EDWIN SWELLINGFOOTE

The Earlstone church spire of Saint Martin the Great rises above the squat buildings of the town and seems to disapprove. *I was erected to inspire mortal wonder and I express the hope and desire for forgiveness and life eternal: I aspire to and allude to mysteries of which you are ignorant,* says Saint Martin. *You are functional, transitional and transactional boxes.*

People enter with money and leave with less, but something else, something inedible or insufferable. Every so often shops are closed and boarded up until another dreamer appears and enters a nightmare world where rent steadily exceeds takings and where that magical word *footfall* turns into a mental taunt; for fewer and fewer feet fall on these mean, cracked pavements, shiny in the rain, until the day arrives where Rent, no longer content to feed on takings, eats into savings until the windows again darken behind boards and the fattened rodent Rent slinks back into the skirting to hibernate and slowly digest takings and savings until the next fool is tempted. But Saint Martin has no cause for complacency. The day will come when feet fail to fall on the worn slabs of His aisle, for faith is declining no less rapidly than customers, and no less rapidly than the money in their pockets, purses and wallets.

This beginning may be a little stilted for my long-awaited novel, but let it stand - or stagger - for a while. My name is Saskia, and you must excuse me if my English is at times a little odd. I have been back here a year nearly. I am, if I am quite honest, quite disappointed with my birthplace and I hover between staying and going. The Earlstone I fostered of my earliest dreams was a kinder, cheerier, busier town. To return has been like meeting an uncle again whose face, fallen through ageing, has seen all good humour drain through the cracks. But at thirty-four I am in a position to make choices. I am quadrilingual and feel rather entitled to make up such a smart word……..but why did I return? Because I think God told me to. One morning. As soon as I woke - or it might have woken me - a loud voice said *Saskia - geh heim nach Earlstone!* It worried me the whole day because my aunt had also heard voices all her life which grew louder and more numerous towards her end. And towards that end my Uncle Ruud, long dead, had "spoken" to her more often and louder than most, usually to castigate her for the affairs which she had begun to refer to, eerily, in his voice, to a roomful of shocked and amused strangers as she sat crumpled in her bedside armchair; her best-kept secrets she would have died rather than divulge to a soul, shouted in her native Earlstone English which many of the visitors to the special hospital understood and furtively translated for others. How I loathed *them*. There she sat, a travesty of the sturdy woman I had admired, feared and hated in equal measure, shrunken in this cheap armchair, shiny with the sweat and slobber of previous senile men and women. She had brought me up in the Dutch Calvinist tradition and had become more severe in her frowns and strictures the more my uncle ruined his liver in his study, under the cover of building model aeroplanes and boats, out of a forbidden cabinet where he locked away his spirits. Was it possible that Aunt Jennifer really had been a serial adulteress in her youth? Did this explain the excessive churchgoing and the model planes?
"Why, why did you betray me, Jennifer?" intoned my "uncle".
"Because you were insufficient to my needs," replied my aunt haughtily.
The kindly nurse had tried to still her, glancing around at me who sat silent and impassive,

inwardly racked by embarrassment and disbelief. The first few times "they" spoke, I declared it to be *een fantaasie* in a voice audible for everyone to hear. And breaking into English, I added "She loved and was loyal to my uncle. She is ill and old. It means nothing."
It was a great relief when all her voices stopped for ever the New Years Day before last.

This smashing of her dignity was the first time I had doubted the Lord's Goodness. Of course, we lived in an imperfect world because of Adam's sin. There were nettles enough to sting, snakes enough to bite and stones sharp enough to cut the soles of the exiles, but did He have to allow an old devotee of His to humiliate herself on a public ward? The pastor had no decent answer, only to imply that if she were indeed guilty of marital improprieties then she may have thus been justly punished.
"Adam chose to live in a world of Free Will, Saskia. Suffering and Death were the price he paid, and the bill is still outstanding for every descendant of his since."
"But Father, what Aunt says is involuntary."
Involuntary. She had become as incontinent of her secrets as of her urine. I had no need to add, for myself, that a failed marriage half-marinated in brandy over many years had also been a pretty severe punishment. In the end I decided that God alone knew the truth and the wherefores, and I left it at that. But a few months later I had to question God again when the boyfriend I trusted turned out to be a sponger, a bastard and a traitor. It was not long after that I heard God's loud response and I made up my mind to return to a place where my aunt's much younger sister - my mother - had been electrocuted in her kitchen while I, a child of four and a half, was crayoning at the table.

So, many years later and with only odd memories of those few years, I had landed home. I am Saskia (Laura) Flikkemar (Smith) ex Groningen, ex Earlstone, as plain and as shapeless as a windmill with my broad shoulders and rump. I imagined that the Dutch air and environment had fashioned me thus, because the earliest photograph of me in Holland showed a girl tall for her age, slim and quite pretty. My nose would have been an attractive long nose had it not acquired a bump half-way along. I felt very angry with my nose because on that first photo there was no sign of a bump. This Dutch me - Saskia - should never have emerged from the English Laura. Had I been normal, I reasoned, I would have been attractive. But any resentment of the transformation of me into a lump lessened the moment I saw that my sisters in Earlstone had been cast from the same mould. They were not my blood sisters, though. Who and whether they were I had no idea, for Aunt Jennifer had refused absolutely to respond to any enquiry about my Earlstone family, and Uncle Ruud could only shrug helplessly when I once quietly asked him. It became an issue I decided to put on hold until I was free to delve without my aunt, a self-pitying tyrant, looking over my shoulder, ready to cry if I showed the least ingratitude or sign of rebellion. And yet I was shocked one visiting afternoon at her bedside to find her lucid for a short time. She recognized me and even smiled a little. *Never return to Earlstone, Saskia. It is a curse,* she intoned in an odd voice, looking up at distant point through the fly- smudged window. *Your grandfather – my father – was a wicked man who hated God and the Church. He paid the price when he was crippled at work. Does it not say in Exodus* - ***For I, the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me……***And then she fell silent for the rest of the time I was there. But I'm not telling you my secrets - mainly because I do not know them yet. I must however confess that I began to regret the neat dormer house on the Diepenring canal which I had been so

pleased to leave behind. For I became lonely and bored after many months in this derelict town.

When the Reverend James asked for volunteers to help feed the down-and-outs that first autumn, I came forward. I asked him if there were that many, for I had seen none huddled in doorways with a cur or a begging bowl. *More than many people think*, he told me. The vicar was very kind. He rode an old bike everywhere like a Dutchman. I liked him. He reminded me of Uncle Ruud when he was a younger, happier man. I kept wondering what it would be like to look after him after Margaret told me one Sunday that his wife had died of cancer two years before. You would never have guessed it from his genial smile. Unless you were a cynic.

