

THE SNOW

It had been a very turbulent summer. Day after day, the majestic ash in the field beyond the house had been thrown to and fro, unwilling dance partner of the clumsy wind. After the trauma of the previous autumn when Kay's cancer had been diagnosed; after the misery and misgiving of a winter and spring of regular chemotherapy, and then the jubilation of June when all signs of the malignancy had vanished, we had looked forward to a summer of calm in the back garden.

Just before her shock diagnosis I had been forced to admit to myself - and I commit it now for the first time in writing to this diary - that my love for Kay seemed to be fading as inexorably as an old rose. To admit this to myself as a possibility brought a measure of relief from the guilt and anxiety which orbited close to that dark star of doubt. I reasoned with myself that it was a normal process of middle-age - a path of transition between passionate love and spiritual love. But if I caught myself admiring or thinking about the pretty young woman who had joined my art class in the village hall, I immediately thought of something else.

The tongue, the eyes and the hands can feign greater affection than they feel, but there is one part of the male anatomy which cannot. We had become more infrequent lovers. I exaggerated a pain in my back to explain my lack of libido. Her eyes told me she suspected a deeper problem but the genuine pain in her own back that October shifted her focus dramatically. It also made me realise just how empty my life would be without my wife. That pretty young woman receded in my mind and a chance glib comment by her about Kay's condition gave an insight into her superficiality. Which brought me more relief.

Paradoxical and ironical was the unexpected effect of the illness on Kay. She grew slimmer and, like an unknown rose opened to its fullest, unimaginable glory, even prettier. A new earnestness and thoughtfulness coloured her expression which I found enchanting. We rediscovered a fiery intensity which I had feared for ever lost.

Kay's immune system was so impaired that any exposure to viruses and bacteria through travel - not that she could have gotten insured anyway - was out of the question. As we settled down one afternoon to enjoy the sun, that wind had sprung up and had continued almost unabated through July and August, blowing in one cold, wet front after another. On top of that there came news of another wave of bestial flu about to engulf the population.

"If I catch it, I'll die." she announced one evening as the solemn newsreader told of many fresh cases in Birmingham, thirty miles to the west of us. An expert came on and predicted an epidemic in the later autumn and a climbing death rate, particularly amongst susceptible groups. The autumn! The chestnut trees in the next field were already on the turn - and August was not yet out.

"But when the jab is ready you will surely be amongst the first to have it."

"No. I heard on the radio that diabetics and people with respiratory disease would be first."

I could not sleep that night. Kay's recovery was little short of miraculous from such a serious cancer. I would allow nothing to put it in jeopardy. The wind howling again in the crannies of the eaves became a malicious voice promising woe. I looked out and saw the ash being bullied again into surrendering its unready leaves. I rose and crept down to the kitchen.

It was odd that the terrible summer - even before the threat of flu - had already made me consider getting in a great store of food. A nagging voice, akin to the wind, kept telling me that we were in for a severe winter - as in 1947 and 1963. I wondered just why it *had* been so rough. I imagined that the temperature of the North Atlantic had fallen due to ice-melt and had conspired

with the warmer air above it to produce that turbulence. But what did I know about climate? Or anybody? The kettle boiling interrupted those resurgent thoughts. I made some tea and looked out at the shadowy shrubs in the garden lurching around. I pictured instantly the heaving mountains of the ocean. Would the gulf stream be deterred by that colder water I imagined? If so, might our winter be long and cold? Even arctic? Was I becoming neurotic?

But during August I had kept those cataclysmic thoughts to myself. There were plenty of Jeremiahs around. A period of heavier than normal rainfall and flooding, a prolonged drought, an earlier than normal spring, a hotter than normal summer saw them shaking their heads gloomily over microphones and talking about emissions-reductions, carbon footprints and energy-saving light bulbs. For me, they might just as well have gone and farted into the wind or pissed into the sea. I had - I reckoned- like most people grown sick of their hysteria. Yet another chilly, wet summer made their talk of the climate overheating sound silly. I had come to loathe their dogmatic certainty.

