar landscape of bright and shadow he finds hard to decode. Her face is smeared with new bruise, the harsh black hollows of her eyes obscuring every expression.

‘I’m not supposed to be here.’

‘I heard them trying to tell you that.’

She sounds...amused? They’re both speaking low. For him, it’s because of the lateness of the hour, the illicit nature of his visit. For her, he doesn’t know. Perhaps she feels the same.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Sore.’

The dark protects him. If he’s bleached to the same jigsaw pattern of moonshine and black that patches the room, he can say what he likes, anonymous, ambiguous. But it’s still harder to say what he wants than he thought it would be.

‘I’m sorry about yesterday. I wish I hadn’t let you walk out.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘I should have done more.’

‘You were right. I shouldn’t have taken the law into my own hands. But I’m glad I did.’

‘Yes. Jo, you know you mustn’t say that to anyone but me.’

‘Speaking as my solicitor?’

‘As your friend, dammit.’

‘I’m in pretty big trouble, aren’t I?’ she says, sombre. ‘That policeman, Superintendent Bell. He’d have liked to throw the book at me. He would have done it, I think. If he hadn’t been afraid it would finish me off.’

‘Don’t worry. So long as you’re sensible, all he’s got to charge you with is having Frank’s gun.’

‘Sensible?’

‘Keep your mouth shut. Don’t admit anything.’

‘I already – ’

'The state you were in, what you said can't be given in evidence. They'll have to take another statement when you've recovered.'

'Dr Waverley hasn't said anything to incriminate me?'

'No. You heard about his arm?'

'Yes. Bram... I just wanted him to admit it. What he'd done to all those girls. To my mother.'

'You saved his life.'

'I went there wanting to kill him. If I'd had bullets for the gun I would have done it.'

'Hush.'

'Let me tell you. As a friend. Please? I can't stop thinking about it.'

It's so unlike her to admit weakness. For a moment he doesn't know what to say. He's touched, but now's not the moment for sentiment. It won't help her. Keep it brisk, professional.

'All right.'

'I hated him so much. Even before I knew who he was, what he'd done. I hated him for abandoning me, for driving Nell away. And then I started to think it was him who'd killed Ruth.'

'He didn't.'

'What?'

'He didn't kill Ruth. He was the one who dumped her body, but it was Edith who killed her.' He wonders if he should tell her anything more, the state she's in. Will it make her feel better or worse? But before he can make up his mind, she starts to speak again.

'She said... when she first came in, she said I was wrong. They started to argue about Adelle, and then... She's confessed?'

'If you can call it that. All the deaths, they're at her door. But he knew, covered them up.'

'Except Adelle. I swear he didn't know about her. So... revolting, but he really loved her.'

'You call that love?' Bile rises in his throat, the way it's been doing all day. 'The rest of the photographs, Jo. We found them. So many of them. Why did you save him?'

'I don't know. I can't stop thinking, I only had to walk away. What will happen to them? To both of them? Will they hang?' Her voice is stronger, more normal. A cool veneer that holds him at arm's length.

'I doubt they'll ever be able to bring charges.' He's suddenly weighted down with weariness. If only he could have her detachment. 'Edith Waverley is –'

'Mad?'

'Yes. She broke down entirely after they took her brother away in the ambulance. She's been committed to the County Asylum. But before they took her away, she admitted all the killings. Including Paul Oxley's death. She says she smothered him, hoping you'd be blamed.'

A croak of sound that might be laughter, might a sob. Might be anything, really. The dark does its work too well for him to be able to see her face. He feels an overwhelming desire to hold her, but he knows she won't welcome it.

'Jo?'

'Jo?'

'I didn't kill him?' The relief is overwhelming. I feel reprieved. 'God... I thought it was me. Because I'd given him a shock.' Though this hospital room is steam heated, far too hot, I'm shivering with release. What I want now, more than anything, is the touch of a hand, a body to hold me close. 'Thank you for telling me.'

'You won't leave, will you?'

'Excuse me?'

'If you're thinking of offering me your resignation, I won't accept it.'

It's a touch of a kind, and I cling to it. 'What if they prosecute me?'

'They won't. You're home and dry, Jo, I promise. Home and dry.'

Sylvie comes to fetch me out of hospital. I know immediately who it is from the pattering of high heeled shoes on the linoleum floor, the waft of perfume she brings with her.

‘Cherie.’ Her greeting is cheerful, pitched at normal volume; refreshing after the hushed churchy tones the nurses use when they speak to me. Her hug is constrained by the awkwardness of my bandages and sling, but it’s comfortingly warm and real.

I’ve been dreading this moment, the thought of being whisked away to Tom and Sylvie’s perfect black-and-white flat. Kind as it is of them since I can’t go back to Dot’s because Ollie is going to stay on, I don’t see myself fitting in. Everything there’s so clear-cut and brightly-lit. The mess I’ve made of everything, it’ll be salt in the wound. But Sylvie’s hug reminds me of the knitting hidden behind the cushions; her kindness to my mother; and I begin to think things might turn out right after all.

For choice, I’d slip out the back way, but Sylvie’s having none of it. She leads me to the main entrance and as we emerge into daylight, I see she’s parked Tom’s Morris van right in front of the notice which says *Ambulances only*. It practically screams for attention with its glossy black paintwork embellished with bright pictures of fruit and veg, its scarlet lettering: T FOX, GREENGROCER.

‘Sylvie,’ I say, ‘you shouldn’t have. Grandfather... He’ll take it out on you and Tom if he knows you’re looking after me.’

‘Pffft.’ She waves away the protest. ‘What can he do, silly old fool? High time he knew we don’t dance to his tune. Now, let me help you.’

Before I know it, I’m installed on the long bench seat. She tucks a cushion against my injured side before slamming the door, taps her way back round to the driver’s side. The van fires up at first push of the starter, but our progress is sedate in the extreme. Either Sylvie’s very cautious or the van’s done for, because we chug out of the hospital grounds at what hardly seems like walking pace. The curtains in the porters’ lodge twitch as we turn onto the main road. The old man in his lair, taking it all in? His hero disgraced, worse than dead. I look away, pretend not to notice. No need to gloat.

We pass the turn that would take us to Ramillies. They tell me Ollie’s said she’ll never live there, that some out-of-town war office is going to take it over.

On down the hill, under the bridge. It's busier here, people standing about, waiting. Black armbands on some of the men's coats. There's a procession, even slower than us, coming up from the town centre. A funeral. Sylvie pulls to a halt.

'Mr Oxley,' I say.

Sylvie nods.

The men doff their hats. As the vehicles turn, I think I catch a glimpse of Nash. He's there to support Ollie. I can't see Dot, but she'll be somewhere in the background, sensible and fierce, looking after her chick.

The procession past, we move off again. I jolt in my seat as Sylvie grinds the gears. Pain punches my shoulder, but I'll be back at work on Monday, bandages or no. Not sure what I'll do. What Nash will let me do.

He wouldn't let me go...

On the pavement, the men put their hats back on. Women clump in groups, gossiping. A couple look our way, look away, and I guess I'm part of what they're talking about. What I did, what I found out about Waverley and his sister. Some of them'll never forgive me for it. The doctor who took his time getting the pellets out of my shoulder, telling me the hospital would be lost without its chief physician. The ward sister who wept, describing Waverley's maimed arm in gory detail. Grandfather. For them, I'm worse than anything the Waverleys have done. I've put the town to shame. While the secrets were tucked away in the dark they could pretend everything was all right. Now it's all out in the open.

It's like an anthill. The structure, the hierarchy. Undisturbed, it seems quiet, well-ordered, productive. A child comes along with a stick, breaks it open. Queen gone, structures destroyed, it seethes. Soldier ants rally to attack the attacker. Workers rush to drag their store of eggs and grubs out of the light, to hide their secret horde. But even when the colony is rebuilt, the damage has been done. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Perhaps the child is sorry. Perhaps she feels the stings.

But I'm not sorry. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

'Home,' Sylvie says, as she pulls the van to a halt outside the greengrocer's shop.

I surface at the sound of her voice. It's not home, but it's close enough.

Commentary

Claire Gradidge

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Introduction.

'I have a golden opportunity to do my own research'¹

My primary aim for this project was to write a full-length detective fiction set in World War II. The novel would build on classic detective tropes relating to setting, social milieu and the nature/role of the detective. It would explore ways in which these might be developed to achieve a work which could be read as an innovative contemporary text, yet nevertheless maintain a sense of continuity with the classic genre that had come into being in the early part of the twentieth century. This era, which is often referred to as the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction, is 'usually taken to mean the period between the two world wars'.² This phrase not only defines a time frame, but also implies a quality or type: the descriptor 'golden' suggests this was a heyday of detective fiction. It describes a time when novel-length fictions featuring the detection of a crime were being produced in an 'enormous and inventive outpouring of crime fiction'.³ This burgeoning Golden Age was founded on the work of authors like Poe and Conan Doyle, whose earlier fictions, chiefly short stories, had popularised and codified detective fiction; and epitomised by the output of British women writers like Agatha Christie, Dorothy L Sayers and Margery Allingham.

Christie, Sayers and Allingham, together with Ngaio Marsh (a New Zealander), were collectively known as the 'Queens of Crime'. While the origin of this phrase, much used in both the popular press and by commentators of detective fiction,⁴ is obscure, it highlights the way women's crime writing was seen as pre-eminent in and representative of the genre at that time. Gill Plain comments: 'fictions such as those of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh have been regarded as archetypally British, and are generally assumed to have enjoyed a 'golden age' between 1920 and 1940'.⁵ Their fictions generally feature a series detective who solves crime by reasoning and deduction from clues, and their plots are structured to invite readers to pit

¹ *Close to Home*, p88 (further references thus: C2H, p#)

² Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction since 1800*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p8

³ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p115

⁴ See, for example, Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), ppvii, 16, 40, etc., and Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp 245, 253. The mantle of 'Queen of Crime' has subsequently passed to writers such as PD James, Ruth Rendell, and Val McDermid.

⁵ Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001) p4

their wits against the detective/author and solve the mystery before the solution is revealed at the end of the story.

In retrospect, these novels have been categorised as 'clue-puzzle'⁶ or 'cosy'⁷ genre crime, and this latter categorisation has obvious implications for a contemporary writer seeking to build on tradition yet wishing to write an innovative detective fiction. 'Cosy' might be taken to imply comfortable, escapist fictions which do not address the problems of real life. American detective fiction of the same period, dubbed 'hard-boiled' crime, with its corrupt urban settings – the mean streets⁸ of Chandler and Hammett – and lone, marginalised private eye whose investigations set him on the wrong side of the law, is often considered more realistic. Chandler himself asserted that writers like Hammett 'wrote or tried to write realistic mystery fiction', and described what he calls the 'English style' of detective fiction as 'pooped out... unreal and mechanical'.⁹

British Golden Age detective fictions with their 'resolved endings, the politeness of the language and the conventional lightness of tone, their feminized [sic] investigators and the circumscribed milieu in which they take place'¹⁰ might thus be presumed to render murder innocuous and unthreatening. Their frequently rural or idyllic settings, and detectives whose role it is to restore order to a settled community which has been disrupted by a killing, are essentially conservative in nature. PD James comments that these texts 'confirm our belief, despite some evidence to the contrary, that we live in a rational, comprehensible, and moral universe'.¹¹ Yet I would argue that since the plot of these fictions almost always turns on murder, 'the shadow of painful truth is never very far away'.¹²

It was these Golden Age fictions which had a shaping influence on the ways in which I understood detective fiction as a genre before I began my PhD study. And, since I planned a small town, somewhat enclosed, English geographical and era-specific historical setting and social milieu for my novel, it was appropriate that I should focus my research on and build from the British tradition of detective fiction. While my text would thus

⁶ Described as: 'the classic clue-based mystery', Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p85

⁷ 'This term has been used... to denote more traditional mysteries, either in the genre of the Golden Age puzzle or pertaining to more rural settings'. Mary Hadley, *British Women Mystery Writers*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc., 2002) p14

⁸ Raymond Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder', first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1944. <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/chandlerart.html> (accessed 24/6/2017)

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Lee Horsley, 'From Sherlock Holmes to the Present', in Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsley, *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) p31

¹¹ PD James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2009), p19

¹² Christine A Jackson, *Myth and Ritual in Women's Detective Fiction*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc, 2002) p48

mirror some aspects of 'cosiness' – setting, milieu and the lack of graphic descriptions of violence – it would have at its heart concerns which are relevant to the contemporary world. In creating *Close to Home* I aimed to produce a work which was not a cosy read in terms of writing/narrative technique, nor in subject matter. It would not be a parody or pastiche of the classic genre, but, as I will show, would incorporate some elements of the genre and subvert others, giving it an innovative and contemporary edge yet maintaining its identity within the classic tradition.

A key aim for the novel was that it should be 'publishable',¹³ appealing to a modern reader of detective fiction, but it also needed to demonstrate my research as a creative writing practitioner. It, and its accompanying commentary would show how my creative process had drawn on a personal practice or methodology of reading as a writer as I worked to produce my novel.

Reading as a writer is a complex matter, 'akin to a biologist's field trip to a rainforest',¹⁴ and the ways in which the conscious and unconscious understandings generated by the practice are incorporated into a writer's creative work are not reducible to a single, immutable standard. Rather, it is an individualised process, which allows the reader/writer to create 'new perspectives and new configurations, experimenting with form while engaging with literary tradition or canonical texts'.¹⁵ By mapping my particular process in this commentary, I show how the process of drawing from a specific body of work influenced my own work, and demonstrate how this technique can be used by other creative writers to build on other genres and texts.

Initially, my reading included a wide survey of the genre, drawing not only on new reading, but also taking into account knowledge from my long-held interest in and reading of detective fiction. As previously indicated, my unconscious, 'pleasure' reading of the past had inevitably coloured my thoughts and decisions as a writer before I embarked on my PhD study, and would continue to influence my future decisions as I wrote *Close to Home*, and it was necessary to recognise this influence. As Boulter comments '[w]hat we read makes up our own mini-tradition and...offers us a way to understand the

¹³ By 'publishable', I mean acceptance by a commercial publishing house. While this cannot be established for my text until such time as the piece has been submitted and accepted (or not), I have some indication that it might be commercially viable. A version of the opening 5000 words, submitted to the *Good Housekeeping* Novel competition 2012, was highly commended, (see Appendix I), and at the 2016 Winchester Writers' Festival Linda Bennett (Director/Commissioning Editor, Salt Publishing) and Ian Drury, (Agent, Shiel Land), asked to see full mss after initial chapter/s were submitted.

¹⁴ Jeri Kroll, 'The Creative Writing Laboratory and its Pedagogy' in Kroll and Harper, *Research Methods in Creative Writing*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) p120

¹⁵ Graham Mort, 'Transcultural Writing and Research', in Kroll and Harper, p207

complexities of the form'.¹⁶ So, as I set out consciously to examine form and tradition and refine my focus, I looked to select core texts for my study which were of particular relevance to my work in terms of how they were characteristic of or innovative to the genre, and how their structures and techniques were influential upon the development of my novel.

The setting and milieu of *Close to Home* had made it appropriate that I should focus on the British tradition of Golden Age pattern detective fiction for my study, but this 'appropriateness' was a choice made not only looking forward to what I would write, but also looking back to what I had read in the past. This Janus-like position – examining what had gone before in order to create something new – was a process which carried through into my own writing and rewriting process.

The cycle of first writing, then reflecting/reviewing/revising a piece of work is familiar to every writer. And in writing *Close to Home*, this cycle or loop was profoundly bound up with the reading I was doing as I examined the genre texts. My research was founded on my reading practice, but, as I will show, it was my writing process which was its expression. As Kroll and Harper say 'creative writing research... always has practice at its conceptual core.... writers... each establishing their own version of the practice-led research loop that drives any creative project forward'.¹⁷ And crucial to this research loop for me was the way in which I not only read the primary texts as I created my fiction, but also how I read my own developing narrative to revise and refine it. While, as Harper says, '[c]reative writing begins with action. It continues and evolves with, and by, action',¹⁸ it is nevertheless true that for the creative writer, action is not always a matter of doing. As the first reader of her text, the writer must also reflect on the way in which 'certain imaginative arrangements of words can be used to unlock emotions or establish a relationship between the writer and a potential reader'.¹⁹ The developing narrative is a product as much of thought, imagination and critical reflection as of action in putting down words on paper, although words on paper are the essential – and eventual – outcome of the process.

¹⁶ Amanda Boulter, *Writing Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p94

¹⁷ Kroll and Harper, 'Introduction', in Kroll and Harper, *Research Methods*, p2

¹⁸ Graeme Harper, 'The Generations of Creative Writing Research', in Kroll and Harper, *Research Methods*, p145

¹⁹ Kroll and Harper, 'Introduction', in Kroll and Harper, *Research Methods*, p2

In the penultimate version of my research question/title,²⁰ I had introduced a number of parameters to describe the focus of my study and reading: particularising the works of British women writers of the twentieth and twenty-first century. If, in the beginning, I had made this choice pragmatically – even naïvely – to define a subset of writers and texts within a huge field of available work, I recognised the need to address the deeper reasons for my choice. Additionally, I had chosen to feature women prominently in *Close to Home*, not only as investigator, victim and perpetrator, but also as significant supporting characters: the landlady, Dot; the almost-victim, Ollie; and as the reason for Jo Lester’s return to her home town to seek justice for Nell, her wronged, dead mother. Megan Hoffman comments that ‘[t]he depiction of a woman in a crime novel, whether as victim, villain, suspect or detective, is loaded...with expectations attached to the genre’s typical characters’,²¹ and, as I shall describe in this commentary, these writerly choices – central to the way in which *Close to Home* is structured and can be perceived – were also influenced by my gender. These choices of reading and writing were not simply a matter of pragmatism. In focusing on specific women writers, and identifying one cornerstone of my research as being defined by their gender and mine, I was recognising certain resonances – which I might call cadence – between my writing and theirs.

My chromosomal gender is female. I identify as a woman, and as a woman, I write. But while I acknowledge that my writing – and my writing choices – are inescapably linked to my gender, I see this as issue with personal or social impact rather than political significance. As Dorothy L Sayers comments, I do not claim ‘to “identify myself”, as the phrase goes, with feminism’.²² Born and brought up in the 1950s and 60s, even an above-average education was considered a byway on the route to marriage. And when, in 1979, I left my job as a senior nurse to have my first child, returning to work was not a viable option. Perhaps these experiences should have made me a second or third wave feminist, openly campaigning for equal opportunities, but they did not. While I did – and do – believe in equality for all, I am not an activist. I could no more ‘burn my bra’ in the

²⁰ ‘How can an English female writer draw on the work of women writers within the canon of twentieth and twenty-first century British detective fiction to create an innovative, novel-length narrative?’

²¹ Megan Hoffman, *Gender and Representation in British ‘Golden Age’ Crime Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p1

²² Dorothy L Sayers, (1938), ‘Are Women Human?’, in Dorothy L Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2005) p21

1960s²³ than join the March for Women in 2017.²⁴ Passive rather than active, private rather than political, I have this in common with the Golden Age writers of my study, who, as Horsley says, would not 'have considered themselves feminists'.²⁵

But my gender experience – like theirs – inevitably colours my thinking, influencing what I choose to write about, and how I choose to write it. In practical terms this meant that when I came to plan my PhD novel, certain tropes and structures appealed to me more than others. While there are many successful women writers working in the more gory reaches of crime fiction,²⁶ I did not believe I could write a successful *noir* crime fiction²⁷ nor convince with a serial killer thriller.²⁸ In choosing classic detective fiction I was reflecting my own gender influences and identifying with a particular group of women writers who wrote – or are writing – a particular kind of genre fiction.

I chose Dorothy L Sayers, Margery Allingham and Josephine Tey as writers whose fictions, as I detail later in this commentary, can be seen as both representative of and innovative to the classic detective genre. The eleven Wimsey novels of Sayers; Allingham's Campion stories – particularly those published from 1931; and Tey's eight detective fictions published between 1929 – 1952, were the Golden Age texts on which I focused. As I made my specific study of these texts, examining aspects relevant to my own fiction in terms of the era in which they were set, their genre identity, and their introductions to the form, I also discovered how unconscious understandings from past readings had influenced my creative process. As I shall show, both unconscious influences and my personal methodology of reading as a writer fed into the way in which I grounded my novel in the tradition of classic detective fiction and allowed me to take inspiration from their example to introduce elements of innovation to my own work.

²³ Although it is a moot point whether anyone ever actually burned her bra. <http://jezebel.com/5045886/the-truth-is-bra-burning-feminists-never-actually-burned-a-bra> (accessed 25/1/2017)

²⁴ A worldwide protest on 21/1/2017, provoked by the inauguration of Donald Trump as US President.

²⁵ Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, p245

²⁶ For example, Val McDermid, Denise Mina, Martina Cole.

²⁷ Lee Horsley suggests that while noir fiction is strongly identified with the hard-boiled, private eye tradition of detective fiction, its roots are deeper. She cites Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) with its 'themes like otherness and the crossing of boundaries', and *The Secret Agent* (1907) 'with its ironic presentation of the perceptions of guilty and vulnerable characters, its non-linear structure and inconclusive ending' as influential in defining the tropes and structures of *noir*. Lee Horsley, 'Introduction', *The Noir Thriller*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) pp1-13

²⁸ A contemporary genre of crime fiction in which the killer is motivated by psychopathy to kill – often victims previously unknown to the killer – and selected randomly or to meet specific requirements of gender, appearance, etc. Val McDermid writes her Tony Hill series in this more graphic mode.

The next author of my study, Ellis Peters, introduced an innovation which was fundamental to my decision to give *Close to Home* a historical setting. Her Brother Cadfael stories, first published in 1977, were crucial to the establishment of historical detective fiction as a discrete subgenre. Although there had previously been examples of detective fiction with a historical setting,²⁹ Peters is credited as ‘the originator of... historical crime fiction’³⁰ in Britain. Her medieval mysteries, set firmly in a credible and well-researched historical past and featuring a compassionate and worldly-wise monk-investigator soon ‘prove[d] an overwhelming popular success’.³¹ While Peters had separately written historical novels and detective fictions, it was for her innovatory joining of the two forms to create the genre of historical detective fiction that she became most well-known.

I had chosen to write my detective fiction as a historical mystery for a number of reasons. First and foremost, was the influence of the Golden Age texts which formed such a prominent part of my reading in the past. This factor, allied with my long-standing fascination with history and previous experience of reading and writing historical fiction, made the choice a natural one. Second, was a conscious decision to develop a scenario whereby my investigators had to carry out their enquiries without modern gadgets and devices. This had a dual purpose: to prevent easy identification of the victim which would have removed a crucial plot point from my text; and to reinforce the parallels between my protagonists’ investigations and those of detectives in the classic texts. Third, was the popularity and character of the historical detective genre: which, as I will argue later in this commentary, is the natural successor of the classic detective fictions of the Golden Age. Finally, there was the way in which setting a detective story in the past adds resonance to the underlying structure of such fictions. As Todorov says, detective fiction ‘contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation’.³² The past story of the crime which the detective investigates means there is always a ‘history’ displayed in detective fiction; and in choosing a deeply-hidden history

²⁹ For example, Agatha Christie’s *Death Comes as the End* (1944) set in Ancient Egypt. Peter Lovesey had published the first of his eight Sergeant Cribb novels – set in Victorian times – in 1970, but they did not have the influence of Peters’ stories. Symons dismisses them as ‘period social comedies with thriller and puzzle elements’. Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder*, (New York: Mysterious Press, 1993) p227. While Lovesey has written a number of historical fictions, he is best known for his ongoing, contemporary Peter Diamond police procedurals.