It was mild that first November night I turned out. It was a little after ten and Fat Charles who had not stopped smiling at me in church all September was already there warming the soup in the big van. It had a let-down side flap which became partly a counter. Margaret, a blonde lady with crooked teeth who became beautiful the moment she turned her back was trying to get his attention but he was too busy smiling at me. He was doing a terrific impression of being a nice person. But why had he just put his gloves on when it was so mild? To hide his wedding ring from me? It was the next night when he invited me in a whisper to his flat for a late cup of coffee.
“But you are a married man, Charles. It would be improper.”*And you are very fat.*
He hastened to tell me that his wife had gone, that he could not remove his wedding ring - *because even your wedding finger is obese*. I laughed at the thought of an obese finger and he took this, unfortunately, as some kind of intimacy and I was forced to borrow for a short while Aunt Jenny‘s fiercest face, when he persisted. Persist is a good English word - it sounds like the hiss of a kettle which continues to boil, and describes perfectly how tedious and annoying the persister can be. Anyway, Fat Charles ceased at once to persist and moved to the other end of the van. Margaret smiled. But I was too furious to return it. Did Charles really imagine that his great stomach and his ten or fifteen years advance on me were cancelled out by my shapelessness and plainness? I hated such sexual algebra, where x =ed the plotter‘s designs on my privy parts.

I had been volunteering for about a week when one November night, after it had been snowing all afternoon and had begun to freeze under cleared skies, from the shadows there emerged a limping man who had not been before, an unusual species amongst this knot of starling-men stamping and mingling around the van. He was tall and long-haired and dressed in the filthiest coat, as if he had fallen over and rolled around in mud. And yet there was something noble and admirable about his face and his forehead; and in his eyes – his soft, steady, bluest eyes – an unmistakeable intelligence and kindliness; his mouth, just visible through his whiskers, should have been driven down and bitter at the corners in view of his parlous state, but it was not - and it even seemed to be verging on a smile, albeit one of wistful calm resignation. Each derelict person is a tragedy – a fall at least from comfort and from some sort of success, and I began to wonder about this man’s particular story, until I realised some days later he was dominating my thoughts to a disproportionate extent. But would he not make an absorbing subject for that novel I longed to write? A man of character fallen on hard times through bad luck and bad judgment who is rescued by the love of a good woman – a woman despairing of finding truth and goodness in a harsh, deceitful world?

He would accept his bacon roll and mug of tea with quiet politeness and take himself away from

the others to sit, steaming, on a bench. He seemed in a trance which allowed me to dare to study him and invent sentences and tales about him – but whenever he looked me straight in the eyes, his stare was so bold that I looked away and fixed some other object to create the impression he had only been in my absent-minded line of sight. If I glanced back, he smiled and raised his mug to me, as if to say I don't mind if you look – if you have nothing better to do than look upon a curio such as me! Then I would make a little throwaway gesture to pretend I had understood him to be saying only thank you. I might look again and he would either be gone or be disappearing back into the night, limping, leaving a trail of white breath behind him. With my eyes I followed him as long as I could.

"Where does the tall man with the long grey beard live?" I asked Margaret one very frosty night.

"Live? You mean where does he sleep? In some doorway I suppose. We never ask - they can get annoyed if they think you're prying. Take my advice and keep your distance. Pass me a cloth, would you."

"How old would you say he is? Fifty-five? Sixty?"

"I think he's younger than he looks," said Charles who had been listening in. "Most of them are. I tried talking to him one night but he wouldn't speak. Not even to say his name. I reckon he's got a little nest up one of the jitties past the old picture house."

"He sleeps in the jitty?"

"Not *in* the jitty. But there are so many derelict outbuildings and yards in the backs. They break in through the window boards and doors. They're like rats and squirrels. But nobody bothers."

From a booklet long turned brown - *Out and About in Earlstone* - priced 2/6d - which I had purchased from the bookstall at the back of the church for fifty pence, I had learnt how proud the town was of its jitties. This was a word I did not know, and neither did my Chambers dictionary, so I had to ask someone. It was a revelation. Rome boasts a Colliseum, Paris, London - and Blackpool! - all have their towers, and Earlstone, like a blue cheese, is riddled with jitties - narrow alleys - and would no doubt have been more proud of them still had they been less smelly, less littered and less spattered with the mini-nova of late-night undigestable takeaways. Did my noble tramp really live amidst such squalor? He had, I imagined, made some great unsung sacrifice in life, and I might be destined by God to return home in order to tell of it. What could it be? Would he deign to speak to *me*? I resolved to put him on the spot, in spite of the advice I had had.

But I get ahead of myself. First, what of my own story? The name Smith is not a very promising springboard for research. I took to wandering the High Street in the hope of spotting a face resembling mine, of a cousin - or even a sister or brother. Aunt Jennifer had erased my history. I had no English birth certificate and could not be sure that my birthday had actually been the day it was always celebrated. In Groningen I was Saskia Flikkemar and my passport proved it. How it had all been arranged I had no certain idea - except that Uncle Ruud had been a functionary of some standing, and doubtlessly influential in the relevant offices. Here I was Laura Smith, but I told everyone I was Saskia, come over from Holland with my job. I did not even know in which Earlstone street I had lived. Aunt Jennifer had told me the barest minimum. Having married a Dutchman met on holiday in Spain, she had come back to rescue me after my mother's accidental death. Who my father had been, Auntie could not or would not say. Part of me was still afraid to delve because of her warning - but that voice was usually countered by the thought that she had been senile - and was finally cancelled out by my recall of that Imperious Voice I had heard on waking that morning. To know or not to know, that was the question, and finally I

came down squarely on the former, taking myself off one rainy day to the offices of The Earlstone Gazette.

The face I found myself staring at on the monitor was not like the one my aunt had kept in a drawer, on a photo featuring her and Mother, the two of them walking arm in arm, with laughing heads, on the esplanade of a resort Aunt had forgotten the name of. The face in the paper under the headline **Open Verdict on Tragic Mother** was smiling against all the odds. The eyes - moulds of my own eyes, round and penetrating - were pained, and the mouth was going against the grain of the downcast lines in its corners, making a brave effort for the photographer. Other faces in the background which I assumed had been deliberately blurred by the newspaper, seemed mainly cheerful, and I deduced that Mother had been coaxed or tricked out to celebrate a birthday she had no wish to mark. Who had supplied the photo to the eager journalist? Had I been alive on that day? Such secrets are kept in a huge chest labelled God Alone Knows, to be opened at the end of time. I trembled to read the report and had to do so several times before I had its full impact. An open verdict. Police had removed a faulty iron; a GP had testified that Mother was on anti-depressants and that she had attempted suicide before. But I, the baby, had featured strongly in the coroner's summing-up, and the jury must have given Mother the benefit of the doubt, on the grounds of the maternal love and responsibility she had surely felt.
I read - with a shudder of horror - that I had been found by a neighbour wandering in the street. This aroused no suppressed memories from their slumbers to join the two I had retained - one of my mother asleep on the floor - and one of a plate of chips and bread and butter in a strange kitchen with a strange little girl opposite. I had no way of telling if these were linked or separate events - another secret in that chest of mysteries. I felt suddenly very depressed. I had no complete ownership of my life, and was more like a tenant. How much of it - of *me* - had been invented, refashioned and deleted akin to the history of a Tyranny? And yet, to experience the truth of life in full would be such agony. Is oblivion not, after all, a blessed kindness? Where was that badly wired kettle now? At the bottom of some waste pit.
I thanked the lady on reception and nodded when she asked if I had found all I wanted. At least I now knew which street I had lived in and the house number. Thirty years later, there was a good chance that a witness still lived in the area who knew things about Celia Smith and Aunt Jennifer, things which Aunt did not know or would not tell; for example, who my father was.