I did not doubt that the planet was getting hotter - though not our little segment of it - but my natural scepticism told me to mistrust the prevailing wisdom that it was due to human hyperactivity. I think - I hope! - I would have been one of the contemporary few to scoff at the idea that the sun went around the earth, and that Adolf Hitler was the new Messiah, in equal measure to the doubt I had entertained as a teenager about the literary merit of JR Tolkien and, in my middle age, about JR Rowling, so ostentatiously admired by childish grown-ups.

If, indeed, our capitalist lunacy, its profligancy and its resultant population explosion were truly the cause of extra heat, then I saw no hope of deliverance. Messrs Thatcher and Friedmann had decided - *ipsi dixerunt* - that capitalism was the natural economic system for human beings, and I had - if reluctantly - in view of our greed and stupid susceptibility to incentives to consume far more than we needed to - resigned myself to no hope of a change of our philosophy any time soon. If we were doomed because of what we were, then we were rightly doomed. A huge reduction in our numbers - grossly inflated by capitalism - was inevitable within the unwritten laws of constraint and compensation determining the condition of our air-bubble - or rather the air-bubble we shared with everything else alive.

It was in the nature of capitalism to boom and bust. The same rule would then apply surely to population. If we were on the verge of disaster, perhaps the surviving few would prove clever enough to not make the same error. Perhaps if we all became extinct, a brighter-eyed, brighter-minded successor would emerge from the new forest, shaking its head at the shocking mess of our legacy, and resolve to inhabit the planet more sensitively. More sensibly. More sanely.

For our way of life *was* insane. It was as if we had all been herded onto a train whose driver had no idea of its destination. In fact there was - and is - no driver. What fuels the train is whatever comes easiest to hand and what drives it is the Schopenhauerian will to prosper and acquire. From a dark Nowhere, this Juggernaut with its pitiless glaring light had appeared to roar along in a brief respite from the dark and chill of Inexistence. Politicians delude us and themselves into believing they have some control of Its levers. But it is as inexorable as the formation of stars; as the process of evolution; as the division of cells.

To be a passenger on such an ugly contraption disgusted me. Its crude fury had been replicated in those first hideous tanks lurching over trenches, in hastily-riveted warplanes wreaking havoc on sleeping cities, and its desperate determination powered now, in my imagination, the sleek metal boxes rushing panicky drivers along to their motorway destinations. Could the monster be

compelled to slow or stop so that the flashing landscape could be appreciated? Could we not climb down to rest and to inhale proper air?

Here in sleepy Dadlingcote I indulged in the fiction - almost at times a reality - that we had indeed escaped across the fields to watch the beast hurtle on. Sometimes in the middle of a clear night when the glow of Earlstone had dimmed on the horizon and a billion stars had burst into bloom, I would look out and pretend we were forgotten and alone. But were we not all so well provided for by the Monster's freight wagons? Within a few miles of everyone were there not Huge Larders from which we could all take our fill on the production of the paper and plastic tokens we had been awarded for our efforts?

But we were dependent. And therefore vulnerable.

At the age of fifty-six, before Kate's illness, I had ceased to care about our ultimate and inevitable collision with the buffers. Days were becoming no longer the steps to the future but a staircase down to oblivion. Do disillusioned lefties become misanthropes? Those obese, ugly, vulgar, stupid, tabloid-brained people I had to rub shoulders with disgusted me. If the Earth had a soul, would it weep to see the multi-titted hamburger back of them?

I drank a second cup of tea. There were few I loved. My Kay was the one I loved most. The threat to her life, having receded, now seemed terribly real again. If her drugs became unobtainable due to snow then she might deteriorate. If she caught flu she might die. Then I would die. She needed a long period of stability in order to regain her strength and disease-resistance. I took some crackers from the cupboard and some blue cheese from the fridge. Upstairs I heard her stir.