³⁰ Rosemary Erickson Johnsen, *Contemporary Feminist Historical Crime Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p21 (further refs thus: Johnsen, CFHCF, p#)

³¹ Margaret Lewis, *Edith Pargeter: Ellis Peters*, (Bridgend: Seren, 1994) p82

³² Tzvetan Todorov, trans Richard Howard, *The Poetics of Prose*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) p44

which acts both as the motivation for my protagonist's return to her home town, and for the killing which is designed to hide Waverley's crimes, I was consciously aiming to enhance this structure in my fiction and show that '[t]wo periods are always in play with each other – not the present and the past, but one past with another'.³³

To contextualise my fiction in terms of the current genre market, and to mirror the choice of three Golden Age authors, I chose to look at the work of three contemporary female authors of classic-pattern detective fiction. The first of these was Stef Penney, whose stand-alone historical crime fiction *The Tenderness of Wolves*,³⁴ was published in 2006. The novel was the subject of popular and critical acclaim on its publication, winning the Costa Book Prize for first novel and overall best book of the year. Innovative in its depth of setting and multi-voiced – and partly unresolved – narrative, it was an exception to the 'rule' that genre fiction does not win prizes,³⁵ and its structures had relevance for my own work. Penney is a somewhat sporadic writer, and has not penned any further historical detective fictions, although she has subsequently written one modern crime novel and one recent non-crime historical fiction,³⁶ neither of these fall within the remit of my study.

The first of Catriona McPherson's Dandy Gilver series set in the 1920s and 1930s, was published in 2005. Her novels, with their traditional Golden Age structures, first person narratives and strong female investigator were relevant to aspects of *Close to Home*. Similarly, Elly Griffiths' Ruth Galloway stories, the first of which was published in 2009, were chosen because although they are set in twenty-first century Britain, they nevertheless have resonances for my own fiction. Featuring a female protagonist whose 'day job' as a forensic archaeologist makes her a peripheral and amateur investigator of crime, Griffiths' present tense, dual-voiced narratives are somewhat more innovative than McPherson's conservative texts in terms of technique, and were important to my study as I considered what structures and innovations the contemporary reader is willing to accept, and how I could contextualise the innovations in my own fiction in the contemporary market.

In expressing my own practice – a personal research methodology developed from the practice of reading as a writer and then writing my own novel in light of what I

³³ Timothy W Boyd and Carolyn, 'Shamus-a-um: Having the Quality of a Classical Detective', in Jerome H Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, eds., *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1997) p24

³⁴ Stef Penney, *The Tenderness of Wolves*, (London: Quercus, 2006)

³⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/feb/08/costabookaward2006.books> (accessed 28/1/2017)

³⁶ *The Invisible Ones*, (2011) and *Under a Pole Star*, (2016)

had drawn from the core texts – I offer an example of the way other creative writing practitioners can inform their own writing. By drawing on a discrete and specifically selected body of work – canonical texts of a genre, period, author or group of authors – other writers too can be inspired, inform their writing, draw context and bring innovation to their work. To this end, I pass on the knowledge gained in my research practice to the students I teach in my role as Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Winchester, since, as Sue Norton suggests, ‘my creative writing directly informs my teaching activities’.³⁷ More formally for my peer-group researchers in Creative Writing, I show in the completed novel and this commentary how, in writing *Close to Home*, one individual challenge has been met, and how ‘research... developed at least in part through...creative practice’.³⁸

This methodology is not an exercise of passive reading. In a layered, iterative process, I read the primary genre texts to understand their tropes and structures, to look at their narrative techniques, to see how they portray and reflect gender roles, and, for the Golden Age texts in particular, to absorb their milieu; the atmosphere that their authors had instilled in their work which could inform my own writing and make it seem real: avoiding parody and pastiche. I read for depth of interpretation and meaning, for characterisation and human interest, for the lure of the puzzle and the pure joy of story.

³⁷ Sue Norton, (2013), ‘Betwixt and Between: Creative Writing and Scholarly Expectations’, in *New Writing*, 10:1, pp68076 at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2012.694451>, p70 (accessed 17/1/2017)

³⁸ Jen Webb, *Researching Creative Writing*, (Newmarket: Creative Writing Studies, 2015) p11

Research

Every maker of any kind of creative work is a person who is involved at some level in research, because any creative work has to exist in time and space, and the maker of that work needs to know about the time and space in which the work is located to 'get it right'.³⁹

When I set out upon the process of undertaking a creative writing PhD, my understanding of the ways in which I would be engaged in research might best be represented by the foregoing quote. Whether a matter of historical detail or geographical location, research to establish 'the time and space in which the work is located' is fundamental to creative writing practice. And as someone who had already written a number of contemporary and historical novels, I was familiar with the kind of research which allows a writer to 'get it right' in terms of making a credible fiction. At another level, I knew that research could be used to initiate work, as well as to support it. For example, as an undergraduate, I used an exploration of the associations of the colour blue first to trigger and then give detail to a poem sequence; while an ekphrastic study of a number of paintings by Vermeer resulted in an experimental short story.

The use of research to initiate creative work was decisive in the early stages of planning my novel. An interest in twentieth century social history had led me to read a number of Mass-Observation diaries/compilations⁴⁰ which had been published in the first decade of the twenty-first century and which focus on World War II. Descriptions of events locally⁴¹ and further afield led me to wonder how many murders might have passed undetected in wartime Britain against a background of civilian casualties. This 'what if' moment led me to research further. The memoirs of Keith Simpson, a famous forensic pathologist,⁴² include the story of Rachel Dobkin, killed in April 1941. Her killer, her estranged husband, had attempted to conceal her body in a bombed-out building, hoping she would be taken for a victim of the London Blitz. However, when her body was discovered a year later, forensic evidence proved she had been murdered.

³⁹ Jeri Kroll, Andrew Melrose and Jan Webb, 'Introduction', to Jeri Kroll, Andrew Melrose and Jan Webb, eds., *Old and New, Tried and Untried*, (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 2016) p xi

⁴⁰ For example, Simon Garfield, ed., *We are at War*, (London: Ebury Press, 2006); Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming, eds., *Nella Last's War*, (London: Profile Books, 2006)

⁴¹ As, for example, in Andrew Bissell, *Southampton's Children of the Blitz*, (Bournemouth: Centenar Books, 2010)

⁴² Keith Simpson, *Forty Years of Murder*, (London: Harrap, 1978) pp49-59

The matter of her identity was crucial to the hunt for her killer. Although her husband had mutilated her body, removing her scalp, hands, feet and face to prevent her being identified, and covered the body with slaked lime, his measures were unsuccessful. Slaked lime does not destroy flesh as quicklime will do, but mummifies it. The consequent preservation of the remaining body tissue, taken in conjunction with the evidence of dental charts and use of pioneering photographic techniques, allowed Simpson to identify the victim as Rachel Dobkin. Her husband immediately became the chief suspect, and was quickly arrested. He was subsequently tried at the Old Bailey, found guilty of his wife's murder, and executed.⁴³

Rachel Dobkin's story was directly relevant to the process of creating my novel. The insistence of my male protagonist, Bram Nash, that the unknown girl is a murder victim rather than an air-raid casualty, and the emphasis on establishing the victim's identity as the way to reveal the killer were underpinned by and echo the real-life case; and both were key to the plot of *Close to Home*. When the body is found at a site where a jettisoned bomb has destroyed a pub and killed seven known inhabitants of Romsey, Nash, as coroner, refuses to give a certificate of death for the girl until he has discovered who she was and how she came to die.

Silent, he makes her a promise. She may be one death amongst many, but one death matters, or Hitler's blitzkreig is just slum clearance and some bastard he knows, some smart alec thinks he can use the grave of seven innocent people to hide a crime.

It isn't going to happen. He will find out.⁴⁴

This inciting incident was also mediated by a fictional reference, drawn from the work of Ellis Peters. Although the way in which I would later come to examine, formalise and articulate my practice of reading as a writer was still in its embryonic stage, the texts of all the twentieth century women authors of my study had been familiar to me for many years. As I considered how I could elide the real-life story of Rachel Dobkin with my fictional plot about a murdered girl,⁴⁵ I looked to these primary fictional texts for inspiration. In Peters' *One Corpse Too Many*, (1979), Cadfael, the monk-detective, is asked to tend the bodies of ninety-four men executed at the end of the siege of Shrewsbury Castle. He finds an extra body, a ninety-fifth, a young man who has not been hung as a result of the King's decree, but garotted with a fine wire and deposited with the

⁴³ Simpson, *Forty Years*, pp49-59

⁴⁴ *C2H*, p15

⁴⁵ Rachel Dobkin's body was discovered two years after her death. My plot required the body to be found immediately, and the investigation carried out without need for special forensic procedures.

other bodies in hope that no one will notice or care. But Cadfael does notice, and he does care. Speaking of the murdered man, he says:

For he is not like the rest. He was not hanged like the rest... he is in no way comparable.... And if you regret that my eyes found him, do you think God had not seen him long before? And supposing you could silence me, do you think God will keep silence?⁴⁶

When I drew from Peters' story at the early stage of planning my novel, I was, without fully realising it, making use of a practice which became fundamental to the creation of *Close to Home*. And as I moved forward with the work of drafting the novel, my investigation of the primary texts – and the way in which these informed my writing – became key to my research method.

In the beginning, however, as I prepared to write a historical detective fiction set in an actual location, I saw my research as a matter of establishing the historical background for the novel, and ensuring that details of its social, political and geographical location were as accurate as possible. While I was not setting out to ape the historian's role by suggesting my narrative was factual, I was, as Kate Grenville says, 'trying to be faithful to the shape of the historical record.... What I was writing about wasn't real, but it was as true as I could make it'.⁴⁷

The making of a credible world is part of almost every fiction writer's aim, and is particularly relevant to the process of writing historical fiction,⁴⁸ especially when the fictional setting is within living memory. This issue of credibility is also a concern for the writer of detective fiction, regardless of the time and place of its setting. This is because the 'mystery' of the crime needs a background that has the semblance of reality in order to function effectively. This does not preclude a fantasy or futuristic setting, such as JD Robb's *In Death* series – futuristic police procedurals featuring Lt Eve Dallas; or Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* novels set in an alternative contemporary London where

⁴⁶ Ellis Peters, (1979), *One Corpse Too Many*, (London: Head of Zeus, 2014) ebook edition downloaded for Kindle 12/7/2014 Ch3

⁴⁷ Kate Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007) p191

⁴⁸ Historical fiction as a genre is generally considered to have originated with the publication of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, (1814). This novel's inclusion of 'authenticating' material which claims authority from research about the past established the popular genre, and attracted work by authors like Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens and Conan Doyle. Doyle rated his historical fictions above his detective works, saying 'if I had never touched Holmes... my position in literature would... be a more commanding one'. Arthur Conan Doyle, (1924), *Memories and Adventures*, Project Gutenberg of Australia ebook, released 2014. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400681h.html>, Ch VIII (accessed 1/3/2017). Like detective fiction, the early genre was largely male-authored, fictions written by women being dismissed as romantic escapism. This perception persisted to recent times, but the work of women authors like Hilary Mantel, Margaret Atwood and Sarah Waters has reclaimed authority for female-authored historical fictions.

magic is a part of everyday life, but means such a setting must be constructed so its reality obeys the internal logic of the created world, and the commission of crime can be seen as an aberration to be resolved. A number of commentators have touched on this point. Boltanski says: 'it is only against this background of reality... that a mystery can stand out'.⁴⁹ He asserts that an unrealistic background neutralises the mystery element of the story, and illogical peculiarities of setting swallow up 'the singularities on which mystery-based novels rely (singularities that the investigator's job is to explain)'.⁵⁰ [sic].

Christiana Gregoriou echoes the point. Commenting on 'crime fiction and the notion of realism',⁵¹ she says '[i]t is... necessary for such texts to be *realistic*, meaning that they need purport to 'the illusion of life''.⁵² [sic]. She argues that this quality of seeming realistic might otherwise be described as verisimilitude, which 'adds an 'air of reality', and 'impression of life'';⁵³ or plausibility: '[w]hether true or not, a plausible text *could* be so'.⁵⁴ [original emphasis]. Gregoriou suggests these aspects of realism are essential to a detective story if the reader is to solve the puzzle presented by the fiction, saying that in order to do so, the story must be 'rendered in a manner that makes it *seem* factual and reliable'.⁵⁵ [original emphasis].

The demand for a text to appear reliable in terms of its background/setting can be seen as doubly important for the writer of historical crime fiction. Browne and Kreisler comment that the genre needs accurate supporting historical detail to be believable: 'To be credible, crime fiction has to be authenticated by details'.⁵⁶ And it was to provide these authenticating details that my initial researches were directed, as I focused on creating a credible setting for *Close to Home* in respect of its historical and cultural background – the milieu of World War II – and the geographical details of the real-life town of Romsey.

I planned to draw my research from a number of sources. The first was represented by secondary, published, non-fiction texts such as period-contemporary and modern commentary on wartime social conditions, historical descriptions of the events of

⁴⁹ Luc Boltanski, trans. Catherine Porter, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2014) p10

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp5-6

⁵¹ Christiana Gregoriou, *Deviance in Contemporary Crime Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p52

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ray B Browne and Lawrence A Kreiser, Jr., eds., *The Detective as Historian*, (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000) p4

the war and personal accounts of the day-to-day lives of people living at the time.⁵⁷ A second strand was represented by investigation into unpublished, primary written sources⁵⁸ such as a number of ARP warden diaries from Romsey⁵⁹ which covered the period of my novel. These proved a good source of information, underpinning the scene set in the ARP,⁶⁰ and clarifying issues about the registration of homeowners' details.⁶¹ Archived but unassigned/uncatalogued material such as postcards, trade bills and local maps stored by Romsey Local History Society (LTVAS)⁶² group was useful to get the 'feel' for wartime conditions as they applied specifically to the area in which I had chosen to set my novel. This element of local history and geography was underpinned by my own knowledge and memories, as I was born and brought up in Romsey in the 1950s before the town was overtaken by post-war change and development. Photographs, diary entries and newspaper clippings of general interest from the period, which had been collected by my parents and passed to me on their deaths, also fed into this background material.

At the earliest stage of my PhD process, it had been suggested that I should investigate the possibility of gathering contextualising material from people who had lived through the war in the area in which my story was set. To this end, I developed an ethics proposal to collect oral history,⁶³ and this was passed by the university. However, as I proceeded with the planning and early draft of the novel, I began to reconsider whether this mode of research was, in fact, relevant to my project.

While the historical novelist grounds her work in historical fact, the elements which give the story life – characters, dialogue, emotions – come about through the novelist's creative process, in an exploration of 'the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived'.⁶⁴ In a rare commentary about her writing, Ellis Peters touches on this blending of fact and fiction. She says that when she began her first historical mystery, *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (1977), she set out explicitly to 'derive a plot of a murder

⁵⁷ See Appendix II, Selected Additional Bibliography

⁵⁸ For example, Romsey ARP diaries 119M88/3/4 at Hampshire Record Office, and unassigned material archived by the Romsey Local History Society (LTVAS Group).

⁵⁹ Romsey ARP diaries 1940/1941 catalogue numbers 119M88/3/4 archived at the Hampshire Record Office.

⁶⁰ *C2H*, pp49-51

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p177

⁶² Lower Test Valley Archaeological Study Group incorporates Romsey Local History Group. Their details and website can be found at <https://www.ltvass.org.uk/>

⁶³ See Appendix I for copies of consent form and information sheet.

⁶⁴ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) p3

mystery from the true history of Shrewsbury Abbey in the twelfth century'.⁶⁵ However, her monk-investigator was not drawn from the true account, but was a character who 'sprang to life suddenly and unexpectedly... [emerging]... as the necessary protagonist... an observer and agent of justice in the centre of the action'.⁶⁶

Margaret Lewis, Peters' biographer, cites the two-volume *History of Shrewsbury* – bought by Peters in 1928 when she was fifteen – as the source for many of Peters' historical novels.⁶⁷ And while the historical account contains a number of details⁶⁸ which appear in the plot of *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, Peters peoples the novel with characters whose interactions, thoughts, emotions and dialogue are not derived from historical documentation but come about as a result of her creative and imaginative process. For *Close to Home*, I had set out, like Peters, to construct a narrative within a real chronological and geographical framework. But unlike Peters, I did not look for a historical basis for the murder of Ruth Taylor: nor did I intend to retell a specific story or set of stories from the past as represented by 'true-life crime'⁶⁹ accounts. I therefore concluded it would be inappropriate to pursue the idea of oral history as a source for my novel. While the idea of real-life story-gathering was attractive to me as an inveterate consumer of stories, it did not represent the actual research on which I needed to focus. The kinds of research I have discussed above, which might be characterised as research-as-inspiration and research-for-background certainly represent the stock-in-trade of the practising writer. But, in embarking on a course of study at PhD level, I had to consider how I would be demonstrating research in academic terms.

Much debate has been – and continues to be – centred on what research is in context of Creative Writing in the academy.⁷⁰ Early in my PhD studies, I became aware of suggestions that research value is articulated not in the creative work but in its

⁶⁵ Ellis Peters, 'Introduction' to Ellis Peters, (1988), *A Rare Benedictine*, (London: Head of Zeus, 2014) ebook edition (downloaded for Kindle 11/06/2014)

⁶⁶ Peters, *Benedictine*, as previously cited.

⁶⁷ Lewis, *Pargeter*, p13.

⁶⁸ The monk who is seized with 'a mental derangement', the vision which suggests the sick monk will be cured if he prays at St Winifred's fountain, and Prior Robert's miraculous identification of Winifred's anonymous burial place are all contained in the story of the expedition. Owen and Blakeway, (1825), *History of Shrewsbury*, accessed via <https://ia601409.us.archive.org/21/items/ahistoryshrewsb01blakgoog/ahistoryshrewsb01blakgoog.pdf> (downloaded 28/06/2017) pp33-42

⁶⁹ Accounts of real crimes factually retold or fictionalised exist as subgenres of crime fiction/faction. For context, I looked at a number of these – amongst others, Nicola Sly, *More Hampshire Murders*, (2010), and Jim Brown, *Southampton Murder Victims*, (2010). Laura Wilson's *The Lover* (2005), is an example of a wartime 'true crime' presented as fiction.

⁷⁰ New NAWA benchmarks for research degrees in Creative Writing are currently being drawn up, due for publication in 2018. Source: discussion with Professor Andrew Melrose, re creative writing in the academy, March 2017.

‘documentation and theorisation’.⁷¹ These seemed to me to undermine the unique quality of Creative Writing research, and I felt from the beginning that the creative work should be central to my research process, and to its outcome. Later commentators uphold this view. For example, Kroll and Harper, (2013), say creative writing research is ‘primarily focused on the production of new works....it always has practice at its conceptual core’.⁷² And the creative work not only lies at the heart of the research process, it also demonstrates knowledge which can be communicated to other creative writing practitioners. Paul Munden, (2016), comments on this latter point, saying

A creative writing PhD informs us how a work of literature *can* be made – when working with an individual ambition, emphasis, and sensibility – not how it *is* or *should be* made.... [it] demonstrate[s] how an individual solved an individual challenge, and it is that from which we stand to learn.⁷³

So, while my novel demonstrates my research and my response to ‘an individual challenge’, the exegetical component of my thesis – the commentary – maps the way I solved that challenge, allowing me to ‘explain [my] creative practice in a different way, and to contextualize it among other, resonating works’.⁷⁴ The production of the creative element of the work is key to the research project, but it is not only in the final product that the research is demonstrated, but also in the work of producing it. The cyclical process of reading, writing and revision which I undertook – and to which I referred in the introduction to this commentary – can be seen as a kind of action research: moving forward incrementally, and based on a cycle of action and reflection.

McNiff says action research is a ‘process of ‘observe – reflect – act – evaluate – modify – move in new directions’’,⁷⁵ and this certainly describes the way in which I worked to produce *Close to Home*. I observed elements in the primary texts – reading – and reflected on them, moved forward into action – writing – and then evaluated and modified what I had written in order to move in new, innovative directions with my text. And this process did not stop with the completion of the novel. Instead, reflection on what was done in its production has then been set out in this commentary and becomes an explicit part of the process, integrating the critical with the creative.

⁷¹ Hazel Smith and Roger T Dean, *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) p2

⁷² Kroll and Harper, *Research Methods*, p2

⁷³ Paul Munden, ‘Writing and Education: The Value of Reconciling Teaching and Research’, in Kroll *et al*, *Old and New*, p79

⁷⁴ Sue Joseph, ‘The Exegesis, Autoethnography and the Ethical Management of Enactive Practice’, in Kroll *et al*, *Old and New*, p112

⁷⁵ Jean McNiff, *Action Research*, (London: Sage Publications, 2017) p9

It is relevant here to point out that my individual writing practice is not one of storyboarding a text in detail before I begin writing it, nor of writing a complete draft of a piece before I revise it. While I have an idea of where I am going (for example, knowledge of some important episodes and an idea of how the fiction will end) the creation of the text is in large part an exploratory process. I work by continually revising what I have written, working back over the already-created text before pushing forward into new material. This mirrors the way in which my reading fed into the work and into my understanding of what I was doing as I read. Crucially, as I read, I pushed forward with my writing: and as I wrote, I re-read and re-wrote before moving forward once more with the writing.

This process might best be illustrated by an example to show how elements drawn from my primary reading influenced my writing practice in a cycle of revision and redrafting as it applied to the beginning of *Close to Home*. In an early draft of my novel, I had written wrote an opening section which was intended to establish the identity and context of the novel. The use of such a prefatory passage or prologue to show the circumstances of the murder and signal the identity of the work as a detective fiction is common in modern genre texts, although less so in the Golden Age texts. A good example of this in my primary texts is demonstrated by the opening of Elly Griffiths' novel *Dying Fall*, (2013). This depicts the crime which will be at the heart of the investigation as it is carried out, and from the victim's point of view. 'At first, he isn't even scared. Even though his room is full of smoke, and when he reaches the top of the stairs the heat makes him stagger backwards.'⁷⁶ Impending calamity is signalled by the opening sentences, while the fact that this is happening as the result of a crime is shown in the closing sentences of the short prologue. 'With his last atom of strength he hurls himself against the door. Only then does he realise that it's locked. From the outside. And now he's scared.'⁷⁷

Similarly, I had opened *Close to Home* with a section intended to establish the context and genre of the novel. The passage began with an explicit statement of time and place:

12th – 13th April, 1941.
9.40pm, over Hampshire.
Bombers' moon, so full and bright the blackout was useless. The

⁷⁶ Elly Griffiths, *Dying Fall*, (London: Quercus, 2013), ebook edition, (downloaded for Kindle, 24/12/2012) p1

⁷⁷ Ibid, p2

Solent shone like a mermaid's tail, marking the way to the heart of the city.'⁷⁸

and concluded with the information that a crime – over and above that of war – had been committed.

