

## THE INSTRUMENT

It had been a stodgy, not to say suffocating morning. The guest speaker at the conference spoke with a soporific, sing-song voice and I placed his accent somewhere close to our Second City, despite his best efforts to tone it down. It was mid-January and the radiators - and I sat near to one - were fully on in the hotel, a venerable Victorian pile in scarlet sandstone. The speaker also had a hypnotic mannerism, rocking forwards on the balls of his feet, and backwards on his heels, as he twittered on, belabouring us all with statistics (had the bearded man in the far corner fallen asleep?) Backwards and forwards swayed the fellow, droning on about targets, percentages and averages, occasionally rubbing his wobbly right breast as if he could massage it away. He evidently enjoyed his beer and grub too much. In spite of all my efforts I could not prevent myself imagining him in the buff and the image both disgusted and amused me. I noticed him looking at his watch with ever greater frequency, perhaps in apprehension, though probably more in anticipation of our lunch break. The somnolent hush in the high, elegantly decorated room was becoming a restless mix of shuffling papers, coughs and creaking and scraping chairs as patience wore thinner and hunger grew sharper. As a distraction, I had counted thirty-two of us. The young woman who had excused herself in a whisper an age ago had conspicuously failed to return.

The stapled copies of his OHTs, *to which* he had been speaking (God, how I loathe meeting jargon and syntax) were now being offered up to us and he was inviting questions. Would anyone dare ask the glaringly obvious one; why had we been forced to listen to him for a good hour when we could have read it all up in five minutes? But no-one did. He turned off the machine, whose whirring, I then realised, had also made me drowsy, and gave us one and all a smug, *aren't I the bees-knees?* grin. The painfully thin organiser, a drab woman of about fifty, leapt up and danced around with her hands clasped, thanking him more profusely than he evidently deserved. She made us aware of the lunch arrangements, unclasped her long hands and swivelled them left and right and down to indicate where the dining room was. But we only needed to follow our noses. I found our lecturer second in the queue with a groaning tray. The food smelt overcooked - as carveries do - and I decided to give it a miss.

The brisk chill was such a relief - intoxicating almost - after the hot air of the morning. A symphony of cries, almost like the shrieking of gulls, drew me into the open-air market where I purchased three bananas. I had not been into Leicester city centre for years, having preferred to shop at the large mall by the motorway. My feet took me into the warren of narrow streets between the market and the low, insignificant cathedral of St Martins. The shouts of the traders faded as I wandered, eating my fruit, further in, gazing abstractedly into windows, an eccentric mix of antique, art and book and curiosity shops; the pleasant cafes and bistros were doing a fairly brisk lunchtime trade. The shops and pavements however were almost deserted. It was bone-bitingly cold and it was Monday, when the urge to shop, like a hormone, is low. I spotted Walton's and purchased some sheet music - *The Enigma Variations* - which I had been challenging myself to learn properly for years. By my watch I had nearly another forty minutes to kill. I found myself staring at my reflection in the tiny, old shop which had sold stamps and other collectables for as long as I could remember; it had always been dark and uninviting, as if it absolutely forbade everyone the right to enter. I realised with a feeling of great gloom how tired and depressed I looked; but as I stared harder into the window and tried to restore my fair looks with a faint smile, there entered into the frame of my blonde hair, as into a photo board with holes at the sea-side, the hideously grinning red face of a man. He waved and proceeded to take something out of the display. I must have looked like a horrified imbecile to him. With a polite nod I turned and hurried away, turning right into a narrower street of which I had no

recollection of entering before. I sauntered left and right and tried to get my bearings. I still had a good while before the conference recommenced and I felt no concern to be quite lost. I turned another corner and at the far end of the lane saw a junk shop. Intrigued, I approached. On the pavement in front was a large stuffed pig. A moth-eaten monkey sat astride it. I could not help but laugh out loud. A white tin bath hung from a nail by the door. In the window were all kinds of chocolate brown and midnight blue enameled signs from years ago, advertising items like corn flour and chocolate. I wandered in. The air smelt predictably musty, as if all those objects had captured and retained the ancient smells of yesteryear, releasing them slowly to please and tantalise the nostrils of the modern browser. I am no collector of bibelots and antiques, much preferring the uncluttered spaciousness which is fashionable at present; but I felt myself somehow enticed further in, into the gloom at the back. There were perambulators, ornate frames with and without pictures, stacked chairs, vases, old radios and television sets, vacuum cleaners with sack bags like the one I could remember my grandmother using, and scores of other items which surely no-one would want to buy. There was no sign of a proprietor. I had taken a fancy to one thing - a wooden toucan advertising Guinness - a novelty gift for my son to put in his new flat. He was a Guinness drinker. Clutching the object I carried on, feeling like an explorer, going further back in time with every step. The door I had anticipated at the very back failed to materialise. I was about to turn when, in the corner, under stacks of old editions of *The Illustrated London News*, a very old piano - a rectangular box on spindly legs - attracted my attention. I strained to adjust my eyes to the darkness and read in yellow gothic lettering the word *Breitner* above the keyboard. I reached out and touched a white key. To my delight it chimed back, though not in tune.

“Can I help you, Madam?”

I was so shocked that I dropped the toucan on the floor as I turned to see a large shape behind me, with its back to the light. I stuttered an apology as the figure came alongside me and turned into a middle-aged man who had a striking resemblance to the keeper of the stamp shop and could well have been his brother. Or even the same man using a secret passageway between the two shops. He bent down to pick up the object I had dropped.

“There, there, Archie,” he said pleasantly as he stroked its great orange beak. “No harm done. The nice lady didn’t mean to drop you.”

He gave it me back and asked me very politely what I was prepared to offer him for it. This took me aback rather and he grinned, revealing a set of yellowed teeth which reminded me of the keyboard I had just touched. The truth was I had already dismissed the notion of buying the bird - a foolish impulse buy if there ever was one. But I felt embarrassed to have it in my possession and I hesitated to disappoint him.

“It’s quite alright,” he said. “Nothing is priced here. I enjoy bargaining. I’ve never knowingly given away a Van Gogh by mistake. Shall we say twenty pounds?”

I found my voice and self-assurance. I offered him ten. We agreed on sixteen.

“What can you tell me about the piano?” I asked as casually as I could. He looked. He removed all the magazines and a piece of sacking and shifted a large cardboard box full of old toys away. It stood now unencumbered in the quarter light. It was a very handsome piece of work in cherry wood (so he said) and hinged at the top. One of the legs had obviously been broken half-way down and the splint repair was a pretty horrible bodge.

“If it wasn’t so badly damaged I’d want a thousand,” he said, rubbing his hand across the smooth wood and removing a load of dust. “It will polish up lovely - and if you stand it in a corner no-one will notice the broken back leg. A proper furniture restorer could make it worth a lot more.”

I wondered why he had not had it repaired himself but did not ask him.

“Of course - as you just discovered - it still plays - well most of the notes.” And to prove his point he drew his finger along the keyboard.

“Where did it come from?” I asked.

“From a house clearance I think, somewhere in Oadby.”

“No. I meant which country. Germany?”

He nodded and asked me if I was a musician.

“I’m an amateur. My ex-husband let me keep the baby grand when we split the house. I don’t know why I’m telling you that.....but I’ll give you two hundred for it.”

I had quickly worked out that it must be a late eighteenth century model by the look of it, though I had never heard of the manufacturer. He sucked in air through his gappy teeth, as if relishing the bidding battle. He started at seven hundred and I flinched. Once I started to walk off. In the end we settled on three hundred and seventy. Where I would put it, I had no idea but I felt utterly thrilled to be its new owner. I am not a materialist and hate to think of all the clutter people have stuffed in their drawers and cupboards. But this was a very special acquisition for me. The shopkeeper would not accept plastic but settled for a cheque. He noted my address. Delivery would cost twenty (I haggled him down from thirty) and I would have to pay the driver. I looked at my watch. I was already late and had to bid him a hasty farewell. I found the market after a series of wrong turnings and made it back to the hotel, slipping in at the back as unobtrusively as I could. For the first five minutes I managed to concentrate but the rest of the afternoon was taken up with thoughts of my precious instrument.

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I lied to my boss about how useful the conference had been. He could tick one of his boxes regarding staff-training and so could I. The case-conference the next afternoon with police and other agencies regarding a seven year old boy from Bragwell was fairly open-and-shut and we soon decided that he should be taken away from his alcoholic mother and her abusive partner into care. I decided to take my files home rather than hang around in my office. When I pulled up outside my house in Earlstone I was followed by a white van. Another red-faced man, with a cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, emerged from the cab and jabbed his thumb at the back.

“Piano for a Mrs Rigby?”

Eagerly I nodded and he opened up. It was swathed in a sheet. He untied it, and he and his young mate carried it carefully into my lounge, where I had already made a space for it in the corner.

I stroked its poorly leg and my cat made a thorough tour of inspection. I fetched a cloth and some beeswax and polished the case until it shone. I had the absurd thought that it was beaming with pleasure to have been delivered from its dungeon.

I typed up my reports from my notes, ate my dinner and carried my piano stool through into the lounge from the dining room, home of my baby grand. I sat down and went along all the keys, noting which ones were silent and which hopelessly out of tune. Remarkably it was in pretty good condition and I reasoned that it must have been well looked after by its previous modern owners, whoever they were. How many had had the pleasure of sitting down to it to play? How many children had sat down resenting it, its unwilling prisoners on a sunny day, breathed over by an impatient music teacher? I tried to imagine the delight of its first owner, undoubtedly a young gentlewoman. I searched through the music in my piano stool and found an early Haydn minuet. I played. It sounded tuneful and the instrument seemed to enjoy it. It was a popular piece and must have been played on it countless times, I mused. I imagined slenderer fingers than mine caressing the keys and thought of all the ears which had listened to it enraptured. Now here it sat in 2007, two hundred years later, in a place not even imagined back in those days. All these thoughts and many more along those lines intrigued me. How could I find out about its provenance?

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I was woken by a noise. What had it been? The wind? I listened intently. In the nearby ash tree the resident tawny owl hooted. Reassured, I tried to settle back to sleep but could only think of the piano. Then I heard the noise again. The piano was playing. Or rather discordant notes were sounding. I sat bolt upright, a chill spreading down my neck and to the very bottom of my spine. I had not imagined it. The discords sounded again. And again.

I crept downstairs into the dark, cold hall. I put on the light. Again it sounded, but there was no rhyme or reason to it, as if a child, as I had used to do at my grandmother's, was plonking away at random. I summoned up every mote of courage. I used to go to church but do not believe in ghosts, nonsense about spirits trapped in this nether world. What would I see when I opened the door? I put on the light and Breville jumped down from the instrument, meowing in delight to see me. I laughed and scooped him up in my arms and took him to bed.

One of the notes - a D - would not play at all, and the next evening I decided to open up the case at the back to see why. The strangest acrid smell came into my nostrils as I did so, making me sneeze, cough and splutter for ages. Was I allergic to a piano? I left the lid open to dissipate that pungent odour and then ventured to look in again. I pressed down the key and saw that the hammer did not quite meet the string. I fetched a knife and tried to push it along a little, but like a fool I dropped the knife inside. It lay in the bottom. In the garage there was still a bow and arrow quiver from when Richard was a youngster, I remembered. The arrows had a rubber stopper on the end. Would the suction be strong enough to pick up the haft of the knife? I found one and wetted it and pushed it down through the gap at the back. It reached. I managed to pull up the knife just a couple of inches before it dropped off. I fetched a torch to see if there was any way to remove any part of the mechanism so that I could get my slender hand in to pick it up. I shone the torch inside and, to my utter astonishment, saw a snippet of elegant handwriting at the bottom. There was a yellowed piece of paper lying underneath the knife. I felt my heart thump. I pushed the knife out of harm's way to one side and tried to secure the paper, but no matter how often I tried, it would not pick it up. Perhaps the surface was too dusty. In the end I went to bed, awaiting inspiration.

I could not drop off to sleep, unable to close my eyes without seeing that script. Was it just a bill of sale? Perhaps it was a letter - maybe even a love letter - quickly hidden in the case and then forgotten about? What might I find out about the owner - perhaps the original owner?

I woke at about three coughing and with my throat burning. I found that I could hardly swallow. I got up and drank a glass of water, slowly and painfully. I felt light-headed. When I saw myself in the mirror I nearly dropped the glass in the sink. Was that person me? My admired grey eyes were reddened and swollen as if I had been weeping for hours; my mouth was blubbery and my cheeks puffed up. What on earth had I caught? I dosed myself up and struggled back to bed.

When I closed my eyes again I immediately saw the piano, hurtling almost into my dark consciousness. The broken leg, I noticed, was now intact. It no longer stood on my functional beige carpet but on a red, gold and cream Turkey rug by French windows, bathed in a shaft of light, in which floated motes of dust. The hinged top was open. I looked around in my feverish reverie and in the corner to the right of the piano a tall dark figure looking down on me as I sat on the stool. This shocked me fully awake and I returned to my bedroom where the moon, gazing through my curtains, was casting a tall oblong of light next to my dark wardrobe. It had been the shadow I had seen in my half-conscious state. Drowsily I remembered the strange smell and of how violently I had sneezed. Had I caught an ancient virus from an antique? The thought would have amused me had I not felt so dreadful. Proper sleep eluded me and obsessive images and words connected to the piano which made no sense ran, as so often happens when

one is ill, over and over through my head. At six I was fully conscious again, trying to make sense of it all but in vain. I finally gave up the effort of trying to drop off to sleep properly and went downstairs to make some tea. While the kettle boiled I rang my office to leave a message for my boss on the ansaphone. I was so hoarse I could barely speak and I did not sound like me at all. What would he think when he heard the croaky apology I had left? At least he would know that I was not skiving. I glanced into the living room. I shivered. The heating would not come until seven. I stood looking in admiration at the dark shape of my new possession then turned on the light. I shivered again, spooked this time, because the lid was still open. Surely I had closed it? I approached the case and, taking a deep breath, turned on the torch and looked in. The letter – if that is what it was – was looking back at me. I tried again with the rubber tip of the arrow but to no avail. My eyes began to stream. Perhaps there was some substance, some lubricant, some preservative chemical in the contraption which did not agree with me. I sneezed and went back to bed.

When I re-awoke I felt even worse. I coughed and coughed and could hardly breathe. Summoning all my strength I got out of bed and opened the window. The air was frosty and refreshing; I saw a large envelope of white on the corner of my lawn where the struggling sun had yet to make his mark. My alarm clock read twenty to eleven. I collapsed back on my bed and watched the room slowly rotate, an experience I had not had since I had gotten drunk for the first and the last time in my teenage. What on earth could be wrong with me? I closed my eyes and again saw the piano. The lid was open. I peered in half dreamily. The letters on the paper were bolder, glowing almost. I read the name Mrs Cole underlined with a flourish. I reopened my eyes but the image refused to fade away. I reached out and switched on my CD player. Brahms third symphony began to play. I forwarded to the soporific third movement and began to drift again into oblivion.

I woke again. I lay quite still in fearful anticipation of the full return of my symptoms. To my surprise and immense relief I realised that I felt perfectly well. My ears were no longer singing with my rapid blood, and the dizzy feverishness had evaporated. My throat was dry but no longer sore. My nose was clear. It was lunchtime and I was very hungry. As I was cutting up a baguette the name Mrs Cole sounded in my head. Immediately I recalled my dream. How odd. Why I would think of a Mrs Cole, I had no clue. I knew absolutely no-one – that is apart from the actor George Cole – of that name. There was no-one at work and no-one on our books called Cole. I examined my face again in the kitchen mirror. It was still rather puffy around the eyes and in the cheeks but I resembled me again, although my nose looked as if it did not quite belong to my face. At forty-three I had no longer great cause for vanity but I prided myself on my appearance and, if the right man crossed my path once I had completely gotten Mark out of my system I might be interested. I felt no urge as yet to advertise that I was a slim, attractive blonde WTM a caring gentleman with a GSOH for a genuine friendship, possibly more. It had been a bruising experience to discover that my husband of twenty-one years was having yet another affair – this time with his new secretary – and I had decided to file for divorce with no second thoughts this time. I was in no special rush to expose my emotions again, hardly a year later, to the uncertainties of a man's affections. The telephone rang.

“Emily? It's Paul. You sounded dreadful. How are you now?”

“A little better. I should be fine to come in tomorrow.”

“You sound so different, like a bass!”

“I thought I was dying in the night. Thanks for phoning. I'll be in tomorrow.”