But please be patient while I return to my gentlemanly tramp. He, not I, might yet become the hero of this rambling story if I could get him to speak. The jitties, the backs; it sounded so lonely and desolate - decrepit old Earlstone, hidden away, forgotten, ignored, quickly passed through on the way to elsewhere. I found myself in the jitty which ran down the side of the defunct cinema in Old Bond street. After a few paces, it surprised me rather by opening out into a courtyard on my right. An enterprising developer had, I surmised, renovated an old building and made five shops out of it, four of which were boarded up - and there within, that gross rodent Rent was hibernating. But one shop - a bakery - was illuminated and a face looked out in anticipation of me. I felt almost guilty to take my footfall away and decided I would buy a nice cake on the way back. Did my scruffy gentleman have some secret access into those other premises? The jitty snaked left and in the angle of the wall was a large green door. But it was locked. I followed the cobbled path left and then right, past outbuildings and workshops long deprived of their purposes, until, on my right, I was amazed to find three neat houses standing back from a concrete yard opposite them. It was pierced with shrubs and weeds and there were cars parked on

it. I thought immediately of Uncle Ruud's wind-jammers imprisoned in brandy bottles, and wondered by what magic they had come to be there. The solution was supplied as soon as a low rumbling began and a huge door on rollers opened slowly in the building which backed onto the yard. When a man in blue overalls emerged and threw down a cigarette, I guessed this must be an old factory converted into a garage. Perhaps somewhere here, over a wall, around a corner, in a niche, living under the most basic of conditions, the person I sought was to be found. The mechanic got into a car and drove it into the workshop. The jitty ahead ran through an archway, and in the gap there were cars criss-crossing on the ring road. Now I had my bearings, but no idea where that man might be hiding. I could not call out because I did not know his name. I came out onto the road and turned left just as the mechanic was parking the car out front. He got out as I passed and nodded at me. On impulse I simply asked him if he knew where the tramps lived. He clearly thought I was mad, so I explained quickly that I was a church volunteer for the homeless on Old Bond Street.
"My friend Charles thinks that one or two of our homeless fellows might be living in the backs here. I wanted to see for myself."
He took me a little way into the workshop and pointed through the great doorway across the scruffy yard. Invisible from the jitty, a narrow passageway squeezed itself between high walls and ended abruptly at the old front door of a building with boarded up windows. His boss kept spares in there, he said. It had been the annexe of an old workshop which had been demolished to make room for more cars.
"The boss turns a bit of a blind eye. He's an unofficial nightwatchman. His name is Eddie. Eddie Swellingfoote. Strange name. Strange dude. Lives upstairs."
"Has he been there long?"
"Longer than any of us can remember. You German?"
"No. Dutch. Please, Sir, don't tell him anyone was asking for him!"
"No danger of that, me duck. Never see him. Reckon I've said no more than five words to him in six years. He never speaks."

That same night it was very cold. It had snowed in the afternoon and frozen again on top. We were near the end of November and people were talking about a white Christmas. At half-past-ten my gentleman - Eddie - emerged from the jitty and came straight to me, not Margaret. He managed a smile. He whispered a thank you for his food and sat down, as straight-backed as a soldier, on his bench. I climbed down immediately from the van and placed myself next to him. He seemed confused, as if torn between welcoming and resenting my intrusion.
"I'm Saskia. From Holland."
He looked at me for a second, sipped his tea and studied his boots. I leant towards him as earnestly as I could and asked him with a hint of mockery if he did not speak much English. Finally he asked me, barely audibly, why I wished to speak to him.
"Why? Because you intrigue me. You are different from the others and I would like to get to know you a little. You are Eddie, aren't you?"
He flinched. "Who told you so?"
"Oh, just one of your English little birds!"
He got to his feet and put the mug down on the bench. I held out my hand and he grasped it.
"You are very kind, Saskia," he muttered "But, believe me, I am not worth knowing."
"I don't believe you. Please. Let me pour you more tea. Your hand. You are frozen through."
I climbed back into the van with his mug, but when I turned he had vanished!

“He actually spoke to you” said Margaret. “Remember what I said, Saskia. Keep your distance.”
“Don‘t worry. His name is Eddie Swellingfoote.”
She pulled a face and rubbed furiously at the marks on the counter.
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Afterwards, I kept thinking about what she had said about privacy and I worried all the next day that I really had frightened Eddie away. And when he failed to emerge from the jitty that night I was almost beside myself with self-disgust. Why did I think I knew better? Perhaps he had spotted me from the entrance and had returned to his hiding place. So I phoned Margaret the following afternoon and feigned a sore throat. Later, I parked opposite the cinema and watched the dark jitty as the church clock approached ten thirty, his time. Flurries of snow were racing and whirling around the street lamps. On the last chime of the half-hour he appeared - and I was so relieved. Hobbling on his left foot, he made his way slowly to the van. I decided to get out and followed him in the shadows. He did not stop or hesitate. Margaret had begun to attend to him when she spotted me.
“Oh, here she is!” she exclaimed, and I realized straightaway with a fluttering heart that he must have asked after me. I announced that my throat had improved and she passed me down a mug of tea. As soon as I could, I whispered to him that I had worried when he had not come the night before. Charles was on duty too and frowning at me.
“I felt a little ill” said Eddie, sitting down on the bench. The snow was thickening and collecting in his beard like a plague of white locusts. He munched his bacon cob and gulped his tea. An impulse gripped me.
“Eddie. Where will you spend Christmas?”
“At the Salvation Army. Why?”
I could not help it. It just came out.
“I’d like you to spend it with me.”
“What? Why?”
“I want to know your story. I want to tell your story. I’m writing a book.”
It is a fault of mine, caught from my aunt, being far too direct. He stood up and sat down again. He was in a dither.
“Please, Saskia…”
But he could say no more. I thought for a second he was shivering, but no, he was shuddering with an emotion I dared not pry into. He walked off into the night, and after that he did stop coming. Margaret said nothing but I saw that she was furious with me. That seemed to be the end of the mystery.

So I return now to the other one. Myself.

Or rather my selves, for the experience of looking at a house which ought to have been familiar but was utterly strange, acted like a catalyst with the power to tear apart two elements forming an uneasy compound. The compound of me. The experience left me feeling dizzy and sick. Had Celia Smith survived, Laura Smith would have grown up on this mean estate and Saskia Flikkemar would never have come into being. With my ears ringing, I managed to get into the pub at the end of the road. I was in the lounge bar in which I just knew that poignant photo in the newspaper had been taken. I should never have returned, my aunt had been right. When the tables and chairs and people refused to steady themselves, I closed my eyes - and saw my mummy lying asleep on the kitchen floor….and then I was eating chips and bread and butter in a

strange kitchen with a strange little girl. Then, with a shudder of horror, I saw who the little girl was. It was me. It had been half a dream, half a memory……
A kind lady had brought me a brandy over and the little knot of people around began to disperse, as I revived. Now I began to understand what I was hearing.
"How do you feel now, duck? Shall I ask Len to call you an ambulance?"
"No, no. I have had a bad experience. A shock."
"Drink a little more brandy."
"Thank you, I'll be fine now."
I stood and looked through the bay window at the road which stretched and ascended before me, a road of post-war semi-detached houses. Here, in this bay of scuffed leather seats, patched with black tape, Celia had sat and tried to smile. Another loud voice in my head - not one I recognized - told me to go home. I sat down again and finished my brandy. The voice did not speak again and I chose to ignore it.