I sat wondering how well the authorities were prepared for the catastrophes I imagined. How many snowploughs were there? Were the officials and politicians sufficiently competent and the opposite of complacent to deal with extreme conditions? I thought of those prematurely golden chestnut trees. I thought of the daily bungling and corruption of the authorities. I began to make my list.

We would need to live in seclusion for months if flu began to touch everyone. I decided to phone the surgery and order four months supply of Kay's drugs, telling a lie about a long holiday in our Spanish villa. What would we eat? A large sack of spuds from the local farm would be our staple. Baked beans and jacket potatoes would be great food. Cheese I could freeze. Bread flour could make loaves and pizza dough. On the pizzas there could be ham (freezable) pineapple and sardines or tuna. I added to the list lentils, tinned tomatoes, puree, rice, pasta, yeast and fruit juice. The milkman came every day and could bring other food I had forgotten or run out of. Once a week Jim came down from Grimsby in his van to sell fresh fish in the villages. We could certainly survive in splendid isolation for months.

The cat stirred in his basket. He looked at me and meowed as if to say - what about me? Oddly enough, he would be the biggest problem with his fastidious and fussy ways. His taste changed from day to day, gobbling down greedily one day what he would sniff and turn his nose up the next. I picked him up and told him that nothing could be wasted if the worst occurred. I heard Kay coming down the stairs.

"Did I wake you?"

"No. I dreamt I had the flu. I was choking. Then I woke up coughing. It's my tablets... a side-

affect... What are you writing?"

"A shopping list."

"What? At four in the morning?"

"It's a special list."

She looked and said it looked as if I was hoarding. I told her I was. I told her of my flu-fears and thought she would laugh but instead she nodded. She agreed it was a sensible precaution. I decided to tell her of my other fear.

"And something tells me we could be in for a bad winter. A specially bad one. How would we survive if transport broke down? We rely on supermarkets. We'd starve to death in a matter of weeks."

She would surely laugh at that.

"You're not getting a bit neurotic in your old age, are you? What *something* told you?"

"The rotten summer. The gale blowing ever since June."

"A lot of berries on the holly and hawthorn....."

"Now you're taking the piss."

I got up and made more tea. She told me she thought her cancer had changed me for the better. I was more considerate and took her no longer for granted. She talked about clouds and silver linings. Inwardly I winced because like the malicious wind, hardly desisting, those doubts had begun again to ruffle my new-found peace of mind. Or were they merely the echoes and reflections of those doubts caused by a recent episode in the bedroom less than delightful? I was coming to despise the fickleness, the uncertainty and stupidity of my own heart as much, if not more, than those shallow, vulgar individuals who rode on the train so unquestioningly.

"Why are you so unhappy?"

The question took me by surprise. "I'm not. I just couldn't sleep."

Kay smiled, stroked my head and sipped her tea. I rolled the pencil between my fingers. A while later, we switched off the light and went back to bed. But I still could not sleep. To all appearances we had an idyllic life.

The hamlet of Dadlingcote had a tiny church, a rectory with tall chimneys, a red phone box, a Virginia creeper-clad pub with a drinking trough for horses and a village green for church fetes and occasional cricket matches. We lived on that green in a house we had bought in dilapidated condition before village-living became so fashionable. Over thirty-five years we had gradually restored it with our own hands. We had conceived and raised our children there. We had gradually become acceptable to most of our conservative neighbours who had suspected us of left-wing leanings - finally confirmed during the Great Schism of the 1980s when a CND poster had appeared in our window. In the bar of The Pheasant I had had a blazing row about the miners' strike with the owner of the rectory - an obnoxious Tory councillor called Butterworth - since departed after a local scandal - but time had healed the grazes so well that now I even sat on the Church Hall committee as the principle organizer of quizzes.