I wandered into the lounge. I dropped my baguette. The lid which I had closed at six was open again. Surely I had closed it! Or had my illness confused my recollection? Had I walked in my sleep, opened the lid and stared at the letter? I slowly shook my head. I looked down at the discarded arrow and instantly thought of glue. I found some under the stairs and smeared a drop

on the rubber tip. I lowered it in and made contact with the edge of the yellow paper. It moved. Dust fell away. Carefully I raised it. As it approached the narrow gap between the wooden case and the iron frame of the strings my thumb and forefinger met it and slowly drew it out. I blew away the remaining dust and read to my utter bewilderment the name Mrs Cole in black ink, underlined with a flourish. Like a hot object I dropped it. It fluttered down and rested on its edges. It was folded twice, above and below the name. I watched my hand reach down to pick it up. On each end of the paper there remained half of a broken wax seal, once red I supposed, now a dark brown colour like dried blood.

Had the message inside been preserved from dust and time? My trembling hand turned the page over and in a bold hand I read

Hollycroft

12th March 1808

My dearest Emilia,

I can contain my feelings no longer! Two nights ago as you played and sang for our company I thought I must burst out in a great passion. You must sense how I adore and admire you! Let this letter be a confirmation of my love! Dare I flatter myself, by the tokens of your frequent return of my regard and by the friendly attention you pay me in conversation, that you are not entirely indifferent to me? I know that you cannot possibly love old Mr Cole in any sense other than spiritual. Might I dare hope that your youthful spirit will give me some encouragement? One word from you now will either silence me and cast me down for ever or make me the most happy man in the world. Dearest, loveliest Emilia, I implore your encouragement and an appointment to meet you at a time and place where we might be alone. My physician has told me that I cannot expect to live beyond my thirtieth year. May that knowledge, which I now share with you alone, explain the boldness and urgency of my address to you. Furthermore I have this very day become acquainted with the circumstances in which you agreed to marry Cole and I am appalled. I wish only to free you now from the onerous obligation which your admirable though misguided duty to your father and family have consigned you. I am a man of not inconsiderable means. I can guarantee you a life of leisure and independence in some faraway place where we are not known and - for as long as God grants me breath - the blessing of my ardent love.

in loving friendship,

Clive Duncan

I felt breathless with excitement. A declaration of love and a barely disguised invitation to have sex! To a married woman! And a plea to run away with him! But the cynic in me immediately construed the revelation of his terminal illness as a ploy to win the young woman's affections; perhaps Mr Duncan had enticed many a wife and many a virgin to surrender their virtue to him by such deception. I reflected. Perhaps my experience of my own silver-tongued husband who had wooed me away from my fiancé all those years ago and, no doubt, countless women from their partners since then, made me jump to such an unjust conclusion now.

What an amazing find! I sat on the sofa and gave full range to my thoughts. How had Emilia reacted to receive the letter? I saw her reading it, her blush deepening, her heart beating more rapidly with every word. She must have been flattered, but had she ultimately been offended? Had she responded with a curt, furious note? Or had she returned Duncan's affections, reasoning that a short, passionate liaison with a dying man whom she found attractive, would

have no evil consequence if it went undiscovered? If Mr Cole was as decrepit as Duncan implied then she must surely have been tempted to find out what she was missing. My heart was pounding. Oh my God, I realised that I identified myself with her! I could not help but imagine the days and the scenes that might have followed. But here was a secret, a riddle from history with no solution. I read the letter again and again before putting it into a drawer. I closed the piano lid. "Down," I said out loud. "Closed."

That night I hardly slept again. I lay thinking about Emilia and Clive and how I might find out more about them. Hollycroft would be a starting point. There was a park and a road of that name in Earlstone. It was perfectly possible that both had lived and died here in my home town. The piano might only have travelled thirteen miles to Leicester in its long existence. Had there ever stood an old house on Hollycroft Rise? I thought of the large hotel at the bottom - the venue for our wedding reception - which had been demolished a few years ago to make way for a scatter of mock Tudor executive dwellings. Part of that building was very old - Victorian or Georgian, or even earlier. It was surely a good candidate. I knew that there was a local historical society. A gentleman whose name eluded me was often in The Earlstone Gazette writing about the olden days. If the pair had been born, married and died here in Earlstone, then church records would turn them up. I felt excited. As I was dozing off to sleep the thought leapt into my head: what was the letter doing in the back of a piano, of all places?

Why had she kept the letter? The question awoke me in the middle of the night. Why had she not torn it immediately into pieces and thrown it onto the fire? By keeping it, even if she had no intention of replying or acting upon it, its chance discovery by a servant or her husband would arouse intense suspicion and, of course, lead to the possible ruin of her desperate suitor, whose reputation she might wish to protect. Why conceal it, of all places, in her instrument? The answer came to me immediately. Why, of course! She must have been reading it there, and, unexpectedly interrupted, losing all composure, had stuffed it in the back. How had she felt later when, attempting its retrieval, she had been unable to reach it? Or maybe she had deliberately let it fall down there. Had she replied to it? Had he written again? I sat up straight in bed almost jolted into action by an electric shock. What if other correspondence was lying in the bottom concealed by the first letter?

As I descended the stairs, the piano sounded and I froze. The blessed cat again! I thought I had shut him out! I swore that he could dematerialise and travel vaporously under doors, so often had he turned up unexpectedly in closed rooms. He was plonking out a "tune" again which was no worse than the atonal noise on Radio Three. I turned on the hall light and froze again. Behind the glazed kitchen door was a black shape. It stretched. It was Breville. The random notes immediately stopped and then broke into the Haydn minuet I had played. Had I stopped breathing? In the hall mirror I caught sight of my altered face and screamed. The piano stopped. I stood paralysed. The skin on my scalp, my back and my limbs was crawling and tingling with terror. I waited for the music to begin again but it did not. Finally I managed to move. I pushed open the lounge door. It swung all the way to the wall. I switched on the light.

"Who's there?" I whispered hoarsely. You know, whispered back that same low voice inside my head. The lid was raised. Strangely my fear evaporated. Like an automaton I sat down and played the minuet without the music, more skilfully than I had ever done, and all the notes sounded perfectly. I went through my repertoire until my fingers began to play an air I did not recognise and in my new alto voice I sang with intense feeling

When you are sleeping I'll cry out your name,  
As the wind sighs at night in the trees.  
In your darkest of dreams I will glow like a flame,

The maid you abandoned, Louise.

When you are waking the face you shall see  
Will be mine singing desperate pleas.  
As you breathe your last breath your nurse will be me  
May you whisper, I loved you Louise.

Had this been the very song which had almost made Duncan burst out in a great passion? I realised that tears were streaming down my cheeks and I knew at once that Emilia must have loved him. I stood and shone the torch into the piano. I saw, as I knew I would see, a folded sheet, looking so fresh it might have been put there yesterday, lying in the bottom. I drew it out with the sticky arrow and took it off to bed.

I had to phone Paul Bevin in the morning to apologise again. I had had so little sleep I could not possibly come into work.

“Emily,” he said “You just don’t sound yourself at all. Take the rest of the week. The case conference has been cancelled anyway. I’ll email you those notes to type up for Pevenseys’ court report if you’re up to it. You must have a bug. Have you been to the doctor’s?”

“No.” I croaked. How can I tell my GP that I’ve been possessed? I thanked him for his understanding and went back to bed. I picked up the letter which had kept me awake all night in a turmoil of confusion and read it through again for a missing clue.

The Vicarage

15th March 1808

Mr Duncan,

I was astonished to receive your letter and quite at a loss to understand why you should think I have encouraged such a brazen petition. If you have interpreted my regard and friendship for you as anything more than the warmth I would show to any guest at our dinner table then I must in all earnest and without further ado correct your misapprehension. I was more than shocked to read such an impertinent appraisal of my feelings for Mr Cole. It is of course obvious that there is a considerable disparity in our ages, and indeed temper, but you are entirely mistaken if you assume that we are anything other than the most devoted companions and that we enjoy anything less than the utmost felicity in our marriage. Were you not the business partner of my brother-in-law I would feel constrained to show your letter to my husband, thus closing our doors to you for ever. I was of course most distressed to read of the state of your health, which no-one could possibly devine from an examination of your robust person. I am disposed to excuse your intemperate addresses to me as the result of some mental anguish caused by such distressing intelligence. Are you entirely sure that your diagnosis is correct? I urge you to seek a second opinion! Mr Duncan, I beg of you, when you

And there, suddenly, inexplicably, it ended in mid-sentence. Evidently she must have been disturbed in the very act of writing. I closed my eyes and stared into my inner darkness. I held the paper to my breast. Then I imagined the scene in its full vividness.

There are voices outside the room; slender hands are opening the cabinet; they thrust the papers in and close the lid; the doors open and a kindly, ruddy, portly gentleman enters and smiles benignly at me.

Had she hidden the letters from her husband? Yes, of course, she must have done! But why had she never retrieved them? Had she, like me in the first place, found no way of retrieving them, because they had fallen all the way in? Had she given up trying and written Duncan another letter, perhaps a more encouraging one? Did the disappearance of the first rebuff into the bottom of the piano strike her as an omen that Fate intended her to follow her inclination and not adhere to her vows? Had they finally become lovers?

I read her letter again for clues. On the face of it there would have been no reason for Clive Duncan to be encouraged. Yet the confidence with which he had addressed her suggested to me that she must have given him, perhaps inadvertently, cause to believe his feelings would be reciprocated. He was evidently a professional man whose reputation would be his fortune. Would he risk it all on such a venture - with the wife of the vicar! - if he was in any doubt about his chances of success or had a doubt about her discretion, should he fail? I looked and looked. The date struck me. Why had she waited three days before putting pen to paper? Had she wavered, suffered, struggled with her feelings and her conscience before obeying, in all propriety, the latter? But had she obeyed? Surely a curt reply, or no reply would have been the most effective slap in the face. Why had she felt it necessary to explain herself or justify herself to him at such length? Was she leaving open, consciously or unconsciously, the faint possibility that a renewed address might weaken her defences? What was she going to "beg" of him? The letter was a decided rejection - but not exactly a cold one. Its whole tone hinted, I convinced myself, at a passionate turmoil in her breast which she might try to, but could not entirely disguise.

I slept again and dreamt of Emilia. She was weeping. Her reddened face resembled mine of the previous night. When I woke with a start, her image, like the name on the envelope I had dreamt off - her name - refused to fade.

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On my way into town I walked past an ex-client, a drug addict whose life I had been instrumental in straightening out. I smiled and whispered a greeting as we crossed but she looked straight through me and carried on. I reflected ruefully on the ingratitude of people and then came to a complete halt. I looked at myself long in a shop window. I was not me. "Emilia," I said under my breath "I want you to leave me alone." She said nothing. Leave me alone? Was I mad? I was intending to put an advertisement in the local paper to sell the piano but instead of heading into Castle Street, where the newspaper offices were, I found myself walking along the alleyway which led to the ancient church of Saint Martin's. Here I had worshipped until a few years ago. When the kindly old vicar had been replaced by a breezy young man whom I could not abide I had lapsed. One of the great studded doors was open. The aroma of coffee drew me inside. Margaret Miles was, as ever, on duty at the tea bar cum religious bookstand. I bought a mug of coffee and a cake and waited for her to remember me. In the end, as she gave me my change, I could bear it no longer, said hello to her by name and asked her how she was. She studied me and furrowed her brow.

"I'm Emily Rigby."

"Emily?"

"It's been a few years, Marge."

"Emily! My goodness me! I didn't...I..." *didn't know you from Eve.*

We chatted rather uneasily and brought each other up to date on our news. Stanley, her husband had passed on; she was very sorry to hear of my marital tribulations. I told her that Mark and I had, in that phrase much overused by middle-aged divorcees, drifted apart. I sat down rather disconsolately as Margaret turned to serve someone else. I reflected on what I had said. What I

had told Margaret was not strictly true. In fact Mark had remained as he was, I had changed. Something about the ancient church moved me, and I felt tears welling in my eyes, contemplating again all those empty, wasted years throughout which I had persuaded myself that one day he would change for the better as he grew older. I had prayed for him. I knew that he was basically unhappy in spite of his fabled beery bonhomie. We had become a married couple in name only. He took little interest in my growing passion, music, and none in my vocation to alleviate the misery of the most unfortunate of our fellow creatures. The ever more pressurised world of commerce with its senseless targets and drive for extra profitability (for whose benefit, for goodness sake??) in which he thrived, I found intensely depressing. His friends were in the main insincere and superficial and, I convinced myself, beneath him; until one morning, after a very enervating party at Jim and Lindsey's I woke and realised he was, or had become, just like the rest of them without me really noticing. When our son Richard left home after our daughter Grace had gone to university, the one link we had to each other, the last lynchpin of our marriage, was broken. Mark's last affair with that empty-headed girl from his office was the catalyst which hastened the process of dissolution to its inevitable conclusion. I was left with a sense of futility and an unrequited desire for fulfilment - not in a physical sense (at least, not primarily) - but emotionally. I had begun to conclude that Earlstone and its drab matter-of-factness was unlikely to throw in my way the intense, all-or-nothing love I yearned for, compared to which a "genuine friendship, possibly more.." seemed so anodyne, so uncertain and so inconsequential.

One furious row at the end of our marriage still troubled me greatly. A few days after the aforementioned party, Mark had come home to tell me that our hosts had invited us to come along to their Devon cottage for the weekend. I was still feeling rather low and now the prospect of sitting for an age at their dinner table buckling with wine bottles, as I made the effort to show my appreciation of the uproarious, stupid banter around me, filled me with dread. I told Mark that I did not particularly like Jim and cared even less for Lyndsey, and would rather not go. But he had already agreed, he shouted. *Agreed without consulting me - as usual*, I shouted back even louder. He demanded that I explain why I did not like his friends. Here was my opportunity. I was a torrent waiting to burst from its dam. After I had finished he said that it was time for me to be told a few home truths. Why, he asked, did I not have a good word to say about anybody? Why did I only see the faults in people? He would tell me! It was all to do with my bloody job - that was why! Years of rubbing shoulders with and breathing the same air as those useless, degenerate, foul people at the bottom of the slag heap had turned me into a misanthrope! I saw nothing but the worst in people's motives, my view of human nature had been tainted by the scum I dealt with day in, day out. I reminded him, he continued, of a fellow called Geoff at the golf club, a former CID man. He had exactly the same low, queer view of folk as I had!

I bridled. He was a bigger fool than I ever thought, I retorted, if he was taken in by the phoney, backslapping camaraderie of his friends, or rather his cronies. Could he not see the cold eyes and thin smile belying the attentive, friendly words which Lyndsey mouthed? The smile which evaporated immediately she deemed herself unobserved? At this point Mark had stomped out. I saw again, with disgust, what a shallow pride that horrid woman took in her extended breasts. For this class of Briton the bigger, the better; house, offroader, mortgage, bosom. I had caught Mark more than once stealing a more than sly glance at it at the party and she had noticed too, and noticed me noticing, I was sure. Occasionally they had beamed at each other. My modest chest could not and had no wish to compete with the false attributes of such a vulgar person. I felt revulsion at her values - or lack of them - and revulsion of Mark's ill-disguised admiration of her.

I thought at this point we were done, but no. Now he came running down the stairs. His patience with me had completely snapped.

“Friends! What friends have you got?” he had yelled. This silenced me and he left the field in triumph. It was true. I did not have one true friend. Mark was my husband but not my friend. We had barely spoken for days afterwards and we did not go to Devon. It was on that Saturday night, as we lay rigid side by side in bed, after a half-hearted, fumbling attempt at reconciliation had failed, that he had told me about his fling with that stupid, conceited girl.

I cast my eyes around the church and nibbled at my cake. Once I caught Margaret staring at me rather oddly, breaking into a flustered smile as soon as she realised I had her in my own gaze. I stood up and wandered around, sitting down finally on the end of the pew where I had used to perch. Why had none of my fervent prayers been answered? There was only a silence as I waited for a reply. With a despondent sigh I looked across to my right to the doughty wall. I saw a long marble plaque which was, I was sure, a recent addition. It listed all the incumbents of the church since 1192; some had had only a fleeting hold on the pulpit, others had preached for nearly fifty years. My eyes descended and fixed on the name Josiah Cole 1783 - 1808. My heart, as if it had been slumbering, awoke with a bump and raced. 1808? Had he simply retired in that crucial year or died in office? Without wishing to, and upon reflection later I felt rather ashamed, I jumped straight to the conclusion that Emilia had poisoned Mr Cole to free herself for Duncan. No! - I heard, almost as a sob. Had he retired or died then in 1808? There came no answer. I rose. I screwed up something in my pocket - a piece of paper - without really thinking. It turned out to be the advert I had written out to sell the piano.