"Does anyone here remember a woman called Celia Smith? She had an accident in King Edward St at number 149. She was electrocuted. Twenty-nine years ago."
The music over the loudspeakers seemed to increase in volume. Those faces stared at me in wonder. The landlord stopped polishing a glass and leant on the counter to get a better view of me.
"I remember, me duck," said the fat old man sitting on a bar stool. I went over to him.
"My sister found her body," he said. "And her little gel wandering around in the street."
"That little gel was me."
Gasps broke the stunned silence.
"I am Laura."
"Laura! Good.God!" said the fat man. "Yes, your auntie came over from Belgium to get you."
"No, from Holland. Is your sister still….in the street?"
"Yes. She looks after me. Still at 147."

"Maisie, I've brought a visitor. You won't believe it. You'd better sit yoursen down."
Then he shouted me to come through and I entered the kitchen. A very fat old lady had seated herself in a chair with a potato in one hand and a knife in the other. Her brother said he would make a cup of tea. I sat down in the armchair on the other side of the hearth from her. Her sagging face, gurning with a question, slowly relaxed into wonder as the answer came to her. The potato bounced on the floor. Her eyes grew large and her jaw dropped.
"Oh, Laws," she said. "Your eyes! It's them same lovely eyes. You're Laura!"
The gas fire fought momentarily for breath and the roar of the kettle diminished as it came to boil.
"Why on earth 'ave you come back?"
I took out the copy of the photograph from the newspaper offices and passed it over.
"Can you please tell me when this was taken?"
"I can't believe you've come back….."
"Are you on it, Mrs Vickers?"
I had remembered her name from the inquest report. Her brother brought over tea but she waved hers away. After a while she said "Malcolm. You goo back to The Westfield. Take a tenner from the pot. Goo on! Shift yoursen! I want to talk to Laura."

As the front door closed, she began her story. Celia had agreed, she said, under kind pressure, to come out for her birthday. Maisie's mother along the street had come in to look after me. On the photo, Maisie and her husband had sat to the left of Celia, hers being the profile half-hidden by Celia's curls. A man from a nearby table had volunteered to take a picture of them all. Poor Celia - only three weeks later she would be dead. Perhaps her eyes signified that she knew. Maisie had come home from work and found me wandering crying on the pavement. She had found Celia laid out on the kitchen mat, the iron sparking nearby. Maisie showed me where in the kitchen, pointing at the exact spot, for this house was the mirror image of 149. She had told the police she would phone my aunt in Holland and would take care of me until she came. Mother had begged her not to allow me to be taken away by Social Services if anything should happen to her. She had briefly been in care herself when a young teenager, and her first child had been taken into care. I found this news too much to cope with and interrupted her story.
"If anything happened to her? Did she expect to die, then??"
Maisie looked away. I looked at the pained eyes in the photo and a cold answer spoke itself in my head. Now the kind old lady lied.
"Die? No, me duck. In case anything happened and she couldn't take care o' you. She was on drugs and 'ad been an alcoholic. She had got 'erself very down in the dumps. The bloke she'd run away from was a rum 'un. Carl Somebody. In and out of prison. Kept turning up and giving 'er what-for."
"My dad?"
"Maybe. I dunno - he'd been back on the scene before the council moved 'er 'ere - for 'er safety - out of 'is road. Before you were born."
"His road? Which road?"
"No - I mean out of 'is *way*. Sorry. I forgot - you're more Dutch than English now, ain't yer Laura?"
"Who was my father? You must know! Please, I want to be told - that is why I've come back!"
"She never knew for sure. There were lots of blokes, you see."
"Lots of? Was she promiscuous then?"
She looked into the gas flames and did not speak. I took her hand and told her I was fearless. I wished to know the truth, no matter how painful. She finally looked up and asked if I was sure, and I nodded. This is the rest of her story, embroidered by me only a touch. I will not interrupt.

My mother had had a tragic life. She had been a wilful, disobedient child - the entire opposite of her elder sister Jennifer - and had got herself pregnant at the age of fifteen. This scandal had seen her turned out of home - a prosperous, respectable home in a select suburb of Earlstone - upon her refusal to have an abortion. She had gone to live in a flat on the run-down Eskdale estate with Carl, the nineteen-year-old father of her son-to-be. Soon, the arrangement turned sour, for after the birth the boy-father got it into his head that the child could not be his. He and Celia were dark. The baby had the blonde locks of an angel and was as beautiful as her partner was ugly. The child was fated to pay the price for this accident of birth. Before he was ten months, he had been taken into care, the father was in prison for child-abuse and Celia swore she would never get pregnant again. As the years passed, she had drifted from one failed relationship to another, eventually becoming hopelessly addicted to drugs and alcohol, supporting her habits, when she could not steal, by selling herself to men. She had told Maisie that she had never forgiven herself for allowing her child to suffer. But, at the age of thirty-two, her new start on the Westfield estate at 149 had descended into a fresh crisis. Maisie did not know the precise details, but Celia's ex-

partner was back on the scene. But not for long, for he got himself killed, blind drunk, in a pub brawl. On top of that, Carl had raped her, and not long afterwards she had found herself pregnant. Terrified, she had told no-one except her new friend Maisie, swearing her to secrecy, fearing that the child would be removed by Social Services. She had toyed with abortion but her conscience would not allow it. It so happened that Maisie's grandmother has been King Edward Street's wise-woman, the woman who laid out corpses and even delivered babies in the twenties and thirties when doctors were expensive luxuries. That woman, after much persuading, had agreed to deliver me in total secrecy. So officially I did not exist. Maisie could tell me nothing more about Carl and I saw I would have to return to the back-numbers of the Earlstone Gazette. All Maisie could say was that Celia had dreaded the child being a boy, for if Carl was the father - and she had no way of knowing for certain because of her prostitution - she feared the boy would inherit his cruel streak, for the youth she had had the misfortune to fall for at the tender age of fifteen had been diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic. And then her elation on having a daughter, me, had evaporated one day and she came round to see Maisie in terrible distress. Maisie thought that the secret might have leaked out - or maybe some other monster from her past had turned up to haunt her - but Celia had refused to say what the matter was. Something far worse had happened but she was too ashamed to confess it.

"From that day on, until 'er death, she never smiled again."
"So it was suicide then, Mrs Vickers. She gave you my aunt's address. She must have planned it."
Maisie shook her head to try and shake me off the trail. She began to go off at a tangent, saying how pompous and stuck-up my Aunt Jennifer had been, how self-righteous and judgmental she had been of her dear friend.
"I don't want to speak ill of her, me duck, but she didn't even thank me for being your guardian for them odd few days. She just put you in the car and drove off - never even came to the funeral. I thought about contacting the authorities - but Celia would 'ave come back to 'aunt me. So I let it go. And now 'ere you sit, Laura! I never thought to see you again."
She dabbed at her tears and asked me what I was doing, if I was married, how long I was staying, etc. I answered her politely for a while and then leant forward.
"You knew her best, Mrs Vickers. Do you think she did kill herself? Tell me what you're not saying. I can tell there is more."
She blushed. She took a long breath as a swimmer might do, preparing to dive into a sea of deep secrets. She asked if I was certain I wanted to know and I nodded again.
"That crappy old iron was a total accident, believe me. Celia had been ironing your prettiest dress, Laura, and was about to iron her own when she must have been electrocuted. I realised later that she meant you both to be buried in them. Afterwards."
"Buried? Afterwards? After what?"
I was shocked. How could Maisie deduce such a thing from my mother's ironing? I asked her if Celia had left a note of some kind. The thought that my mother would kill herself in spite of me and leave me at the mercy of the world had been gall in my mouth since my visit to the Gazette.
"You want to know the absolute truth? I never told a soul - but I reckon you're entitled to know. Your mam would've never left you in the lurch, Laura. There were two glasses of milk on the draining board. I put two and two together. After I'd dialled 999 I looked in the bin. Her pill bottles were in there. Empty."
"What did you do?"