But when the Heavy Rescue Crew finally dug the last victim out of the ruins of the *Rose and Crown* in Middlebridge, there would be one body extra laid out on the trestles in St Stephen's parish room. Not six shrouded corpses, but seven: seven unlawful deaths for the town's coroner to investigate.⁷⁹

But while my opening passage, created in part in response to the modern genre texts I was reading, made an unambiguous statement about the novel's identity, it failed to satisfy me as a means to engage the reader immediately in the narrative. As I re-read both what I had written and the genre texts of my study, I revised this passage over and over again, making changes intended to give it immediacy. The tense was changed from past to present as part of a global alteration to the whole narrative; the pseudonymous town was given its true name to add authenticity; while extraneous material – the over-fussy details of time and place in the first quoted passage and pub name in the second – were removed.

But tomorrow, when the Heavy Rescue Crew digs the last casualty out of what's left of a little pub on the outskirts of Romsey, they will have an extra body to carry to the makeshift mortuary. Not seven shrouded corpses, but eight: eight unlawful deaths for the town's coroner to investigate.⁸⁰

But still, as an omniscient, third person narrative, the whole passage lacked a sense of engagement – what Iser calls '[t]he dynamic interaction between text and reader... which helps to create the impression that we are involved in something real.'⁸¹

Minor changes could not address this problem, and I had to re-think the way in which the novel began. The use of a prefatory section can be a risky strategy, appearing to the reader as a false start, because nothing really happens. Griffiths' prologue, quoted earlier, avoids this problem because the desperate situation of the victim engaged the reader's interest. While I had written my opening *before* Griffiths' novel was published, in later revisions of *Close to Home* I could see that in comparison with a beginning like this, my original had nothing *but* context to offer. I needed to make further, more radical changes.

⁷⁸ C2H, p1 early draft, March 2010.

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ C2H, p2, final submitted version 2017

⁸¹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) p68

At this point, I went back to the Golden Age authors of my study. Margery Allingham's novel, *Traitor's Purse*, (1941), has an intriguing opening and an innovative⁸² premise, beginning with a description of her series detective, Albert Campion, waking up in a hospital bed with total amnesia:

The muttering was indistinct. It crept down the dark ward, forcing itself upon the man who lay in the patch of light at the far end of the vast room.... In a little while the words might start connecting and then, please God, he would learn something and this appalling fear would recede.⁸³

Beginning like this, with the protagonist of the piece, is an effective way of engaging reader interest. Sol Stein says that it is '[m]ost often a character one wants to get to know better'⁸⁴ which 'entices the reader in the first few paragraphs of a book'.⁸⁵ In moving to an opening which introduces my protagonist, Jo Lester, I was acting on what I had read in texts like Allingham's. With this new beginning, I was still able to offer a degree of contextualizing detail to the setting, while the first person narrative offers the reader a sense of immediacy with the action, and reveals that there is something at stake for the protagonist at the end of the journey.

It's midnight when the train leaves London. I'd arrived much too early, had to wait until the carriages filled up and the labyrinthine processes of wartime travel set us on our way. Now, in the blacked-out, blue-lit, third class compartment my fellow travellers are sleeping, stiff upper lip in the face of danger. *If it ain't got your name on it...*

I can't sleep. It isn't the bombs, I've got used to them. It's the thought of what lies ahead.⁸⁶

The previous opening to the book was at first discarded, but in the final version became the second section of the text, allowing additional historical context to be added once a human focus had been established.⁸⁷ Additionally, this revision allowed me to indicate the novel's multi-voiced identity⁸⁸ at an early stage. While the reader now knows who

⁸² Allingham's American agent was reluctant to take the novel because of its innovation because 'it was different from most stories...and an agent is always scared of what's different.' AS Byatt, 'Margery Allingham: A thriller is as precise as a sonnet'. Article published in The Guardian, 25/7/2015, at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/25/margery-allingham-traitors-purse-thriller-1940> (accessed 30/6/2017)

⁸³ Margery Allingham, (1941), *Traitor's Purse*, (London: Vintage Books, 2006) p7

⁸⁴ Sol Stein, *How to Grow a Novel*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999) p31

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ C2H, final submitted version, (2016) p 1

⁸⁷ See C2H pp1-2 for final version.

⁸⁸ The narrative structures of C2H are discussed further detail in Section 6 of this commentary.

the protagonist is, the technique of switching between narrative modes is established from the beginning.

The example of the changes I made to the opening of *Close to Home* shows one of the ways in which my reading and writing process worked in practical terms: by a re-iterative critical reading applied to both the primary and created texts, which was then translated into action as I drafted and redrafted the novel. The changes made were not achieved in one redrafting 'pass' but on multiple revisions over a period of time, until I arrived at version of my text which I considered effective.

Reading as a writer.

'...you can't write fiction well unless you read a lot of it, too....
because you need, even if only instinctively, to understand what
reading does to a reader.'⁸⁹

'The truth is that good writing can only be learned from good writing.'⁹⁰

Reading as a writer is not a new concept. While Dorothea Brande coined the phrase in her text *Becoming a Writer*, (1934),⁹¹ the advice that would-be writers should read and learn from the work of established authors goes back to antiquity. Longinus, writing in the first- or second-century AD,⁹² recommends that writers should look to an 'emulous imitation of the great poets and prose writers of the past',⁹³ because by 'fixing an eye...on those high examples they will become like beacons to guide us'.⁹⁴ His advice is not to analyse these texts, but to draw inspiration from them by taking 'a divine impulse from another's spirit';⁹⁵ and suggesting that learning to write well comes not only from emulating writers of the past, but also from absorbing their influence in what Francine Prose calls 'a kind of osmosis'.⁹⁶ Prose says that this is the way 'most – maybe all – writers...learned...to write',⁹⁷ and it was certainly true for me: a voracious reader from early childhood, writing my own stories had always been an instinctive response to what I read. And from the beginning, my reading and writing practice had been inextricably linked, arising from what Amanda Boulter calls 'the joy of the story, the desire to explore imaginary worlds, the thrill of language used in new and startling ways'.⁹⁸

Brande, on the other hand, suggests that reading as a writer is a skill in which pleasure of reading has no part to play. She says that to read 'as if you had no responsibility to a book but to enjoy it',⁹⁹ is amateur, and proceeds to offer specific instructions for how the reader/writer *should* read. The implication that there is a right way, and perhaps only *one* right way to read as a writer requires the reader/writer to

⁸⁹ David Rain, 'Believing Stories' in Maggie Butt, ed., *Story*, (London:Greenwich Exchange, 2007) p1

⁹⁰ EM Forster, (1919) 'The Fiction Factory', in EM Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (London: Penguin, 2005) p177

⁹¹ Dorothea Brande, (1934), *Becoming a Writer*, (London: Macmillan, 1996)

⁹² Author and date are disputed. See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/longinus> (accessed 15/1/2017)

⁹³ Longinus, trans. H L Havell, *On the Sublime*, Project Gutenberg ebook, first released 2006 at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17957/17957-h/17957-h.htm>, section XIII (accessed 15/1/2017)

⁹⁴ Ibid, XIV

⁹⁵ Ibid, XIII

⁹⁶ Francine Prose, *Reading like a Writer*, (London: Aurum Press Ltd., 2012) p3

⁹⁷ Ibid, p2

⁹⁸ Boulter, *Writing Fiction*, p18

⁹⁹ Brande, *Writer*, p100

consider that ‘every book is a specimen’,¹⁰⁰ because ‘to read effectively it is necessary to learn to consider a book in the light of what it can teach you’.¹⁰¹ Although I was certainly looking at the texts I chose as examples of their genre, Brande’s methodology and explicitly didactic purpose did not describe – nor did I wish it to define – my own practice of reading as a writer. Her focus is fixed on the surface of the text: she recommends a mechanistic imitation of a passage of writing, dissecting and reproducing it ‘noun for noun, adjective for adjective, verb for verb’¹⁰² in order to learn how to achieve ‘technical excellences’.¹⁰³ McCaw critiques this approach, commenting that it suppresses ‘creative joy of reading and interpretation’¹⁰⁴ in its concern with utility. The insistence on this close reading means that ‘form, rather than content, is the central concern’.¹⁰⁵ Like Boulter, he uses the word ‘joy’ to describe a creative approach to reading and interpreting texts, and it was in this sense that I moved forward in my practice of reading as a writer. My priority was not simply to examine form – as in Brande’s reductive process – but rather to develop an approach which was ‘imaginative and dynamic, multi-layered and also (equally importantly) *enjoyable for its own sake*’.¹⁰⁶ [original emphasis]

The importance of story is not to be discounted: the impulse to tell and consume stories is as old as humanity. Karen Armstrong, in her history of myth, says ‘stories proved to be... crucial to the way that human beings understood themselves’.¹⁰⁷ Philip Pullman puts the need for story at an even more fundamental level. ‘After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world’.¹⁰⁸ And it is story, essentially, that classic detective fiction is chiefly concerned with. Its strong narrative structure, which promises the reader a resolved ending to a mystery, satisfies a need to make sense of the world in a way real life which fails to do.

Detective fiction is not a genre which is commonly perceived as high art, but rather as part of popular culture. RA York says that although detective fiction ‘can be judged, like any other novel, for the convincingness, sensitivity and moral integrity implied

¹⁰⁰ Brande, *Writer*, p99

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p108

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p106

¹⁰⁴ Neil McCaw, (2011), ‘Close Reading, Writing and Culture’, in *New Writing*, 8:1, pp25-34 at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2010.527349>, p27 (accessed 17/1/2012)

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p26

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p31

¹⁰⁷ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005) p12

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Philip Pullman at https://clubs-kids.scholastic.co.uk/clubs_content/7922 (accessed 28/1/2017)

in its presentation of social life',¹⁰⁹ its function as part of popular culture means that authors of detective fiction are 'seeking to entertain',¹¹⁰ just as its readers are looking for that 'sense of relaxation which is part of the pleasure it offers.'¹¹¹ Since my aim was, in part, to produce a novel which would appeal to a general reader of the genre, I needed to consider what constitutes Boulter's 'joy of story' for such readers. For, as Margery Allingham has Campion say, it is hard to 'imagine the mind of a man who could write a whole book for the purpose of annoying those with whom he lived' .¹¹²

The pleasure of reading a genre text may depend to some degree on how well it satisfies reader expectations. Conversely, strict adherence to fulfilling those same expectations may nevertheless fail to guarantee reader satisfaction. While part of my reading as a writer was aimed at identifying tropes in the primary fictional texts which I would use or subvert in my own work, I was also looking to identify why some texts, despite fulfilling expectations of the genre, nevertheless fail to deliver a satisfying reading experience. For example, Sayers' *Five Red Herrings*, (1931) keeps the rules¹¹³ of fair play enshrined by the Detection Club,¹¹⁴ offering the reader all the information necessary to solve the mystery of Campbell's death. She wrote the book to answer reviewers who criticised previous work because 'the identity of the murderer was too obvious',¹¹⁵ commenting 'if people really *want* to play 'spot the murderer'here is a book in which... practically every sentence is necessary to the plot'.¹¹⁶ [original emphasis]. But in focusing on the mechanics of puzzle-solving, *Five Red Herrings* lacks depth of characterisation, and the story is disappointingly – and uncharacteristically – 'flat'. The experiment had produced perhaps the least successful of all her novel-length fictions, and Sayers quickly returned to work which 'contain a certain amount of human interest'.¹¹⁷ I

In creating *Close to Home*, it was my aim that it should contain 'human interest' as well as demonstrating what I had learned in terms of the tropes and conventions of classic detective fiction. An early example of what I looked for in a specific text and how I used it

¹⁰⁹ RA York, *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p4

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹¹ *ibid*

¹¹² Margery Allingham, (1931), *Police at the Funeral*, (London: Penguin, 1973) p235

¹¹³ For these 'Rules', see Appendix I

¹¹⁴ Dorothy L Sayers was one of the founding members The Detection Club, set up in 1930, which was 'an elite social network of writers whose work earned a reputation for literary excellence' Martin Edwards, *The Golden Age of Murder*, (London: HarperCollins, 2015) p6. Its aim was 'to keep the detective story up to the highest standard its nature permits'. *Ibid*, p8.

¹¹⁵ Dorothy L Sayers in Barbara Reynolds, ed., *The Letters of Dorothy L Sayers*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995) p312

¹¹⁶ *ibid*

¹¹⁷ *ibid*

to influence my own fiction will illustrate what I mean. As I have indicated previously, Sayers' detective texts were very familiar to me from my pre-research reading, and I had unconsciously taken on aspects of the way she had characterised her protagonist, Lord Peter Wimsey, when I set out to write *Close to Home*. These influences were a beginning, but I needed to bring an informed and conscious process to bear on what I was doing as I created my novel. In considering how to add depth of character and human interest to my male protagonist, Bram Nash, I re-read Sayers' first Wimsey novel, *Whose Body*, (1923). Wimsey first appears as something of a silly ass, with more in common with Bertie Wooster¹¹⁸ than Sherlock Holmes. Presented as a man whose 'long, amiable face looked as if it had generated spontaneously from his top hat',¹¹⁹ crime seems no more serious a pursuit to him than his hobby of collecting rare first editions. At first sight there is nothing to make the reader suspect the story will present anything other than an intellectual game: a puzzle to solve. But the impression that detecting is simply a game Wimsey plays to amuse himself is soon undermined. Sayers brings innovation to the form with her characterisation of Wimsey, making him more than a one-note crime-solver. In a way which is uncommon in the Golden Age texts of the early 1920s, she gives her detective a real, often inconvenient psychology which affects his ability to act effectively. Suffering from shell shock as a consequence of his service in the Great War, Wimsey's history – and his conscience – mean that tracking down a killer is not just an intellectual exercise for him. By identifying the murderer, he himself becomes complicit in an act of killing.¹²⁰

Wimsey's crisis of conscience when he contemplates handing the killer over to justice and the gallows brings about a breakdown, as he reverts to a helpless sense of responsibility. Sitting in his flat late at night, he begins to hallucinate:

can't you hear it? Tap, tap, tap – they're mining us – but I don't know where – I can't hear – I can't. Listen, you! There it is again – we must find it – we must stop it... Listen! Oh my God! I can't hear – I can't hear anything for the noise of the guns. Can't they stop the guns?'¹²¹

In characterising Bram Nash, I wanted, like Sayers, to reflect a generation of men whose lives had been affected by war in a way which seemed plausible. History has shown how deeply marked those who served in the trenches were: I did not want to sidestep this

¹¹⁸ This comparison has been drawn by many commentators. See, for example, Janice Rossen, *Women Writing Modern Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) pp149-150

¹¹⁹ Dorothy L Sayers, (1923), *Whose Body?* (London: New English Library, 2003) p1

¹²⁰ Capital punishment was not abolished in Britain until 1969, although an Act of Parliament in November 1965 had suspended the penalty. See <http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/abolish.html> (accessed 20/1/2017)

¹²¹ Sayers, *Body*, p137

issue. And a man of Nash's age would certainly have seen service of some kind in the Great War, so I decided that a wartime disability – like Wimsey's neurasthenia – would not only be true to the times, but also give Nash depth of character and add a degree of interest unconnected with the murder investigation.

While Sayers' choice to give Wimsey a sometimes disabling mental condition was unusual for the time, the trope of a detective who is physically or emotionally flawed can be traced to the earliest days of the genre. Used to signal that the perfect, rational/detached detective has vulnerabilities that make him a rounded human being, in the early days of detective fiction these flaws are not allowed to detract from the protagonist's ability to detect crime. For example, Ernest Bramah's blind detective Max Carrados¹²² functions so well the uninitiated do not realise his blindness. 'I can scarcely believe it. You seem so sure and self-reliant....you were typing when I came'.¹²³ And Holmes' intelligence is so overactive he must use cocaine to quieten his mind when no investigation is at hand. 'My mind... rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work... I can dispense then with artificial stimulants.'¹²⁴ These flaws offer the reader an identifying characteristic, but the reader does not get a sense that the characters are truly vulnerable. I would suggest that by introducing a sense of fallibility to the characterisation of her detective, Sayers' had brought a level of innovation to the trope and the genre. Wimsey's realistically-drawn psychological difficulty gives dimension to his character which has become almost *de rigueur* in modern genre fictions: where investigators who have alcohol problems like Dexter's Morse, problematic personal lives like PD James' Dalgleish or dysfunctional personalities like Val McDermid's Tony Hill, self-described as a 'sexual and emotional cripple'¹²⁵ are commonly portrayed.

In thinking about how I could use this trope in characterising Bram Nash, I wanted to offer a dimension that was not common in either Golden Age or contemporary fictions, and thus bring a degree of innovation to his portrayal. While Wimsey and his successors are flawed in ways which are not outwardly visible, I decided Nash's problem should be

¹²² Carrados featured in several collections of short stories and one novel, published between 1914-1934

¹²³ Ernest Bramah, 'The Coin of Dionysius', in *The Eyes of Max Carrados*, ebook edition (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2013) downloaded for Kindle 9/4/2017

¹²⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Sign of Four' in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, (London: Magpie Books, 1993) pp89-90

¹²⁵ Val McDermid, (1995), *The Mermaids Singing*, (London: Harper, 2010) p121. And see Janet Brons, 'The Flawed Detective: From Hercule Poirot to Sherlock Holmes...' in *The Strand Magazine*, 5/11/2015, at <https://www.strandmag.com/why-are-our-favorite-detectives-so-fatally-flawed/> (accessed 12/7/16)

something he could not hide. My early researches¹²⁶ led me to sites concerning WWI facial injuries, a common result of trench warfare.¹²⁷ The image of a tin mask¹²⁸ haunted me, and became the visual cue for Nash's injuries. In *Close to Home*, this disfigurement has various effects, just as Wimsey's neurasthenia affects his ability to function. Nash's injury is looked on by others sometimes as fuel for prejudice, '[m]an like that, face like that, no decent woman...'¹²⁹ sometimes admiringly: 'I wouldn't want him to think I'm a coward.... Bloke like that, you know. Stuff he's been through.'¹³⁰ It throws light on his character:

by the end of the day the mask is an irritation he's glad to be rid of. It isn't vanity that makes him wear it, but a wish not to shock. A courtesy. He'd no more go out in public without his glasses than he would without his trousers.¹³¹

and gives him a reason to shun emotional closeness:

The irony, unmanned by Josy Fox. Shrapnel couldn't manage it, but she's found him out. Should have kept his own rules in the first place. No pity fucks, no sympathy. Pay and stay free.
Once, only once. Once too bloody often. Now she thinks she owns him.
Plenty of reasons to kick himself.
Again.¹³²

My aim was that by giving Nash a flaw which affects not only his outward appearance but also his relationships with other people, I would add depth to his portrayal as well as something new to the trope. In examining Sayers' text and drawing consciously from it, I was exploring what reading as a writer could offer in terms of my creative process; looking at my previous impressions in light of a conscious and reflective practice. And, as in the example above, I explored the text by re-reading it both as a whole and in focused sections, I identified an aspect of her characterisation of Wimsey which had not been commented on before. In this, I was building on what I had observed from earlier readings, and discovering a deeper level of understanding. This insight allowed me to add

¹²⁶ At this stage of my plans for the novel, the issue had not been much covered in fiction. The much-vaunted publication of Louisa Young's novel, *My Dear, I wanted to tell you* (2011), featuring a protagonist who suffers facial injury, made me reconsider the choice, but I concluded too much of Nash's characterisation rested on this aspect for me to change it at that stage. (And see Pat Barker's *Life Class* trilogy 2008-15).

¹²⁷ <http://www.gilliesarchives.org.uk/> (accessed 1/10/2009) and

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/faces-of-war-145799854/?no-ist=> (accessed 1/10/2009)

¹²⁸ See http://www.qaranc.co.uk/war_medicine_exhibition.php (accessed 1/10/2009)

¹²⁹ *C2H*, p18

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p30

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p52

¹³² *Ibid*, p64

my own innovation to that which I had identified in Sayers' novel, adding depth to the way I characterised my male protagonist and informing my writing practice.

The concept of re-reading as the basis of reading as a writer is not a new one. Each of the earlier-named commentators, from Brande onwards, advocates re-reading. While Brande and Prose offer a list of strategies, Boulter comments more generally that '[c]reative writers are *active readers* who come back to their favourite books again and again'.¹³³ [original emphasis]. My own sense was that in re-reading, I exploring what Boulter calls 'the deep places within fiction',¹³⁴ not only to examine what the writer had done and how she had done it, but also to tease out layers of meaning.

In *The Act of Reading*, Iser comments on the way in which a reader experiences a fictional text, a 'literary work...which brings into the world something that did not exist before'.¹³⁵ He distinguishes between a 'real reader' whose reactions to a text can be documented, and the hypothetical, 'implied reader' who is assumed to have the knowledge necessary to interpret the text. The role of the implied reader is to 'assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him'.¹³⁶ But this implied reader nevertheless coexists in the person of an actual reader, whose understanding and experiences play a part in his/her interpretation of meaning. Iser describes the interaction between text and reader as an 'aesthetic response because, although it is brought about by the text, it brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his own focus'.¹³⁷

I would suggest that the more effective a fictional text is in evoking an imaginative and intellectual response, the more likely it is to engage the reader's interest. By inviting the reader to interact dynamically with the text to decode an embedded set of clues and solve a mystery, detective fiction is specifically designed to engage this dual response. It promotes engagement with the text, and in offering a resolved ending to the mystery, rewards that engagement.

As a reader, my experience of the texts – how deeply they engaged my interest, how challenging of interpretation – tended to drive my reading practice and my writing process. Reciprocally, my writing process worked to narrow the field of my reading practice. That is to say, those texts which had most to suggest for my own writing were

¹³³ Boulter, *Writing Fiction*, p18

¹³⁴ Ibid, p16

¹³⁵ Iser, *Reading*, p x

¹³⁶ Ibid, p38

¹³⁷ Ibid

those which best satisfied my sense of what reading a detective fiction ought to offer: an engaging story that went beyond the puzzle aspect of solving crime. And it was to those texts which offered a sense of ‘something more’ that I looked for influences for my fiction. Although I read a number of Agatha Christie’s novels as part of my early reading research, for example, I did not find them engaging in the way that Allingham or Sayers’ work was. Their plots were ingenious, but to me they lacked depth and characterisation, offering only a puzzle to be solved. I was of Auden’s opinion that once the solution became known, I did not want to read them again.¹³⁸ And because these fictions did not offer what I was looking to replicate in my own writing, I did not choose them as focus texts for my primary reading.

My decision to include engagement with a text – the joy of story – as a factor in my choice of texts was based not only on my own response and opinion of those texts, but also by a wider consideration: whether they could be seen to have achieved popularity with the reading public. On these grounds, the fictions of Sayers, Allingham and Tey from the Golden Age, and Peters’ Cadfael stories from the 1970s and 1980s have stood the test of time, remaining popular as new generations of readers discover them. Each of these authors’ work has stayed in print from their original publication, and is currently available in new, twenty-first century hardcopy and ebook editions. Although it remains to be seen how the contemporary writers I have chosen will be judged in future, Penney’s *The Tenderness of Wolves*, (2006), was the subject of popular and critical acclaim on its publication.¹³⁹ Elly Griffiths received the 2016 CWA Dagger in the Library award for ‘the author of the most enjoyed collection of works in libraries’¹⁴⁰ and Catriona McPherson has been nominated in ‘best historical novel’ 2016 Agatha¹⁴¹ awards for *Dandy Gilver and the Reek of Red Herrings*, (2014), and the 2017 Lefty awards¹⁴² for the same novel.