It was a glorious January morning. The sky was blue and clear. It was almost warm. Had it been July I would have been sweltering. I prowled around the graveyard, examining the stones. If this had been a Gloucestershire church, the soft sandstone of the graves would have rendered their residents, of only the slightest fame, utterly nameless and eternally untraceable. These here were beneath hard black slate and their sharply chiselled summaries emphasised in all solemnity for me the permanence of their deaths. My feet led me further along the crumbling path. Around me there were no flowers adorning these final resting places; for none here were loved, remembered or missed by anybody. I stopped and stared. I read

Josiah Oliver Cole

born 17th April 1755

and departed this life 2nd March 1809

venerable vicar of this parish

and his beloved wife

Emilia Cole

8th February 1782 - 7th February 1810

Emilia had outlived him by eleven months and had missed her twenty-eighth birthday by one day! I looked around and, in a farther corner, pushed backwards by the persistent winds, was the gravestone of Clive Edward Duncan, born 1777 and died February 4th 1810. I felt something akin to grief seize and overwhelm me. She had survived Duncan by a mere three days. Had she taken her own life? Did they bury suicides in consecrated ground back in 1810? I

imagined her sitting in quietude at her piano with - I calculated - five months of mourning to endure before she could throw off her widow's weeds and herself into the arms of Duncan, if that was indeed her inclination. I conjured up the utter despair she had felt when her intended, her sweetheart had laid down to his fatal illness. Was it really possible to die from a broken heart? I was impatient to know the truth which only she possessed. Would she tell me in my dreams?

As I walked back through the town, my head full of dates and theories, I heard a familiar voice ranting at a traffic warden in the car park adjacent.

"Seventy pence to park for an hour in this armpit of a town! I hadn't got any change. Look, let me pay you now! A fiver - give the rest to charity!"

The reply of the warden, who was scribbling out a ticket, was inaudible. A few shoppers were stopping to enjoy a free piece of street theatre.

"You tell me what any normal person could do for a whole hour here, apart from get pissed up! I only needed to pop to the cash point, for Christ's sake!"

People were laughing. I hurried on in case Mark saw me.

Many days passed. I waited for other signs and clues but none would come. I returned to work and was met everywhere with the same puzzled look Margaret had given me. Colleagues and clients I spoke to on the phone invariably told me that they had not recognised my voice. I remained calm. I knew I was not insane. If I was indeed somehow touched by Emilia's spirit I felt no fear; I sensed in her absolutely no malevolent purpose. I felt ashamed of the uncharitable conclusions I had jumped to and heard Mark's voice berating me over and over again for my lack of generosity towards my fellow man. I sensed that Emilia wanted to make use of me but had no idea in what manner and to what end. I felt great joy when I played her piano and sang. My sleep was untroubled; I slept more soundly than I had for years. One evening I realised, as I played from Bach's Well-Tempered Klavier that I had not thought of Mark the whole day.

As the first signs of spring beckoned me out in late February my spirits lifted even further and I began to take walks along the canal in my lunch break and to keep a diary of all the subtle changes in hedgerows, banks and the swelling, rising daffodils. In my canalside solitude I asked Emilia to tell me what she wanted with me; to tell me her story and then to rest. As with my prayers, my gentle enquiries went unanswered. But I was no longer impatient and, to my relief, I realised I was regaining what I had not enjoyed for years, possibly never had had. My peace of mind.

Since our divorce I had not written one poem - my pointless obsession as Mark had termed it. On one particularly lovely early spring day I was moved to write a sonnet. I sent it to the editor of The Gazette with the humble suggestion that he might send out a photographer to my favourite spot (where the first line had sprung into my head) on the edge of a wood just past The Lime Kilns, the red-bricked watering hole on the Watling Street, with its long lawn, so well-loved by the narrowboat fraternity on a warm summer evening. The following Thursday, to my delight and astonishment, the editor printed my poem with the beautiful scene which had inspired me.

#### THE CANAL SPINNEY

As bright as hope are new-found leaves  
As fresh as love in youth's perfection;  
From February's dereliction  
What tapestries the Master weaves!  
What leaps from winter's prison bars!  
In dungeon woods on empty ground

Are blue and silver swirls unwound,  
Vast galaxies of tiny stars!  
I see the generous sunlight beamed  
To bathe the breaking clusters gold.  
Beneath the dismal litter mould  
Stirs every root which God has schemed.

Quick chaffinches and blue-tits sing  
And greet the safe return of spring.

I leafed absent-mindedly through the rest of the newspaper and turned over the page to read my favourite feature edited by that man I had mentioned, a leading light in Earlstone's historical society. His name - of course - was Joshua Perry.

Imagine my amazement when I saw an old photograph of Hollycroft House.

It appeared beside a picture of the much extended Hollycroft Hotel – which had been demolished in 2003 or 4 - and fitted perfectly the central part of it, which formed the main entrance and reception. Avidly I read the article, which was entitled **The Manor House Which Earlstone Forgot.**

Why was this building not listed in spite of the efforts of many of us to preserve it, in a town renowned for its drabness? If some of our derelict factories can achieve listed status it is exasperating that Hollycroft was overlooked. A more cynical mind than mine might suggest that certain people pulled certain strings in view of the millions and millions of pounds at stake in the redevelopment of the site - now known of course as Hollycroft Meadows, a new entry in the directory of all those phoney names for the mock-ancient, standoffish enclaves of aspiring, executive class England.

Hollycroft was erected in 1778 by one Abraham Barnes who became rich on the hard work of the frame-knitters and weavers in their Earlstone cottages. Much in debt and subsequently ruined by the arrival of new technology in the shape of the spinning jenny, Barnes was forced to sell Hollycroft in the second half of the century to one of the new manufacturers, Peter Floode, who proceeded to evict the cottagers and demolish their rented abodes to build premises to house the much despised new machinery. We know that Floode, having greatly prospered, and with a large family, had outgrown Hollycroft by the turn of the century. By building a grand residence on the higher land to the north of the town he began the development of what would eventually be known as Sowerbutts Lane, now of course the most exclusive part of Earlstone and home to all our grand old manufacturing families.

But to whom did Peter Floode sell? The next reference to Hollycroft appears in 1835 when it was acquired by Elizabeth Warren who extended and opened it as an exclusive boarding school for girls. The photograph shows the assembled school on the occasion of Queen Victoria's silver jubilee in 1888. It became a hotel in 1927 having fallen into disrepair and, of course, as everyone knows The Beatles spent a night there in 1964 having performed at the DeMontfort Hall in our county town. If any readers can help to fill in the gaps in Hollycroft's history between 1795 and 1835 I would be most grateful.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joshua Perry turned out not to be at all as I had imagined him. Is it not strange that when we hear a voice on the telephone or the radio our minds immediately conjure up a face and a figure

to go with it? Mr Perry had been well spoken on the phone and in my mind I had straightway pictured a tall, aristocratic figure with finely chiselled features. He had been very excited to hear about my piano and the brief account of the letter I had found, and had asked, stuttering slightly, if he could come around to see me that very evening. This took me aback rather and made me a little uneasy. He explained to me that his house was in somewhat of a mess at the moment and I leapt to the conclusion that perhaps he was having building work done. I agreed to see him at seven thirty.

I had expected him to be rather too self-assured and in that respect at least I was not mistaken. The loud knock at the door made me jump. I opened up to a man in an old duffle coat, flinching in the wind, and before I had a chance to invite him in he almost pushed past me, blowing out his cheeks and complaining about the cold.

“Have you walked here?” I asked him.

“I walk everywhere,” he replied, unpegging and stripping off his wet coat. He hung it, uninvited, in a corner of the hall on the radiator. As I examined him I felt a slight disappointment. He was only as tall as me and not exactly handsome; at least not in that classic way I had imagined him. However he seemed pleasant enough, being blessed with a high brow, an open, cheerful expression and bright, inquisitive eyes which looked huge behind his glasses. He looked me up and down too and then gave me his hand. He bowed slightly. His fair hair was a fuzzy mess on top, like candy floss, and too long in the sides and neck. He was probably in his late forties.

“Joshua P-perry, at your service, Madam.” he said without a trace of self-mockery. It was if he had been out walking since the nineteen thirties and had only now, in the foulest weather, decided to seek shelter. I asked him if he would like a drink but he was not listening, bending backwards to peer through my living room door to get a better look of the piano which he must have glimpsed as he had walked past the brightly lit living room window. I showed him in and he went straight to it, leaving wet, gritty footprints on my beige carpet. Too late I asked him to remove his shoes and he slipped them off without a thought, revealing socks which almost, but did not quite match. As he bent and knelt and circled the instrument talking to himself in a whisper as if he was entirely alone and unaware of me, I studied him further. Clothes of course provide many clues about the lifestyle and state of mind of the dresser. He wore a short green V-necked pullover over a beige check shirt and a blue tie. One collar seemed on the point of flying away and was not buttoned down. His trousers were of dark brown corduroy which had not been fashionable for years. His belt was twisted at the back. Clothes for him were, I soon concluded, only a necessity to protect against the freezing cold, the wet, and summary arrest. I took a few steps towards him and watched fascinated as he looked inside the lid and muttered to himself. His glasses were smudged, lopsided and loose and every so often he had to push them up the bridge of his nose; his moustache needed trimming and one eyebrow had a long flyaway hair which I had an almost irresistible urge to pluck. The edges of his mouth were turned down as if he disapproved of the world and as I came even closer I saw that he had missed many whiskery stubbles when he had last shaved. There was a nick of blood on his chin. All in all, his whole person announced to the world: I have no-one to look after me nor anyone for whom I shall make an effort. He straightened himself, folded his arms and became aware of my presence again. I had the impression he was enjoying some private joke with himself - perhaps at the foibles of his fellow man. I decided I quite liked him.

“Breitner. Mmm. Probably an Austrian, more likely a German reproduction. Italians were the great masters of course. Decent enough instrument I suppose. Lots of these around I reckon at the turn of the century and later. Wouldn't be worth a great deal.”

I sat at the keyboard and played him a few bars. He looked inside and examined the frame as I did.

“Not bad, not bad at all, Mrs W-wrigley.”

“It’s Mrs Rigby. I’m not a worm. But please, call me Emily.”

Ignoring my pleasantry, he spotted the torch on the shelf and picked it up.

“So, the letters were down there, at the bottom?”

He shone the light inside and got as close as he could, nearly knocking his glasses off in the process.

“It’s alright,” I told him. “I’ve checked for others. There are none.”

“Can I see them?”

I fetched them and we sat on the sofa together. I poured us a glass of wine but he left his untouched. He examined the paper with a magnifying glass and read the text for an age. I felt the back of my neck tingle as he tutted, whistled softly and held his breath in turn, rustling the pages and feeling them between his thumb and forefinger, pausing regularly to push his glasses up his nose. I considered hunting down my micro screwdriver, taking the glasses off his face (would he notice?) and tightening them up.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” I asked, unable to contain my curiosity longer. He looked up in surprise, as if he had forgotten again he was in company.

“Well, the first question of course is, are they g-genuine? The paper - the ink - the vocabulary - the style - the grammar....”

I stared at him. I felt suddenly irritated by his naïve manners. Surely, I asked him, he did not suspect me of fraud?

“Emily. As a historian I have come across all kinds of c-confections and charades. Perhaps someone dropped these in there as a hoax.”

I had, of course, no reason to consider this as a possibility but nonetheless it troubled me. I replied that, if so, it would be a very elaborate one and ultimately rather pointless.

“What guarantee would your hoaxer have anyway that his or her pointless ruse would be discovered? This thing sat in a junk shop for years and might never have seen the light of day again.”

I did not add what else Emilia had “told” me.

“How much did you pay?”

The bold impertinence of this question startled me so much that I told him. He frowned.

“Rather generous of you, I think.”

I felt foolish. He sensed my embarrassment and broke out in a merry laugh. He winked and told me that if I liked the instrument then it was worth every penny. He looked at the letters again.

“These are, I would stake my reputation on it, g-genuine. They are quite a find. Correspondence of those days between ordinary folk is very rare.”

“Are you saying they are valuable?”

His nose wrinkled in what I thought was disapproval of what he took for pecuniary motives. He sighed in sadness and disappointment, no doubt, at the horrid ways of this modern world he was forced to inhabit.

“Possibly. Probably! Almost certainly! A collector might pay hundreds - particularly in light of their quite extraordinary and intriguing content.”

He paused and looked at me and shrugged in sorrow.

“I could get them v-valued for you Ealinor if you wished....”

I went to correct him but stopped. I snorted. I looked at the grit he had deposited on my lovely carpet. He pushed up his glasses again. I felt a surge of indignation in my breast which I could not quite entirely hold back.

“I could not possibly consider selling them!” I said more loudly than I expected. This sounded so much like a tawdry cliché from an old trout on an antiques programme that I felt myself blush. He must have seen this, for he smiled and shook his head. I thought I glimpsed again the private joke he was enjoying at the expense of a shabby world.

“NO. Honestly, Mr Perry. I have NOT contacted you in order to be a few measly hundred pounds better off! I want to get to the bottom of all this. Please believe me!”

This time he nodded and patted my arm as if to assuage my anger. I asked him what he could find out about Emilia and Clive. He stared. His faintly sardonic expression changed immediately to earnestness, as if he was looking at me properly for the first time. He asked me to tell him first of all what I had deduced. I faltered. How much should I reveal? I quite liked him in his way and I needed his help. I had no wish to frighten him off with tales of pianos playing themselves, voices in my head, altered features, the graves, possession and all the rest of it, nonsense which my rational self could hardly accept anyway. Finally I began.

“I think Emilia was a very brave girl. I think she must have sacrificed herself for the honour and benefit somehow of her father and her siblings...I think Clive was utterly in love with her and wanted to rescue her...so utterly in love he couldn't give a fig about what conventional morals stipulated. I think she was sorely tempted but maintained her vows. She would, I am sure, be content to wait for the old man to die. She might have gone off with Duncan then, I think...but she would have been determined to do the proper thing and wait until her period of mourning was over. I would not have done - but I'm a twenty-first century woman...Look here in Duncan's letter..... Josiah Cole took advantage somehow of a problem her father had, probably a debt to his brother, Duncan's business partner. She would have had no dowry, apart from her beauty. Josiah Cole virtually bought her as a chattel. Hardly a Christian act....”

If I had expected applause and sympathy from Perry for my views I could hardly have been more disappointed.

“What if I told you she was a m-murderess?”

I flinched.

“What if I told you that the widow's w-weeds you imagine were merely a disguise to allay suspicion? She might already have begun an affair with Duncan behind the kindly old gentleman's back. What if he had taken pity on the unfortunate d-daughter of an extravagant gambler and had offered her a position in society? And what if she had regularly deceived old Cole? Maybe Duncan was only one in a long line of lovers. She might have simply used her husband to gain a foothold - him a local dignitary - her a penniless, ruthless social climber -“

I began to protest but he was in full flow.

“Ah, you see, Mrs Wrigley, you have committed the worst imaginable analytical sin - you have interpreted the facts, as we have them, sentimentally and s-subjectively -”

“No!” I cried “I know that Emilia -”

“You have committed the worst sin - as I just have - of permitting a personal prejudice to influence your appraisal of the historical evidence! Of course, I have no more idea than you do as to whether Emilia Cole was the most saintly or the most s-selfish of wives! And as for Duncan, did he really have a terminal illness or did he have a terminal illness in every insignificant Midland town he fetched up in, where a shy belle caught his eye? Did -“

“NO!” I bellowed in a dark voice no longer mine to command. “NO!”

My pale blue porcelain cat on its hind legs rose from the mantle shelf and flew across the room, missing my companion by a whisker before shattering itself on the wall. Breville, who had been lying unseen in the gap between sofa and wall, leapt up in terror, scrambled across our laps and fled. In swift succession other objects flew in Perry's direction.

“EMILIA! STOP! HE'S PLAYING THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE. That's all....”

For a few seconds there was a complete calm in which the wall clock solemnly ticked; and then the most appalling discord rang out from the piano. As the silence slowly restored itself we sat like statues. I hardly dared look across at him in case he had died of terror. In slow motion he leant over the arm of the sofa and began to pick up the pieces of my cat. He held them out on his outstretched palm for me to take. I transferred them to my right hand and put them on the

coffee table in front of us. Half of the smile on the broken face was missing. I put as much of the cat back together as I could.

“Emilia is adamant you are wrong,” I murmured. Without a word he crept out and left. I studied his shoes. I heard the front door close. I picked the shoes up - his poor, broken down shoes - and went to the front door. But there was no sign of him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, Friday, I phoned Paul Bevin and told him I would work at home as I had all the notes I needed to prepare for a case conference. At eleven I could bear it no longer. I found his number and called him.

“Joshua Perry? It’s Emily Rigby. Can we talk? I’ll be in the church at two. I have something to show you in the cemetery. If you don’t come I’ll understand.”

At quarter past two I had given him up and was on the point of leaving when he came in, looked around, saw me, hesitated and then ambled over. He bought himself a mug of coffee. He sat opposite and stared at me, then looked away. Without his air of total self-assurance I found him more appealing.