We were proud of our house. It had a cellar and outhouses where I had brewed cider from our own apples and a long, long garden where I had grown all our vegetables and raised chickens until the arthritis in my elbows had caused me first to falter and then to stop. In the wide green hollow beyond it, beneath the larger village of Goldingthorpe - first the home of the Saxon Goldinga clan - and then, evidenced by the *thorpe* suffix, settled (peacefully?) by ancient Danes - there now flowed or rather drifted the canal and its cheerful procession of gaudy barges. Locals were adamant that a dynasty-deciding battle had taken place there, in that natural basin, and not three miles to the north as history had determined.

Nowadays, it was a peaceful place. All scraps of slaughter had been garnered up in those faraway days after the dust had settled and the gore had dried, thereby denying all evidence to modern sceptics to lobby for a change of the name of the most famous battle in our history to The Battle of Goldingthorpe

No-one could not deny that on a practical level, Dadlingcote had become an even more desirable place to live. The old necessity of travelling into the depressing town of Earlstone had instantly disappeared with the opening of a huge superstore on the new ring road three miles away which flung impatient traffic from the A5 onto the main road to Leicester. This fostered the illusion of self-containment - if not of self-sufficiency - and house prices soared.

Into my view of this tranquil spot new battles had intruded; the battle of cancer and the battle of doubt. In the first we had triumphed but in the second I could not be so sure. For decades we seemed to have been blessed with good fortune. If recently we had attracted the pitiless stare of the god of adversity, could I justly complain? I had every reason not to be discontented. And it was utterly perverse that I was.

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Kay had been nagging me half to death. Finally, one fine late September morning I resolved to clear out the garage. One of our neighbours had actually complained - though not to our faces - about the mess. I often forgot to close the up-and-over door when I had been in for a tool or the watering can. It had gotten to the point where it was so crammed with junk that I could hardly squeeze in.

So after breakfast I began to stack things on the drive, working my way further in like a miner, and I came across something on a tripod covered in a black plastic bag. I lifted a corner and was amazed to see a small, clapped-out barbecue. We had grown to loathe barbecued food and I was sure I had thrown our old contraption out. So where had this one come from?

It dawned on me that somebody in our vicinity might have stuck it in our garage rather than drive it to the dump five miles away. If so, what a cheek! Had it been that very same neighbour making some kind of ironic point? The grill was sticky with black grease and the pan grey with ash. In disgust, I picked it up and placed it in the to-dump pile.

The garage gradually emptied and the access through the back door from inside the kitchen was restored for the first time in years. In the corner sat two more plastic bags. More outsider junk? A peek inside revealed wallpaper we had stripped off bedroom walls before the children had gone. So, was it recyclable or what? Into which bin or box should it go? Oh, the dilemmas of modern life! As I was debating the depth of my carbon footprint, wondering if this paper, improperly disposed of, might just be the butterfly wing to tip future generations into a sweltering nightmare, something akin to a thought made me pause. I left the bags finally where they were. And carried the barbecue back in.

Finally, I cleared out a kitchen cupboard of bits and pieces, made room in the freezer and then went to the supermarket with my special list. I spent around a hundred pounds.

“What? No beer or wine?”

“No. Just bottled water. I think we can manage for a while without booze. And I’ll lose a bit of weight.”

“And your mind.”

“I’m going to make some cider. The apples have swelled up really well after so much rain - and so sweet with that yellow hot thing hanging around these last two weeks.”

“Yellow hot thing?”

“The s-s-sun, is it?”

“Mmm! So much for your theory of a bad winter. We had July in September. That’s all. Seasons are all a mess. Global warming.”

“Load of tosh. You’ll see.”