¹³⁸ ‘I forget the story as soon as I have finished it, and have no wish to read it again. If...I start reading one and find after a few pages that I have read it before, I cannot go on.’ WH Auden, (1948), ‘The Guilty Vicarage’, in Robin W Winks, ed., *Detective Fiction*, (Woodstock, VT: Foul Play Press, 1988) p15

¹³⁹ Overall winner of the Costa Prize 2006. See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/feb/08/costabookaward2006.books> (accessed 28/1/2017)

¹⁴⁰ <http://www.thecwa.co.uk/news/cwa-dagger-awards-awarded-in-glittering-ceremony/> (accessed 28/1/2017)

¹⁴¹ Named after Agatha Christie, awarded annually for ‘cozy’[sic] crime mysteries. See <http://www.malicedomestic.org/agathaawards.html> (accessed 28/1/2017)

¹⁴² See <http://www.leftcoastcrime.org/LeftyAwards.html> (accessed 28/1/2017) and <http://www.shotsmagcouk.blogspot.co.uk/2017/01/2017-lefty-award-nominees.html> (accessed 28/1/2017)

Tropes.

'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance... is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.'¹⁴³

The first and overriding tropes in detective fiction are the most ancient, and concern the repercussions of crime. While the earliest stories cannot be described as detective stories, because, as Stephen Knight comments, 'none of them includes anyone who could be described as a detective',¹⁴⁴ they demonstrate the premise that perpetrators of crime will inevitably be revealed and punished, and justice will be done. *The Newgate Calendar*,¹⁴⁵ which appeared in a number of versions throughout the eighteenth century, is a prime example of these conventions. Purporting to present true accounts of crime, these early stories were forerunners of modern detective fiction, and deliver a moral message about good and evil. Often told in gory detail, they emphasise the way in which the criminals' guilty consciences prompt them to confess and reveal themselves to the world. Repentance follows, often at the foot of the gallows, and the criminal is seen to be justly punished. Although the contemporary genre avoids such overt messaging, the pattern is upheld in the resolved endings of classic-pattern detective fiction. While in these fictions it is the detective's investigations which reveal the criminal, it is notable that the criminal's confession almost always closes the story so it is obvious the right person has been apprehended. Justice is seen to be done, and order is restored to the community.

In *Close to Home*, I reflect these oldest imperatives of crime fiction – that the perpetrators reveal themselves and confess, and justice – of a kind – is done. Edith Waverley's admission to her brother in the final chapter of the novel discloses a crime he did not know she had committed:

'Silly little girl,' she says. 'She was goin' to get us all into trouble. I had to put her away.'

The jolt that runs through Waverley would have got him killed if there had been a bullet in my gun. But he doesn't seem to notice his lucky escape.

'Edie,' he says. 'Edie. What are you saying?'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ TS Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1921) at <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html> (accessed 14/01/2016) Section I

¹⁴⁴ Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p4

¹⁴⁵ *The Newgate Calendar*. <http://www.exclassics.com/newgate/ngintro.htm> (accessed 15/1/2017)

¹⁴⁶ *C2H*, p 207

The later transcription of Miss Waverley's confession to the police goes on to reveal her guilty secrets: her involvement with her brother – their incestuous relationship, the dead baby which resulted from their union – and the crimes she has committed to protect his reputation, including the murder of Ruth Taylor and her uncle Paul Oxley. This resolution could be said to mirror the style of *The Newgate Calendar*, where guilty conscience betrays the criminal.

Nevertheless, I imparted a twist to the narrative by withholding a corresponding sense that revealing Edith and Dr Waverley's criminal activities will restore order to the community. In subverting the trope which means, as Auden says, that when the guilty party is identified and arrested 'innocence is restored and the law retires',¹⁴⁷ I hoped to suggest a more realistic outcome: that crime has consequences which are not so easily resolved. The revelation of the Waverleys' crimes shatters rather than restoring the *status quo*, and Jo's involvement does not serve to heal the community, but rather to reveal its deeper fractures. Although the perpetrators are punished, they will not face due process. At the end of the novel, Jo asks Nash:

'What will happen to them? To both of them? Will they hang?' Her voice is stronger, more normal. A cool veneer that holds him at arm's length.

'I doubt they'll ever be able to bring charges.' He's suddenly weighted down with weariness. If only he could have her detachment.¹⁴⁸

This avoidance of due legal process does not contravene the boundaries of classic detective fiction. In a number of the Golden Age texts I was influenced by, the culprits are not brought to law. Instead, while justice is served and the criminal punished, open scandal is avoided and order restored to the community without the disruption of arrest and trial. Sayers allows several of her perpetrators to evade due process: either by suicide like Penberthy in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, (1928), or Tallboy in *Murder must Advertise*, (1933); or by dying a hero's death like Will Thoday in *The Nine Tailors*, (1934). Tey, in *Miss Pym Disposes*, (1946), goes further, and has her eponymous protagonist connive at murder rather than disturb the peace of a community she admires. In a step further than Wimsey's inconvenient – but eventually overcome – pangs of conscience, Miss Pym allows a girl she likes but believes is a murderer to go free 'because I am quite incapable of sending anyone to the gallows. I know what my plain

¹⁴⁷ Auden, 'Vicarage', p18

¹⁴⁸ *C2H*, p226

duty is and I can't do it'.¹⁴⁹ Even when she learns she is wrong, and discovers who the actual murderer is, she still opts for peace rather than justice. She leaves the community of Leys and goes home to London, vowing to avoid meddling in future. She will take refuge in 'her own, safe, nice, calm collected existence, and in future she would be content with it. She would even give up... psychology'.¹⁵⁰ Nash's attitude to Jo concerning the crimes she committed in pursuing Waverley mirrors Miss Pym's in some small way, as he advises her how to evade prosecution.

'I'm in pretty big trouble, aren't I?' she says, sombre. 'That policeman, Superintendent Bell. He'd have liked to throw the book at me. He would have done it, I think. If he hadn't been afraid it would finish me off.'

'Don't worry. So long as you're sensible, all he's got to charge you with is having Frank's gun.'

'Sensible?'

'Keep your mouth shut. Don't admit anything.'

'I already –'

'The state you were in, what you said can't be given in evidence. They'll have to take another statement when you've recovered.'¹⁵¹

My protagonists do not want the Waverleys to escape justice, however. Nash is disgusted by the full discovery of Waverley's perversion, '[b]ile rises in his throat, the way it's been doing all day'¹⁵² and Jo admits the depth of her animosity towards her father: 'I hated him so much. Even before I knew what he was, what he'd done',¹⁵³ but in the end they must accept that the siblings will not face legal consequences. And Jo, who could have allowed Waverley to die when his sister shoots him, can only question herself about why she decided to save him. 'I can't stop thinking, I only had to walk away.'¹⁵⁴ There will be no gallows scene: they must be content with the knowledge that each of the culprits has confessed, and Ruth Taylor's murderer will kill no more.

The next, and most basic trope of detective fiction is the introduction of an explicit detective figure to a story of a crime. This came about during the early part of the nineteenth century with the publication of stories in which an individual is shown to actively undertake the business of seeking out the perpetrators of crime. 'True-life' memoirs like master criminal turned thief-taker Vidocq's¹⁵⁵ paved the way for fictions that focused on the investigator's role.

¹⁴⁹ Josephine Tey, (1946), *Miss Pym Disposes*, (London: Arrow Books, 2002) p234

¹⁵⁰ Tey, *Pym*, p248

¹⁵¹ *C2H*, p 211

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p 212

¹⁵³ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁵ Francois Eugene Vidocq, (1828-9), *Memoirs of Vidocq*.

Poe's three stories, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', (1841), 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', (1842-3), and 'The Purloined Letter', (1845), are widely recognised as being the first modern detective fictions. These stories introduced a protagonist whose role is explicitly that of an investigator. Poe's Dupin, whose 'aura of genius combines with the actuality of simple explanation',¹⁵⁶ was to fix the pattern for future detectives: men who solve mysteries by a process of observation and logical deduction.

This pattern was not only set in terms of the detective's intellectual capacity, but also his – male – gender. While a small number of female detectives featured in nineteenth-century fictions such as Andrew Forrester's *The Female Detective* or William Stephens Hayward's *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, (both 1864), the trend was for male-authored fictions featuring a male detective figure who could solve mysteries by a process of ratiocination. In the later part of the century, stories featuring female investigators authored by women did emerge – for example, Catherine Louisa Pirkis' *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* (1893-4), and in America, Anna Katharine Green's *The Leavenworth Case* (1878) was an early example of a female detective created by a woman writer. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of detective fiction was androcentric, a pattern which was strengthened even more firmly by the appearance of Sherlock Holmes.

If Poe had created the first detective, Arthur Conan Doyle created 'the one great detective'¹⁵⁷ in Sherlock Holmes. First appearing in *A Study in Scarlet*, (1887), Holmes established for all time the pre-eminent character of the fictional detective: 'highly intelligent, essentially moral, somewhat elitist, all-knowing, disciplinary in knowledge and skills, energetic [and] eccentric'.¹⁵⁸ These characteristics – or a selection of them – are echoed, repeated or subverted in the portrayal of every subsequent fictional detective. Holmes' abstruse knowledge about tobacco ash, 'I have, as you know...written a little monograph on the ashes of 140 different varieties of pipe, cigar and cigarette tobacco';¹⁵⁹ Poirot's much-vaunted intelligence, '[t]his affair must all be unravelled from within.' He tapped his forehead. 'These little grey cells. It is up to them';¹⁶⁰ Wimsey's morality 'I hate violence! I loathe wars and slaughter, and men quarrelling and fighting like beasts! Don't say it isn't my business. It's everybody's business';¹⁶¹ and Campion's eccentricity,

¹⁵⁶ Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p28

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p55

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

¹⁵⁹ Conan Doyle, (1891), 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery', in *Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p214

¹⁶⁰ Agatha Christie, (1920), *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2007) p158

¹⁶¹ Dorothy L Sayers, (1937), *Busman's Honeymoon*, (London: New English Library, 2003) p 141

'[s]omewhat to his host's embarrassment, Mr Campion shook hands with the dog'¹⁶² are all Golden Age examples of these characteristics.

In modern fictions, these qualities continue to be displayed by investigators. Intelligence is a requisite, though characterisations tend to be less colourful than in earlier texts. Investigators act from a stubborn determination to uncover a mystery, like Mrs Ross, 'I've already decided; I don't have to think any more',¹⁶³ because they have nothing better to do, like Dandy Gilver; or because they have specialist knowledge like Ruth Galloway's, 'Professor Galloway is an expert on bone preservation'.¹⁶⁴

For *Close to Home*, I chose to create protagonists who have qualities in common with the early texts, but who are, like their modern counterparts, less flamboyant in their characterisations. Building on classic tropes to characterise my protagonists and confirm their identity as detectives, and contextualising their portrayal with a more modern approach, I drew on my reading practice to inform my writing process. Nash, for example, as a solicitor and the local coroner, has specialist knowledge of the law, and a strong sense of professional ethics. 'What I insist on is doing my duty. Finding out who she was, and how she came by her death'.¹⁶⁵ Jo Lester, while she begins her work with Nash as cover for her search for her father, nevertheless acknowledges her duty to the dead. 'Till now, I've been thinking of her as a convenience. A smokescreen for me to make my own search. But she's real. Her death is real. I owe her more than that'.¹⁶⁶ While neither of my investigator protagonists are super-rational intelligences like Dupin or Holmes, they are resourceful – as when Jo goes to the ARP post and pockets the left luggage ticket '[q]uicker than thinking, I palm the scrap of pink',¹⁶⁷ and stubbornly persistent in their inquiries, as when Nash defies Miss Waverley's insistence that the ARP registers will not reveal anything about Ruth Taylor's whereabouts: 'You won't find anything.'/.... 'I don't suppose I will',¹⁶⁸ he says, but he doesn't mean it. If there's something, he will find it'.¹⁶⁹

Doyle's detective texts established other tropes for the genre that would influence its fictions into the present day. Of these, the introduction of Dr Watson as the narrator of the stories is perhaps the most significant. The partnership between Holmes and Watson confirmed the pattern of an almost exclusively masculine milieu for the early

¹⁶² Allingham, *Police*, p 39

¹⁶³ Stef Penney, *Wolves*, pp74-5

¹⁶⁴ Griffiths, *Crossing Places*, p21

¹⁶⁵ *C2H*, p26

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p40

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p42

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p161

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p162

genre, wherein the male detective and his male sidekick solve crimes in which women feature as clients or criminals, but have only a fleeting impact on the essential partnership between detective and helper. Even though Watson marries, the significant relationship remains that between Holmes and Watson. His wife, Mary Morstan, who first appears as a client in *The Sign of Four*, soon becomes a shadowy figure, complaisant about Holmes' calls on Watson's time. Frequently conveniently absent when Holmes needs Watson, she is quickly disposed of altogether, her death dismissed in a few words: 'In some manner he had learned of my own sad bereavement'.¹⁷⁰

Unlike Holmes, whose one job is to be the great detective, Dr Watson has a multi-functional role. He gives the detective a sounding-board for his deductions, acts as the recorder of the adventures and, in his person as what Knight calls 'the average man',¹⁷¹ serves as a surrogate: his purpose to be as baffled by the mysteries as the reader. It became almost mandatory for detective stories to feature a sidekick of this sort, for example, Poirot's friend Hastings, and Campion and Wimsey's menservants, Lugg and Bunter respectively. Certainly, of the Golden Age writers I cite, only Josephine Tey resisted giving her detective a close associate: her Inspector Grant is a lone wolf, whose 'native detachment ...never quite deserted him'.¹⁷²

In creating a dual investigatory team to look into the murder of Ruth Taylor, I was drawing on the Holmesian binary, while subverting it in terms of the gender of the protagonists and the dynamic between them. A partnership between a male and female protagonist to create an investigatory team is not unknown in Golden Age fictions, however. Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, a married couple, feature in four of Christie's novels, first appearing in *The Secret Adversary* (1922). Sayers and Allingham both introduce a female partner for their protagonist investigator, and in varying degrees, these partners are included in their later investigations. Nevertheless, in each of these cases, the man remains the chief investigator and crime solver. Campion, for example, meets the girl who will later become his wife in *Sweet Danger*, (1933), and while she is actively engaged in his investigations, her role is explicitly that of a subordinate. Amanda proposes this subsidiary role herself: 'I should like to point out that I would make a very good aide-de-camp.' 'Or lieut,' said Campion'.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Arthur Conan Doyle, (1903), 'The Adventure of the Empty House', in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, (London: Magpie, 1993) p488

¹⁷¹ Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p63

¹⁷² Josephine Tey, (1952), *The Singing Sands*, (London: Arrow Books, 2002) p23

¹⁷³ Margery Allingham, (1933), *Sweet Danger*, (London: Penguin Books, 1973) p81

In contemporary detective texts, the relationship between a woman protagonist/investigator and her male counterpart is rarely shown as subsidiary. Most often, the relationship is depicted in such a way that the woman holds the balance of power in the narrative. Ruth Galloway, for instance, is the lead investigator in the mysteries in which she features, although her male counterpart is a high ranking policeman. Even when the setting is historical, contemporary writers show the female character as dominant, representing modern thinking about relationships rather than reflecting era-specific attitudes. McPherson's Dandy Gilver, for example, is very much the leader in her detective partnership with Alec Osbourne. As she says, 'I may not have a pipe, nor a deerstalker, nor a magnifying lens... but I do have a Watson.'¹⁷⁴ This contemporary representation of an early twentieth century gender dynamic is at odds with the depictions of that same dynamic in the fictions of the time. Although factors influencing gender issues – women's suffrage and their role in two world wars, for example – had begun to initiate 'significant changes in the construction of gender roles in the popular consciousness',¹⁷⁵ attitudes towards women in employment and marriage, as reflected in Golden Age fictions, remained conservative.

Having identified these differing approaches in my reading, I had to decide how I would depict the relationship between Nash and Jo Lester in *Close to Home*. I wanted to ensure that my novel remained true to the era, but I also needed to take into consideration the modern reader's perceptions. Setting my story in World War II, when women were stepping out of their traditional roles as part of the war effort, gave me more freedom to portray Jo as an independent woman, as did establishing her as a woman of forty rather than a girl. But she remains aware of the constraints on women's behaviour – from conventions about what they wear 'Romsey's not the sort of place which takes kindly to women in trousers',¹⁷⁶ to criticism of her behaviour as 'unwomanly' by those who hold the cultural attitudes of the time: 'I know we're short-handed, sir, but a woman? Begging your pardon, but that's hardly suitable'.¹⁷⁷

In choosing to portray the relationship between Jo and Nash as I did, I was using my reading of the Golden Age fictions and the contemporary texts to inform my writing process. By neither following contemporary fictions in making Jo anachronistically the leader, nor showing her as a classic pattern subordinate, I was able to create a plausible

¹⁷⁴ Catriona McPherson, *The Burry Man's Day*, (London: Robinson, 2006) ebook edition (downloaded for Kindle 12/6/2014) p103

¹⁷⁵ Hoffman, *Gender*, p1

¹⁷⁶ *C2H* p112

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p30

relationship between my protagonists. And this, I believe, adds an element of innovation both the Golden Age texts and contemporary historical detective fictions of my study.

Structures.

‘Attention should be paid both to the way a narrative develops in terms of the overall patterns of crime fiction and also to what variations are made from those patterns in each text in terms of innovations of form...’¹⁷⁸

‘There is a fragile co-existence between original ideas and what has gone before.’¹⁷⁹

Detective fiction is typified not only by its tropes but also by its structures. Early commentators like Cawelti have suggested that it is these ‘highly predictable structures that guarantee the fulfillment of conventional expectations’,¹⁸⁰ and suggests that the reader reads these stories with the expectation that the conventions of the genre will be respected. Todorov puts it more strongly, saying ‘[d]etective fiction has its norms; to “develop” them is also to disappoint them’.¹⁸¹ At the most basic level, it can be seen that there is a balance to be drawn for a writer of genre fiction who seeks to create an innovative text. The structures of the genre must be respected, or else the fiction will not be true to type, and also transgressed, or it will not be innovative.

It might be argued, however, that the innate structure of the genre has given it a quality of resilience, allowing the possibility of development and growth. Its essential elements, which Allingham typifies as a box whose walls are ‘a Killing, a Mystery, an Enquiry and a Conclusion’,¹⁸² can be used as building blocks rather than a prison. And from these foundations, any number of edifices may be built.

If, in Britain at least, Doyle had set the pattern for detective fiction: short stories focusing on intriguing, sometimes bizarre crimes which would be resolved by ratiocination, by the turn of the century, detective fiction had moved on. Short stories

¹⁷⁸ Stephen Knight, ‘Introduction’ to *Secrets of Crime Fiction Classics*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, Inc., 2015) ebook edition(downloaded for Kindle 3/8/17) loc 67-77

¹⁷⁹ Andrew Melrose, ‘Creativity, Research, and Practice Working Together: Collaborating with the Past, Present and Future’, in Kroll *et al*, ‘*Old and New*’, p88

¹⁸⁰ John G Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) p1

¹⁸¹ Todorov, *Poetics*, p43

¹⁸² Margery Allingham, ‘Introduction: Mystery Writer in the Box’, in *The Mysterious Mr Campion*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963) p7

were superseded as the dominant form by longer novels, and 'women increasingly became recognised as both authors and readers'¹⁸³ of the genre.

The reason for this has been variously commented upon. Cawelti ascribes the success of women authors in the Golden Age to their social 'training': 'women of an earlier era, trained from childhood to be exceptionally alert to social cues, had a special gift for the skilful parading of clues and suspects.'¹⁸⁴ Despite what now seems an uncomfortably biased statement, he does agree that these women writers 'had an influence on the development of the detective story much greater than they had in any other literary genre'.¹⁸⁵ In respect of women *readers* of Golden Age detective fiction, Hoffman points out that factors like an increase in women's leisure time and spending power, and the availability of books from lending libraries, played a part in increasing this demographic for the genre after World War I.¹⁸⁶ She suggests that these fictions, authored by women, spoke especially to women readers of the era because they were able to engage with 'contemporary anxieties about women's place in society and changing modes of femininity'.¹⁸⁷ Walton expands on this, saying the fictions of the time offered women a scenario they could relate to, since 'the interest of the mystery lies in its capacity to explore and reflect the life that is lived in the context of home'.¹⁸⁸

By the second decade of the twentieth century – identified, with the publication of Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, (1920), as the beginning of the Golden Age – women writers were established at the forefront of the genre. And the work of the Sayers, Allingham and Tey – the Golden Age authors of my study – was fundamental to the development of classic detective fiction. These women moved their fictions from the pure clue-puzzle texts of the early genre, a form which had much in common with the crossword puzzle, to a more modern expression of the genre. As they built their oeuvre, they broke away from the early genre code which suggested that 'the point of the story...[is]... detection and detection alone',¹⁸⁹ to produce fictions which, while they had a detective investigation at the heart, nevertheless aimed to be more fully-realised novels.

¹⁸³ Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p80

¹⁸⁴ Cawelti, 'Canonization, Modern Literature and the Detective Story', in Delamater and Prigozy, p6

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p5

¹⁸⁶ Hoffman, *Gender*, pp16-17

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, pp17-8

¹⁸⁸ Samantha Walton, *Guilty but Insane*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p5

¹⁸⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, (1940), *Les Origines du Roman Policier*, (Hurstpierpoint: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2003) p25

Writing in 1940, Sayers comments on this development. She begins by offering a critique of the puzzle text, which

has remained at the level of a short story. All emotions, psychology, shades of meaning and background settings have been removed. The characters are nothing more than puppets with a few stereotyped characteristics who can be propelled through the tangled web of the plot like pawns on a chessboard.¹⁹⁰

She goes on to say that '[i]n England, for the last twenty years, our best detective novelists have been trying.... to introduce some subtler, more realistic psychology.'¹⁹¹ In shifting away from the 'mechanics of narration',¹⁹² Golden Age detective fictions enlarged the scope and boundaries of the clue-puzzle text, moving towards more realistic characterisations and motivations.

It was for these innovatory changes that I looked to the women writers of the Golden Age as a primary source for my own work. While the essential tropes of the early genre texts could be traced in their fictions – the inevitable discovery and punishment of the perpetrator, a detective figure who investigates the crime, the binary between detective and partner figure – they also offered something more: genre texts that were not simply puzzles that could be read and discarded once the mystery was solved. Produced in the shadow of two world wars, these fictions had become fully realised novels, nuanced in terms of characterisation and mirroring the concerns and attitudes of their time.