“I’m really sorry about last night” I began, hardly knowing how to explain without making myself appear crazy. “Emilia is normally calm. Please believe me - I’m neither schizophrenic nor plagued by poltergeists. She came - I know how nutty it seems - with the piano. She wants something. I am NOT mad. Walk away now if you don’t want to help. I don’t mind - well I do, because you are the key to solving the mystery, I know you are.”

I waited for him to get up and go. What must he think? Do not all mad people assure their auditors that they are perfectly sane? I could hardly believe myself that in some inexplicable way a woman so long dead was influencing me.

“Mr Perry, I do not believe in ghosts. I am experiencing some strange...intuition. As a child I could often see what people had on their minds and what might happen. It frightened my mother. I grew out of it. But in the last few months I have had.....a terrible upset...and that might explain....”

He stood up, brought a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and wiped his nose. He looked steadily down on me. I looked back at him calmly and honestly. He stuffed the hanky back into his pocket and, to my relief, sat back down again.

“I’m all ears now, Emilia,” he said after a while.

“Good. Give me your glasses.”

“I’m s-sorry?”

I reached out and took them off his nose, polished them, tightened the screws and pushed them back onto his startled face. I looked in my handbag, took a pencil and paper and wrote in block capitals MY NAME IS EMILY RIGBY and slid it across to him. I gave him a carrier bag from which he extracted his old brown shoes. He looked at them puzzled. I told him to drink his coffee. There was something outside he must see. I took his hand, helped him to his feet and asked him to follow me out. We walked in a drizzle to the graves.

“She showed me the way. She brought me out here, whatever you think and whatever theory you might be cooking up now. You know, I honestly don’t care *what* you think, Mr Perry.”

“Emily. Please call me Joshua.”

He took out a camera and photographed the graves.

“This is...frankly...quite a-astonishing,” he said, pushing his glasses unnecessarily backwards.

“But is this the end of the line?” I asked.

“Ah, not quite. We’ll go and see Eddie.”

\*

Eddie Hughes, a tall, thin man in his early fifties, turned out to be the editor of The Gazette. He received Joshua with a friendly nod and me with polite deference. But he seemed a little uncomfortable.

“You have upset a few people, Joshua,” he said finally, once coffee had been brought in and we were left to ourselves.

“I have? How?”

Eddie looked at me over the top of his glasses and hesitated.

“It’s alright, Ed. Emily’s a friend.”

I offered to leave but Joshua held up a reassuring palm. Eddie carried on.

“What you wrote last Friday about Peter Floode and the new development in Hollycroft.....I’m just annoyed it wasn’t spotted.....”

“What wasn’t spotted?” exclaimed Joshua.

“Evelyn Floode was not best pleased. Not good for the family image, making out Peter was some cruel factory owner.....”

Joshua snorted in indignation. “But what her a-ancestor did .... I’m...I’m...just astonished! He did it! Got rid of the cottages just to line his own pockets...Mrs Evelyn god-almighty Floode wouldn’t be sitting pretty now in Sowerbutts Lane if he hadn’t -“

“Ah!” countered Eddie, “But you failed to mention that he built a whole terrace of better houses along George Street to rehouse the frame knitters!”

“Yes, he did, but only later, when public opinion became hostile and he had a few windows of his own smashed - ”

“Doesn’t matter. Should have mentioned it, Josh. Balance!”

“Balance! I write a column in a local newspaper not a I-learned text book, Eddie!” Joshua could hardly sit still, he was so excited, crossing and uncrossing his legs. The editor held up his hands to calm him. He picked up last week’s edition and read out what Joshua had written about the property company. He put it down and told him that it might be actionable.

“You’re implying corruption. Read this email. It’s from McCallum, the MD of Exclusive Developments Ltd.”

I watched as Joshua scanned, with increasing consternation, the paper he had been handed, now muttering its wording half to himself, now reading sections aloud which particularly infuriated him.

“W-well, it’s t-true,” he finally stammered, putting the email back on the desk, “The i-integrity of the old building had been c-compromised by the many additions to it, but they c-could have left part of it standing as a gatehouse - as we suggested - to the estate. They could even have installed a flunky in it to keep out the r-riff-raff!”

“But Joshua! You hint in this very column at some behind the scenes deal - bribery even.

McCallum’s p.a. states that the Department of the Environment was consulted and that they agreed, upon inspection, that the old house was of no particular architectural merit and that to preserve it.....what does she say? Hold on...here it is....*It was agreed that the retention of the original walls, given the demolition of later extension walls around them was impractical and unsafe. Mr Perry would, if he is anything like a competent researcher, be aware of this. His comments are either based on lamentable ignorance or malice .....* Strong stuff, Joshua!”

“Ah! But what YOU don’t know is that ExD Ltd gave quite a tidy sum to the C-c-conservative Party that year, 1997. Sheer coincidence?”

“Election year, Joshua! Irrelevant and inconclusive. You cannot connect the two! We’ll have our arses sued off us, if we aren’t careful!”

There was a silence as the two friends stared at each other across the table, arms folded. Joshua raised his right hand to adjust his glasses and I grabbed it, placing it firmly back on his left arm. Eddie looked at me in surprise. But Joshua seemed not to have noticed anything.

“So what are you going to do then, Ed? Print a m-m-mealy-mouthed retraction and apology? Eat humble pie?”

“I’m under pressure. What YOU don’t know is that Evelyn Floode owns twenty percent of the Gazette and what you don’t know either is that her cousin is a major partner in ExD Ltd. The Floodes have a lot of clout, Josh.”

Joshua turned as still and pale as if Emilia had just thrown something else at him. He began to breathe again rapidly and in fury.

“Loathesome...d-disgusting...f-fucking sickening people....Oh, I’m so sorry Emily!”

I laughed and told him not to worry - in my line of work I heard plenty of bad language every day. But Joshua blushed deeply as Eddie carried on.

“I’m too near retirement to let such people intimidate me. I’ve told Mrs Floode and McCallum to write into the Letters Page if they want their views aired in public - just like anyone else.”

“Ah. And how did that go down?”

“I don’t give a MONKEY’S how that goes down! But Joshua, do me a favour, keep to history, stay out of politics!”

“B-but can the two be separated?”

“Oh deary me, ever the great philosopher! Yes, of course they can! Come on! This is a local weekly rag in a quiet backwater. Fundraising and minor drunken thuggery are my stock-in-trade.....Now then, what can I do for you this afternoon?”

“Ah! Let me introduce you properly to Mrs Ealin - ah - *Emily* Rigby. She has a fascinating story to tell. It could be the best feature you’ve ever dealt with.”

Within a few minutes we had told the editor where we had got to so far, minus the things he would doubtless scoff at.

“So what do you want from me, Joshua?” he asked, placing both palms behind his head.

“The key to the archive. These were people of distinction. Their lives and deaths must have been reported.”

Eddie beamed. This was exactly the apolitical, human-interest story his readers liked, he said.

“Ask Eileen at reception for the key. It should keep you busy and out of mischief for a while. Emily, let me know if he gets on his soapbox - he’s further left than the SWP when he starts. Happy hunting. Keep me informed.”

The neon lights flickered on, one after another. We were in a cellar with white emulsioned walls and row upon row of wooden cabinets with drawers marked with different years. The expression on Joshua’s face was illuminating. This was clearly his true element, not the grimy air of modern Earlstone.

“After 1965 everything was kept on fiches - horrible plasticky photographic records. They’re in the corner over there. The newspapers, one copy of each edition, start over in the far corner, in 1805. Come on!”

He grabbed my hand like a child running down the beach to the sea and led me to the farthest row. He gave me white cotton gloves to put on. With great excitement he pulled open the drawer marked 1809 and drew out the four editions from March.

“We need to look for any announcement of Cole’s death as a news item - he was the ex-vicar after all - plus the obituary and a list of mourners. They should all be covered by one or two editions. They did not have refrigeration in those days, of course, and death would be followed pretty quickly by interment.”

We separated the broadsheets - a very pale yellow colour but still in remarkable condition - from their flimsy tissue covers and unfolded them on the broad reading table which looked so clean it might have been used for surgical operations.

"How few pages there are!"

"Ah well, so little happened back then! No telly supplements and all that jazz about lifestyle. Look. The front pages are all exactly as The London Times used to be - all announcements. This is how the Gazette was, would you believe, until 1967. Ah! Look, here it is! *Cole, Josiah Oliver. The death is announced of Josiah Oliver Cole, aged 53, erstwhile vicar of the parish of Saint Martin's. He departed this life on March 2nd after a short illness and is survived by his wife Emilia and sister Anne. Interment took place on March 4th at the church of Saint Mary. A short illness. Mmm. Could have been..... poisoned.*"

He smiled faintly and I looked at him as darkly as I could manage, but otherwise refused to take the bait. We scanned the inside pages for a more detailed report of his demise but there was none. My eyes began to stray over other news items. A bull had escaped and run amok at an auction; a house had burned down, killing its elderly occupant; a man had been sentenced to hang for burglary; there had been a brawl at The Barley Sheaf and a clerk had been stabbed - (little change there then.) As the page turned I saw to my astonishment an advertisement for my piano. Joshua spotted it at the same time and read it aloud in a sententious voice.

"Horace Ford of Castle Street is pleased to offer for sale a limited stock of Breitner piano-fortes, superior instruments of German manufacture, at the special price of thirty-two guineas." See you were done! Common as muck - had to sell them off cheap!"

I glowered at him and made to tap his hand in reproof. In the Obituaries we read a glowing tribute to Josiah Oliver Cole and of his long and distinguished service to the community and to the glory of God.

"It doesn't give a cause of death," I said with a feeling of great disappointment.

"Of course not. More often than not they had not got a clue what the cause of death was unless it was an accident, a fall, a murder or a fever. Read your Jane Austen - your nemesis could begin with a chill, a slight fever or what was called a putrid sore throat. Thousands died from food poisoning and septicaemia. There were no forensics and no post mortems - unless you were important. And he was 53, a ripe old age for then."

"Oh look! Clive Duncan is listed as a mourner!"

I suddenly imagined - or did I rather see him? - standing rather aloof behind an Emilia shrouded in black lace, viewing with satisfaction the lowering of his rival's coffin into the sod. As she crumbles earth over it, and then turns, he tries to catch her eye. Were they already lovers as Perry had speculated? I closed my eyes tight but the image froze and then faded.

"It strikes me now that Emilia would inherit quite a substantial fortune as well as her liberty," whispered Joshua. "Enough to relieve her father of his financial embarrassments and render any sisters of hers marriageable. She had a strong motive to murder the old duffer."

"NO. That just feels totally wrong Joshua. I don't want to hear it again!"

He retreated one step and placated me with the palms of his hands outstretched, as if ready to duck, and made the sign of the cross. I smiled and patted his hand.

"Very well, Mistress Emily. Let us conclude, with no evidence to the contrary, that Josiah Cole died of old age. There was obviously no inquest. Now for Duncan."

As I reached down with trembling hands further into the drawer, picking through the summer and bringing to light the autumn, a voice called out down the stairs.

"Mr Perry. It's Eileen. You're going to have to leave it for now. I need to lock up."

He sighed. "Can we not have just another five or ten minutes?"

"Joshua," I said, taking his arm, "I'd rather not rush this. I'm feeling really nervous. I'm not quite ready for him - and her. I need to think."

“But that will mean waiting till Monday. Oh no, *Tuesday!* I’m speaking at Aston on Monday about the demise and resurrection of the canals.”

“Look, it doesn’t matter. These are going nowhere. We’ll come on Tuesday and take our time over it.”

“Aren’t you at work?”

I frowned. I had intended to spend the few days leave I needed to use up - or lose - in Haworth in April or May.

“I’ll take one of the days I’m owed.” I said.

It was pouring when we came out. A premature darkness was falling over the square Earlstone skyline. I persuaded him to let me drive him home. He turned out to live only a few streets away from me, in Spa Terrace, in one of a row of elegant Victorian villas, seriously expensive, of three storeys, and had done so, he said, for nearly twenty years. How strange, I mused, as we turned the corner, that I had never crossed his path in all that time, neither in the vicinity nor at the local supermarket. Perhaps I had done, but had never noticed him.

“What a lovely house! I never drive past without admiring them. Aren’t you going to ask me in Joshua?”

He frowned and looked back at me through the open passenger door.

“Ah. It’s a b-bit of a mess....as I said.”

“Here. Take your shoes. Have you got the builders in then?”

“N-no. It’s...just a mess. I’ll be in touch Ealinor. Goodbye.”

“EM - IL - Y!”

But he did not hear me. He scurried away in his duffle coat, hood up, bent forward, like a character from Kenneth Graham or A. A. Milne, looked back at me once, nodded, then disappeared through his front door. What a very strange man! Then it came to me. He must be either a bachelor or a widower. That would explain his attire and his domestic mess. I sat and pictured to myself his rooms; tables, chairs and carpets were piled high with books and documents. I saw his kitchen worktops feet deep under pots, plates and pans. I just had to see. I got out, pulled up my collar and ran up his steps. I knocked. The curtain in the bay window to my left - a drab, faded thing - suddenly moved and joined its poor partner. I knocked again - louder.

“Joshua,” I cried out. “I forgot something.” (What had I forgotten??) He opened up a few inches, as if I were a Jehova’s Witness or a door-to-door salesman. Why did I have the distinct impression he did not want me to see along the hallway?

“Well?”

“Er, did we agree to meet at ten or eleven on Tuesday?”

“Eleven. It was your idea.”

I gently pushed at the door and after a feeble attempt to resist my pressure he gave way. I found myself staring at a junk palace, like that shop in Leicester those three weeks ago. To left and right were suits of armour, grandfather clocks ticking in counterpoint, barometers, and, all at once emerging from the inner gloom, as if walking up to greet me, a large black bear. I found myself inside. He closed the door and turned on a ceiling light powered, if that was the right word, by a hopelessly inadequate bulb. There was scarcely any room to allow passage; newspapers were piled high by the staircase, along which, mounted on the wall, cantered a row of horse paintings. He was a hoarder, a man with an obsession.

“Now you k-know my little secret, Emily,” he said, rather ashamed.

Had Igor, Doctor Frankenstein’s servant, or Albert Steptoe, emerged, wringing their hands, from the shadows, I would not have been surprised. I went up and studied his bear. His furry arms were outstretched and he was holding a cheap kitchen tray.

“Let me introduce you to Bartholomew, my very silent ursine butler.”

He stood slightly above me, looking down amicably. His glass eyes were sharp and somewhat sly. He watched me come closer. His mouth was very slightly open and I could just see his dull white fangs within. I reached out and grasped his massive paw and told him with a curtsy how delighted I was to make his acquaintance. His sardonic mien reminded me oddly of Joshua's. "The pleasure is all mine Mrs Rigby."

I jumped and Joshua burst out in a merry laugh. One of his amateur talents, he explained in the same dark, bruin voice, without moving his lips at all, was ventriloquism. I felt foolish. He bowed and apologised. I looked back at the bear. On his tray was a pile of letters.

"He's a kind of postman," he explained. "If I don't put my letters, bills and junkmail on the tray, it all gets muddled up with..." and he looked around and pointed.

"...with the rest of the junk?" I added, coming to his assistance. He winked and covered his face in mock shame.

"Precisely. I was nearly cut off by the electricity people last year for not paying my bill."

"Direct debit?"

"Pardon me?"

"You should pay by direct debit."

He looked at me helplessly, as if I had spoken Chinese, and turned.

"Do come into the kitchen. It's a bit clearer there."

"Your abode certainly has...character," I said, sniffing the air. It was sweet and musty, like an album of pressed flowers my grandmother had possessed, like the smell in that junk shop. The kitchen was, to my surprise, tidy and businesslike. He put on the kettle and offered me his biscuit jar. He showed me into the dining room where an iron stood on a table by a heap of check shirts, which, like the one he persisted in wearing, should really have been discarded or given to Oxfam years ago. Here the walls were also covered in Victorian paintings of idyllic gardens, landscapes, sweet children, plants and animals, chiefly horses.

"It's a bit of a weakness of mine, Victoriana...mainly kitsch of course," he admitted in a whisper. "Ah. Let me go and pour the tea before it gets too strong. Help yourself to another bicky."

The wallpaper was of a pretty Chinese floral design fashionable in the eighties. This had been to a woman's taste. Perhaps he was a divorcee. Perhaps his wife had given him an ultimatum: either the bear walks or I do! The bear had not walked. He came back in jittering two ornate cups, precariously balanced on their saucers. The tea was very, very strong but I sipped it politely.

"Oh no. You know what I've done, don't you? I've left one of this morning's bags in the p-pot by mistake! "

He grabbed my cup and muttered how sorry he was. I told him not to worry. I told him to sit back down.

"Do you live quite alone, Joshua?"