I started my cider. September days narrowed to fit into October. Late in the month, nights became very chilly. The distant fir trees clambering the slope into Goldingthorpe seemed to invite snow. In early November there were severe frosts, and the hard-bitten leaves of the ash came down en masse one windy night. I stood at the window and watched as the full moon bowled itself at the tree, silvering the stampeding clouds and turning the sky bright blue. Golden starbusts of detached leaves billowed and soared. It was the most spectacular night I had ever witnessed. In the bleak dawn the tree was bare. It was ten days or so later that a new south-westerly storm blowing in encountered freezing northerly air, producing a huge blizzard which raged all night with thunder and lightning. While Kay slept I made a pot of tea and watched. Fascination gradually gave way to astonishment. At dawn all signs of our human presence there - fences, hedgerows and gates - were gone. The cat stood meowing at his door-flap which his paw could not push. I fetched the long decorating ruler, opened the back door and measured. In a few hours nearly three feet of snow had fallen - or drifted against my door. I dropped Barnacle onto the surface and he fell in howling. I hauled him back out and put him in a tray in the garage. I went back upstairs and looked out over the village green - or where it had been. Little more than the short spire of Saint Anthony’s indicated that there was a village. The dawn sky was blue-grey. Crows landing in trees sent flurries tumbling. Apart from them, life out there had come to a halt.

“Kay. Come and have a look.” I put a mug of tea down by her head.

“What?”

“The snow.”

She flung back the duvet and came to my shoulder. She gasped.

“My God!.....Where’s the canal? And the cows? They must be dead! Oh no. This wasn’t forecast.....Was it?”

“It was a thunderstorm which went slightly wrong.”

We looked from rim to rim of the horizon. Nowhere was there a farmer struggling to cross a field; nowhere were there footprints, and apart from the crows circling and a thread of dark smoke evaporating from Pankhurst’s farm into the grim sky there was no activity. There was no clue either of where the sun might be.

I followed her to the front of the house. The village green, the road, the gardens, the church hall car park, its laurel hedge and the graveyard had become one uniform surface. The church looked as if it had been sprayed white and only half a porch - the rest lay under a huge concave drift - was visible. No-one was out there because no-one could be. I looked at the thatched cottage on the right-hand side of the green next to The Village Green hotel and saw Colin Mason at the window. He must have seen me looking because he opened it, so I opened ours.

“Have you heard the news?” he yelled. “The central spine of the country is buried from north of

Manchester as far south as Oxford, from Shrewsbury across to Peterborough. Drifts up to fifteen feet deep.”

“What are they doing?”

He looked at me for a moment and shrugged. He closed the window.

“The cars are nearly up to their roofs” said Kay. “Nothing can move in this.”

She looked to the north-west where great dark clouds were now welling up. She seemed relieved.

“I bet you it’s going to rain” she said and wondered off to the bathroom. The air was so cold. I closed the window. It did not rain. It snowed. Slowly and steadily for most of the day; it snowed big flakes like ash from a paper blaze. The clouds cleared at twilight and a hard frost consolidated it all.

The evening news told of the heaviest snowfalls since records began. A satellite photo of Britain showed a diagonal stripe of white running north-west to south-east. Power lines were down, vast areas including towns and cities were completely cut off, roads impassable, airports and stations buried, thousands stranded in cars, emergency services impotent. A state of emergency was in force and everyone was to stay put, consume food and energy sparingly and to expect phased power cuts. The forecast was for a thaw to set in within a few days after more snowfalls. Help would then be on its way. There were pictures of firemen on a motorway dwarfed by a huge drift while behind them, astonishingly, there was only a thin dusting like icing sugar. Pictures from a helicopter showed wave after wave of white, extending to a far horizon like a frozen sea. A solitary snow plough was shown making a slow inroad. More snow ploughs were being rushed over from the Continent. There was a lot which the news did not say. It did not say that the snow had frozen the momentum of our engine. It did not say that such notions as innovation and improvement had been rendered absurd by a lattice of ice crystals. It did not declare how puny were our pretensions to dominate the rest of creation. I went upstairs alone to survey the snowfield as it turned bluer beneath the bright sky. And I could help but beam like the huge moon.

“Why are you laughing?” said Kay, creeping up behind me.

“I’m not.”

“You are. You’re pleased, aren’t you?”