Sayers, who expressed her conscious aim to add 'psychology' to her detective fiction, had, as previously discussed, given her protagonist depth of character from the beginning. As Wimsey moves through the subsequent novels detailing his investigations, Sayers allows him to develop: the 'silly ass' persona he has used as a smokescreen has vanished by the time he reaches his final mysteries. In *Gaudy Night*, (1936), we see him as a paragon: a scholar, a diplomat, and a lover. His intellectual abilities are unchallenged, but his detective skill is not the only quality which defines him. But the paragon has failings, too, and in *Busman's Honeymoon*, (1937), Sayers brings the character full circle, reminding us that her detective is a man haunted by his experiences in the trenches, and troubled by the responsibility of sending a killer to the gallows. Waiting for the moment when Crutchley will be executed, Wimsey is shown as vulnerable in the extreme. 'The

¹⁹⁰ Sayers, *Policier*, p25

¹⁹¹ Ibid

¹⁹² Ibid

light grew stronger as they waited. Quite suddenly, he said, 'Oh, damn!' and began to cry'.¹⁹³

Sayers' innovations to the genre did not stop at giving Wimsey a realistic psychology. I would disagree with PD James, who suggests that Sayers 'was an innovator of style but not of form, and was content to work within the contemporary conventions of the detective story which in the Golden Age were imperatives'.¹⁹⁴ Instead, I would assert that Sayers did not remain safely within the conventions of the genre, at least in her later novels, *The Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night*. Each of these two fictions, which have been cited as Sayers 'most admired novels',¹⁹⁵ incorporates innovative elements to its structure.

In *The Nine Tailors*, Sayers draws on her childhood as a vicar's daughter, brought up in a remote East Anglian parish,¹⁹⁶ to create a vivid and realistic Fenland setting. The arcane world of campanology also features, giving depth to the setting and providing the key to the mystery. But what sets the novel apart is the way in which the detective investigation is portrayed. Wimsey's deductions are not reserved for a grand denouement that will enlighten the reader in the final chapter, as seen in texts like Christie's Poirot. As Cawelti comments, 'the detective and the reader do not part company two-thirds of the way through the tale but share in the process of discovery throughout'.¹⁹⁷ As Sayers describes Wimsey's near-fatal experience in the ringing chamber, the 'killer' – the unbearable clamour of the bells – is revealed simultaneously to reader and detective: 'The belfry heaved and wheeled about him as the bells dipped and swung.... Mouth up, mouth down, they brawled with their tongues of bronze, and through it all that shrill, high, sweet, relentless note went stabbing and shivering'.¹⁹⁸ Although this structure whereby reader and detective arrive at the crucial information to solve the mystery together is more common – if not ubiquitous – today, it was an innovation in its time. For much of *Close to Home*, I employ this structure, ensuring the reader is in possession of as much information as the investigators.

¹⁹³ Sayers, *Honeymoon*, p451

¹⁹⁴ James, *Detective Fiction*, p91

¹⁹⁵ Edwards, *Golden Age of Murder*, p17

¹⁹⁶ See Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L Sayers: Her Life and Soul*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993) p7 and ff

¹⁹⁷ John G Cawelti, 'Artistic Failures and Successes: Christie and Sayers', in Robin W Winks, ed., *Detective Fiction*, (Woodstock, VT: A Foul Play Press Book, 1988) p194

¹⁹⁸ Dorothy L Sayers, (1934), *The Nine Tailors*, (London: New English Library, 1993) pp367-368

Another innovation which Sayers brings to *The Nine Tailors* is the introduction of characters who are not suspects in the crime. The close hermeneutic of earlier clue-puzzle texts demanded that every character should have a motive and come under suspicion, but Sayers peoples Fenchurch St Paul with characters who 'are never presented to us as possible suspects'.¹⁹⁹

In the matter of suspects – or lack of them – *Close to Home* introduces an element of change to the form of both Golden Age and contemporary texts. The investigation does not rely on a series of interviews with a cast-list of suspects, each with good reason to kill an obnoxious murder victim, as, for example, in Christie's Golden Age texts or Ann Cleeve's contemporary 'Vera' series. Nor does it, like Allingham's innovative *The Tiger in the Smoke*, (1952), and some modern thrillers, reveal the criminal's identity early on. While I show fragments of the Waverleys' thoughts in the narration, I do not reveal their identities – or even that they are not one and the same – until late in the story. Although I give clues in their thought/speech patterns – Miss Waverley drops the 'g' at the end of present participles: 'There's that bugger Nash. Don't know who he thinks he is, makin' a fuss. Standin' in our way';²⁰⁰ while her brother does not: 'Who does Nash think he is, questioning the girls' death?'²⁰¹ I made a conscious choice to hide the fact that the killer and the person responsible for disposing of the body are not one and the same, and to screen the gender of the killer from investigators and readers together.

In structuring *Close to Home* without a conventional cast list of suspects, I ensure the story of the investigation focuses on the murdered girl, and the search to establish her identity. Unnamed, unmourned, killed almost accidentally and almost literally 'shoved under the carpet' she remains a central figure. The quest of the novel is not so much to find 'whodunit', but rather to know who the victim was and to bring her out of the obscurity in which she has lived and died. The reader is not distracted by red herrings and false alibis, but experiences the same quest for truth as Jo and Nash. This, while it draws on patterns I have observed in my reading of Golden Age and modern fictions, does represent one specific element of innovation which I introduced to my text.

Sayers described *Gaudy Night* as 'the book I wanted to write'²⁰² because she felt passionately about its theme of 'the integrity of the mind'.²⁰³ But it was, for some commentators, a step too far, taking it beyond the boundaries of its genre. Symons called

¹⁹⁹ Cawelti, 'Artistic Failures' p194

²⁰⁰ *C2H*, p18

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, p34

²⁰² Sayers, quoted in Reynolds, *Dorothy L Sayers*, p261

²⁰³ *Ibid*

it 'essentially a woman's novel, full of the most tedious pseudo-serious chat'.²⁰⁴ Sayers herself admitted it was not really a detective story at all, but a novel with a mild detective interest of an almost psychological kind'.²⁰⁵ In it, she explores the stark choice for many women of the time between a successful career or marriage and children. Harriet's investigation seems to promise equality with Wimsey in future, but Sayers, disappointingly, does not follow through. In *Busman's Honeymoon*, her last novel about Wimsey,²⁰⁶ Harriet takes little part in the investigation, betrayed by her 'feminine'²⁰⁷ feeling of revulsion about the crime: 'it's such a beastly little crime – sordid and horrible'.²⁰⁸ Sayers wrote no more Wimsey novels, and in the final glimpses of the couple in two short stories,²⁰⁹ (one of which was not published till many years after Sayers' death) both Wimsey and Harriet have been 'tamed'. Harriet has become a wife and mother first and foremost, while Wimsey, in these last appearances, looks into minor mysteries in domestic settings.

But if *Gaudy Night* pushed the boundaries of the genre too far for some critics, and left its author with no wish to write further genre fictions 'as for writing detective stories... I can feel no desire for it',²¹⁰ others saw it as a welcome development to the genre. Its realism of setting and depth of social commentary are two innovative elements, while the third is the role she gives Harriet Vane as the chief investigator of the disturbances at Shrewsbury College. In this, Sayers paves the way for female investigators of crime in future texts, though it is not until PD James' first novel featuring Cordelia Gray, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, (1972), that a comparable female detective figure appears again in British classic-pattern genre. Sadly, like Harriet Vane, Cordelia Gray does not continue as a female role model. In her only other appearance in the novel *The Skull beneath the Skin*, (1982), she is characterised as indecisive and insecure, more comfortable finding lost pets than dealing with serious investigations. I discuss this matter of a female investigator as it applies to *Close to Home*, in the section 'Gender Roles' later in this commentary. Allingham's series of detective fictions featuring Albert

²⁰⁴ Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) p128

²⁰⁵ Letter to Muriel St Clare Byrne, 8 September 1935, in Reynolds, *Letters*, p354

²⁰⁶ *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), was the novelisation of a stage play first produced in 1936, written in collaboration with Muriel St Clare Byrne while Sayers was also working on *Gaudy Night*. See Reynolds, *Dorothy L Sayers*, p263.

²⁰⁷ Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, p141

²⁰⁸ Ibid

²⁰⁹ 'The Haunted Policeman', (1938); and 'Talboys', (1942) in Dorothy L Sayers, *Striding Folly*, (London, New English Library, 1972)

²¹⁰ Sayers, in Reynolds, *Dorothy L Sayers*, p 339

Campion is almost an illustration in itself of the way in which the Golden Age genre developed and grew. Her first Campion novel, *The Crime at the Black Dudley*, (1929), is a light adventure story in which Campion's role is equivocal. He is a subsidiary character, not the detective-protagonist, variously described as 'just a silly ass',²¹¹ 'a lunatic or a drunk',²¹² an aristocrat,²¹³ and a member of a sinister gang.²¹⁴ From this unpromising beginning, he continues his career in a number of stories best described as adventures rather than detective fictions. It is not until the mid 1930s that he really begins to acquire depth of character, and the fictions become more realistic in setting and situation. So much so, in fact, that while Allingham continues to feature eccentric households and strangely named characters like the exotic Palinode family of *More Work for the Undertaker* (1948), throughout her career, she addresses contemporary realities in a way that very few of her Golden Age contemporaries do,²¹⁵ setting two of her fictions in the recognisable milieu of World War II.

Traitor's Purse (1941) and *Coroner's Pidgin* (1945) were of particular relevance to me in terms of their wartime setting, and my reading of these texts had influence on the structures of *Close to Home*. As previously discussed, *Traitor's Purse* employs an innovative plot device, showing Campion suffering from amnesia after a blow to the head. This means that he carries out the majority of his investigation knowing less than the reader. 'He did not remember anything at all. There was only that secret worry, that gnawing, fidgeting, terrifying anxiety... that awful half-recollected responsibility about fifteen.'²¹⁶ Allingham thus goes further than Sayers' structure in *Nine Tailors*, since Campion is behind the reader, rather than alongside him/her, in his deductions. And this was relevant to *Close to Home*, since, in the final stages of the novel, the reader learns the solution to the mystery of Ruth Taylor's death – and is party to the Waverleys' confessions – before my protagonist/investigator Jo Lester. She has to wait to hear the true solution until Nash visits her in hospital. 'She's confessed?' 'If you can call it that. All the deaths, they're at her door. But he knew, covered them up.'²¹⁷

²¹¹ Margery Allingham, (1929), *The Crime at the Black Dudley*, (London: Penguin, 1973) p11

²¹² Ibid, p23

²¹³ Ibid, p168

²¹⁴ Ibid, p98

²¹⁵ Sayers stopped writing detective stories before the war, and Tey published no detective fiction during the war years. Some genre fictions written at this period do include wartime settings, for example Christie's *N or M* (1941) and Christianna Brand's *Green for Danger* (1945)

²¹⁶ Allingham, *Traitor's Purse*, p9

²¹⁷ C2H p225

In *Coroner's Pidgin*, Campion is in his right mind, but his deductive capabilities fail him in that he is wrong almost to the last²¹⁸ about who is behind the crimes of murder and Nazi-inspired art theft. And Allingham encourages her reader to go along with Campion. While it is apparent on re-reading that the detective knows the truth before the reader, Allingham clearly misdirects the reader until the very end. Campion's unease at the inquest which closes the story is ambiguous. Is he anxious because he is afraid that his friend, Johnny Carados, is guilty of the crimes and has undertaken a suicide mission to escape the consequences, '[t]he full story, as he saw it now, appearing in its true light, was unbearable: one of those tragedies which rankle for a lifetime',²¹⁹ or is it because he has misjudged his friend: 'Who was it who sent him to his death somewhere out on that perfect night?... was it you, Campion? Is it possible you, yourself, provided the final straw?'²²⁰

Like Campion in *Coroner's Pidgin*, my protagonist Jo Lester is wrong to the end of the story about who has committed the murder. She accuses Waverley, 'I know you killed her. You abandoned her baby, left it to be eaten by rats', but it is Miss Waverley who responds: 'Wrong, on every count'.²²¹ Nevertheless, it is Jo's determination to unmask Waverley which is instrumental in revealing the killer. This offers a 'twist' to plot structures like Allingham's in that the 'wrong' hunt – the search for her father – leads to the 'right' killer. This is not a structure I have discovered elsewhere; either in the close reading of my study or in my wider genre reading. As such, it adds another element of innovation to my text.

Josephine Tey, the third of my Golden Age authors, was most innovative in the structures of her texts, flouting even the most basic imperative of the Golden Age clue-puzzle – that '[t]he crime will be murder'²²² in half her fictions. Only four have murder as the inciting incident for an investigation, but even then, in her 1949 novel, *Brat Farrar*, the murder, discovered almost incidentally, is many years old; while in her most innovative work, *The Daughter of Time*, (1951), the murder is historical, many centuries old. *The Franchise Affair*, (1948) and *To Love and be Wise*, (1950), do not feature murder at all.

Val McDermid says of Josephine Tey that she provides a 'bridge between the classic detective stories of the golden age and contemporary crime fiction. She left the

²¹⁸ Allingham's *Dancers in Mourning*, (1937), uses the same structure with Campion misled regarding the identity of the criminal. It even turns on the same crucial evidence of a marriage certificate which finally shows who had a motive to commit the crime.

²¹⁹ Margery Allingham, *Coroner's Pidgin*, (London: Vintage Books, 2006) p218

²²⁰ Ibid, p222

²²¹ *C2H*, p220

²²² Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p86

genre in a different place from where she found it and she cracked open a series of doors for others to walk through.²²³ McDermid suggests that Tey's most influential innovation was in allowing her characters secrets which have a bearing not on the mystery but on the characters themselves, secrets which McDermid says 'helped me to understand that I could write books that dealt with serious aspects of human behaviour within the confines of genre fiction.'²²⁴ Following Tey, like McDermid, I showed my characters as having secrets which had an impact on their lives and natures, but were not a part of the solution to the mystery. Jo's bitter relationship with her captured husband²²⁵ and Nash's fear of a loving relationship²²⁶ are examples of this.

As I read to understand the structures of the Golden Age fictions, and to identify their innovations, I brought what I had discovered into my writing process. As I followed some patterns that I had observed and added elements of innovation to others, I looked to the more modern fictions to contextualise my work. In these, depth of characterisation as introduced by the Golden Age authors is ever-present. Sometimes, as in Tey's work, this depth of character is represented by secrets which do not concern the mystery. Dandy Gilver, for example, a married woman, tries to pretend to herself that she is not attracted to her Watson, Alec Osbourne.

I think it would have been at that moment, if I were the type to fall in love, that I should have fallen in love with Alec Osbourne. It would have been the first time in my life (and of course I should not have admitted it to myself)²²⁷

On occasion, like Allingham, McPherson allows her detective to withhold information from her reader. In *After the Armistice Ball*, the story concludes: 'Finally the last piece fell into place. No, I thought, grasping my cane and preparing to stand. No, Lena, not so stupid after all'. But Dandy's final discovery is not made explicit. Instead, the reader is left to deduce the truth from what has gone before.

My decision to have no cast of suspects was not paralleled in the contemporary authors' work. In fact, their fictions tend to offer a number of suspects to the reader, and conclude with a modified denouement or explication of the mystery. In both McPherson and Griffiths' fictions, the most frequent concluding structure is an action scene in which the detective is put at risk and the criminal is revealed. This is followed by a chapter – or

²²³ Val McDermid, 'The brilliant unconventional crime novels of Josephine Tey', article in *The Telegraph*, 15 November 2014, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/val-mcdermid-the-brilliant-unconventional-crime-novels-of-josephine-tey> (accessed 5/12/2015)

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ See *C2H*, p41-42; p186

²²⁶ *C2H*, p64; pp119-20 for example.

²²⁷ McPherson, *Armistice Ball*, p36

chapters – of explanation whereby the ‘loose ends’ of the story are resolved and order is restored. For example, in Griffiths’ *Dying Fall*, there are five chief suspects, whose various alibis and motivations have been suggested throughout. The explication of who did what and why occurs in a modified – if complicated denouement,²²⁸ followed by the resolution – if temporary – of the personal stories of the protagonists. ‘Nelson looks as if he is about to speak, but in the end he just smiles, and, with a flourish, takes Kate from his shoulders and hands her back to Ruth’.²²⁹

In ending *Close to Home* as I did, I was paralleling the concluding structures of modern genre fictions, although my intention was not to offer the same sense that every thread is tied up. This stays true to my intention to show that the effects of crime are not so easily resolved, and, more pragmatically, to the plan I have for the novel that it should not be a stand-alone, but the first of a series.

²²⁸ Griffiths, *Dying Fall*, ch 34 pp 368-374

²²⁹ Ibid, p390

Narrative techniques.

*Who speaks? To whom? In what form?*²³⁰

From the earliest days of planning *Close to Home*, I saw its narrative structure as the principal means of introducing innovation to my text. The shape of a satisfying detective fiction had been set for me by my early, unconscious reading, and, as previously discussed, this had influenced both the way I planned my novel, and the focus of my PhD study. Accordingly, I had made the decision that the underlying plot and characterisation of the novel would follow the classic pattern of the Golden Age authors of my study: I did not want to deconstruct or destabilise either of the core elements of such stories, as, for example, Paul Auster does in *New York Trilogy* (1985).

In my reiterative reading practice, I looked to interrogate a number of different features of the primary texts. The narrative techniques of these texts as they concerned point-of-view were of particular relevance to the creation of *Close to Home*, and I focused on these in one iteration of my reading. Historically, the most usual form for detective fiction has been a third-person limited, past-tense narrative. And despite Conan Doyle's use of a first-person narrator in the shape of Watson, (or Christie's Poirot texts narrated by Hastings),²³¹ these texts also *present* as third-person past-tense narratives, since the narrator acts as author of the stories, looking back on events from outside and reporting what happened. While fictions in the third-person limited form may be separated into various sections to offer more than one person's point-of-view, Golden Age stories generally offer a consistent and integrated text. Third-person past-tense narratives are 'perhaps the most conventional way of telling a story',²³² and, as in modern popular culture fiction of all genres, this form remains common in contemporary crime fiction. It allows for reasonable engagement with the viewpoint character's thoughts and emotions, as well as giving flexibility of story-telling since the viewpoint is not as internalised as in a first-person narrative.

The Golden Age authors of my study almost exclusively employ a third-person past-tense narrative mode. Sayers and Allingham occasionally experiment with different

²³⁰ Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, (New York: Longman, 2003) p254

²³¹ Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is a first person narrative, purporting to be a 'witness' account of Poirot's investigation, but actually a form of confession to the crime. Mullan notes that this harks back to a long tradition of fictions where the first person narrator is guilty of a crime. John Mullan, *How Novels Work*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p45

²³² Boulter, *Writing Fiction*, p152

viewpoints, but the body of their work – as all of Tey’s – is presented in the conventional form. Allingham has one foray into a first person narrative from Campion’s viewpoint in *The Case of the Late Pig*, (1937), ‘[t]his adventure is mine, Albert Campion’s, and I am fairly certain that I was pretty nearly brilliant in it’;²³³ but she did not revisit this viewpoint in later fictions. It is significant that *The Case of the Late Pig* is a novella-length story, and it may be that Allingham found a first-person narrative form too restricting – both in revealing too much of the detective’s processes and restricting the narrative to a single consciousness of events – to want to use it for subsequent fictions.

However, a first person narration has become more common in modern detective fictions. Of the contemporary novels I read as my primary genre texts, Penney’s *The Tenderness of Wolves* and Elly Griffiths’ Ruth Galloway series both use first-person narratives, at least in part. These stories are closest in narrative structure to *Close to Home*, and they were especially relevant as I sought to contextualise *Close to Home* in the contemporary market and genre. Penney’s story is carried in a mixture of first- and third-person narrative strands. The account of her protagonist, Mrs Ross, is prioritised by the use of the first-person narrative: a technique I use for Jo Lester in *Close to Home*. Griffiths’ texts are simpler in construction, making use of a narrative which is chiefly dual-voiced, split between a first-person narrative for her protagonist Ruth Galloway, and third-person limited for DCI Nelson, the official investigator and her sometime lover. Although Griffiths does offer other characters’ viewpoints on occasion, these are less frequently employed, and achieved without an accompanying sense of fragmentation to the text.

These viewpoint structures of Penney and Griffiths’ texts offered contextualising references for my novel, and their work demonstrates that another modern idiom can successfully be applied to the classic detective text: that of using the present-tense for its narrative. This underpinned my own choice for *Close to Home*. This is a relatively new form for detective fiction. Huber comments that ‘the prevalence of present-tense narration in the literature of the new millenium is conspicuous’;²³⁴ and suggests that the trend for present-tense narrative has spread down from literary fiction into the mainstream so that ‘it has become so widespread that it hardly registers as a defamiliarising and experimental move any longer’.²³⁵ But it was not to defamiliarise my

²³³ Margery Allingham, (1937), *The Case of the Late Pig*, in *The Mysterious Mr Campion*, p17

²³⁴ Irmtraud Huber, *Present-Tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p1

²³⁵ Ibid, p2

text that I had decided to use the present tense. Instead, I used it to give the story an immediacy of action that would ‘place the reader in the present of...[the]... protagonists’,²³⁶ and engage them more closely with events.

Building on my reading, I planned a multi-stranded narrative for *Close to Home*. The technique is particularly suited to the genre because of the way in which a multi-voiced narrative can be used to produce a kind of mosaic of stories. This mirrors the investigative process: as evidence is gathered from a number of different sources, a complete picture is built up which allows the mystery to be solved. As John Mullan says, multiple narrators in crime fiction work ‘as if they were witnesses testifying at a trial. The solution to the crime... is...pieced together from the different narratives’.²³⁷ Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*, (1868), described as ‘the first and greatest of English detective novels’²³⁸ is presented in this way, in a series of first-person, past-tense, witness-style narrative threads. The individual narrators are always aware they are telling their story and giving evidence about the crime in question: ‘the idea is that we should all write the story of the Moonstone in turn – as far as our own personal experience extends’.²³⁹

But if the characters in *The Moonstone* are always conscious that they are telling a story, the characters in *Close to Home* are not. They are not looking back on events, but living them. The present tense ensures that they do not know how their own story will end, and nor do they have knowledge of ‘their own historical context’ – for example, what will happen in the war.

It’s Boys’ Own stuff, war and Nazi spies and how he hopes the fighting won’t be over before he can join up. And I hear that, and ask him how old he is, and he tells me nearly fourteen, and I think, god, four years, surely it won’t last that long?²⁴⁰

Only in the final part of the novel, where the Waverleys’ statements are introduced, is there a sense that the characters are aware of giving evidence. But by using a number of different narrative voices, I could ensure that while the protagonists do not have all the evidence to solve the mystery, the reader sees it all. My protagonists, like Campion in *Traitor’s Purse*, or Wimsey in *The Nine Tailors*, muddle through to the solution alongside a more knowing reader.

²³⁶ Huber, *Present-Tense Narration*, p50

²³⁷ John Mullan, *How Novels Work*, p56

²³⁸ TS Eliot, cited in Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p44

²³⁹ Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, (London: Penguin, 1968) p40

²⁴⁰ *C2H*, p182

As I created the fractured – sometimes fragmentary – narrative of *Close to Home*, my aim was that each different narrative voice would be distinguishable and contribute to whole. Unlike Penney, who builds up a layered narrative in which not all the strands are connected to the resolution of the mystery, I wanted to ensure that each separate narrative element would carry the story forward. Dove calls this the hermeneutic specialisation of detective fiction, which adheres to the principle ‘that anything mentioned in the story must be important to the forward movement of the plot’.²⁴¹ And although I had introduced the apparently unconnected story of Jo’s quest to find her father, this was in fact essential to the solution of the mystery.