He laughed loud but without a hint of bitterness.

"How can you tell?"

I was too embarrassed to reply. We sat in silence each waiting for the other to change the subject. I nibbled my biscuit - or rather chewed it - because it was soft and probably three years past its use-by-date.

"H-how long have you been on your own?"

"Oh, let me see. About a hundred years. That's how long it feels at any rate. I was married to a wonderful person, Kate. She died nearly three years ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I really didn't mean to ...pry..."

"Ah! But you did! Why deny it? We're all priers! I pry into the past. But why are you so interested in me?"

Now I was on the spot. Why indeed?

“Oh, I’m just the way inclined - interested in people. It’s my work I suppose.”

“So what do you do?”

“I already told you, Joshua. I knew you weren’t listening. I’m in social work.”

He wrinkled his nose as he had done on my sofa when I had asked about the value of those letters. He shook his head. He went to push his glasses back, but this time managed to remember for himself that he did not need to.

“Why do people react like that, when I tell them what I do? If I told them I was a guard at a concentration camp it would hardly go down worse. Mark always -” and I broke off as that hot wire, which I thought was fading, pierced my heart again as acutely as ever.

“Mark? Is he your husband? I hesitate to say partner....”

“Was. We divorced eleven months ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not!..... I’m not!” I added bravely.

He laughed. “It’s just something to say *I’m sorry*. It’s easy. *I could not care less* is what we mean, but we can never say it. Imagine a world where we all tell the unvarnished truth!”

I looked at him long and he studied me.

“Joshua.”

“Yes?”

“Will you allow me to perform a little service for you?”

He stared at me in perplexity and anxiety. Now it was my turn to tease him. I stood up and approached him. He recoiled very slightly as I examined his face.

“Will you allow me to cut your hair?”

He stared at me in astonishment. “W-why? Do you think it needs doing?”

His expression was such a picture of incredulity, framed by that fuzzy, unruly mop, that I could not help myself. I burst out laughing and laughed until I ached. This dumbfounded him even more. Tears ran down my cheeks and I struggled for breath.

“Does it need doing??” I managed to gasp. He got up and studied himself in the oval mirror and ran his fingers through his mane. I wondered how long it had been since he had had a good look at himself.

“Joshua - it’s a hopeless mess. Admit it - it’s been years since you had it done.”

He nodded. I drove home and fetched the electric razor and attachments which I had not used since Mark’s departure. Back in the kitchen I sat Joshua down in front of a mirror and went to work. I carefully removed his wonky glasses - those gold-framed, old fashioned glasses - and placed them on the table. He stared at himself blindly. I went to work like a sheep-shearer and gradually something akin to a smart, handsome man began to emerge. I turned the fuzz on his crown into a stipple; I took a blue razor and shaved away the fluff in his neck; with the scissors I attacked his unruly eyebrows and cut back his moustache to reveal the top lip I had not yet seen. I combed everything flat and smooth and put his glasses back on his nose. He beamed at himself in delight.

“My word, Emily, is th-that me?”

“Just look at all this hair on the floor!”

I straightened up behind him and placed my hands on his shoulders as if posing for a photograph. He looked at himself and then up at me. He patted my hand. He thanked me and said he had forgotten what a pleasure it was to have his hair cut - particularly by such a nice barber as me.

“You’re very welcome, Josh,” I whispered. I asked him for a brush. He stood uselessly by as I swept the floor clean of hair - and one or two other bits and pieces from the corners and under the table.

“Look, Emily,” he said finally- and somewhat uneasily - “Now let me pay you back...with a meal. I know I might not look the part, but one of my other hidden talents is my c-cookery.”

But I did not want to outstay my welcome and I sensed that he wanted his solitude restored to him to get on with his own agenda. So I told him that I had a friend coming round. He looked rather disappointed and it was not until I was driving home that it occurred to me, not without a sensation akin to pleasure, that it might not have been my declining of his invitation to dinner that had caused that crestfallen look, but the mention of my fictitious friend.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Saturday morning when I woke, my first thought was of the vicarage. Had I been dreaming of it? I tried hard to recollect. There was a tag-end of a dream - an image of the view from the French windows (as my parents had quite proudly called theirs in the sixties, before the arrival of patio doors) - but no matter how I tugged at it, the rest of the dream would not emerge from the dark cave it had faded into.

All morning the bright picture of the lawn and borders with their tall, slow, breeze-blown flowers would not fade. At eleven I walked into town. The early March winds were flapping the stall-awnings of Earlstone's much reduced market, and the merchants stood around disconsolately, looking for customers amongst the sparse groups of passers-by. By the church I turned and looked up at the vicarage behind the tall red-brick wall in which there was a white gate. I walked through the churchyard. As I reached out to open the gate something in the corner of my eye near Emilia's grave made me pause. Had I imagined the waving edge of a black veil - or was it a dark flurry of rain in the gust of wind? I stared. I felt strange, as if I was trespassing on ground where it was not advisable to step. I whispered to Emilia, and for answer the gate rattled on its latch in another gust. I was not afraid but I felt uneasy. I saw my hand reach out and open the latch. The borders were full of struggling daffodils a few sunny days away from bursting; the house was sombre and ivy clad, with stone window frames, and I had a strong sense that its walls had contained precious little joy. Like Emilia had done many times before me, I walked up the crazy-paved path to the arched oaken door, wondering whether the feelings in her breast had been as disinclined as mine. What lay behind this door for her to dread or desire? There was no bell, only a large metal knocker below a small square window of distorting glass. I took the knocker, hesitated and let it fall and rap against its deeply indented plate, record of many house-calls. I pictured Duncan standing where I was, on one of his official - or clandestine - visits to Mrs Cole.

A bloated face, now with three eyes and a fat nose, now with one eye and no nose at all, a hideous animated Picasso, peered out at mine and startled me. I prayed for inspiration. I had not thought through clearly what I would say. Should I simply tell the truth? Standing there before me now in the open doorway was that full-faced, over-jolly, vicar from Liverpool who reminded me so much of a ripe holiday camp comedian.

"Hello? Now then, what have we here then?" he asked himself in that over-familiar, presumptuous manner which had so disgusted me and quickly driven me into exile from my church. Surely he would not remember me!

"Hello? Reverend Bull? I'm Jane ... Cole. I work for the Mercury. We're doing a series of features on old Leicestershire rectories....I just happened to be in Earlstone...and I thought I'd just pop by to arrange a time convenient for you...when I could call with a photographer ...if you're interested of course...."

A scrawny waif of a woman who looked quite poorly appeared behind him and asked in a whisper who it was.

"This lovely lady wants to put us in the paper, Katriona!" he yelled.

Katriona gave the faintest of smiles and faded into the gloom. He beckoned me in with his finger and waved away my apologies and concerns for his peace and privacy. He was fatter than I recalled. I saw a cartoonlike scene of him and his lathe of a wife at table; him piling his

plate ever higher; her trying to steal a potato or a spoonful of peas betwixt and between the great hams of his forearms. And then, disgracefully, I saw her in bed grimacing, tongue flapping from the corner of her mouth, squished beneath his sweaty, heaving mass. I turned my face away to hide my stifled giggle and remembered why I had come. Why had I come? Bull was looking me up and down to my disgust with a rapacious eye and I had an unmistakable vision of him peeling off my garments inside his fat head. What on earth would Josiah Cole make of this successor of his in a tight, barely adequate tee shirt and old jeans, too untidy to qualify as his gardener? He asked me if I would like to see the main reception room and with a dramatic flourish he showed me in. Immediately I saw the French windows exactly as I had seen them in my dreams and daydreams. I saw the garden beyond. Forgetting him almost I walked towards the light. Here, I knew, she had played our piano. I closed my eyes and the sit-on toys littering the yard disappeared. I saw tall white and yellow hollyhocks and waving crocosmia in alternating sheaves of red and orange; against the tall red wall at the end pink roses rambled, and apricots and pears hung from espaliers. A warm glow suffused me and I suddenly knew that Emilia had once been happy here. The imperative for me to be at the present-day vicarage now vanished. My head slowly turned to the right. The darkness from my dream in the corner began to take shape but before I could see who it was, a voice dragged me back to the present. I opened my eyes. *Tea*, he was saying quite loud, would I like a cup of tea? He had come quite close and I could feel his hot breath on my neck. To get rid of him, I accepted.....Perhaps Emilia was telling me that the dark shape was Clive Duncan, and that he had shattered her peace of mind, rousing feelings within her which she had not previously had. Feelings she had managed to sublimate into a dutiful devotion to her generous husband? Or was the dark shape Josiah Cole, who, like the Reverend Causabon in Middlemarch, had gradually imposed a tyrannical and jealous restraint on the natural inclinations of his young wife?

“Here’s your tea, Ms Cole. Would you like a biscuit? Are you feeling alright?”

“Oh I’m sorry. I’m fine, thank you. Biscuit? Er, no. Sorry. I was miles away, wondering what shots we should take.”

I looked around the rest of the room. It was far too large for the meagre bits of furniture he and Katriona had stuck in it. A tricycle stood in one corner. The large fireplace was screened off and in front of it an ugly electrical appliance was glowing red. A large brown stain was half covered by a rug. From upstairs there spilled the sounds of children squabbling loudly. He went out, bellowed something and came back in with a huge smile on his face. He said he would write a short piece about the history of the house and we agreed that I should return on Thursday afternoon. I was more than pleased at the prospect of taking my leave but something made me pause beneath the staircase. I looked up at the balustrade of the landing and felt my heart quicken as my eye rested on the closed bedroom door. I looked at it long but it would not open to reveal its inner secrets. My gaze ran slowly back down the stairs and returned to his pudgy face. He was speaking.

“It’s the original rail, that is you know. Carved out of oak. You should get a photo of that.”

The hallway had smelt of ripe socks. The refreshing buffets of air in the churchyard were so welcome. I paused at Emilia’s grave and stared at it for inspiration but there was none to be had. She was not there. I thought of the tall dark man in my reverie, and he troubled me.

All afternoon, back at home, my mind kept returning to that indistinct figure in the corner of my eye. I sat at Emilia’s piano and played, hoping for an insight or a respite from the vague unease I felt. I spoke her name in a whisper and then more clearly, asking her what she meant to tell me. The slow ticking of the clock was the only reply I had. How foolish! Living alone was turning me into an eccentric! I had risen so early and I now felt exhausted. I contemplated the long, empty hours left of my weekend and felt intensely miserable. Could I find a pretext to phone Joshua? Did I really want to? I sat on my sofa and flicked through my

TV magazine, finding nothing on terrestrial or satellite channels of any interest to me. I let the magazine sink onto my chest. The dark clouds scudding low past the window gave me no incentive to break up the afternoon with a stroll. The poor light began to fade. I sat and watched the lounge grow dark. The window became a backcloth for my animated thoughts. If I could have one of my waking dreams perhaps I would see what it was that Emilia was trying, I felt sure, to make me fully aware of.

I pictured the vicarage door and stared at it intently until it opened. Poor Katriona stood there in a frilly white apron. I sailed past her. The drawing room door was ajar and from within I heard the alto voice I recognised, accompanying the tinkling notes of the piano. As I pushed the door open I saw three men in dark frock coats and two women in long, low-cut dresses standing in rapt attention. My entrance caused the party to smile and one of the men, a portly, elderly gentleman, leant forward to shake my hand. This was the Reverend Cole. I looked at the pianist. Her hair was honey blonde and fell in long tresses down her long, slender back. She was singing the very song I had sung. Her arms were as smooth and pale as ivory and as she played she swayed very gently from side to side. She was utterly lovely and compelling. Now with a flourish she brought both hands down to play a final chord and as the room applauded her pretty shoulders relaxed. She turned to face her audience and showed her left profile to me. I found myself looking at a woman who might be my sister.

Now she becomes aware of my presence and turns to face me. Her grey eyes grow wider and her lips open in a friendly smile. She has a fine nose and her cheeks are blushed like the apricots on the espalier. Perhaps I stare at her too intently for now her blush seems to deepen and she lowers her eyes. I turn my head left to see if any face there amongst the party betrays a suspicion. I see only genuine friendliness. Reassured, I look at her again, just in time to see her eyes dart for a second to her left and my right, guiding mine clandestinely, but unmistakably, into the corner where a dark figure is standing.

A loud noise. I opened my eyes to almost total darkness. The telephone was ringing. Intensely annoyed, I rose to answer it. It was Joshua. He told me he had been on the internet and had discovered some very interesting information, which he teasingly refused to reveal over the phone. He had work to do that evening but wanted to take me out for Sunday lunch to repay me for his haircut. All would then be revealed. How could I refuse such an invitation?

That night I had a terrifying experience. It was a waking nightmare, such as I had last had in childhood, when the GP had thought I might be suffering from petit mal. It began innocently enough - in Joshua's kitchen. As I snipped away at his hair, his face began to turn by degrees into Bartholomew's. At first I laughed until the change was complete, when he suddenly roared at me. I could only have been half-wake. My whole body was in a spasm of horror and I knew I was dreaming. But I could not move. I could not let the scream inside me escape. The dark shadow cast by my wardrobe was moving and above me now a figure hovered - it was me in that drawing room dress rippling slowly in the still air. I was sobbing violently and pointing into that terrifying corner. In an instant the image changed and I found myself standing behind Emilia at her piano which she was playing maniacally, bringing her trembling hands crashing down, creating appalling discords. Again my eyes flickered open. She was still there at the instrument but now the chords were coming from downstairs. This time I felt fully conscious but the vision and the music would not go. I managed then to scream loud and I clamped my hands to my eyes. When I dared to look again the noise immediately stopped. But the dream would not come to an end. I now saw her playing as sedately as she had in my imagination that afternoon. But silently. She inclined her head, as she had then, to take her applause and she looked at me with her glad eyes, which flickered left over into the far corner. This time I could

follow them. There in the corner, motionless and grinning at me was Joshua's bear. I saw a hand in front of me - my hand? - pat his snout and his snarling mouth fall open. I sat up in bed sweating and panting with terror. I managed to turn on the light. The chimeras vanished. I begged Emilia aloud to leave me in peace. My heart gradually calmed down and my breathing slowed, but it was well over an hour before I dared switch off the lamp again.

I had risen late. I had lain in bed reviewing my dreams and my nightmare about the vicarage. Something else bothered me about what I had seen, not just those terrifying images. I opened the drawer where I kept the letters and read them again. It had occurred to me that I might well have been shown the very scene which had led Duncan to declare his love; however something did not fit the circumstances. Then it came to me. The flowers and the apricots! They were of high summer, not of March when the letters were penned. Did this delay and those sly looks indicate that Joshua was right? That they had already been having an affair for months? The thought was intensely depressing. I had only ever once in my marriage been remotely close to having an affair. My previous boss had been a very caring, charismatic person. We had perhaps gotten too close. One early evening, when we had been poring over a particularly difficult case, the proximity of his hand and the invitation in his eye had been unmistakable and, although Mark and I had been at a low ebb at the time, I chose to ignore it, and was later so glad I had.

And then, with a sudden start and flash of insight, I realised that the person in my first vision entering the musical party late had not been Duncan at all. It had been me! And Duncan, of course, must have been the mysterious figure!

Joshua came for me at twelve. I wore my prettiest red dress - the one I had last worn at that dismal party where Mark had gotten so drunk after a solemn promise that he would not.

"Ah! So you don't walk everywhere then?" I said as I got into his vintage Jaguar, admiring its red leather seats and walnut dashboard. It smelt of another era.

"I save it for special occasions" he replied, taking his time to look me over. I saw he approved and I was pleased. And he looked very smart. He wore a powder blue jacket and a royal blue silk tie and white shirt, black trousers and shoes. He had made an effort. For me. As I put on my belt a comment came to me which I could not resist.

"You look smart. Is your duffle coat at the cleaner's then?"

He looked puzzled until he realised I had cracked a joke and then laughed slowly and sardonically at my sarcasm. We drove out of Earlstone talking of nothing in particular, neither of us wishing yet to broach the bigger issues on our minds. It was a beautiful day. There was more than a hint of green in the hedgerows and clumps of wild daffodils were blooming on the grass verges. We passed through sleepy Sharnstoke and turned right off the main Leicester road running from the ancient Fosseway, which, south of Earlstone, joins the equally ancient Watling Street near the disappeared village of High Cross, the very centre of England. On the edge of Broughton Appleby we slowed and turned onto the car park of The Three Tuns. He hoped the place would still be alright. He had last eaten there over three years ago, he said. It was. There was no nasty, salty smell in the air from that modern abomination, the carvery. We were shown to our table in a quiet, secluded corner by a pretty waitress. There was no enervating background "music", just the low, pleasant chatter of other guests. We ordered halibut. Joshua chose the most expensive bottle of white wine but insisted he would only drink a small glass.