“I poured the milk away, washed up and threw the bottles in my own bin. I didn’t want folk hereabouts to think worse of your mam than they already did.”
Sobbing, I threw my arms around her. My mother *had* loved me! Loved me enough not to leave me alone in this mean, sordid world.
“But Maisie, what problem could have driven her to do such a terrible thing?”
She kissed me and sank back heavily in her chair.
“Problems? There were more than enough o’ *them* on ‘er plate. She was back on drugs, she was selling ‘erself - men would either abuse or use ‘er. What did she ‘ave to look forward to? The police were sniffing round, and if she were arrested, ‘er secret - you, me duck - would come out. And you’d be gone - like ‘er first. She were in a tight corner. Who could ever blame ‘er? I wouldn’t!”

Nor I. I bade Maisie farewell on the path and when I turned, her front door had closed. The thought of my aunt - and of her parents, my unknown sanctimonious grandparents - filled me only with contempt. I heard my aunt spouting doctrine, morality and scripture and suddenly and irrevocably I hated her. If her senile utterances had been confessions, how dare she sit in judgement on her sister - or anyone? If she were in heaven and not my mother, then God could keep salvation! I walked back up King Edward Street light at heart and light on my feet. I had found out enough, and loose ends now seemed ridiculously unimportant. It was up to me to get on with my life. My name was Saskia, not Laura, and only for that did I owe my aunt any gratitude. Laura was as dead as Celia - and the who and the where of my cruel father were matters of total indifference. But I had made the discovery of a brother, or a half-brother – the abused child taken into care. Was it my obligation to find *him?*

By early December, those events lay well behind me. My mind was made up to leave Earlstone and its jitties in the New Year and return to Groningen. It had slowly become my ambition to open up that neat, old house on the Diepenring as a refuge off some kind - for fallen or abused women, or maybe the homeless. The wish now to do good in this ditch of a world was my new passion. Celia would surely approve as much as Jennifer would disapprove. Eddie had receded in my thoughts. The offer of friendship had been made and he had refused it. How far, after all, should reluctant people be pursued to have kindness and sustenance thrust down their needy throats?
And then, one night, as Earlstone’s Christmas tree glittered and glowed with haloes of frost, he reappeared. Wearing a smarter coat and with a trimmed beard, he approached the van, smiling, seeming to hobble less, and came straight over to me. I sensed he had taken a decision. My heart fluttered. He refused the bacon cob in my hand and said he had already eaten. He took the mug of tea and sat on the end of the bench, not the middle. Seeing myself invited, I came alongside him and sat down. We talked of nothing important- of the cold, of the beautiful tree, of the time of year for a while and then out of the blue I just said “Will you please, please tell me your story, Eddie?”
He sipped his tea and put it on a spar of the bench.
“My life has been a very frightening and sad one, Saskia. You might regret hearing of it.”
“No sadder, I bet, than my own. I have a spare room for you. I would like you to be my first rescued sheep. Let me tell you of my plans back in Holland.”
I told him and he seemed excited by them. He looked me full in the eyes and said I was the kindest person he had met in many years. In that instant we formed a bond which I knew was

unbreakable. I sensed Margaret staring at us, and when I glanced round, her face was dark with disapproval. Taking a deep breath, I told him in a voice loud enough to carry to the van, to go and get his things. Things? He had no things, he said. We stood up and walked away together.

As soon as we reached my flat overlooking Holycroft Park I ran him a deep hot bath. He threw his old rags onto the landing and I sealed them in a refuse sack. My pyjama top was too big for his body but the legs were too short, leaving his calves bare. His foot was swollen and his ankle twisted but I did not stare. The next morning he agreed to let me trim his hair and his beard even further, and gradually a handsome, younger man emerged. I measured him and went into town to buy him clothes. Upon my return he was frying chops he had found in the fridge and boiling potatoes. Over lunch he began to tell me of his existence in the backs. Due to the generosity of the garage owner he had a sleeping bag, candles, a camping stove and a few sticks of furniture. He had lived at this basic level for many, many years.
“But what did you do with yourself, all day, all night?”
“I read. I had a little radio. I listened to music. The years passed.”
“How old are you, Eddie?”
“Guess!”
It was impossible. His face was lined but his eyes were clear. He had all his hair but it was streaked with grey. I did not wish to offend him so I said *mid-forties.* He laughed and said again how kind I was. He put down his knife and fork. He had nothing to offer me, he said. Officially, he did not exist. This took me aback. I told him in all earnest that neither did I. He said he was fifty-one and looked embarrassed. Thirteen years seemed less of a gulf than seventeen, and not wishing to cause him anxiety, on impulse, I lied that I was thirty-eight. He seemed relieved. In the following silence neither one of us knew how to pursue the subject further. So I asked him if he would tell me his story that afternoon. He sighed. It was, he said, a story he was ashamed of. He wanted to think first how best to tell it. Inspired, I rose and fetched my laptop. I showed him the fundamentals of word processing and it was touching to see his childlike astonishment.
“If you would prefer to write it down, Eddie, you can type it here.”
I had opened the file entitled *Title* and he read that ridiculous first paragraph I had written about the church - the sum total of my great work in progress. He suggested some changes and I showed him how to make them. Then he stopped. *Not today*, he said; he would rather go for a walk on such a beautiful afternoon - in the woods which he had not seen for many years.
“Will you come Saskia?”
“But what about your poor foot? Won’t it be too much?”
“No. It is not as painful for me to walk as it looks.”

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to be walking with this man in Earlstone woods. I felt perfectly at ease with him, as if we had been life-long friends. He seemed to be hobbling less on his misshapen foot, but I offered him my right arm, and with a pleasant laugh, he took it.
“It’s nice for an old man like me to have such support from a youngster.”
“Not at all! You’re my friend. How did you damage your foot, Eddie? And where does your name come from?”
“You mean *injure*. Look, Saskia, would you mind if I told you everything on that clever contraption of yours? It would be easier. And please, would you call me Edwin?”
“I will. But is it just a coincidence that you have such a strange surname? Sorry to be so inquisitive, but I do wish to know all about you.”