By using first-person viewpoint for my protagonist, Jo Lester, and a mixture of other, third-person limited, detached and omniscient narrative voices for the remaining characters and story threads, plus the inclusion of ‘artefacts’ such as the house sale details, will, and letter, I set out to create a narrative which puts the reader in the position of an eavesdropper to events. The narratives switch without overt labelling such as section headings, and are offered without interpretative intervention.

The hierarchy of the narrative threads is established early on. Jo Lester’s appearance in the opening scene establishes her as the primary protagonist. While she conceals information from the characters around her, her thoughts and feelings, her memories and dreams, are open to the reader. For example, when she first arrives in Romsey, her sighting of the stationmaster, Mr Burnage triggers a childhood memory. His obsequious behaviour in the present is at variance with the memory of past insults, but she conceals her feelings from him: ‘I want to laugh, dare him to call me bastard to my grown-up face. But satisfying as it would be to make him squirm, I’m not ready to declare my hand just yet.’²⁴²

A first-person narrative has advantages for the writer in allowing the creation of a character with whom the reader may engage intimately. The reader experiences events from the character’s viewpoint, and may empathise with, even if they do not approve of, the character’s actions and reactions to events. First-person narration privileges the narrator’s viewpoint, and mimics the way in which we experience stories in real life: either as the central participant or as a ‘listener’ to stories we are told by our friends and family. It has disadvantages for the writer, too: the viewpoint is limited to what the narrator knows or experiences. For *Close to Home*, I managed this by using other narrative threads

²⁴¹ George N Dove, *The Reader and the Detective Story*, (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997) p77

²⁴² C2H, p11

to offer relevant information. This, in a sense, turns a disadvantage to advantage, since I want the reader to engage intimately with Jo's investigation, but not to see her as a super-intellectual detective making clever deductions from baffling clues. Instead, I show her as an ordinary person, stumbling her way to the truth,²⁴³ within a narrative that means that the reader has access to more information than the protagonist. The reader knows, for example, that Nash is aware who Jo's father is before she discovers it: 'he doesn't doubt the letters would stand as proof of paternity in a court of law. In so many ways, they are no longer harmless relics. They have... explosive potential'.²⁴⁴ In the context of the scene it is strongly implied that it is Dr Waverley, although Nash does not reveal the information until Jo discovers it for herself:

My mother. It makes me sick to think of, but – he's my father.'
 There's a long, long, pause. Nash rubs his face in his hands.
 'I know,' he says.
 'You – know?'
 He hands a piece of paper across the desk to me. It's a letter.

 It's signed by Edward Waverley.
 I drop the letter back on Nash's desk. If I say anything,
 I'll say too much. I turn on my heel and walk out.²⁴⁵

But while I privilege Jo Lester's first-person narrative over other narrations for the majority of the novel, I also play with this to show aspects of her relationship with her co-protagonist, Bram Nash. In an early scene of the novel, she remembers their sexual encounter in the Blitz. The scene is shown from her viewpoint but is written as a third-person limited narration. This was a late redrafting of the text, as the scene had originally been presented, like her other memories, in first-person. By altering it to third-person, I indicate her disassociation with the memory of their meeting:

*The bar's lit with a sickly yellow glimmer. Her throat's ragged with smoking, her eyes sting as she lights up another cigarette. The gin's too weak to have much effect, and she's sick of herself, of everything. She'd almost welcome a bomb.*²⁴⁶

Later in the novel, I again use narrative switching to show the way in which the balance between Jo and Nash alters as the story progresses. While Nash's narrative is subordinate to hers for the majority of the novel, demonstrated by the fact that scenes featuring them

²⁴³ Like McPherson's Dandy Gilver, Jo succeeds by dogged determination rather than super-ratiocination.

²⁴⁴ C2H, pp150-151

²⁴⁵ Ibid, p213

²⁴⁶ Ibid, p19

both are told from Jo's viewpoint, after the scene in which Jo seduces Nash at Olly's cottage, the passages between them are shown with increasing frequency from Nash's point of view. This dislocating device shows the shifting dynamic between them as the investigation comes 'close to home' for her, impacting both on her peace of mind and their relationship. The scenes are mirrored, so the action is seen from Nash's viewpoint first, and then is countered immediately by Jo's.

Her gaze is hard, such an intensity of pain he can't help himself.
He steps back, leaves the way open. She's through the gate in a flash.
'Jo.'
'Later,' she says. 'I'll come in to the office later.'

*

The pain comes in waves. Like childbirth, I suppose, though I've never given birth to a child. Like a stone in the kidney, griping, a blockage that won't be dislodged, a useless warning, functionality destroyed.²⁴⁷

This narrative play reflects the way in which the balance of their relationship changes: his growing emotional involvement with Jo is countered by her somewhat shamed and fearful avoidance of engagement with him. And by manipulating the narrative form associated with my primary protagonist, I can show how her emotional climate changes. This is not a narrative technique I have observed elsewhere in my close or wider reading of detective fiction, and as such, I believe that it brings an element of innovation to my text within the genre.

The second most dominant strand of narrative belongs to Bram Nash. In giving him an autonomous voice, I could achieve a number of effects. The more distanced, third person limited viewpoint I chose for his narrative strand reflects his more reserved character, but nevertheless allows me to show him as an active participant in the story of the investigation. It also gives me the opportunity to add depth to his character, hinting at his backstory and showing his activities when not engaged in the investigation: '[h]e learned to work metal behind the lines. Cutting shapes from shell cases. Twisting salvaged scraps to make things – god help him – in the midst of destruction.... Lately, he's been working on a set of animals.'²⁴⁸ Additionally, as he is the second investigator, it allows me to show his independent discoveries:

Nash frowns, bends closer. Brighter than the bottle-blond of her hair, a thread of orange silk is tangled round the gold stud in her right ear. He loosens it carefully. Tearing a blank sheet from his pocket diary, he folds the paper into a makeshift envelope for the thread.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ C2H, p251

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p52-53

²⁴⁹ Ibid, p14

While I introduce some elements of innovation into the protagonists' narrative threads, a third character's narrative strand, is, as far as I have been able to ascertain by my reading in the genre, entirely my own creation, and thus, innovative. This is the introduction of Ruth Taylor's 'ghost' voice. Her comments are offered without interpretation or explanation, and while they are aimed at the protagonists, in a kind of dialogue with and prompting of their investigations, Jo and Nash are never aware of her commentary. Instead, the reader alone 'hears' what she says as she tries to tell her story.

It is not uncommon in detective fiction to have some means by which the voice of the dead can be represented. In the Golden Age, a diary entry or letter is often used as a vehicle for this voice. For example, in Sayers' *Clouds of Witness* (1926) the evidence that Cathcart has not been murdered but has committed suicide is contained in a letter. Cathcart has killed himself because his lover has deserted him and he has been exposed as a card sharp. 'I suppose they'll put my suicide down to fear of exposure. All the better. I don't want my love-affairs in the Sunday Press.'²⁵⁰ The Duke's counsel, Impey Biggs, makes the message even clearer: 'You have listened while, as it were from his narrow grave, the dead man has lifted his voice to tell you the story of that fatal night'.²⁵¹

Detective fictions with a contemporary setting can employ technology for the same function. In *Dying Fall*, Griffiths' investigator follows a trail of messages from Dan, a one-time colleague who has been murdered. Shortly after learning about his death, she has a letter from him which has been held up in the post. Ringing his mobile on impulse, she hears his voice 'from the land of the dead itself'.²⁵² And later, when she acquires a memory stick with his computer files on it, she learns not only the motive for his killing, but also learns about him in a way that means 'Dan is more real to her than he has ever been....She now knows [him] as she never really knew him'.²⁵³

While I could have used one of the more conventional means to introduce information about the dead girl, such as the discovery of written testimony, or by introducing flashbacks to show the key events of Ruth's story, I felt neither method would be appropriate for *Close to Home*. From a practical standpoint, I had chosen flashback to focus on and flesh out the character and past of my protagonists, especially Jo Lester. To use the same method to introduce backstory for Ruth would have diffused the focus of the flashback sections and risked confusing the reader. More importantly, I wanted to

²⁵⁰ Dorothy L Sayers, *Clouds of Witness*, (1926), (London: New English Library, 2003) p273

²⁵¹ Ibid, p276

²⁵² Griffiths, *Dying Fall*, p15

²⁵³ Ibid, p254

ensure that the dead girl did not become a cipher, simply an ‘excuse’ for the investigation, sidelined into obscurity by the hunt for her killer. By allowing her to tell her own story in a direct, first person narrative which mirrors Jo Lester’s, I signify her position at the heart of the story and the investigation. ‘One death matters’,²⁵⁴ Bram Nash says, and the importance of her death, her centrality to the investigation is represented in her commentary.

The way I approached using Ruth’s ghost voice was to include it as a commentary to the investigation into her death. First appearing before anyone is aware there is an eighth body to be recovered from the wreckage of the bombed pub, she appears to answer Bram Nash’s thoughts as he waits for the Heavy Rescue Crew to excavate the ruins: “He rubs his face, tries not to remember how it feels to be buried alive.’ [*gotta be better than buried dead*]’.²⁵⁵ I use a number of visual cues to alert the reader to the fact that this textual element is different from the other narrative voices. First, square brackets which contain the text suggest their conventional use to indicate an interpolation. Although this may have more significance for the academic rather than the general reader, the use of brackets is widely accepted to indicate material which is additional to the main thrust of the text. Second, I used italicised text for Ruth’s dialogue. This echoes its use in Jo’s memory sections, and suggests that, like those, there is something not of the physical present about them. Third, I chose to represent her naivety in her speech patterns by using phonetic spellings ‘gotta’, and omitting grammatical elements like capital letters and punctuation ‘[*old tin chops wouldn’t never touch*]’.²⁵⁶ While I did not expect the reader to be conscious of these devices, I believe that they signal the identity of these snippets of text as distinctly separate from the other narrative voices in the novel.

Ruth’s commentary chiefly responds to thoughts or dialogue being expressed by Nash or Jo, although once she responds to Edith Waverley, who is musing about the murder:

Dammit, the little tart swore she’d never breathe a word
 [*no more i did was you told the lies*]
 Should never have believed her. Should have got rid of her straight away,
 her and the brat together. Only safe way, no matter what he said.
 [*didn’t make no difference did it you got rid of us anyway*]²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ C2H, p15

²⁵⁵ Ibid, p12

²⁵⁶ Ibid, p48

²⁵⁷ Ibid, p86

For the most part appearing in these short, incomplete phrases, her information is nevertheless crucial to a full understanding of what has happened. And, just as I wanted to keep her as central to the investigation as represented in the story of the investigation, so I also wanted her testimony to be central to the text. As with my decision to signal the otherworldliness of her comments by visual clues, I also decided to make her explanation of what had happened to her child at the Waverleys' hands structurally central to the text. I therefore created a longer section in which she 'speaks' to Nash as he sleeps by the fire. This section is central both literally and metaphorically to the structure of the novel, appearing almost exactly half way through the text, and giving information which is not repeated in full anywhere else. It is the only place where the fate of the abandoned baby and the Ruth's fatal decision to confront the Waverleys on Easter Monday is revealed.

*he was sleeping when they took him
 didn't cry
 not like i did when they went out the door
 n'i knew
 i'd never see him again
 could've lived with that
 but when i heard*

*had to try n'make them pay
 had to try²⁵⁸*

I saw this section as the spindle on which *Close to Home* turns. The investigation which has been focused on finding out who the murdered girl was turns here: now the information which the protagonists gather brings them ever closer to discovering who killed her.

In order to signal this twist to the momentum of the story, I decided that the layout of the text, as well as its content, should mirror its significance. In keeping Ruth's style of truncated and naïve phraseology, and representing it as it had been throughout, in short, fragmentary lines rather than as a conventional block of text, the effect was to produce what looked on the page like a kind of 'free-verse' form for Ruth's testimony.

The inclusion of a poetic element is not unknown in detective fiction. In two of my focus texts, a verse is crucial to the story. In Tey's *The Singing Sands*, (1952), a fragment of verse '*The beasts that talk/The streams that stand/The stones that walk/The singing sand*'²⁵⁹ written on a newspaper engages Inspector Grant's interest, and he is driven to investigate. The writer appears to have died in a drunken accident on the night

²⁵⁸ C2H p104

²⁵⁹ Tey, *The Singing Sands*, p10

sleeper to Edinburgh, but Grant comes to believe that the author of the verse has been murdered, as indeed he has, and Grant pursues his unofficial investigation to identify the murderer.

It would be sweet, consoling sweet, satisfyingly sweet, to watch Lloyd take the news. He had murdered to keep that secret his own, to ensure that the glory should be his, and now the secret was front-page news and the glory belonged to his rival.²⁶⁰

Sayers uses a verse in *Gaudy Night* to reflect the way in which Harriet Vane and Peter Wimsey see the world. Wimsey comes across a sonnet Harriet has begun in some papers she gives him about the poison pen mystery. He completes it, and when she sees it, she sees a different side to him:

So there was the turn she had vainly sought for the sestet! Her beautiful, big, peaceful humming-top turned into a whip-top, and sleeping, as it were, upon compulsion....But if she wanted an answer to her questions about Peter, there it was....He did not want to forget, or to be quiet²⁶¹

Sayers' image of a spinning top may have had an unconscious influence on my vision of Ruth's testimony as a spindle on which *Close to Home* turns. An influence, in fact, which I did not perceive until I was reflecting on my creative practice for this commentary. My *conscious* choice in formulating Ruth's testimony as I did was to bring a structural innovation to my novel. And it did do this, as far as I am aware, since I have not found a similar structure featuring an explicit voice from beyond the grave anywhere in my reading of Golden Age or contemporary detective texts.

A further narrative choice which impacted on the structures of *Close to Home* was my decision to avoid overt clue-gathering. In traditional fictions, the detective-figure picks up significant material evidence which either he or the reader must decode. These clues may be traces, like footprints, or objects, like the pebble which Wimsey finds on the stairs at Pym's advertising agency in *Murder Must Advertise*, which allows him to deduce the murder method: 'you realised how easily a man could be plugged through the skylight as he went down the iron staircase. If the blow didn't kill him, then the fall might, and it was well worth trying'.²⁶² In *Close to Home*, perhaps the only material clue which

²⁶⁰ Tey, *The Singing Sands*, p230

²⁶¹ Sayers, (1936), *Gaudy Night*, (London: New English Library, 1972) pp348-9

²⁶² Dorothy L Sayers, (1933), *Murder Must Advertise*, (London: New English Library, 2003) pp375-376

functions in the traditional way is the thread that Nash takes from the murdered girl's body at the beginning,²⁶³ and is revealed to have come from Waverley's carpet at the end:

What's this?
She peers at the orange fibre. 'A hair, i suppose. One of mine. Looks the right colour.'
This isn't a hair. Oh, I grant you, it's not far off your colour, but – I've seen one like this before.'²⁶⁴

Instead of having the investigators discover material clues, I included a number of textual 'artefacts' to give information to the reader: the house details which describe Ramillies Hall,²⁶⁵ and the will²⁶⁶ which shows the conditions under which it can be inherited. The letter²⁶⁷ Jo receives from the War Office and the Waverleys' statements²⁶⁸ also fall into this category. Each of these is presented according to the pattern I had established elsewhere, that the individual narrative elements would be offered without contextualising information. Additionally, it meant that I could put the reader in the position of primary investigator, discovering 'clues' and being left to decode and interpret them for herself. And this, was not an innovatory stretch, but drew on the pattern of classic detective texts of the Golden Age in particular, in which artefacts like ciphers,²⁶⁹ family trees,²⁷⁰ letters and diaries²⁷¹ and newspaper clippings²⁷² are included in the text.

Allied to these artefactual elements, *Close to Home* also features a number of epigraphs to the text, most of which are drawn from the guide to coroners' practice²⁷³ which was current at the time. These function to give information that is not included in the narrative, for example, to show the legal position of the coroner in respect of his duties:

The coroner may, at any time after he has decided to hold an inquest, request any legally qualified medical practitioner to make a post-mortem examination of the body of the deceased... with a view to ascertaining how the deceased came by his death. (Jervis on Coroners, 1927:145)²⁷⁴

²⁶³ C2H, p14, passage quoted earlier in this section.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, p205

²⁶⁵ Ibid, p119

²⁶⁶ Ibid, p141

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p185

²⁶⁸ Ibid, p223-225

²⁶⁹ Dorothy L Sayers, (1932), *Have His Carcase*, (London: Gollancz, 1948) pp252-258

²⁷⁰ Allingham, *Police*, p25

²⁷¹ Sayers, *Honeymoon*, pp1-29

²⁷² Allingham, *The Beckoning Lady*, (London: Penguin, 1978), p13-14

²⁷³ F Danford Thomas, *Sir John Jervis on the Office and Duties of Coroners*, (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1927)

²⁷⁴ C2H, p32

The identity of these as non-fiction quotes from the era adds authenticity and historical contextualisation. Although none of the contemporary authors of my study used epigraphs, Sayers from the Golden Age does include them in some of her novels. She often uses lines of poetry or prose from a fiction source, but in *The Nine Tailors*, she features a number of non-fiction sources for the epigraphs: many of which are associated with the art of change-ringing, but whose meaning can be applied to the investigation into Deacon's death: 'Hunting is the first part of change ringing which it is necessary to understand. TROYTE, on Change-Ringing'.²⁷⁵

Like the artefactual elements and epigraphs, the sections presented in a third-person omniscient or detached voice allowed me to add depth and texture to the narrative. Describing scenes which cannot come from any other point of view, they allowed me to present material in a lyrical, detached voice, and yet maintain relevance to the plot of the novel.

Somewhere, in the deep curve pool of a stream, half submerged already in silt, lies a clot of paper, a knot of cloth. The waters fret at the unravelling edges, current fraying the fibres, wearing away words. Fish find nothing to engage them, but a questing leech briefly samples the marks, the smudge of blood. Proof of identity, traces of guilt.²⁷⁶

This kind of allusive language, which not only describes a setting but also functions within the plot, is not common in detective fiction, either of the Golden Age genre or the contemporary texts. Allingham, however, does use a similar lyrical, detached voice for the opening narrative of *The Beckoning Lady*, (1955), cuing the mystery ahead: 'It was no time for dying. The summer had arrived in glory, trailing fathomless skies and green and gold and particolour as fresh as sunrise, yet death was about, twice'.²⁷⁷ Although Penney writes lyrically, her descriptions are given from a narrator's viewpoint, often Mrs Ross', as she describes her icy travels: 'these trails, like this bitter path, are fragile, winterworn, and when the snow falls again, or when it thaws in spring, all trace of our passing will vanish',²⁷⁸ and while they add atmosphere, they are generally not associated with the investigatory plot.

By including elements like artefactual elements, epigraphs and passages of omniscient description, I set out to replace more traditional clue-gathering or information-giving. I was drawing on some aspects of the primary texts of my study as I

²⁷⁵ Sayers, *Nine Tailors*, p91

²⁷⁶ *C2H*, p88

²⁷⁷ Allingham, *Beckoning Lady*, p15

²⁷⁸ Penney, *Wolves*, p439

created my novel, and adding freshness to them. While none of these techniques originated with me, I did combine them in ways that I had not observed in my close or wider reading within the genre.

One final narrative thread which I believe does offer innovation to the genre is represented by the 'flash-forward' sections of interrogation of Nash by Superintendent Bell. In contrast to the remainder of the text, these do contain elements which indicate hindsight: showing that at least part of the story is already known:

SB: ...Were you angry with Mrs Lester for undermining your search for the girl's killer and turning it into a witch hunt for her father?

N: No.

SB: Really?

N: I wish she'd been honest with me. I might have helped sooner, perhaps. Avoided this outcome.²⁷⁹

Flash forward scenes allowed me to change the pace of the narrative, and to suggest the aftermath of the investigation. They reveal Nash's position in regard of Jo's unofficial activities; and hint that there is something unfortunate ahead. As the novel progresses, the way in which these scenes explicate or foreshadow events that are yet to happen within the action of novel becomes clearer. Their identity as fragments of a later encounter is clarified as the time-line that separates the 'now' of the action with the 'now' of the interrogation converges, represented by the moment when Miss Haward informs Nash that '[a] Superintendent Bell telephoned. He wants to speak to you'.²⁸⁰ Even then, it is not until the final section of the interrogation that it is revealed that the whole interview has been carried out after the crime has been resolved.

SB: Your client admits –

N: What she might have said in the heat of the moment is not admissible. You know that as well as I do. She was injured, in shock. She'd witnessed traumatic events....

SB: And if we ask her to repeat her statement?

N: I'm sure she'll tell you what she can. But not before I've advised her.²⁸¹

I presented these sections as third-person detached, without giving either character the viewpoint. I wanted to suggest the impersonal atmosphere in which such an interrogation might occur, with the balance of power between the two participants held in a fragile equilibrium. Nash, who has an official position as coroner, is not willing to incriminate himself or Jo; Superintendent Bell is frustrated by his lack of co-operation, and

²⁷⁹ C2H, p45

²⁸⁰ Ibid, p201

²⁸¹ Ibid, p222

knows he is on uncertain ground, trying to pursue Jo as a criminal. Again, layout had a part to play, as I set the sections out as a script, with questions and answers tagged only by an indication of who is speaking.

I did not encounter any Golden Age or contemporary detective fictions in my close or wider reading which had similar scenes of interrogation in them, either in terms of content or format. Formal police interviews of any kind are not common in classic pattern detective fictions, despite the fact that most feature a non-professional detective whose investigations must, at some point, transect with some kind of police intervention. Often, the detective enjoys a cordial relationship with the police. In the primary texts of my study, Wimsey's relationship with Inspector Parker is one of friendship, and the policeman eventually becomes his brother-in-law; while Campion works in friendly co-operation with a whole series of policemen: Stanislaus Oates, Sergeant Yeo and DCI Luke, despite his sometimes nefarious activities. Tey's principal investigator Alan Grant is himself a policeman, but his style is not interrogatory. In the contemporary fictions, Ruth Galloway has a personal as well as a professional relationship with DCI Nelson. Only Dandy Gilver's detective investigations are shown on occasion as being treated with suspicion by the police. At the conclusion of *After the Armistice Ball*, Gilver and her associates manage to conceal the truth behind Lena Esslemont's death – and their belief in her involvement in blackmail and murder – despite extensive questioning. Gilver's status as a lady puts her at an advantage, and while she will not lie to Inspector McAlpine, she does not tell him the truth either. 'I was horribly aware... that while my interrogator might think he was being so rigorous as to be forced to offer two apologies for every one question, I knew that he was merely nibbling around edges of what would choke him if he were to take a proper bite'.²⁸²

The other factor for my inclusion of these flash forward sections – as with all the innovatory elements I brought to the structure of *Close to Home* – was bound up with my underlying academic purpose for the novel. In playing with the narrative structures of *Close to Home*, I was, as I have set out above, consciously intending to bring new writing techniques to the text. While these techniques are not separately unique to me, or even, in part, to the genre, in combination, I believe they fulfil my intention for *Close to Home*, by demonstrating innovations in its story-telling, while retaining its integrity as a genre fiction.