"Right, Come on, tell me," I said, as soon as the waitress had scurried away with our order,

"What have you found out?"

He took out two pieces of paper and unfolded the first. He had copied it from the church record. Failure of the heart was given as the cause of Duncan's death.

“Heart failure? At what.....thirty-two, no thirty-one?”

Joshua nodded gravely. “Not very common, I admit. But think of all the children today who are born with heart defects, which are put right by surgery. I dare say he had something like a hole in the heart. Or it could have been a cardiomyopathy, caused by a virus or a condition he inherited.”

“Cardiomyopathy?”

“A dilated, flabby heart. It’s what Kate had.”

“Oh - I didn’t.....” I was flustered.

“It’s OK!” he said and smiled, patting my hand. He swilled the glowing filament of sun around in his wine glass and sipped in approval. He rearranged the spring flowers in the vase, sighed and slowly shook his head.

“She was forty-three when it was diagnosed. A shortness of breath... she thought she had a chest infection. Drugs controlled it at first and then, just as she seemed to be doing so well, she deteriorated very suddenly and unexpectedly. She was on the transplant list when she died.”

“How tragic.” I squeezed his hand and not knowing what else to say I took a large gulp of wine, which made me cough.

“And now for my second trick!” he declared, spreading out another piece of paper. Emilia had been married in 1805. Her maiden name had been Barnes. I studied it for a while and was about to put it to one side when he reached over and tapped the maiden name. He gave me a sly wink.

“What? Barnes. So what?”

“Emilia Barnes!” He produced another paper from his inside pocket and smoothed it out. “Don’t you see? The record shows she was Abraham Barnes’ daughter. Look. You read my Hollycroft article. Her father built it. He was the manufacturer who fell on hard times and overreached himself. This explains why Cole took her on, presumably without dowry, as Duncan’s letter implies. She came from erstwhile respectable Earlstone stock. Doubtless the reverend paid off the father’s debts. To his own brother, who had lent Barnes the money in the first place. Your analysis was correct, I think.”

“Emilia was a chattel. Charming.”

“Yes, but don’t go running away with the romantic idea that she necessarily resented that; she is much more likely to have felt grateful. She would have a respectable position in society with the not remote prospect - given his age - of inheriting Cole’s money and property - and her father would be afloat again financially -”

“But it’s so cold...so mercenary.”

“But that was the way then and the norm amongst the better classes. Think of Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*. She chooses to marry the egregious Mr Collins for status, connection and security; she is much more typical of her epoch than Elizabeth Bennett, and, of course, Miss Austin herself, who would have only married for love, and, finding none, never did.” He smiled. “Besides, why do you assume that your prejudice - and Duncan’s for that matter, at least according to his love letter - about Mr Cole is correct? Perhaps he wasn’t such a doddering old buffer after all.” His eyes twinkled with mischief. “Perhaps he was no slouch in the trouser department!”

“Joshua!” I giggled.

“Just because you’re gouty and middle-aged it doesn’t mean you’re a has-been in the bedroom. Some men get better as they get older. Like a good wine.”

He winked, took the bottle from the cooler and filled up my glass to the brim. I was relieved when the fish came. It turned out to be perfectly cooked and delicious. After we had eaten he showed me a fourth note in his spidery hand.

I read it and gasped. “She died of injuries from a fall? She did kill herself!”

“Ah, hold on! Don’t jump to conclusions! This is what we need to find out in the archive on Tuesday - in the coroner’s report. There is bound to be one.”

“I’m going to look on Monday!”

He winced and looked disappointed. He topped up my glass again but said nothing. We ordered pudding. I looked out at a field of rape which would soon be in golden flower. There was a question within me which I could no longer repress.

“Joshua, please don’t think I’m being nosy, but did you make a conscious decision to remain.....on your own.....after Kate passed away?”

He winced again. I looked at the emptying bottle which I had reduced almost single-handedly and realised I had overstepped the mark. I began to apologise for the intrusiveness of my question but he gave a short laugh and shook his head again. He pushed his glasses against his nose.

“I hardly know you Emily. You insist on cutting my hair. You criticise my clothes and now you want to know my innermost secrets.” He laughed again. It sounded rather forced. What a relief when our puddings came! I pushed my glass well away. He noticed and smiled.

“I won’t go to the Gazette on Monday. I’ll wait for you.” I offered.

“No. I’ll phone Eddy. I want you to do some research.”

“Research?” I felt uneasy.

“Don’t look so worried. It’s easy. Just go through the back numbers before 1808 and note down any info on Emilia, Josiah and Clive. These were prominent people. Look for social events, snippets of news.....”

Joshua paid the bill and we left. I asked him to come back for a cup of coffee but he politely refused. I had upset him! But then I wondered later if he might have misinterpreted the warmth of my invitation.

The elation of the wine quickly evaporated. Now intensely depressed I sat alone again on my sofa. I contemplated my options and tried to crystallise what I felt. It sounds naïve - silly almost - but I had long held a belief that there is a person - a soulmate - we are predestined to meet, with whom a complete and serene happiness would be - or would become - possible. It troubled me that so many marriages and relationships ended in failure, not necessarily because people had found the wrong person but that other distractions had caused the balance of forces which held them together to wobble and break down, as if some rogue star had come too close to the orbits of two concentric planets and driven them apart. To maintain their equilibrium two people in close proximity needed not only an inner strength but such a loving, mutual attraction that not even the most massive disturbance could break them away from each other. I had dreamt and prayed for such a strengthening with Mark. I could forgive his strayings as a young man - when the blood is hot and temptation high. I had persuaded myself that he was indeed my soulmate and that in our middle life, in our fruition and maturity all would be well, and that indeed we would approach that perfection.

It was the biggest grief and shock of my life - worse even than the sudden death of my mother when I was eleven - that Mark was not in fact the man I thought he was, not my soulmate, and that my marriage was an illusion and a failure. At forty-three I was beginning to fear an old age of loneliness and despair. I contrasted my idealism in my darker moments with the chaotic lives and relationships which so many of my clients experienced. They were, in the main, unschooled, immature young women bumping up against one callow, selfish youth after another, collecting for themselves, as they went along, a screaming, roundhead souvenir of each. And I expected to find bliss in such an imperfect, haphazard world! Those people I knew who seemed to have found it - and there were ever fewer - had just been lucky, I had come to conclude. I had begun to envy them - even sometimes as I sat alone in my lounge to hate them. I went as far as to invent private woes for them, which they never brought over the threshold of their front doors.

Once, I had discussed relationships with my previous boss. He took the decidedly unromantic and opposite view to mine that if one night the world was all shaken up and we found ourselves the next day with total strangers, we would soon learn to live and love with them - until we tired of one another and looked elsewhere. The world, he thought, would be no worse - and possibly even better for it. I could see his point of course. Increasingly men and women seemed able to discard their old lives, like a snake leaves behind an old skin, to begin afresh elsewhere with little apparent anguish or remorse. There were few front gate dramas, passionate doorstep scenes, screaming pleas and remonstrations from open bedroom windows. This was no soap opera. The planet turned serenely from one day to the next. Yet I could see no partner for myself in such a feckless waltz....*for friendship and outings, maybe more.* I thought of myself as one of the swans on my favourite stretch of the canal, those lovely, dreamy birds which mate for life. My white swan had turned out to be a noisy, greedy goose. Melissa, my colleague, who came close to being an intimate friend, had impressed upon me the need to find a someone to relieve the loneliness I felt. I knew she meant well and part of me knew she was absolutely right. The part which disagreed unreservedly had the casting vote however and the result was inertia.

I played the old piano hoping for some insight but without conviction. I stopped. I looked in the television magazine. I listened to some music. By five I could stand it no longer and picked up the phone.

“Joshua? I - I just wanted to say a big thank you for such a wonderful lunch...and to say how sorry I still am....”

“Sorry? Why sorry?”

“For being so nosy. It was the wine. Otherwise I would not have been so...so intrusive about your wife...prying into your feelings....”

“But you did mean to pry! The alcohol took away the inhibition, that’s all. You w-want to know why I never remarried - or as they say, horribly, these days - entered into another relationship. The reason I dodged your question was that I didn’t really know how to answer it. I don’t know...well I do...b-but anyway, let me tell you another time.”

I felt so agitated all evening that I was sure my sleep would be troubled again. But I slept soundly and awoke in far better spirits the next morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eileen at the desk smiled at me and handed over the key to the archive. I had brought my notepad to scribble down all references to the Coles and Duncan. I found the announcement of Emilia’s marriage and, for a while, nothing more. Of Duncan there was no mention. I decided to stop and go back to the beginning of the archive. Perhaps I could find when Hollycroft House was sold to him - and now it occurred to me that she and Duncan were almost certainly acquainted then if he had bought her father’s house. This encouraged me to read every edition twice and I was intensely disappointed when I found nothing. I closed my eyes and sought inspiration and guidance. In my internal darkness the date March 1806 appeared. I got up and carefully took out the five editions for that month. There was nothing in the first, nor the second. As soon as I smoothed out the third I saw it.

“Mr and Mrs Josiah Cole are delighted to announce the birth of a daughter, Mathilda Louise, safely delivered by God’s good grace on 12th March.”

I could scarcely breathe. My heart was racing. I stared at the announcement and felt - there is no better word to describe it - utter relief. I closed my eyes and pictured both parents looking with

rapture into the cradle. I saw Josiah pick up the puling infant and rock it in his arms and saw Emilia look on with pride and delight. Then a chill entered my heart - an anxiety which disturbed my reverie. And I thought I understood. I thought I sensed the terrible dilemma and confusion which Duncan's presence had caused in Emilia's breast. She knew that here stood her true, predestined soulmate but one she could not now possibly have. A dreadful anguish filled me from top to bottom. How Duncan's visits had unsettled her! As she grew more and more aware of her attraction to him how cruelly she had been torn between her duty and obligation, and, no doubt, affection she felt towards her kindly husband, and of course her love for her child - and the emotion which Duncan aroused in her young body.

At first the prospect of pregnancy and the arrival of the child must have brought relief, stilling the longing she had already conceived for Duncan. But like a spark unknowingly left unextinguished it had begun to glow and burn painfully in her and she could not suppress it. Had she begged in subsequent letters to him to let her be, to stay away, to leave Earlstone and restore her peace of mind? I imagined her utter loneliness. To whom could she turn for solace and advice? In whom could she confide? I felt suffocated. I needed air. I had to leave the cellar.

"I must come round to see you, Joshua. I've found something out. I'm rather upset."

"What exactly?"

"Have you eaten?"

"No. I've just got back from Birmingham. The train was late. B-b-but -"

"Do you eat takeaways?"

"Not as a rule. I do fish and chips odd times."

We never did get round to eating those chips. I can still hardly believe myself what was about to happen. As soon as I entered the hall a figure almost rushed at me. I saw Bartholomew exactly as I had seen him in my nightmare at the vicarage, with his jaw dropping open in a frightening grin. I dropped the soggy bag on the floor and stopped dead. The mouth regained its enigmatic smile and the eyes sparkled slyly.

"Joshua. Where did you get the bear?"

"Bartholomew? Oh, it was ages ago. There was an auction for famine relief at the church hall just before old Reverend Huddleston retired. Everyone had to bring a piece of junk. Don't you remember? You used to worship there, didn't you say?"

Now I remembered the event which for some reason I had not attended.

"Did the bear come from the vicarage by any chance?"

He frowned. He might have done, he thought. The vicar was having a clear-out and that was what had given him the idea of an auction for charity. Joshua was bending down to pick up the chips.

"Joshua. Get me a knife."

"But I've already set the table and the plates are warming..."

"NO. Get me a long carving knife. PLEASE. Just do as I ask!"

He came back, looking on in apprehension as I took the knife from him. I inserted the blade in the thin gap between the bear's fangs. And pushed down. Slowly, against two centuries of immobility, the jaw descended until the mouth was fully open. I stood on tiptoe and there, where I knew it would be, was the end of something. With my fingertips I drew out a scroll tied with a faded red ribbon.

"Bartholomew was their letter box." I whispered.

I handed it to Joshua. He stared at it in incomprehension and then at me in fear, as if I were a witch. I followed him into the kitchen. He undid the bow and opened the yellowed paper out. The writing was very faded but still just legible.

28th February 1809

Dearest Friend,

This must be, I fear, my last letter to you for quite some time.. My husband seems lately suspicious again that there is some special understanding between us for he asks and speaks particularly about you and appears to watch my reactions. When the weather is a little better and he is recovered from his latest pernicious cough we will go up into Derbyshire to visit his sister and stay on until his lungs have quite improved. What accursed damp, foggy, smoky air plagues Earlstone!

I will write to you from Buxton as soon as I can do so in safety. I am elate of course that you have had more encouraging news as to your own particular malady. My Aunt Gibbs was told many years ago that her heart was failing. She has outlived my other aunts and uncles and can still stand up at a ball! So farewell for the present, my dear friend. As I write I am already looking forward to our musical gathering tonight which Mr Cole insists he will not cancel. I know Bartholomew will keep our secrets safe.

Your affectionate friend, Emilia, who one day, God willing, may yet be more.

“How astonishing!” exclaimed Joshua. “What on earth made you suspect it was there?”

I shook my head. It was my secret.

“So my bear did live at the vicarage all those years ago.”

I would say nothing further. I only sensed that the mists around Emilia’s intentions were thinning.

“Look at the date,” said Joshua.

I looked. He took out those certificates from a drawer. Josiah Cole had died a mere two days after the letter was written.

“And so - of course - she never thought of the letter again.”

“And he never visited - how could he? - during her time of mourning to retrieve it.”

We looked at each other. I sensed what was in his thoughts.

“You think she had already broken her vows, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “To relinquish all others? I won’t venture an opinion.....o-only to say that euphemism and understatement were the norm in those days.”

What was he trying to imply? I read the letter once more. And then I twigged.

“Ah! So you assume that what she meant by an “understanding” was a quickie whenever the vicar’s back was turned!”

He winced. “She would not be the first!”

“How...sordid!”

“No. You made it sound sordid.”

I snorted. He trod more carefully.

“Emily, please. We just do not know and never can. Perhaps their friendship was, er, still platonic at that point.”

I picked up the knife and got to my feet. He looked startled, afraid even and his eyes were asking me what I now intended. I went back out to Bartholomew and studied his chest and torso. Secrets, not secret.

“Oh no you’re NOT!” shouted Joshua and stood in front of him between us.

“But what if.....?”

“You leave Bartholomew alone!”

“But what if Clive’s letters are hidden inside him?”

“But he’s stuffed! And why would she put them in there where she could never retrieve them?”

The bear looked down at me just above Joshua's head and appeared to nod in agreement with him. I got my handbag and took out my make-up mirror. I asked Joshua if he had a torch. He went to look through his drawers and finally found one. From the glory-hole under the stairs he brought out some steps, and standing on the top step he shone the torch into the dark mouth, ridged like the roof of a cave. Perching on the bottom step I held the mirror in place in the palate. Bartholomew's throat went down a few inches and stopped, appearing to be blocked off by what looked like wool. The throat was empty.

"Now do you b-believe me? Is there any other orifice of my poor old bear you would care to examine?"

As I thought the offer over Joshua raised his eyebrows and pulled such a silly face that I burst out laughing.

The chips were cold and greasy and we threw them away. We sat in the dining room devouring four pikelets he had found in the fridge and then two overripe bananas which he had fried in butter with almonds, honey and sultanas; plus ice cream.

"Can I tell you what I deduce, Joshua?"

"Can I stop you?"

"Ah, no. I think Earlstone was far too small a place in the early nineteenth century for a woman of Emilia's social standing to conduct an affair. The servants would have known. Think of Emma Bovary! The whole village, apart from her clot of a husband - suspected what she was up to. No. If Emilia had lived in a bigger, more fashionable place, then perhaps yes. How could you be discrete in Earlstone for goodness sake? No. She was prepared to wait for however long. And so was he."

"You've made up your mind?"

"I have."

I could tell that he tended to agree. In the hallway as I was about to leave I noticed again that the other door was firmly shut and wondered if this was his private sanctuary. I plucked up the nerve to ask him. He frowned and then, after a moment's hesitation, turned the door-knob.

The second thing to strike me, after the general mess - pillars of books, piles of papers and folders on the floor, sofa and table - were the beautiful watercolours of birds on the wall. I counted over twenty. On the table there was another on a small easel, half-finished, of a proud swan. A palette stood open.

"How beautiful!" I breathed. "Is this another of your hidden talents, Joshua? Remarkable."

When he did not reply I looked around at him. He seemed troubled. Now on the mantelpiece, above a Chinese screen of a pale green pagoda, I noticed a picture in an oval frame. It was the photograph of a lovely woman, with earnest grey eyes, intelligent and dreamy, staring into the distance with just a hint of a smile. Her hair was chestnut, tied back, leaving wisps around her ears. I went over and picked it up. In the hearth was a stoppered, green and cream onyx vase. I guessed immediately what it must contain. My eyes returned to the photograph and her eyes seemed to be warmer now and the smile more pronounced.