“Later. Later. Let’s just enjoy the clear air and that blue sky - like the very first Earthlings. Let’s pretend we’re the first people to see all this, Saskia, full of awe and wonder! Look at the magpie over there! My favourite good and evil bird!”
Edwin was the most wonderful, intelligent company. I almost cried when I thought of all his lonely, futile years. Why? But why?? There were birds I did not know the English for and he taught me. In return I taught him the Dutch words which he pronounced with perfect accuracy. Dusk began to invade the woods and we made our way back to the car park. Eastern stars were twinkling and with our backs to the glow of the town, the sky was a glorious sight. How beautiful the world was meant to be and was made to be! As we stood looking up our hands grasped each other tightly and we crossed our thumbs over.
“Look!” he said. “My word! How strange that we have the same sort of stubby, fat thumbs.”
“Oh yes! Goodness! I hadn’t noticed. Margaret on the van has them too.”
“Then we must all three be descendants of the same ancient clan which settled here after the Romans left! With a chieftain called Erl, maybe.”
“To be honest, I have always been ashamed of my ugly thumbs and tried to keep them hidden. I was pretty as a girl, now look at me.”
“I *am* looking, Saskia. You know, I‘ve heard it said that we love best what we see of ourselves in others.”
“So-o-o-o, if you ever managed to fall in love with me, it might be because of my funny, stubby thumbs?”
He laughed. I shivered. He drew me close. I put my hand around his waist.
“Why have you been hiding from me, Edwin? All these lonely years.”
“Hiding from you? You’ve been hiding from me! In Holland. How could I ever have known about you?”
That night I could not sleep and in the end I went into his room. It seemed natural and obvious to follow my instincts, and I was not sorry. Without speaking, we both knew it was the right - and holy - thing to do. I shall not defile our first togetherness that long night with details, and need only say that he utterly astonished me. The next morning I turned to him and asked when he had first loved me.
“The first time? When you first looked at me from the van and smiled with those eyes, those big, beautiful, sad eyes.”
I thought instantly of what Maisie had said about my eyes when I entered her kitchen. I laughed. I told him he was a shocking flatterer of a plain Dutch girl.
“Saskia. Listen. The beauty of an intelligent, loving person shines out from a face of even commonplace features. A glamorous face without that inner light is an empty shell, a doll‘s face, dead. Now, please, never talk yourself down again.”

December days grew shorter until we were on the threshold of Christmas. A blissful contentment filled me. My new life was a dream. Edwin had not needed much persuasion to accompany me to Groningen to begin the charitable project which Aunt’s generous legacy would fund. In my new state of mind I prayed to be forgiven for hating her, and sentiments of kindness and tolerance duly replaced the bitterness I had been feeling. It was not her fault to be the product of parents against whom my mother, surely the cleverer, more spirited sister had rebelled. I apologized to God too for the blasphemous thoughts I had had. On Christmas Eve I gave to my favourite vagabond Cds of his favourite composer, Mozart. And he, without money of his own, had simply wrapped ribbons around my laptop. That meant that his story was finished. On Boxing Day it

was cold and brilliant, and Edwin said he would go for a long walk while I read what he had written. I had a cough and a sniffle so I agreed. He had so far asked to know nothing about my past, apart from my life in Holland. He showed no curiosity about my presence in England, and besides, I had no wish to talk about it, desiring to do no more now than erase Laura Smith completely from my memory.

With a mixture of trepidation and curiosity I opened the file and began to read.

Saskia. Here below I have told the truth. Please remember that fact, and forgive me if what I have to say upsets you. Once you have read this, please delete it and look forward as eagerly as I do to a New Year and a new life together.

I had a happy childhood, Saskia, growing up in Tamworth, Staffordshire. My swollen foot and bent ankle did not stop me joining in all the games children love to play, and although a few of them were cruel, most were kind and my friends. My parents told me I had been born that way and I accepted it. After all, my best friend was blind in one eye after his brother had shot it out with an arrow by accident as he swung round a lamppost. And there was Michael Duffey in another class with a hare lip. We live in an imperfect world, Saskia, whatever God originally intended. When I was twelve years and a week old my happy childhood ended. One Sunday afternoon my mum and dad sat me down and explained that I was not their natural-born child after all, not Edwin Taylor but an unnamed boy they had adopted shortly after I had entered the world. They told me my father had been cruel to me and stamped on my little foot. I had lain untended in my cot for so many days that doctors had not been able to mend it properly. They could not (or would not?) tell me who my true mother was. But they assured me that they loved me as if I was their own. Mum said she couldn't have her own children. I was a precious gift, a blessing to them from God.
Oh, how difficult the thirteenth year of childhood is, Saskia! Had they told me the truth in my calmer eighth, ninth or tenth year, how differently might my life have turned out?! On such whims might our entire happiness depend. On the Monday, still in shock, I returned to school Edwin Nobody, and when a new boy made a snide remark about my foot I saw red and knocked him out. I scrubbed out the name Taylor on my exercise books and wrote the absurd word Swellingfoote instead. I became so unmanageable and violent in class that I, previously a clever, model pupil, had to be expelled. My poor parents. How they suffered. I loved them and hated them.
But gradually, with counselling, I began to pull myself together, and at my new school I was winning praise and prizes. I was a big boy by then and no-one dared to tease me over my limp. One Saturday morning, a wet and blustery morning, my parents announced that we were going on a trip - to the town I had come from. I suppose now, with hindsight, that the counsellor had advised them to accustom me to my past a little at a time, perhaps with the aim of eventually reconciling me with my birthmother. So we set out south along the Watling Street. Which town we were heading to they would not tell me - I should wait and see and think of it as a mystery tour! The rain was very bad and we had driven about ten miles when a car ahead overtook a lorry and crashed straight into ours. Mum and Dad were killed instantly and I had to be cut out of the back seat. There was not a scratch on me and the fireman told me I was lucky to be alive. Lucky? I was fourteen and a half, an orphan and back in care in a terrible children's home. I had an "aunt" in Polesworth but she had declined custody of me. After a year of bedlam, I

walked out to go to school, never arrived there, threw away my books and never returned to the home. I told a lie about my age and got a job in a garage at Atherstone changing exhausts - with a dexterity and speed which astonished the owner. Was Atherstone the town of my origin? If not there, then maybe Naunton or Earlstone or Allingworth.…..

My "parents" had been quite elderly and their parents, apart from my senile Nan, had passed away. The only relative I could ask about my past was that "aunt" in Polesworth. She took only a few seconds on the phone to tell me tetchily that she had no idea where I came from. I phoned the counsellor in Tamworth but she told me she thought that the documents regarding me would not be released until I was eighteen, as my real mother was not deemed a fit and proper person to have contact with me, a minor. At sixteen I came into part of my inheritance and could afford to drift. The garage owner was sad about my departure and said a job would always be waiting for me. I was so tall and muscular that no-one ever questioned my age in pubs and I began to drink quite a lot and have women. They enjoyed me and I was proud they did. By the time I had turned seventeen I had worked my way south as far as Earlstone and in a pub they called the Dead Ferret a twenty-odd-year old called Griffin took me under his wing. I lied to him that I was twenty. He told me I could make a lot of money if I went to work for him. It turned out that he was supplying all kinds of drugs. Believe me, Saskia, I still feel very guilty about exploiting the weaknesses of the addicts I supplied, but in those days I was an angry teenager, resentful of the terrible hand life had dealt me. No-one loved me and I felt no love or respect for anyone. Without ever intending it, I became a criminal. And I was good at it. Within weeks I had a flash car and a nice flat. For the first time ever my life was easy. I had my round of customers and all I had to do was supply and collect. Without Griffin's approval, I had set up some of my more reliable customers as mini-pushers themselves and made extra money by skimming off their income. One was a prostitute who loathed what she had to do to feed her habit. She was funny and bright and I could see, even as a callow teenager, that she was a good woman fallen on hard times, caught in a trap with no escape. So I took pity on her, often selling gear to her at a discount.