²⁸² McPherson, *Armistice Ball*, p285

Intervening like this in a traditional form has been described as a post-modern approach. Scaggs suggests that by taking on the conventions of previous genre fictions, 'more apparently 'traditional' mainstream crime fiction... can employ postmodern approaches... for its own engagement with both literary and social history'.²⁸³ He goes on to say that 'postmodern detective fiction emphasises... the clear parallels between reading, detection, and interpretation',²⁸⁴ and in that sense, then, *Close to Home* does represent a post-modern text, since its academic purpose was explicitly to demonstrate the link between what I had read, and what I wrote. And, in as much as its identity as a crime fiction means it is a double narrative, containing Todorov's story of a crime and the story of its investigation, it is a story about a story. Scaggs says that such fictions 'are, by default, metanarratives. They are narratives about narratives... and it is this metanarrative self-awareness that... creates the perfect framework within which the genre can endlessly question and reinvent itself'.²⁸⁵

But if *Close to Home* uses post-modern approaches, and can be described as a metanarrative text, my goal in producing it was not to produce a novel which was self-consciously post-modern, as, for example, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, (1983); but rather to build on what I had read to create a story which clearly fits within the tradition of classic detective fiction despite the elements of innovation introduced in its writing techniques. Indeed, by a definition like Rzepka's, which says that '[p]ostmodern detection...[exploits]... the typically unrealized possibilities of an open-ended plot, undecidable conflicts in testimony, indecipherable clues, and impenetrable motives ... that the traditional detective story deliberately excludes',²⁸⁶ *Close to Home* is not post-modern at all. Although the plot of my novel means that order is not seamlessly restored to the community, Waverley and his sister are removed from it, and punished in some sort. Clues *are* offered to and decipherable by the reader, even if the detectives do not discover them overtly and indulge in superior ratiocination to decode them. Motives for the crimes are revealed as clear and sufficient – a perverted sexuality, the need to protect a reputation and remain eligible for an inheritance – and Miss Waverley is functionally sane until she is found out.

²⁸³ John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005)p139

²⁸⁴ Ibid, p142

²⁸⁵ Ibid, p143

²⁸⁶ Charles J Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) p233.

Gender Roles.

‘female characters are... used in ways that can be read as questioning and renegotiating social, gender, and genre norms’.²⁸⁷

Earlier in this commentary, I described some of the ways in which gender impacted on my reading choice and my writing process as I planned and drafted *Close to Home*. And the issue of gender was central to the writerly choices I made as I chose the identities of my investigator, victim and killer. In making each a woman, I set out to explore how personal and social issues mediated by gender might impact on the crime and its investigation.

By giving the part of chief investigator to a woman while the man has the less active role, I was not only subverting the Holmesian binary of male detective with his male sidekick, but also drawing on the work of the women writers of my study. Although Allingham, Sayers and Tey chose male protagonists for their series detectives,²⁸⁸ these men, as a number of commentators have noted, are nevertheless anti-heroic and feminised.²⁸⁹ And women are given an investigatory part to play in some of these Golden Age fictions. Amanda Fitton has a small role in several of the Campion stories, and Tey uses a female protagonist in the stand-alone *Miss Pym Disposes*, although her role is more that of an observer than an active investigator. Sayers features women more actively in her fictions, creating a number of subsidiary investigatory figures who are female. Miss Climpson runs an investigation bureau for Wimsey, staffed by ‘women of the class unkindly known as ‘superfluous’’,²⁹⁰ and she and/or her staff are active in a number of investigations including *Unnatural Death* (1927) and *Strong Poison* (1930). As previously noted, Harriet Vane has a partial role as detective in *Have his Carcase*, (1932), and a more prominent one in *Gaudy Night*, although it is Wimsey who eventually solves the crime in both cases. Her role in the latter story is to highlight the dilemma between the demands of an ‘emotional’ life – wherein the conventional and respectable outcome is marriage – and an intellectual or professional life. The outcome of the novel will position Harriet’s

²⁸⁷ Hoffman, *Gender and Representation*, p1

²⁸⁸ Peters features a male detective, but Cadfael is particularly feminised in his celibate and nurturing role as herbalist and healer. He is frequently shown in a pseudo-motherly role, taking young suspects under his protection, and his methods of detection often rely on the observation of domestic detail to elucidate the mystery.

²⁸⁹ See, for example, Alison Light, Susan Rowland, Lee Horsley. Horsley comments ‘The feminized detectives of the interwar years – Christie’s Hercule Poirot, Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey, Allingham’s Albert Campion – can themselves, in their non-violence and their reliance on intuition and empathy, be seen as a reaction against the heroic male model’. Lee Horsley, ‘From Sherlock Holmes’ p32

²⁹⁰ Dorothy L Sayers, (1930), *Strong Poison*, (London: New English Library, 2003) p54

role towards the conventional,²⁹¹ but Rossen comments that while Harriet is not a feminist, she 'possess[es] the spirit of independence which feminists would promote'.²⁹²

Despite the lack of a female protagonist for their fictions, the Golden Age writers feature what Susan Rowland calls 'questions of power, gender and the social roles of women'²⁹³ in their work. The way in which the genre promotes investigation of ideas – analysing thought processes and problem-solving within a specific community – means that, as Megan Hoffman comments, '[c]lassic British 'golden age' crime fiction provides an ideal space in which to explore issues that accompany changing models of femininity'.²⁹⁴ Sayers' *Gaudy Night*, Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938) and *The Beckoning Lady*, and Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* and *The Franchise Affair* (1948) all throw light on women's role in society of their time.

In contrast to the Golden Age writers, all of my twenty-first century women writers use a female protagonist/investigator in their fictions. In each case the investigator is not a professional detective,²⁹⁵ but, in keeping with the classic tradition, is an amateur whose enquiries result in the solution of crime. Stef Penney's Mrs Ross becomes involved in a criminal investigation as she goes in search of her adopted son, who is suspected of murder. Catriona McPherson's Dandy Gilver investigates because she is bored and 'the pleasure of boredom was beginning to run out just then, in the spring of 1922'.²⁹⁶ Married to the local laird and impoverished after the Great War, she has a reputation for unwittingly solving problems. 'I was just chatting, no earthly clue what I was saying, but Cuthbert Dougall's yacht had sailed out from Anstruther harbour the very next day and never been seen again'.²⁹⁷ When her friend offers her money to 'sort' a problem, she accepts despite not knowing what it will entail. The call to action acts 'like a patent tonic....I was going to sort it, whatever it was'.²⁹⁸

Although Elly Griffiths' series is set in contemporary Britain rather than a historical past, her protagonist Ruth Galloway, a forensic archaeologist called on by police in her professional capacity, nevertheless has issues about her identity as a woman. As an

²⁹¹ Harriet accepts Wimsey's proposal of marriage because she believes their relationship is one of intellectual and emotional equality.

²⁹² Rossen, *Women Writing*, p111

²⁹³ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p157

²⁹⁴ Hoffman, *Gender and Representation* p1

²⁹⁵ Later, McPherson's protagonist does set herself up as an investigator – with a male sidekick – but her role is always unofficial.

²⁹⁶ Catriona McPherson, *After the Armistice Ball*, (London: Constable and Robinson, 2005) ebook edition (downloaded for Kindle 12/6/2014) p9

²⁹⁷ Ibid, p15

²⁹⁸ Ibid, p16

overweight, unmarried woman in her late thirties, she is aware of the inequalities faced by women even today. Asked to consider what significance the role of women might have had in prehistoric society, she thinks 'Look around you... we don't always play a significant role in *this* society'.²⁹⁹ The fact that she is not confident enough to express her thoughts reveals her insecurities. Like these twenty-first century authors, I set about creating a female protagonist for my fiction. The choice was made in order to reflect the modern idiom; to draw on my own gender experience which would enable me to write authentically from a woman's point of view; and because I wanted to explore the role of an investigator through the lens of a woman's perspective. Reddy comments on this issue saying '[i]f women, because of their socialization, read the world rather differently than do men... then it stands to reason that a woman detective might read clues differently than a male detective'.³⁰⁰ In giving Jo Lester a first person narrative, I was able to reflect the way she sees herself and the world. Her characterisation relied on showing, rather than telling; for example, the reader is only given indirect information about her physical appearance 'I must take after my father, then. Do you know any pasty redheads with ditchwater eyes?';³⁰¹ and the disconnect between what she says – or does not say – and what she thinks is always apparent. "I haven't asked him, I say.' I don't say, I wouldn't ask, even if I could.'³⁰² As the subject of the dominant narrative thread, her character is central to the story, as well as to the investigation of the mystery.

Despite a focus on crime, the classic pattern detective fictions of my focused and wider reading are, as Maureen Reddy comments, primarily concerned with 'character... [and]... its revelation... the investigation of personality and... the conjunction of the personal and the social'.³⁰³ This conjunction between the individual woman and the society in which she lives is expressed in a variety of ways. In *Close to Home*, for example, Jo approaches the business of investigation with a different mindset to the more conventional Nash:

Early on Monday morning, I know what I must do.... It has to be early, before I go into the office and see Nash. If I ask him, he won't let me.... Unorthodox as it may be, I have to establish the chain of evidence.³⁰⁴

Jo's gender impacts on her characterisation, and I show how her responses to events are different from those of her male counterpart, Bram Nash. Their reactions, for example, to

²⁹⁹ Griffiths, *Crossing Places*, p14

³⁰⁰ Maureen T Reddy, *Sisters in Crime*, (New York: Continuum, 1988) p10

³⁰¹ *C2H*, p32

³⁰² *Ibid*, p41

³⁰³ Reddy, *Sisters*, p5

³⁰⁴ *C2H*, p143

the discovery of the pornographic photograph. In devising *Close to Home*, I had deliberately set to create a fiction which followed the precept of earlier texts, avoiding graphic detail, and showing the impact of the photograph in these different ways not only adds to the characterisation of the protagonists, but also confirms the identity of the text itself. By choosing to suggest the horrors of murder and paedophilia rather than describing them in technicolour detail, I was following the precept of earlier texts which do not 'disturb the readers too fundamentally'.³⁰⁵ Like Sayers in *Have His Carcase*, (1932) – which necessarily includes the goriest corpse-description of any of her novels³⁰⁶ – I apply distancing techniques to lessen the impact of unpleasant detail.

The reader first sees the photograph through Nash's eyes. While it is clear he is disgusted, he can distance himself professionally from the subject matter and observe it in clinical terms:

Her body, the budding breasts and half-developed genitalia are not hidden. With a wantonness that belies her childish looks, she seems deliberately to offer herself to the viewer, one knee raised and a hand parting the grubby rags to display her sex.³⁰⁷

Later, when Jo sees the photograph, I use her visceral reaction to show its emotional impact: 'What I feel when I see what he's given me goes beyond shock. It's like a blow to the solar plexus, and I barely have time to turn away before I'm vomiting'.³⁰⁸

Nevertheless, I was careful not to characterise this as a simple male/female binary. The old man, Paul Oxley, has a similarly shocked response: 'After one long look he slumps, grey in the face, exhausted. He's not sick, as I was, but the shock on his face is plain enough'.³⁰⁹

Jo's characterisation comments further on issues connected to her gender and identity. As discussed earlier in this commentary, her gender is seen as a bar to her employment with Nash: 'Josy Fox. Coroner's assistant. It's a man's job, everyone knows that'.³¹⁰ She does not have professional status as a detective, although, like Griffiths' Ruth Galloway, she has official backing to investigate. She is both free to investigate

³⁰⁵ York, *Power and Illusion*, p4

³⁰⁶ The plot means that a detailed description is essential, as the state of the blood is a vital clue to the mystery. Sayers allows Harriet Vane first to be shocked by the bloody corpse, but her protagonist then becomes professional in her observations: 'it was exceedingly necessary that the body should be examined.... She pulled herself sharply together and walked firmly up to the body'. Dorothy L Sayers, *Have His Carcase*, (London: Gollancz, 1948) p13

³⁰⁷ *C2H*, pp109-110

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p125

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p137

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, p85

independently, and constrained by her gender, history and class. Her role is not taken seriously by many in the town, including Miss Waverley:

‘She said she was Mr Nash’s new assistant.’
‘Say what she likes, she’s still the scullerymaid’s byblow.
Clever as paint, but it don’t do.’³¹¹

Her illegitimacy plays a large part in town opinion. This reflects the attitudes of the time. Paley comments ‘[i]llegitimacy has always been defined as a problem, and those deemed to be illegitimate have suffered stigmatisation [and] discrimination’.³¹² Jo’s grandfather’s dismissal of her as a disgrace, ‘[y]ou should never have been born. Spawned’,³¹³ may seem extreme in the twenty-first century but is accurate to the prejudices of many, which persisted well into the twentieth century. He makes it clear that there is one rule for women, and another for men. ‘A man does what a man must.’/ ‘And the woman he does it with?’/ ‘No sin in a wife.’³¹⁴ Her illegitimacy, plus her long exile from her home town means she is seen as an outsider, and this reflects her own feelings about her return. ‘I feel like a stranger, but so little has changed’.³¹⁵ In this, she echoes Harriet Vane, whose return to Oxford in *Gaudy Night* leaves her ‘unspeaking and unspoken to, like a ghost’.³¹⁶

Jo’s sense of dislocation is a play on another classic detective fiction trope, which states that the investigator should stand apart from the community s/he investigates. Auden says: ‘the detective must be the total stranger who cannot possibly be involved in the crime.’³¹⁷ While Jo is not actually a stranger, the length of time she has been away has made her hometown seem strange to her. And she chooses not to fit in: to remain aloof, even as an object of scorn, although her status as the wife of a man who has gone missing in a heroic endeavour might otherwise have conferred respectability on her.

The eager pity on her face makes me want to bite. What Richard did was sheer bloody waste. Bravado. Playing the hero, taking a yacht to Dunkirk against official advice. A doctor, he’d have been so much more use staying home to help the wounded when they came.

‘You must be very worried,’ she prompts me.
I shrug. I’ve nothing to say that she wants to hear.’³¹⁸

³¹¹ C2H, p56

³¹² Ruth Paley, ‘Introduction’, *My Ancestor was a Bastard*, (London: Society of Genealogists Enterprises Ltd, 2011) ebook edition, (downloaded for Kindle 1/9/2017)

³¹³ Ibid, p36

³¹⁴ C2H, p36

³¹⁵ Ibid, p15

³¹⁶ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p11

³¹⁷ Auden, ‘Vicarage’, p21

³¹⁸ C2H p42

While allowing my protagonist to appear as an outsider, I introduced an element of paradox into the classic trope, since the equivocal nature of her role as an ‘uninvolved’ stranger is apparent to the reader. Her secret purpose to find her father connects her intimately with the murdered girl’s death, and that connection – however mistaken she is about the true motivation and the identity of the killer – brings about the denouement of the crime.

In also choosing to make the killer a woman, I wanted to avoid a simple binary that would suggest women are victims, while men kill. Although Waverley’s treatment of young girls and women is abhorrent, deeply abusive, and offends the standards of decent society, he is somewhat passive. Chiefly a voyeur, he gloats over the passive bodies of his victims in life and in his photographs, while his sister acts: killing over and over again to protect his reputation. Her gender is no barrier to violence: ‘Of course I killed her the little whore you think only a man can kill?’³¹⁹ Her role as villain counters Jo’s as investigator and bringer of justice. Her voice, like Jo’s, is a first-person narrative, established early in the novel, and identifiable as the antagonist of the action. ‘Ought to be stopped. Got to be stopped. I’m goin’ to stop it’.³²⁰ Miss Waverley tracks her counterpart’s movements from the moment Jo meets Nash in the town square, watching and waiting for her opportunity to stop the investigation. Her hand is visible, literally, in Oxley’s death, ‘all it needs is a hand. Palm across dry lips, occluding. Thumb pinching the bony nose closed’,³²¹ and her shadowing of Jo’s movements means that if Oxley’s death is considered suspicious, ‘the Fox bitch can take the blame’.³²² In this, Miss Waverley succeeds, at least in Jo’s thoughts. She does believe she has killed the old man by her confrontation of him. The shadow has been turned around, so Jo stands in the dark of Miss Waverley’s deeds: ‘Thinking about him makes me cringe inside. I can’t escape my part of the blame. I was there. I upset him, and he died’.³²³

Casting a woman as the criminal occurs both in the Golden Age and the contemporary detective fictions of my focused reading. There is no precedent to be drawn from statistics here: in two of her eleven Wimsey fictions, Sayers makes the perpetrator a woman. As a killer in *Unnatural Death*, (1927), and as the writer of poison pen letters in *Gaudy Night*. Allingham chooses a woman as murderer in three of her nineteen texts: *Coroner’s Pidgin*, *The Beckoning Lady*, and her last novel, *Cargo of Eagles*

³¹⁹ C2H, p223

³²⁰ Ibid, p18

³²¹ Ibid, p139

³²² Ibid

³²³ Ibid, p153

(1968). Women feature more strongly as transgressors in Tey's work: in five of her eight texts,³²⁴ the culprit is female, although the crime is not murder in two of these.

Contemporary fictions give no clearer a guideline: while McPherson chooses a female killer for half of her fictions, Griffiths only has one in nine.³²⁵

It may, however, be significant to note that three of these texts – Sayers' *Gaudy Night*, Allingham's *Miss Pym Disposes* and McPherson's *Dandy Gilver and A Most Misleading Habit*, (2016) are set in enclosed communities which are almost exclusively female – a women's college in *Gaudy Night* and *Miss Pym*, and a nunnery in *Misleading Habit*. While the theme of *Gaudy Night* concerns gender roles, neither of the other texts is focused specifically on a woman's role in society, and the choice of a female killer in these would seem to be pragmatic, rather than thematic.

The choice of a female victim is common in crime fictions of all kinds. As Hoffman says, '[t]he female murder victim's identity and the structure of the crime and its subsequent investigation provide a lens through which representations of women... can be...explored'.³²⁶ In *Close to Home*, I set out explicitly to ensure that the murdered girl does not lose 'her individual identity, becoming a symbolic body'.³²⁷ Instead, she remains central to the story; and the discovery of her body raises questions that must be answered. Bright and Mills comment that questions arising out of the discovery of the body in Golden Age fictions, 'can signify degrees of transgression.... Out of place, uncertain and resurfaced bodies... reflect postwar and traditional anxieties related to death and violence'.³²⁸ The death in Sayers' *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928), reflects these anxieties vividly: the body of General Fentiman is moved during the Armistice Day commemoration, and the violation of the two minute silence is seen almost as more shocking in its disrespect than the murder itself:

This is the most disgraceful thing I ever heard of. At the moment when all our thoughts should be concentrated on the brave fellows who laid down their lives for us – to be engaged in perpetrating a fraud – an irreverent crime – '³²⁹

³²⁴ *The Man in the Queue*, (1929); *A Shilling for Candles*, (1936); *Miss Pym Disposes*, (1946); *The Franchise Affair*, (1948); and *To Love and be Wise*, (1950)

³²⁵ *The Outcast Dead*, 2014

³²⁶ Hoffman, p158

³²⁷ Ibid, p177

³²⁸ Brittain Bright and Rebecca Mills, 'The Revelations of the Corpse: Interpreting the Body in the Golden Age Detective Novel' in Casey A Cothran and Mercy Cannon, eds., *New Perspectives on Detective Fiction: Mystery Magnified*, (New York: Routledge, 2016) p32

³²⁹ Dorothy L Sayers, (1928), *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, (London: New English Library, 1970) p109

Close to Home reflects this dynamic, and in this sense, Ruth's female body is transgressive. She did not die where she is found; her body has been buried and is unearthed, and then cannot be buried again because her identity is not known: 'you want me to tell Doc Waverley her body has to be kept?/ 'I certainly do'.³³⁰ She has been deliberately killed but is hardly marked by death, '[h]er skin's still plastic, pearl and pink',³³¹ although the true victims of the bombing found alongside her are rendered unrecognisable; she is little more than a child, but sexually experienced, and a mother; 'A baby? She's only a child herself.'/ 'Not at all. Girls like her start breeding in ankle socks'.³³² Nash's refusal to grant burial to the murdered girl until the mystery of her death is solved subverts the decent tidying-away of the transgressive corpse and ensures that while those with social status in the town consider her death hardly worth noting, her class and gender rendering her negligible, her death will be the trigger that overturns the socially powerful.

Like her narrative thread, which demonstrates her centrality to the text structurally, Ruth's female body is a pivot on which the story turns. From the description of the post mortem, where the evidence of her past sexual history and the abuse she has been subjected to after her death is clinically catalogued: '[t]here was semen on the body, but I don't think she'd had full intercourse',³³³ to the scene in which Jo tries the red shoe on the corpse in a grim subversion of a fairy story identification: 'I've tried the ugly sisters, now it's time for a macabre Cinderella',³³⁴ her physical body is key.

Her foot is so small, so cold. So forlorn. Somewhere, dee inside, it feels like abandonment to cover her foot over again without trying to chafe it warm, the way Granny used to do for me when I was little. But with the reasoning part of my brain I know it's ridiculous to feel that way. The only thing I can do for this girl is find her killer, bring them to justice.³³⁵

Jo's feeling of connection with the dead girl are shown as almost maternal, mediated by her memories of female nurturing. While she understands she cannot help Ruth as a mother might, she can, in her role as investigator, find the person responsible for the girl's death. Jo's reaction is influenced by her own, and the victim's, gender.

The rage is hot inside me. For Nell, for Ruth, for Adelle. For all the little girls.

...

I don't care about the chain of evidence. I just want the bastard locked

³³⁰ C2H, p34

³³¹ Ibid, p14

³³² Ibid, p33

³³³ Ibid

³³⁴ Ibid, p143

³³⁵ Ibid, p145

up in a cell, all his precious status ripped away.

I want to hear him say it. I want to make him confess. I want to hear him admit he seduced my mother, frightened her, drove her away.

I want to hear him confess he killed Ruth and her baby.

I feel in my pocket for reassurance. The photographs?

Still there.

The gun?

That too.³³⁶

As a woman, she stands for all the victims, all female – Ruth, her dead mother, the abused girls – whose stories she uncovers. When she acts to confront Waverley, she is not acting as investigator bringing him to the law, but as an individual, a woman representing other women, fortunate to have escaped the culling herself, compelled to reveal and punish the guilty.

³³⁶ C2H, p217

Historical Detective Fiction and Milieu

‘Writing these books...requires adherence to the requirements of two genres – crime fiction and historical fiction....they face a daunting hurdle in creating credibility because their historical material may not fit easily with their readers’ preconceptions about this particular time and place.’³³⁷

Rzepka says, ‘[c]rime and detective fiction have proven to be vigorous cross-pollinators’,³³⁸ and the genre’s adaptability and openness to innovation demonstrate, and are demonstrated by, the genre’s enduring popularity.