"This was Kate's room. Painting was her hobby, not mine. I couldn't paint a door..... She made me promise her, on her last night, that I would remarry. She could not stand the thought of m-me being lonely and unloved. I couldn't promise though. In the end, she got so upset that I did. But I didn't really mean it. How could I?"

I replaced the photo and said nothing. I could tell he was very upset and I pretended, picking up a book from the table, that I had developed a sudden interest in the rise of mercantilism in the Middle Ages. When I turned he had left the room. I went out into the hall. He had crept upstairs. From one of those large, cold, empty rooms which I was able to picture, there came the soft, hushed sound of a man weeping, the confession of a man to a dead wife who stifled his

sorrow with bric-a-brac, with dried up canals, with non-listed buildings and other lost causes. I put my foot on the bottom riser, changed my mind, turned and let myself out.

At nine-thirty my doorbell rang and of course my first thought was that it was Joshua, come around to apologise for deserting me. Replacing the bulb in the porch light was one of those jobs I kept meaning to get round to, and I almost fainted when out of the street gloom materialised not Joshua, but Mark.

"Is it convenient?" he asked, looking beyond me into the hall. Did he think I had a man round? I stood aside and, like a cowed dog, he came in. I followed him into the lounge and we sat down on separate sofas.

"You look very smart," I said breathlessly.

He winked. "Thanks. I've just driven back from Manchester. Big deal in the offing. Megabucks."

We swapped news we had had of the children and he told me his mother was not so well. I looked at his new charcoal grey suit and brushed pigskin shoes, crossed over each other, close to where Joshua's broken down ones had been. The shadow of the stain they had made was still visible. He looked around and then at me.

"It feels really odd to be back again - like you feel when you've been on a long holiday and come home....Em? You look different somehow. What have you done to yourself? Had a makeover?"

Before I could think of what to say he noticed the instrument and leant over to press down some of the keys. Their tone was thin and sour.

"Blimey! You must have paid an arm and a leg for this old Joanna. Very nice wood. Yew? Walnut?"

"Mark, what do you want?"

He shrugged and folded his arms. The gold strap of his wristwatch caught the light and flashed. He leant to his right now and tickled Breville, who had pretended to sleep on, under the chin.

"Just to see how you and Breville are getting on... You OK?"

"More or less. I've been down...winter blues I think...but I'm better now. And yourself?"

"So, so I suppose. ....You with anybody?"

The question made my face feel very hot and flustered me. I weighed my words carefully.

"With anybody? Not *with*, no. You can tell I'm not. Do I have a friend? Sort of. Just a friend."

An unsettling gleam entered his eye.

"I see. Well, I'm in between as well at the moment. Things looked good for a while and then....."

"And then?"

"Well, she moved in for a while...woman I found in the paper."

"Ah! Was she cuddly? Dog lover? Keen on dining out, looking for genuine friendship, maybe more....?"

He smiled. "I see you've been there too. This friend. Local is he?"

I saw now a new gleam in his eye - more of a dangerous glint, such as I had never seen before. A mischievous imp within me decided to get some revenge.

"He's very tall, slim, in his late thirties...an academic...."

"Handsome of course..."

"Handsome? Well, I think he is, but that's not what matters. He's very kind and generous, dependable."

"With a good sense of humour? Likes country walks? Married is he?"

"No. Was. A widower."

We fell silent. It occurred to me how desperately I wished him to be gone. I felt relief as it dawned on me that what I had felt at the door had been shock, and nothing more. I was cured!

Feeling more relaxed, I studied his smart clothes, his neatly coiffured brown hair and his stylish, reactolite glasses. He was certainly a handsome man and he had lost weight. He looked younger. While I had absent-mindedly studied him he had been studying me for now he said “Em, you definitely look different...around the nose and mouth...”

“You think I’ve had cosmetic surgery? I haven’t. Why should I?”

The cat yawned, stretched out his black arms and claws, rose, arched his back, turned once and then wrapped himself round into an even tighter ball. I envied him his state of ignorance and innocence.

“Mark, if you’ve come around for sex, I don’t mind. If you’re desperate. Come on.” I stood up. He flinched and tried to look hurt. “What sort of person do you really take me for, Emily? If I wanted...relief...there are plenty of call-girls advertising in the Gazette. I want you. I want you back. I miss you. I know now just how big a fool I’ve been. I’ll change.”

He came to me and embraced me. I expected to feel his magical power and I feared it. But, again, much to my surprise but more to my relief, I felt nothing, not even a primitive sexual arousal.

I led him upstairs and we had sex. It did not take very long. In spite of his great prowess I did not have an orgasm and I refused his offer to procure me one by other means; my final act of revenge. We lay there for an age, side by side, like two ancient stone statues on a church tomb. Finally he looked at his watch, which, in his haste he had forgotten to remove, rose and, glancing at himself in the long mirror, dressed carefully. He bent down to peck me on the cheek and asked me if he should call me. I shook my head and turned away onto my side. He began to protest weakly but I did not reply. I listened to his smart shoes hurry down the staircase and when the front door slammed I knew that the final episode of my turbulent marriage had just taken place. I took a long, hot bath and meticulously washed away all traces of him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday. In the bright, glorious morning I walked as early as I dared to Joshua’s. The daffodils and their cousins were now fully persuaded to peep out, and then had no choice but to stay out. There was not a hint of chill in the still air. Spring would be postponed no longer. Joshua looked a little embarrassed as he opened his door. He had shaved badly and a tiny piece of tissue showed where he nicked himself on the jaw. At the far end of the hall, through the half-open kitchen door where the sun came beaming through, I spotted one empty and one half-empty bottle of wine on the table. He saw me notice and turned to close the door. One of his eyes was bloodshot. He took his duffle coat from the coat-stand and buttoned up the toggles. As soon as he had finished I unfastened them and told him he would not need it. It was a perfect morning. I felt sorry for him, catching a faint smell of stale alcohol on his breath. In silence we walked into town and climbed up Castle Street to the Gazette office.

One of the last pieces in our puzzle was soon to be discovered and I was nervous. I watched Joshua carefully remove the editions for early February 1810 from their drawer and pull away their tissue paper covers. Emilia had died the day before the second edition of the month. The report of the inquest would surely be in the third. On the front page under DEATHS her demise was duly announced.

“On Thursday February 7th, tragically, EMILIA COLE, widow of JOSIAH COLE, erstwhile vicar of this parish. Interment took place at Saint Martin’s church on February 9th.”

“Not by her own hand, you see,” I whispered. He raised an eyebrow, shook his head and made a gesture of uncertainty with his palms. He turned a few pages and there, on the right hand side at the top by the left margin we read under the rubric **The Widow of Josiah Cole Falls to Her Death** the following report.

The County Coroner, the Hon. Frederick Stubberfield, has recorded a verdict of accidental death on Emilia Cole of twenty-six years, widow of Josiah Oliver Cole, who was discovered by her own maid, Judy Timms, at the foot of the staircase on Thursday morning, September 7th. Her neck was broken in the fall. The court heard testimony from Miss Timms that her mistress had been much distressed and given to weeping in the days prior to her decease. No other witnesses were called. Mr Stubberfield offered two verdicts for the jury to consider, one of suicide and one of accidental death. He asked the jurymen to bear in mind that Mrs Cole had not yet emerged from her period of mourning, and that her distress would be therefore nothing uncommon. He questioned furthermore whether a young mother of a three year old child would be more or less likely to take her own life, however temporarily she might have been taken again by a seizure of an old grief. No suicide note, he reminded them, had been discovered. He recommended them to incline more reasonably towards a verdict of accidental death, particularly in view of the fact that a child’s toy, a ball, had been found by the body, on which the deceased might well have stumbled at the top of the staircase. The jury needed only a few moments in conference to concur with the Mr Stubberfield’s recommendation.

I saw a ball thrown down the stairs and immediately realised the truth. Her guilt seized me. Now I knew it all.

“Did she fall, did she jump or was she pushed?” said Joshua rather flippantly. Without a word to him I got up and walked out.

I phoned to tell a startled Paul Bevin that I was sending him my resignation. I went to the doctor’s and got a note to cover the period of notice I was contracted to serve. She wrote *depression* on it.

I had sat in silence for hour upon hour that Tuesday afternoon and evening, considering my options, and had finally concluded that I wanted nothing more to do with abusive relationships, absentee fathers, immature mothers, child neglect, alcoholism, drug dependency, fecklessness and all the other depravities, ancient and modern, against which I now understood I had been fighting a losing battle. My mortgage was paid and I had my father’s bequest. Given my modest expenditure I had no financial problems to fear. I felt no guilt only relief. I would suit myself. Why exactly I came to feel that way I cannot readily explain. I think a growing inner doubt - one I had hardly been aware of - had been, upon the discovery of Emilia’s suicide, hardened into a conviction, that my life - and, by extension, the lives of the people on my books - was essentially futile.

In the days that followed I sat playing Emilia’s piano, pausing only to feed myself and Breville. To my surprise and relief I slept soundly and did not dream. Only the wistful thought would not leave me that no matter how we tried, contentment was a matter of chance. It seemed to me the normal default setting for life for me and so many other millions of people at home and abroad was, at best, a banal routine punctuated with modest highs and lows; at worst it was torment. No kind deity smiled upon us and if God did exist he was an absentee landlord who did not interfere in the imperfect world he had deliberately created. I let the phone ring and ring. I went out seldom, for necessities. One evening the doorbell rang. I was in the shower. Later I found a note pushed under my door.

Dear Emily,

I rang you. If you are upset and I am somehow to blame, please excuse me. Get in touch if you wish to talk it over. I would love to write an article about Emilia and how her extraordinary story came to light. Would you approve? Will you help?

Missing you,

Joshua

Then, on Saturday afternoon, the phone rang over and over again. I dialled 1471. It was Joshua's number. I dialled 3.

"D-did you not get my note, Emily?"

"I did, Joshua. I'm sorry. I've been feeling rather low."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear it. I h-hope you won't think me forward, but the forecast for tomorrow is perfect and I wondered if you would like to come on a p-p-picnic. To Thornby."

I had vaguely heard of Thornby reservoir, but had never been there. I asked him politely but without enthusiasm what the attraction was.

"You've never been? You an Earlstone lass and never been to Thornby reservoir? It's only eight or nine miles away, not far from Market Bosworth. Please say you'll come. It would lift your spirits, I just know it would. I have something special planned. Leave the picnic to me. My treat and....peace offering..."

Reluctantly I agreed. I put the phone down and sat at the foot of the stair. Was I really going to spend my Sunday at a reservoir?

It was ironic indeed that such a treasure as Thornby had lain all those years undiscovered by me so close to my doorstep. In Joshua's car we barely exchanged ten words and my inclination at one point was to ask him to turn round and take me home. How fortunate that I did not! We drove, pausing at one traffic light or mini roundabout after another, through the drab villages of Bragwell and Earlthorpe and then, turning off the tedious A447 road to Leicester, we were soon in quiet, narrow, winding lanes where I had never, in all my forty-three years, driven. One bend untwisted and then veered away into another, ascending and descending, past brightening spinneys juggling rookeries in their branches, past fresh green cattle meadows, past old farm houses and fields of yellow rape. The sparse canvas of early spring was rapidly filling. Soon I felt better. And then, as we rounded a bend, a sparkling stretch of water surged into view. We stopped and got out. The view was idyllic. An almost childish excitement swelled within me. The sun was shimmering and climbing steadily towards his early April zenith. Amongst the glittering sun-gems sat fishermen in rowing boats casting for trout which sprang unpredictably from the placid water in pursuit of flies. The reservoir was shaped like a crescent and was bordered by woods which would be dense in a few days time with new leaf, by fields in which cattle or horses grazed, and, at the widest point on the back of the crescent, amongst a congregation of cedars, on a high slope, rose up the ancient grey steeple of the village church. Joshua must have been studying my reaction for now he said, squeezing my arm, "Emily, I knew you would love it here....Here. Take these."

He passed me a small pair of binoculars from his rucksack. We began to walk. He drew my attention to the call of a chiff-chaff and trained his binoculars - which looked like the kind Montgomery might have used at El Alamein - on a tree a few yards away.

"There he is! Not been back from the Mediterranean long. Little green and grey bird. Touch of yellow. Can you see him?"

I could not see so he showed me in his pocket book. I admired it but told him that I liked swans best of all. Nearby there was a pair of them and, a little further away, a solitary one which

turned left and right uncertainly. Joshua deduced that he might have lost his mate. He pointed out a nest in the reeds on which another sat. The cygnets would hatch in two or three weeks, he thought.

“Might that one on his own be her mate?” I asked optimistically. Even as I spoke there started up a great whirring and beating, like the sound of a machine, and a swan from nowhere appeared, clapping the surface with his wingtips, and bore down upon the solitary individual, who now veered away from the nest and escaped in a confusion of wings and paddles. I watched sadly as calm restored itself and the lonely swan, reaching safety, turned left and right, circled without aim and stopped. Joshua was looking through his binoculars elsewhere.

“My favourite bird is the great crested grebe. Over there!”

The name was such a clumsy mouthful that I expected some bumbling, fat thing to paddle into my circle of sight. Imagine my astonishment and shock, almost horror, when the most exotic wizard mask of a bird I had never seen and could never have dreamt up suddenly materialised.

“Why, he’s amazing!” I gasped. Then he was gone, submerged.

“He’ll be back up in a second...Look to the right of where he went down! There!”

And there he was again, with a small, wriggling, silver fish in his beak. I watched him swim to meet a replica of himself, his mate, who greedily swallowed his gift. And then they danced! Face to face, darting their heads and necks past one another, first to the left then to the right, they danced! I laughed out loud, almost sobbed with delight.

“Fabulous!” I shouted. What on earth had I been missing all these years? I had felt so complacently sorry for all my clients who, preoccupied with their own conceits and miserable lives, never looked up at the stars. Was I any better? In humility now I watched the grebes dance, totally oblivious of me and my concerns.

“In May you can see their grebelings riding on their backs to keep them safe from the pike.

Their necks look like stripy sticks of humbug rock. Would you like to come back then, Emily?”

I could not speak. I had to turn away from him, pretending to focus elsewhere. We walked on. A long bird call with a jolly, twittering flourish broke the silence and made me laugh. He sang again, telling his audience like the compere of an end-of-the-pier-show, it sounded uncannily similar, how “happy to see you” he was.

“What on earth is that?”

“You don’t know? It’s just a common, cheeky, old chaffinch! There he is on the path as usual, looking for crumbs from the people feeding the ducks.”

The chaffinch had a cobalt blue head with a pink breast, an absolute beauty of a little bird.

Joshua swung his rucksack off his back and took out a few slices of bread, threw him a few crumbs, and then walked to the rail of the landing stage where four rowing boats were tied up. We paused to feed a troupe of bobbing, quarrelsome mallards. One or two laughed as if they were sharing a hilarious joke. The swans, aloof at first, finally could not resist a change of diet from weed and scattered the ducks like liners gliding through a regatta. I saw an enormous trout steal in amongst the frenzy of paddles, gobble a falling crumb and steal away again. Speechless, I seized Joshua’s arm and pointed.

“Fish are cleverer than we think,” said he.

We wandered on past the overgrown churchyard, past banks of reeds until we reached the woods almost opposite the church. The stems of bluebells were beginning to emerge and some, like sleepers waking, were raising their pale, budded heads.

“Oh we must come back and see them when they’re out!” I exclaimed. There were swathes of white and golden stars between the birches and in my imagination I saw them intermingled and daubed with the blue of the bells. There was a bench. We sat and stared at the flat, blue water, trying to predict where the next trout would leap out. Joshua pointed out the smaller tufted ducks, black with a curl at the back of their heads, and how they dived for weed, whilst the

mallards could only dip into the water, leaving their rear quarters pointing upwards. I laughed in delight like a child seeing the comedy and strangeness of things for the first time.

“Listen! Can you hear that?” he asked, swivelling round to look into the field behind us. “Hear it, Emily? It sounds like “give a little bird a piece of cheese”. It’s a yellowhammer.” He showed me a beauty of a bird in his book. The call sounded again - just as he had described it.

“Where is he?”

“In that oak over there, I think. No! Look! He’s on the dry stone wall in the field. At ten o’clock, near the corner.”

And yes, there he was, in all his tiny, golden glory, ruffling out his feathers and preening himself, telling anyone who cared to listen just how wonderful it was to be a bird on such a day. On the still, warm air the occasional remarks and laughter of the anglers carried clear to the bank. I had been keeping an eye on them and had not yet seen one fish taken; but the men seemed patient and relaxed, glad to have an excuse to be out there.