Then one night my easy life changed because of my kindness. I always dealt with that woman on the car park of a large pub. That night I was late, and when I turned in I could see her in my headlights with a man who had her in his grip, pushing and slapping away at her. I jumped out and he told me to back off. I told him that if he hit her again, I'd kill him. He lashed out and sent me flying. The woman began to sob and he shook her, calling her a slag and a bitch. I sprang to my feet and, summoning every ounce of my strength I sent him somersaulting with one almighty punch. Imagine my horror when he landed head first on the bonnet of a car and just lay there bleeding. I hadn't really meant to kill him but his eyes said he was dead. The woman was drunk and on the edge of hysteria. I dragged her into the car before anyone came out and got a good look at us. I drove around for a while and then took her home, to a house which was not far from the pub. I asked her for a drink and for an alibi in case there had been a witness to the fight. I was so terrified that I began to cry. Why had life turned out so bad when I had done nothing to deserve it? How could people believe in a good God? Was I cursed? The woman comforted me. She told me the man I had killed was a louse who deserved it - an ex-partner who had brought her nothing but grief, a violent man who had turned up again and again, this time demanding to pimp off her earnings to pay for his heroin habit. We heard the sirens and any moment I expected the door to be beaten down by the police. But no, it seemed as if by some miracle that no-one had witnessed the scene we had fled from. When I went to leave in the early hours she pleaded with me to stay. She said I had always been good to her, the most decent fellow she knew, and she would show me her appreciation. So I stayed and she did. For free. We hit it off

*straightaway. She was older than me - twenty-seven she said - and I felt no qualms about lying about my age when she asked. I laid low there for a couple of days. The police were appealing for witnesses to the killing - they hadn't a clue - so I was in the clear! I phoned Griffin and told him I'd been ill when he asked where the f*** I'd been. He wanted me to go down to Milton Keynes - his half-brother was setting up an operation there and he needed a hard man - me - he could depend on to watch his front and back. So, with a mixture of sadness and relief I left Earlstone behind and went south further along the Watling. Straightaway I got heavily involved down there with a local woman that Mick - Griffin's brother - introduced me to, and a few months later I was devastated - and astonished - when she apologized and told me she had met somebody else. I phoned Griffin and said I wanted to come back home. His brother was established by then and I had recruited some local lads in the boozers to be his foot soldiers and protectors, so Griffin agreed to my request. I had been back a few hours when I decided I would look up my old girlfriend. She had a baby girl in a pram - and said she couldn't be absolutely sure, but there was a damned good chance that she was mine! Imagine my pride and delight! I told her the next day she should give up the game and try to come off the drugs. I would go straight, I knew where to go for a job. Maybe with my savings I could even start a business. We could move away and have a new life. It was two or three days later when disaster struck again. Until then, we had been together in the darkness and she hadn't seen my back. I jumped out of bed one afternoon to make a cup of tea and she began to scream and howl like an animal. It was terrifying. I begged her to tell me what was wrong but nothing worked. In the end I lost my temper, got dressed and walked out in disgust. I was in my flat that evening. The phone rang and it was her. I thought she would ask me to forgive her. But she told me to pack and get out. She had heard that Griffin had found out about my little sidelines and was going to fix me. I begged her to come with me. She said it was impossible. How could she come with me? The man I had killed had been my own father. I was her son. The birthmark on my back - like a four-leaf clover - had told her everything. I had been taken away from her after my drunken father Carl had stamped on my foot on my changing mat. Her little daughter might be my little sister. I laughed like a fool and told her she was mad! If she was twenty-seven - (I confessed then and there that I was nearly eighteen) - then she would have been a mere ten when she had had me. There was a momentary silence which I took to be relief. Then, horribly, she groaned. She had lied about her age as well and was really thirty-two - I had been born when she had been fifteen. She put the phone down. A few seconds later it rang again. Another voice - a stranger's voice - told me to clear out straightaway. Griffin was coming round with his mates to duff me up. My terror overcame my shock, I got into the car, leaving everything behind, and drove south along the Watling. I would get on the M1 and start again in London; I was young and used to disaster. To rule a line and forget - maybe even go abroad - was my guiding light in the freezing darkness. But as I and the cars and lorries around me rushed south, the traffic became a grotesque symbol of the frenzy and futility of existence. As I sped along, overtaking and being overtaken, I began to howl with despair over the hated and hateful unknown father I had killed; despair over the lover who was the mother my counsellor had tried to persuade me to stop hating and forgive for neglecting and rejecting me; and more despair over the kindly Taylors whom I had cruelly rejected. But I drove too fast in my despair and was pulled over by the motorway patrol. My emotional state made them suspicious. And what did they find in the boot of my sports car? Umpteen sachets of heroin, barbiturates, plugs of cannabis and bundles of notes. The desk sergeant refused to believe me when I kept saying I was Edwin Swellingfoote with no date or place of birth - but in the end that was the name I appeared under in court. The judge took my*

age into consideration when he sentenced me to only eight years in prison. In my first year I survived two stabbings - one knife pierced my lung - instigated by that influential villain, Damian Griffin. I took "the numbers "- 144, Special Category - and found myself on a wing with the nonces and bent coppers. After four long years I was out but stayed well away from Earlstone where Griffin would still be King. I drifted even further south along the Watling, frequenting cheap hostels and boarding houses, gambling, drinking and smoking pot until most of my inheritance was gone. By the time I was thirty, destitution was staring me in the face. I remembered the offer of a job I had from long ago and spent most of what I had left on a train ticket to Atherstone. But the garage was closed and in a pub nearby someone said that the business had moved down to Earlstone. I slept rough that night for the first time and nearly went mad with cold and discomfort. My mind was made up to kill myself if I ever had to sleep out again. By that time I had a beard and the years of experience and torment had altered my face. Would Griffin recognize me? Realizing I no longer cared what he might do to me, I walked the dangerous seven or eight miles along the Watling to Earlstone. The thought of seeing my mother again and of seeking a reconciliation of sorts helped me along as the lorries nearly blew me off the road.

I found the garage pretty easily but the boss was ready to chuck me out of the office until he suddenly remembered me. An honourable man, he would keep his promise, but at that time he had no need for a fitter. Taking pity on me, he gave me general duties to do, tidying and sweeping, mashing tea, sorting out the store room where I could sleep upstairs and keep one eye open for the intruders who had been breaking into properties in the backs. And so began the life I have led for the past twenty years. I never touched a drop of alcohol or a smoke in all that time. I made no friends, kept no company, bad or good, ate a minimum of food and lived on the few quid Mr Chappel and then his son allowed me, causing no trouble, keeping mainly out of sight and trying to forgive myself. I had phoned my mother a few days after my arrival but got only that long beep you get when a number is discontinued. The noise seemed to say ***keep your distance - let it be - it's all up.*** *With every passing year, the urge to trace her diminished and the conviction grew that it would be cruel to the both of us to tear open the scar tissue grown over that dreadful wound. She would now be getting on for seventy. I hope she found - or has found - the kind of peace of mind which slowly came to me. As I read more library books - a kind lady there guided my selections - and as I listened to music, seeds germinated which had lain dormant within me during those turbulent early years. Had the Taylors never told me what I was - or rather what I was not - which pathway in life might I have followed? I never blame them now. It was a great comfort for me to discover the work of Thomas Hardy, where so often the dreams and fortunes of well-meaning men and women are destroyed by a momentary lapse, a freak event or by mishap, misunderstanding or miscalculation.*

The terrific urge to put an end to my miserable existence fell away the more I found escape and enlightenment in books and music. In my own private world – in my own private way - I discovered God. I had been crippled by circumstance and events and yet my mind, like a bird, could soar above and beyond my ragged predicament.