Of obvious significance to my fiction is the way in which cross-pollination occurred between classic detective fiction and historical fiction. In melding these genres in her Brother Cadfael story *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, Ellis Peters brought innovative change to the classic detective text. Her medieval mysteries, featuring the compassionate and worldly-wise Cadfael, and set firmly in a credible and well-researched historical past were soon to ‘prove an overwhelming popular success’.³³⁹ While Peters had separately written historical novels and detective fictions, it was for her innovatory joining of the two forms to create the genre of historical detective fiction that she became most well-known.

While Peters based her stories on historical fact, drawing on available information about Shrewsbury Abbey and the wider conflicts of English and Welsh history in the early twelfth century, her stories are reassuringly familiar in format. From the first, the tight-knit settings – the monastic community, the walled and river-moated town of Shrewsbury, even the limited cast of characters involved in the quests which Cadfael undertakes – and his feminised methods of detection ‘like Hercule Poirot before him...[he]... attends to the kind of detail usually associated with women’³⁴⁰ identify these fictions as springing from and true to the mould of classical detective fiction. Peters’ work had particular resonance for me, showing how I could use a historical setting to create a classic-pattern detective text. Like Peters, I chose a time when war was raging beyond the confines of the town in which the story was set, heightening tension within the community.

Peters’ innovation brought new life to the genre. At almost the same time as Peters published her first Cadfael novel, Cawelti had commented that ‘[w]hile the classical detective story was...preeminent...between the end of the nineteenth century and the

³³⁷ Johnsen, *CFHCF*, p4

³³⁸ Charles J Rzepka, ‘Introduction’, in Rzepka, *Companion*, p7

³³⁹ Lewis, *Pargeter*, p82

³⁴⁰ Johnsen, *CFHCF*, pp9-10

time of World War II... it has not shown the same capacity for change and development as the other major formulaic types'.³⁴¹ I would assert that Cawelti was premature in his assessment, and in the guise of historical detective fiction, the classic-pattern text has not only survived, but thrived. Winks comments, 'the "historical mystery" is the most rapidly growing branch of the genre',³⁴² and it is true that historical detective fictions set in every age from Ancient Rome to 1950s Britain continue in popularity today. By choosing to write *Close to Home* as a historical detective fiction, I was building on Peters' innovation in order to present a classic pattern detective fiction which nevertheless had something to offer the modern reader.

I have shown how a number of tropes drawn from my reading of contemporary and Golden Age genre fictions shaped the way in which I planned and wrote *Close to Home*. But there was a further area of influence I identified in my practice of reading as a writer which had relevance for my novel's identity. This was not a generic trope, but a more subtle influence, particularised to the Golden Age texts, which I would characterise as period atmosphere or milieu. While these works had been written as contemporary texts, they read as historical fiction in the twenty-first century, offering images and details of their era which were relevant to the setting of my novel. TS Eliot says the writer's mind is 'a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together'.³⁴³ These images and impressions, gathered from Golden Age texts, came to represent an important outcome of my reading as a writer. As Southgate comments:

fiction represents and actually embodies some of the widely accepted social mores and intellectual presuppositions of its age; and so it often provides evidence... for the time in which it was actually written.³⁴⁴

The term milieu implies everything that makes up the fictional world: detail and setting, atmosphere and tone, attitudes and beliefs which give a sense of verisimilitude to the fiction. Johnsen suggests that milieu is 'particularly important in historical fiction because it does more than establish the author's credibility and provide an authentic backdrop for the events of the narrative...milieu is part of the narrative's subject'.³⁴⁵ It is, perhaps, the greatest difficulty for the writer of historical fiction to get this right and instil

³⁴¹ Cawelti, *Adventure*, p43

³⁴² Robin W Winks, 'Preface', in Ray B Browne and Lawrence A Kreiser, Jnr., *The Detective as Historian*, (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000) p ix

³⁴³ Eliot, 'Tradition', section II

³⁴⁴ Southgate, *History meets Fiction*, (Harlow, Pearson Education, 2009)p8

³⁴⁵ Johnsen, *CFHCF* p87

a sense of what Boyd and Higbie call 'texture – the “feel” of a past time'³⁴⁶ into her fiction. While secondary texts may enable confirmation of specific detail or procedure – like a telephone call, for example: 'I put down the receiver, press button B.... two pennies rattle into the brass cup',³⁴⁷ social attitudes and habits of mind are harder to access.

It was part of my aim in writing *Close to Home* that its milieu should be as accurate as possible. As well as trying to avoid factual errors, I wanted to create characters whose lives would seem believable within the parameters of their times. This meant I needed to depict social attitudes – as well as historical details – accurately in my fiction. Golden Age texts, criticised in recent times for displaying racist or sexist views, reflect the attitudes of their times in the background context of their detective plots. I would argue that this unconscious reflection³⁴⁸ does not constitute evidence in itself that the individual authors were racist or misogynist, but rather suggests the general attitudes of the day. Indeed, in many ways its status as unconsidered material makes it more valuable as contextualising evidence for matters both trivial: for example, mode of dress, and fundamental: sexual behaviour, ethnic stereotyping and class assumptions. The texts modelled these attitudes in ways I could draw on as I portrayed the fictional Romsey in *Close to Home*, and helped to authenticate my vision of a community that did not necessarily change its attitudes because of the war, but continued to be subject to prejudicial attitudes regarding class, ethnicity and gender.³⁴⁹ Unlike Catriona McPherson, who says she chooses not to include 'any of the casual anti-semitism or racism they would have had then. It's not worth it to make a book sound authentic',³⁵⁰ it was important to me that I told my story 'without trying to make things seem better than they were'.³⁵¹ I saw this as an issue not only of being true to the period I was writing about, but also of my integrity as a writer. George Eliot puts it like this:

³⁴⁶ Boyd and Higbie, 'Shamus-a-um', p19

³⁴⁷ *C2H*, p55 Source for cost of a call at <http://www.1900s.org.uk/1920s30s-public-phones.htm> (accessed 23/03/2012)

³⁴⁸ On occasion, particular attitudes are *consciously* included as part of the plot – for example, the debate in *Gaudy Night* about the choice for educated women between marriage and a career.

³⁴⁹ 'the Blitz did not dissolve prejudice or definitively break down class barriers'. Juliet Gardiner, *The Blitz*, (London: HarperPress, 2011) p370. 'Anti-semitism... was not diminished by the shared threat', *ibid*, p 368. Women were expected to keep up appearances, be sexually chaste and undertake war work, but they were not considered equal to men, even if they were injured doing war work. See Jennifer Purcell, *Domestic Soldiers*, (London: Constable, 2010) pp84-5; 161.

³⁵⁰ Catriona McPherson: 'Capital Crimes'. Interview in *The Scotsman*, 12/12/2009, at <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/catriona-mcpherson-capital-crimes-1-771989> (accessed 1/8/2016)

³⁵¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Project Gutenberg ebook released 2006, updated 2016. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/507/507-h/507-h.htm#link2HCH0017>, Ch XVII (accessed 22/2/2017)

my strongest effort is...to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is no doubt defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel... bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is³⁵²

Reflecting authentic period behaviour is necessary not only in terms of historical accuracy, but, as Boyd and Higbie comment, also to make the plot work effectively. 'The behavior [sic] of one character towards others and the relationship between a person and a society are the generators of the text.'³⁵³ In drawing from Golden Age fictions, I was able to construct a model for how the small-town, wartime setting might colour the views of its inhabitants, and texture my own fiction. In a sense, I was replacing the information I might have achieved through oral history-gathering with the silent witness of the primary genre texts.

The way in which Jo Lester is disparaged because of her illegitimacy and lower-class origins reveals the attitudes of a middle-class elite towards her in particular, but I also wanted to evidence the general atmosphere of suspicion towards outsiders. I looked at Josephine Tey's *The Franchise Affair* for evidence of this milieu. The provincial, market town setting of Tey's Milford has much in common with the setting of *Close to Home*. While on the surface, small towns like Milford and Romsey might seem to offer the 'domestic scale of the action'³⁵⁴ which is characteristic of classic detective fictions, beneath lies a destabilising web of prejudice and lies. Milford's xenophobia and the townspeople's quickness to judge is summed up when the proprietor of the Ann Boleyn [sic] coffee house 'tilt[s] the chairs against the tables'³⁵⁵ to exclude the Sharps, who, as outsiders, have been falsely accused of a crime. In Jo Lester's Romsey, suspicion about outsiders is characterised when the Labour Exchange and Billeting office prove unco-operative, declining to find her a job and sending her on a wild goose chase for lodgings. "'Stranger? Heave half a brick at 'im has always been the town's attitude,'"³⁵⁶ Jo thinks when she discovers there is work to be had after all.

A more serious concern – and a more delicate issue to negotiate – was the question of racism. The Golden Age fictions were influential in suggesting an unthinking attitude of prejudice towards anyone of foreign origin. Allingham, Sayers and Tey have each been criticised for their casual racism, but as Rowland comments, they 'lived and

³⁵² Eliot, *Adam Bede*, as previously cited.

³⁵³ Boyd and Higbie, 'Shamus-a-um', p19

³⁵⁴ Horsley in Rzepka, *Companion*, p32

³⁵⁵ Josephine Tey, (1948), *The Franchise Affair*, (London: Arrow Books, 2003) p66

³⁵⁶ C2H p24

wrote in a racist society',³⁵⁷ and their novels reflect this. Tey's Grant considers the murder weapon – a dagger – in *The Man in the Queue*, (1929), and decides: 'the very femininity of it proclaimed the dago, or at the very least one used to dago habits of life'.³⁵⁸ In *Police at the Funeral*, Margery Allingham portrays a family shocked by a number of bizarre deaths, but the most shameful secret is not that there is a murderer in the family, but that one of its members is of 'half caste blood... a touch of the tarbrush! It is unthinkable'.³⁵⁹ While Campion does not share her view, he does understand 'what it was that she considered worse than murder'.³⁶⁰

Sayers is accused of anti-semitism, though the evidence for this is rather slight. In descriptions such as that of the supposed kidnappers in *Unnatural Death*, the tone is disparaging as Parker deduces from footprints at the scene that one of the attackers appears to 'wear the long-toed boots affected by Jew boys of the louder sort'.³⁶¹ Wimsey's assumption that 'financial individuals'³⁶² are Jews and the Dowager Duchess' patronising 'I'm sure some Jews are very good people' in *Whose Body?*³⁶³ certainly carry unpleasant undertones, but they are mild compared to real-life opinions such as one expressed in Mass-Observation diaries of the era. 'Husband said this morning that he has only one sorrow about the Nuremberg thugs, and that is that they did not exterminate the Jews before they were stopped'.³⁶⁴

While I did not want to express such extreme views in *Close to Home*, I highlighted anti-semitism as one reason why Bram Nash is not considered to be 'one of us' by elements of Romsey society. A number of characters in various social classes express this view. Fred Deeds, a factory worker and member of the Home Guard calls Nash a '[d]irty Jew',³⁶⁵ Jo's grandfather taunts her with '[a]lways were sweet on that Jew-boy',³⁶⁶ while Miss Waverley, the doctor's sister and pillar of Romsey society says '[b]ad blood there.... his mother was an East End Jew'.³⁶⁷ In my depiction of anti-semitism in the fictionalised Romsey, I drew on the way that Golden Age writers had allowed the attitudes of the time to colour their characterisations, and tried to replicate the casual way in which the insults

³⁵⁷ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p66

³⁵⁸ Josephine Tey. (1929), *The Man in the Queue*, (London: Arrow Books, 2009) pp13-14

³⁵⁹ Allingham, (1931), *Police*, p244

³⁶⁰ Ibid

³⁶¹ Dorothy L Sayers, (1927) *Unnatural Death*, (London: New English Library, 2003) p 246

³⁶² Sayers, *Honeymoon*, pp113-4

³⁶³ Sayers, *Body*, p40

³⁶⁴ 'Edie Rutherford' in Simon Garfield, *Our Hidden Lives*, (London: Ebury Press, 2005) p257

³⁶⁵ *C2H*, p59

³⁶⁶ Ibid, p36

³⁶⁷ Ibid, p56

appeared in my text. However, while I was true to the period in allowing negative views to be expressed, I made a conscious choice to present these as underlining the unpleasantness of the characters who voiced them.

My close and wider reading of Golden Age fictions allowed me to gain a feeling for the era in which they were written. These texts, which reflect unconscious echoes of the social and personal conditions of the time, enabled me to create a milieu for my fiction which would convey a realistic-seeming picture of wartime attitudes and habits of mind. In drawing from these texts as primary sources for information about the attitudes of the time, I was using my reading practice to inform my writing process. This methodology underpinned my own novel, but it could also be used by other Creative Writing practitioners to inform their own work, drawing from within their own areas of interest.

Conclusion

'The question is, what has she been looking for?'³⁶⁸

When I set out on my PhD study, I saw my principal concern as being the production of a detective novel which would draw on the tropes and structures of classic detective fictions, as represented in particular by the work of a selected group of twentieth and twenty-first century women writers of the genre. I proposed that while this novel would have a historical setting reflecting the era of Golden Age fictions, it would be couched in a modern idiom, contextualised by works penned in the twenty-first century. Although it would recognise genre boundaries – elements essential to a classic-pattern text – it would seek to introduce elements of innovation in its structures and writing techniques. As the major part of my thesis, the novel would demonstrate what I had learned from my research, yet remain accessible to a general reader of the genre. Initially inspired by my life-long reading of Golden Age and contemporary detective fictions, the process of writing *Close to Home* would be fundamentally influenced by the way in which my practice of reading as a writer developed.

In order to discover how I could achieve my aims, I had first to develop a personal methodology whereby my reading practice and writing process were linked in a reiterative, self-reflective cycle. From the unconscious influences which had first shaped my ideas of what my novel should be, I moved on to an examined and conscious methodology. As a reader, I looked to the primary texts to see how previous writers had negotiated the boundary between innovation and genre expectations; to identify structures on which I could build; and areas in which I could add innovation. As a writer, I explored how I could use the knowledge I had gained in my reading research, and experimenting with forms and structures as I wrote and re-wrote my work to achieve the goals I had set myself.

As I have shown in this commentary, my reading was directed towards an exploration of the tropes and structures of the classic genre. This led me to the conclusion that in order to maintain my fiction's identity within the classic genre, I should not fundamentally disrupt the plot structure or characterisations/roles of my investigators. Instead, I would build innovation into *Close to Home* by the way in which I structured the narrative. In creating a fragmented, multi-voiced text I was, in part,

³⁶⁸ C2H, p91

following the precedent of earlier texts. But as I have shown, I built on this structure to introduce two specific narrative innovations. First of these is the ghost voice, which speaks in response to the living characters, yet only the reader can 'hear' her. This voice signifies the victim's centrality to the story, and, at the centre of the text, provides a spindle or axis about which the novel turns. Second, is the thread which carries the flash forward sections of interrogation. Functioning in part as a foreshadowing device, its identity as a future encounter becomes clear as its time-line intersects with the time-line of the novel. Neither of these narrative techniques are paralleled in the close or wider reading of my study, and I believe that they are innovative to the genre. While it is a smaller element in the text, the narrative switching between the protagonists which signals the shift in their emotional engagement with each other, is also new, and I did not find it elsewhere in my reading.

In terms of wider narrative techniques, my decision not to provide a cast list of suspects for my detectives to investigate or my readers to puzzle over was innovatory to the classic genre. Of the texts of my study, only Allingham's *The Tiger in the Smoke* does something similar, although in that novel reader and detective know the identity of the criminal almost from the first, a structure which is now common in contemporary thrillers.

Detective fiction has been so extensively examined in recent years that, with my goals set firmly on the production of a novel as my primary demonstration of new knowledge, I did not expect to discover something which critics and commentators had not noticed before. However, as I discussed in Section 8, 'Historical Detective Fiction and Milieu', I did make one observation that I have not seen elsewhere. Cawelti's 1977 verdict that the classic detective story had lost its capacity for change implied that such fictions had had their day. But I believe that through Ellis Peters' innovation it did adapt and has subsequently thrived in the guise of historical detective fictions. The patterns of the classic tradition are upheld in this mode, featuring private investigators who use their wits instead of technology to solve mysteries and murderers operate from recognisable motives, rather than complicated psychopathies.

Inspired by Peters' innovation, it was as a historical detective fiction I chose to write *Close to Home*. But it was the Golden Age texts, written not as historical fictions but as stories set in their own time, to which I directed my reading as I sought to create a realistic milieu for my novel. Allingham's *Traitor's Purse* and *Coroner's Pidgin* were directly relevant, being written and set in World War II, while Tey's *The Franchise Affair* features a similar small town society, but other elements, such as attitudes towards

women, ethnicity and sexual behaviour are reflected in all of the Golden Age texts. These reflections are, I suggested, a kind of silent witness to the times in which the novels were written. They thus offered me as reader/writer a source of information about their era and the unconscious attitudes of their time on which I could draw for my own fiction.

In this commentary, I have shown examples of how I worked from my reading practice to my writing process, and how I drew on the primary texts to inform the creation of *Close to Home*. And the way I had learned to explore and interrogate the primary texts also fed into the way I read my own text as I drafted and redrafted it to achieve the outcome I wanted. The novel expresses what I have learned from my reading research, demonstrating knowledge which is explicable to other practitioners and observable by readers. In its submitted form, it is innovative in aspects of its structure, but nevertheless retains its identity as a classic pattern detective fiction. Its production lay at the heart of my work, and represents the core of my new knowledge.

But it does not stand alone. The commentary makes what I have done as a creative writing practitioner explicit, showing my personal methodology, describing how I explored the primary texts, and assessing to what degree and in what ways the novel achieves its aims. Together, the novel and commentary represent my contribution to knowledge the subject discipline.

For the future, my plans to pass on the new knowledge I have acquired as a result of my PhD studies falls into three categories. Firstly, as a trial of the novel's identity as a genre text – and to attempt to fulfil a personal ambition – I will submit my novel to agents in the hope of commercial publication. If that option proves unviable, I will consider self-publication via electronic media. Publication by any route is likely to reach the general reader of historical detective fiction rather than an academic audience, but since that was always part of my aim for the book, I will pursue that aspect of communicating my work to others. I shall continue to write detective fiction, and am in the early stages of planning a second novel featuring Jo Lester and Bram Nash.

Secondly, I hope to continue with my teaching: the opportunity to nurture the understanding of creative writing students about their chosen subject, and to be part of their development as writers has been one of the most exciting and rewarding adjuncts of my PhD studies. What I have learned as a research student will continue to inform the work I do with undergraduates, especially in terms of sharing my experience and practice as a writer. I believe that a valid outcome of my studies is to encourage student writers to explore the practice of reading as a writer for themselves, and I can achieve this by

sharing my knowledge of the ways in which it can inspire and inform their writing, as it has done mine.

Thirdly, there is the academic arena in which to communicate my work to my peer group – other creative writers undertaking PhD studies. Mapping the journey by which I negotiated the PhD process is necessarily personalised, but nevertheless adds to knowledge of how such a thing may be done. My methodology – from the initial genre survey to the focused exploration of specific genre texts – could apply equally well to other practitioners who might seek to draw from other discrete bodies of text to inform their own work. Paul Munden says, '[i]f there is any generic knowledge produced, it derives from...accumulated diversity, relating to the nature of problem solving itself.'³⁶⁹ In the spirit of adding to this accumulated diversity, I will seek to take forward material derived from this study which I might communicate to a wider audience, so that in my looking back, I can illuminate the way for someone looking forward: setting out on the process of undertaking a creative writing PhD.

³⁶⁹ Munden, 'Writing and Education', in Kroll *et al*, *Old and New*, p79

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Appendix I

Email from Good Housekeeping Magazine	291
Information sheet for proposed oral history-gathering	292
Consent form for proposed oral history-gathering	293
Detection Club Rules	294

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Email received from *Good Housekeeping Magazine* – confirming an early version of my opening 5000 words had been highly commended in their novel competition.

Judged by Kate Mosse, (author); Luigi Bonomi, (agent); Kate Mills,(editor, Orion); Lindsey Nicholson, (editorial director, GH magazine).

A 250 word extract was published on their website in August 2012.

Wed 25/04/2012, 12:23

Dear Claire

Thank you so much for entering the Good Housekeeping Novel competition. Our judges met last week and I am happy to tell you that, while you didn't make the top four, we have singled out *Close To Home* as highly commended.

We received over 7,000 entries so to have reached the top 10 is no mean feat, and we are planning to print your name, and some details of the book in the August issue of the magazine. I would also like to be able to publish a short extract on our website, too – I hope that would be OK with you.

Thank you once again for entering, and I wish you all the best with your writing career.

Kind regards

Andreina

Andreina Cordani
Features Director
Good Housekeeping

020 7439 5266

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Information sheet

As part of my studies for MPhil, I am writing a detective novel set in World War II.

I am interested in finding out more about everyday life during this period. I am not specifically looking for stories about crimes, nor do I wish to enquire about upsetting or traumatic events. Instead, I am hoping to learn about day to day life, so I can write a novel which will seem authentic to anyone who lived through that period.

The sole use for any stories which you may be willing to share will be for background material for my novel. The novel will not be based on the material gathered, as the plot and characters have already been planned. Instead, these stories will enable me to create a realistic atmosphere for the novel which will seem believable to the reader, and one which will honour those who lived through that period of time. Names and details will not appear in the novel, nor will they be used/reproduced in any form other than that described above.

The way in which I would like to gather information is by meeting informally with you at a place of your choice. This meeting would last about 30 minutes. During this time I would like to chat to you about those events of the period which you are willing to share, with especial interest in everyday life. I would not record the interview, but might make notes of the discussion afterwards. Any notes would be paper copies only, and no one but myself would have access to them. They will be kept in a secure place and destroyed after my novel is completed.

Claire Gradidge
Research Student, University of Winchester, Faculty of Arts, University of Winchester,
West Hill SO23 4NR



Consent form

Please read the following:

- I have been informed about the general goals and methods involved in this research project.
- My participation is completely voluntary and I can withdraw at any moment I choose.
- I reserve the right to refuse to answer any specific questions and to discuss any experiences I hold to be private.
- I understand that all the identifying information gathered during the research will be held in a secure location and in total confidentiality.
- I understand that my identity will not be revealed by the researcher either directly or indirectly through specific personal or professional details, unless permission is otherwise indicated by me.
- I understand that information gathered during interviews will not be used in an identifiable way either in the researcher's novel or in the supporting academic work.
- I understand that my participation includes consent to an informal interview of approximately 30 minutes.
- Interviews will not be recorded. Any notes made by the researcher subsequent to the interview will be kept securely. Access to such notes will be by the researcher only and solely for the purposes of background information for the researcher's novel. No direct quotations will be made nor identifying details included either in the novel or in any supporting academic work.
- I understand that I can ask for information about the project at any time, and that I can have access to the final piece of work.

I hereby agree to participate in the research project, and acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent agreement.

Name of participant (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signature of participant

Date

Detection Club Rules

The 10 Commandments for Detective Novelists

- The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
- All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
- Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
- No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
- No Chinaman must figure in the story.
- No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
- The detective must not himself commit the crime.
- The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.
- The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
- Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

From: Ronald A Knox, 'A Detective Story Decalogue', in Howard Haycraft, ed. (1946). *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1983) pp194-196

Appendix II

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