“This is a magical place, Joshua. Thank you.”

He looked at his watch and opened the neck of his rucksack. He took out neatly wrapped foil packages which contained wholemeal baguettes filled with smoked salmon and prawns.

“I baked the rolls myself,” he declared proudly. “You see, I’m not entirely useless.”

“Who said you were? Ah! You brought some wine too!”

“I think I can walk off a couple of small glugs before we go home. Here, take the glasses.”

He removed the stopper and poured till they were full and the lemony wine was gleaming in the sunlight. We clinked glasses but did not know what toast to make. We hesitated then drank. We ate our lunch in a pensive silence. For pudding he produced two pasties filled with apple and cinnamon, also home-made, also delicious. I saw my chance.

“Kate was a lucky woman to have a chef for a husband.”

But he did not reply. I touched the binoculars and asked him if they had belonged to her. He nodded, took up his own and looked away into the far distance.

“Delicious wine,” I said, determined to make him speak. “Can I see the label?”

“It’s German, the best quality they keep for themselves. We bought a case in Trier, on the Moselle. Three years ago. It was for our silver wedding party but we never got round to drinking it. Tomorrow would have been her forty-eighth birthday I thought it was time it got drunk. White doesn’t keep.”

I drank deeply of it and so did he. As we walked on - and I swear I did it absent-mindedly - I took his hand. When he clasped it tight I realised what I had done and soon found an excuse to let go.

“This was Katie’s favourite spot.”

We had arrived at the furthest point from the church, at the end of the crescent by a shallow pool, a quiet backwater separate from the reservoir, joined to it by a narrow channel. It was overhung by whitethorn bushes which had speckled the water with their tiny confetti and from the branches wagtails were expertly wheeling amongst clouds of gnats spot lit in a sunbeam aslant through an enormous cedar. In this exclusive enclave tufted ducks were bobbing and plopping out of sight, mallards dipping and coots minding everybody’s business but their own. Just below us a swan was sitting on her vast nest of reeds amongst the rushes. The main sheet of water stretched past the grey church, far into the distance and disappeared amongst a copse which could not quite muster enough trees to crest the green hill on the horizon.

“This is an enchanting place, Joshua. No wonder she loved it.”

“I’ve not been back here since she died,” he said quietly.

I put my arm around his waist and held him tight.

“She was a lucky woman, to be loved so much.”

The sun, past its zenith, now sparkled in the water at the further end.

“She wanted to be scattered here. But I can’t bring myself to do it.”

I told him - rather lamely - how I had been unable to sever my ties properly with Mark until only recently. But he seemed to be only half-listening and was keen to tell me of a recurring dream he had, where his wife appeared and asked him why he had not carried out her request. "She asked me again the other night. She turned into you. It disturbed me." He shuddered as if a chill breeze had unexpectedly sprung up. In the silence I knew he was waiting for my opinion. "If that is what she wanted, I think you should do it. Why, I wouldn't want to be trapped in that vase like a genie for all eternity. I'd want to be in the air. In the sun. In the water.....I can't think of a nicer place to spend the rest of time.....than here."

He looked at me fully, gave a great whoop of joy, and kissed me on the forehead.

"You're right!" he shouted. "I'm being s-stupid and selfish!"

At the country lane we turned and walked back the way we had come, giving me a fresh perspective on the scene. We returned to the bench we had picnicked on and finished off the wine, watching the grebes dive and dance. At the church he led me up the steep, narrow path through the overhanging grasses from the previous summer.

"Kate's parents came from near Thornby. Her people are buried here. Three generations. Here let me show you."

Dutifully I allowed myself to be taken through various levels of undergrowth to see first her parents' grave, in whose urn blackened and broken stalks of flowers persisted, then to her paternal grandparents and finally, in closest proximity to the sleepy church, beneath an arched stone of slate like Emilia's in Earlstone, to her eldest ancestors. I stopped and stared.

"Yelland! I don't believe it! That was my maiden name!"

"Then you are almost certainly distantly related to Kate," he said matter-of-factly. "Tom Yelland came up from Dunstable in 1897 and married a girl from Earlthorpe. He was a clicker in the boot and shoe trade. He came up here looking for work with his brothers. Yelland is rare around here. You would be her distant cousin."

"But that's astonishing, Joshua!"

"Ah, no, not really. Most English people are related to Henry the Eighth you know."

"No! You mean I could be related to you?"

"Very probably. And Anne Boleyn. When we get home I'll show you my favourite ancestry website."

We left the churchyard, went by a pretty row of cottages, turned left and ambled down the quiet main street past the post office until we reached The Fisherman's Rest. There the road divided and we took the left hand fork, a steep hill to the car park. On our right was an inviting nursery specialising in fuchsias. I told Joshua that after roses, those were my favourite flowers. We went into the long greenhouse to admire them. A slim pink and cream variety, all elegance, caught my eye immediately.

"Oh, it's an upright one," I said rather disappointed when I looked at the label.

"I could show you how to train it as a standard."

"How?"

"Easy. Just keep removing all but the top leaves and take away the flower buds for two or three seasons. All the plant's energy goes into stem growth."

"But that seems such a pity, such a waste."

"I suppose you can look at it that way."

He looked around and pointed to a tall, thick-stemmed specimen, an ancient plant in a large pot in a corner. Its gloriously bushy top would soon be coming into flower from a multitude of white, pebbly buds. In a week or so it would be magnificent.

"Patience is a virtue," he said and picked up two plants. "We'll have a competition, Emily. We'll see who has the best standard when we...you know....whenever...."

"Patience is a virtue as long as you have plenty of time to play with," I said half to myself.

Again, lost in his own thoughts, he appeared not to hear what I said. It struck me then that he

must be acquiring that hard, insensitive shell which I had noticed very solitary people are prone to. He handed me a plant and told me it was a token and souvenir of a rather special day for him.

“You’ve helped me to reach a very important decision.” He smiled but would not tell me what it was. Joshua paid for the plants and we returned to the car. Instead of taking the direct route back to Earlstone, he drove along the reservoir wall in the direction of Bradgate Park, home of Lady Jane Grey, and turned left into a smaller car park near to where we had turned and walked back, not far from the shallow pool. He got out and reached down for something behind his seat. It was the green and cream onyx vase.

“You made my mind up. Will you come with me?”

I could not speak. I looked down and shook my head. He came around to my door and opened it.

“Please, Emily. I sense she would like you to come. Please.”

How could I refuse? At first I stood back a little as he twisted off the stopper. He picked his way carefully through the rushes and held out his left hand for me to take. The nesting swan not far off began to stir and then, somehow reassured, settled back to her statuesque immobility. At first there emerged a wisp of grey smoke as Joshua tipped the vase and then the ashes came out in a sudden rush, tumbling into the water. With his hand he stirred them round, immersed the vase and washed it out, making sure it was quite empty. He stirred the water again. In the deeps just beyond the channel a great fish leapt for sheer joy and fell with a great smack back into his element. There was utter silence as we watched the ripples from both events spread out, touch each other and vanish. There was a bin by the car. Joshua opened it and threw the precious vase in. I opened my mouth to protest but his face forbade it.

We were nearly back on the outskirts of Earlstone, near Sowerbutt’s Lane when he finally spoke.

“I think I ought to feel guilty but I don’t.”

“Why should you, when you loved her so much?”

The lights changed to red and he stopped.

“I didn’t love her as much as I should have. Let me p-put it another way. I didn’t tell her and show her as much as I should have.”

“Oh, Joshua. You shouldn’t -”

“No. I was too much wrapped up in my research, too wrapped up in that vanished world of the past to notice...She had her s-space, I had mine and I just assumed that was the way she wanted it. But she wasn’t happy and she kept it to herself.” Now he made a conscious effort to calm himself and speak clearly. “She met someone. She was going to leave. I begged her not to. We forgave each other. Then as we were touring Germany - we had been out for a strenuous walk in the hills - she fell ill. There! Now you know our big secret. Not another soul knows - apart from him,” he added bitterly. He roared away from the lights and then dropped his speed.

“And who was he?”

“She wouldn’t tell me his name. A businessman.”

“Local?”

“She met him at the supermarket. Her shopping bag ripped. He helped her pick everything up. A charmer, she said. A chance encounter. Brief encounter.”

“A charmer? Did he live nearby?”

“Why? Why do you ask? Don’t pry!”

“Oh, I just have a feeling it might be someone I used to know. You never saw him?”

He took a deep breath and let out a long, painful sigh. I told him quietly to leave it be.

“What other creatures dwell on their own histories? What a blessing - and what a curse!”

“You did a brave thing today. Look. Let’s go to my place. I’ll fix us some tea. You can show me that website on my laptop.”

While he sat in my dining room and connected to the internet I blended some smoked mackerel and yoghurt to make pâté. I put some wholemeal toast, cucumber, red onion and pineapple on large plates and stuck a bottle of white into the freezer for ten minutes. When I entered the room he had a colourful screen up of characters in various historical costumes from Edwardian to Elizabethan. There were three fields asking for full name, date of birth and place of birth. He invited to me to enter my details and with mounting excitement, bordering on trepidation, I did so. He pressed SEARCH and within seconds my own name and several others near and dear to me, parents, brother, (my ex-husband) and our children appeared. My finger was drawn to press ZOOM OUT and I did, but rather too heavily for immediately the end of our little branch vanished amongst a confusion of fractals, a section of an immense, illegible tree of local humanity.

“Whoa! You were too heavy-handed,” said Joshua, clicking ZOOM IN until gradually all became legible again and my own family twiglet grew large enough to fill the screen. In the top half as I clicked on OUT again my aunts and uncles and grandparents appeared, but above and around them were forebears and relatives of whom I had little or no knowledge.

“This is just like Google Earth!” I exclaimed.

“Exactly. It’s best to use the arrows in the corners. No, hold on. I’ve got a better idea. My wife was born in 1961. We’ll try coming down her line and see if we can spot a connection to you.” He selected NEW SEARCH and entered the name Thomas Yelland, the date 16th November 1881 and the town of Dunstable. And there he was. He had had two brothers, Edward and Albert, and one sister, Victoria. Joshua asked me if my own great-grandad was called Edward or Albert, but I felt ashamed to say I did not know, adding quickly that the one on my mother’s side had been called Arthur. He raised an eyebrow, as if to say that was, yes, very interesting but rather irrelevant.

“There’s no point following Victoria’s line - unless by a remarkable coincidence she or her daughter married another Yelland -”

“No, Joshua. I want to look.”

I clicked on the bottom right arrow and followed her lifeline down until it fizzled out after just one generation. I returned to Edward. He had also married but there were no children. Albert had married a Selina Cort in 1898. If Edward had not been productive, his brother, quite to the contrary had found his Selina not wholly repugnant, for there were four daughters and three sons. One of them bore the name Earnest, born in 1908 - my own grandfather, I felt sure! I clicked on the right bottom arrow until my father, in 1932, and finally I came into view again. Joshua smiled at my delight and then clicked right and up until his own wife appeared on Thomas’s line.

“See. She was a distant cousin of yours. You are descended from her great-great uncle Albert.”

“Unbelievable.”

“No. Every day we pass people in the street who are our distant relatives, maybe even our half-brothers and sisters we do not know we have. We might even marry them. Likes attract, of course, as far as folk are concerned.”

I thought of my ex-clients who did not travel far for a mate, perhaps round the corner. Paul Bevin reckoned that Bragwell was the most insular and interbred village in the Midlands. Then I thought of the wine and got up to extract it from the freezer before it turned to ice. Except that I did not. I felt so dizzy that I sat straight back down again. My skin felt prickly and cold. Joshua did not notice however and after a couple of deep breaths I managed to get to my feet and bring in the food and wine. As we ate I reached out and found the homepage again. This

time I entered Emilia's details, which I had remembered. Calmly Joshua touched the FORWARD button and told me not to bother. I was annoyed.

"No, I want to see!"

"I've already seen. Watch."

He went back up to my great grandfather Albert and kept clicking on the top left hand arrow until, after five or six families, the name Mathilda Louise Cole appeared. Through her, by marriage with the great grandfather of the wife of Albert Yelland, I was a distant blood relative of Emilia. I felt a surge of joy fill me.

"You already knew... Why didn't you tell me, Joshua?" I whispered.

"Deep down you knew too." He took out a square of paper from his back pocket, unfolded it and spread it out. He had underlined his own name at the bottom. He sat back and drank deeply from his glass of wine and chuckled. What incestuous arrangement was he now hinting at? There was such a mesh of information that the font was very small. I scan-read the paper for the name Yelland and then Cole. In the top corners I half-expected to find Henry the Eighth.

"What? What am I supposed to be looking for?"

"Can't you see it?" He tapped the left hand side and filled his glass. The writing was so faint that I had to fetch my reading glasses. As soon as I put them on I saw it. Clive Edward Duncan. I gasped and felt faint again. He took a pen and traced in the line from Duncan to himself.

"There. Mystery solved. I am descended in a very roundabout manner from his brother. In my veins flows a drop or two of Clive's blood. What do you think about that then?"

But I could not think. My head whirled, just as it had when I had fallen ill that night, and my ears began to roar. I was saying something, I knew, but it was indistinct and incoherent. I saw him look concerned. He sounded as if he was speaking underwater. He stood and picked me up and carried me into the lounge to lay me on a sofa. He propped my feet up with cushions. Slowly my head slowed down and his voice became clear again.

"Emily, you're so pale. Like a ghost. May I?"

Without waiting for my reply he held my wrist. He looked horrified.

"W-what's w-rong?" I managed to stammer.

"Have you felt like this before? Had dizzy spells?"

"Now and then. I have a poor head for wine. I mean, how many glasses have I -?"

"Do you get short of breath?"

"No. never."

"A tight chest?"

"No."

This seemed to reassure him a little. He went to get me a glass of water and while he was gone I felt the artery on my neck. I could not be sure but every so often the pulse seemed to weaken. Did it even miss occasionally?

"You must get yourself checked out at the doc's, Emilia. Tomorrow. Do you promise?"

He had called me Emilia but the urge to correct him subsided immediately.

"Don't be such an alarmist, Joshua! I've had two, no three big shocks in one night. Of course I'm dizzy. And I'm tipsy. Come on, I want to see your family tree again."

"Not until you promise!"

He got off his knees to block my path, but stumbled as I got up and I nearly fell on top of him.

"Oh dear. Now I'm drunk!" he said. "I'll have to walk back home."

"Remember your shoes then this time."

He looked at his odd socks, then at me and began to laugh. I began to laugh too until we were howling in total, unconditional joy. He excused himself and I went back into the dining room.

In his absence I tapped in The Future and pressed GO. Over a million websites were found.

When he came back I slyly explained what I had done. He looked taken aback but then grinned.

He topped up our glasses, emptying the bottle. He toasted me silently and I whispered "to the

future.” We drank. My baby grand sat neglected in the corner. I sat down and played. I sang the song of the deserted maid. He appeared at my shoulder. I was longing for him to touch me. Finally he laid his hand on my shoulder. I stopped.

“No, please go on Emily. This is so charming.”

I went through my repertoire like a schoolgirl and with one song, Danny Boy, he joined in. He had a fine baritone voice and I complimented him.

“One of my other hidden talents,” he murmured, looking into my upturned eyes. And then he bent down and finally kissed me.

“What others do you have, Joshua?” I said. “Will you please show me?”

The next morning I woke as the first hint of dawn appeared at the edge of the curtains. Had I heard the old piano in my dreams or in the real world as I had woken? I lay listening. To my amazement I saw a pair of old jeans on the chest of drawers and a check shirt. I turned and saw Joshua’s sleeping head on the pillow and instantly recalled all the delicious events of our evening and night together. The piano chord sounded again. Quietly I slipped downstairs. An unearthly, sinister chord made me stop. But it was my baby grand, not the antique. The rising sun directed in a beam of golden light straight in through the bottom stair window. I looked in through the dining room door and Breville sprang down, with another clang, from the keyboard and sat up on his hind legs, clenching and unclenching his paws, imploring me to pick him up until, laughing, I did. I cradled him like a baby, rocked him to and fro and sang to him until his eyes were pale, skinny slits and he began to snore. I walked into the lounge where all my clothes lay strewn and approached the old piano. The lid was up and I knew for a fact that it had been down the previous evening. I shuddered. I reached out and touched one key after another but hardly one note sounded. I leant forward. The mustiness had completely vanished. Breville struggled free and leapt down, suddenly aware again of the true purpose of his cuteness. He began to walk out of the lounge to demonstrate in which direction I needed to go to the kitchen, turning his head and meowing indignantly when I failed to understand. I told him to hush and followed him into the hall. Something made me stop as I passed the mirror. I turned. And there, looking back at me, I saw a face which I had not seen for many, many years.