I came out at night to the van not because I was hungry for food or for company; I had a hunger to be near Goodness, near the charity of kind people. The instant I saw you, Saskia, I saw what a good soul you were. You asked me after our first night of physical love what it was I saw and loved in you. I told you about your inner light. Truly, Saskia, you would not win a conventional beauty contest - all vanity and transience! Can you remember how the sun came out and lit up the frosty woods and fields that afternoon? It transformed the ordinary into the magical. So it is

with the light in you! The very light of God. Why does it illuminate some and not others? Why is there a Griffin - or more than one? - for every Saskia? Some say it is the fault or the error of the Creator. Really? We are blessed with eyes. The light is all around. Only we can choose to open our eyes to allow the light to flood in - or to keep it out.

So, Saskia, now you know my history. Saskia, dear Saskia, how could I anticipate the joy you have brought me? I have a new life and, by means of these few pages, I hereby cast off the old like a shrivelled skin and look forward to a future with a meaning and a purpose, a late blessing from God in whom I can now fully believe. He has brought you into my life and I am transformed. God bless us both!

I sat for an hour paralysed, staring at the screen, trying to reason with the dread and horror freezing me inside and out. What could I possibly say to that poor man on his return? Finally, his uneven footsteps were on the stairs and the door opened behind me. He told me how wonderful the clear air was, how good it was to be alive on such a special day. He laid his palm on my nape and I shuddered. He laughed and apologized for his hand being so cold. The laptop screen had gone dark and I watched his face alter as he saw how grim my reflection was. He asked me if my cold was worse. I shook my head and told him that I had read his story.
“Oh” he said. “It’s upset you. I’m sorry. I should never have written it and you should never have read it. Has it disturbed you very much?”
“It has.”
I got up and went into the toilet, shooting the bolt. Half-an-hour must have passed before he gave the door a gentle rap and asked me if I was alright. It was useless to pretend.
“Edwin. That woman in your story. What was her name?”
“Does it matter?”
“It does. Kindly tell me her name.”
“Celia. Celia Smith.”
The words were like icicles piercing my heart and innards. I could not help but moan.
“Why? What’s wrong? Do you know her?”
I was unable to speak and he rattled the door in a useless attempt to get in, saying my name, convinced I had passed out. There was no choice. I had to tell him, but not to his face. I could not bear to see his kind face disintegrate into shock and misery.
“Edwin. Celia was my mother too. You’re my brother. But worst of all, you may well be my father. I might have have lain with my own father and you might have had sex with your own daughter. I am only thirty-four. I lied.”
There followed a period of silence more terrible than shouting and screaming. In the end I dared to whisper his name as a question but there was no answer. Unable to bear the tense silence any longer I drew the bolt back in fear and anguish at what I might see. But he was not there. My feet somehow carried me from room to room though I knew the search was futile. In our bedroom his new clothes were scattered all around and the refuse sack had been taken from the cupboard and emptied of his foul rags. It lay on the carpet like a burst black balloon. He had gone*. There was wine in my cabinet. I sat at my laptop, brought that terrible file back up and began to write fast and furiously. I drank. As soon as the account was complete up to this *point, I sat on the sofa and poured glass after glass of wine into me. I must have passed out.

It was only on the twenty-eighth of the month that I came properly to my senses again. The sight

of his scattered new clothes filled me with a misery more intense than I have ever known. *This is not about a nightmare, it's true* - they were declaring.

It was two o' clock. I sat with my still aching head in my hands. *Isn't the love we feel more important than who we are?* The voice which said this was so wise and kind. I got to my feet and put my coat on against the rain which was steadily falling. I somehow got myself to the jitty by the old cinema. The baker stood glumly in his large window. A cat fled as I turned the corner and hurried down the path of the first of those neat houses. I crossed the old weedy, ugly concrete and turned left into the path leading to the old front door. I knocked.
"Edwin. Please. Come down and speak to me. It doesn't matter. I love you. We'll go for counselling. The vicar will talk us through it. He's kind. It isn't our fault. We'll work something out. Please come down!"
I hammered and hammered at the door. An arm reached out from behind and took my hand. I turned to see the kind mechanic looking at me in wonder. I began to cry and he led me into the garage, where I slipped and fell, covering myself with oil and filth. In the office, under the cold, glassy stare of a woman receptionist, he gave me tea to drink. Eddie had gone, he said. The room upstairs was empty. His tiny case was not there.
I recalled what he had said about walking along the Watling Street. I drove the next day north as far as the M6 and then south as far as Towcester. Back at the flat, I phoned Margaret to ask if he had been to the van. She could hear how upset I was. She was not very sympathetic. Had she not warned me about keeping my distance?
"Now you've gone and got yourself involved in something out of your depth, haven't you, you silly girl."
"Yes."
"You should have served food and drink and kept it at that."
"Yes."
"Now you're feeling sorry for yourself because he's gone."
"Yes. Yes."
"I just knew this would happen. Those men are loners. You can't expect to change them or rely on them. Well, I hope you've learnt your lesson. Will you be along tonight?"
"No. I'm going home."

*

Just off the Diepenring is the tiny church where I had said so many prayers and felt so much guilt in my young time. The pastor - that kind old man who, in the light of Aunt Jennifer's confessions, had tried to assuage my angry doubts about the goodness of God - had agreed to meet me. It took an hour - and much fortitude - to tell him the story, unvarnished and unexpurgated. By the time I had finished he was weeping. For some reason a line from the Lord's Prayer entered my head and a fury gripped me
"Father, the holiest prayer we can pray talks about our delivery from evil. But have I not been delivered *unto* evil - like a senseless package - when I was trying only to do good? Yes, I have done a sinful thing but unwittingly. How can you speak now of Free Will? God has played a joke on me - and on Edwin before me. What fate lies in store for the child I am carrying? Edwin's child! I shall abort him!"
The pastor closed his eyes and murmured a prayer. When he looked at me again a new light

seemed to have entered him. He smiled.
“You have not sinned, Saskia. Neither has the child you carry. He or she is just as innocent as you have been - and Edwin. God has His strange purposes. We are all born into a vale of tears and sin. No-one escapes the vale except through Him. Adam and Eve’s progeny must have lain together in incest to have issue themselves. And are we not, as their sons and daughters, all brothers and sisters? I shall pray for God to send you a sign so that you know what you should do. Have faith and go in peace.”
“And this is all you can tell me for comfort, father?”
He looked up at the cross and I got up and left him. Along from the church by the canal there is a café with a pretty terrace. I ordered an apple juice and surveyed the barges and boats bobbing at anchor and rippling in motion. I felt the monster within me stir for the first time. A hideous hunchback with an unsteady gait - a derelict -came by and asked me for the price of a coffee. I gave him ten Euros and his eyes widened. Off he lurched, heading, I knew, for a supermarket where he would be able to buy alcohol. He made my mind up and I caressed my stomach. I drained my glass and set off for that neat and tidy house on the far side of the Diepenring, kicking through the fallen lime blossom and litter on the quayside as I went.