“No. I was just thinking how...over-confident we are. We think we can solve everything...understand everything....We think we can’t help but make progress.”

“Why do you rate the human race so low? It bothers me. Don’t you believe in progress? Would you rather live in a bloody cave?”

I held her tight and did not answer.

“You look tired.” I said. “Why don’t you have a lie-down for a while.”

“I am. I will.”

As soon as she had gone I opened my diary and wrote the new date. **November the nineteenth.** I wrote down the word **Progress**

Progress! Here is the warcry of the politician and the plutocrat, before which enemies of change are routed. For who in their right mind cannot subscribe to the evident righteousness of the notion? It is as unquestionably a “good thing” to modernise and to banish old inefficiencies, as it is to discard the old for the new - the décor, the clothes, the hairstyle, the car, the gadgetry - under the relentless pressure of infantile advertising. We are children ripe for deception. The

economy has to grow, in the same way that bodies have to consume unto gross obesity. The trick is to persuade everyone of the virtuous logic of more and more, of better and better, of faster and faster, at lower and lower cost, even if it does unseen damage to their lives, their security, their mental health and their environment - even if many have to be dislodged from their seats and consigned to the third class carriages at the rear of the hurtling train. How ironic that those same political voices at other times issue warnings about over-consumption and its effects on the environment!

If modernisation means reducing the human being - as worker - to a passive, deskilled instrument in a more efficient process of production, and reducing the human being - as non-worker - to a passive recipient of benefit, like battery pigs, then so be it! New technology offers a home for investment monies. Old capital has to be destroyed or junked to generate new profits. Wherever it cannot be destroyed by war then there is only one other option: progress. And where do its true beneficiaries live? In a futuristic cityscape? No. In the unmodernised ancient castles and stately homes vacated by the impoverished aristocracy, surrounded by antiques, not that far from the dadlingcotes, but miles removed from the dust and mayhem of upheaval or the dereliction of neglect which areas way down the list for modernisation have to suffer before their time for renewal comes.

Those who resent being frog-marched along to Utopia are stereotyped as naïve, luddite, primitive. There has to be growth and momentum - or the Train will halt. But growth and momentum will ultimately derail it. There is no debate. It is undemocratic. There is little protest. Just as naturally as the weather, it just happens. The silent majority sit staring out of the window as the world rushes by. They are so conditioned by the illusion of going somewhere fast and by the jolly announcements over the loudspeakers that doubt never enters their heads.

I heard Kay descending and hurriedly returned my diary to its hiding place.

By three the next day a strange dusk had fallen. The sky was heavy and the air was so filled with snow that there was barely room for light. The one light bulb we had had on in the kitchen made the world outside seem even darker. It had kept dimming and brightening. Now it dimmed again and stayed dim. The radio faded out. The kettle we had been boiling for tea lost its roar, became a whisper and then fell silent.

“I’m frightened” she said simply. I grabbed the torch and brought out our stock of nightlights from the cupboard. I placed one on a saucer, struck a match and lit it. The flame wavered and cast eerie shadows of familiar objects around us. Her up-lit face became grotesque. I moved it until her kind features were restored. I patted her hand.

“Kay. Don’t worry. They said they’d cut the supply every so often.”

The bulb went out and she gave a little cry of alarm. I put my arm around her.

“We’re OK. We’ve got plenty of wood for the stove. We can keep warm as toast in here.”

I climbed up into the roof space in the garage where loads of off-cuts as well as logs were stored. I fed the fire. Gas had only been laid to the village in the seventies and our predecessor had not chosen to have it installed. If the electricity failed then of course our storage heaters would be useless. I went upstairs to drag down our mattress. I pushed the kitchen table into a corner and laid the mattress down in front of the fire. Kay was tapping the phone. There was no dialling tone, she said.

“Lines must be down.”

“Who do you want to call?”

“My mother. I told her I would.”

She lived in Kent and had not been affected.

“Well use the mobile then. But don’t stay on too long. We might not be able to recharge it.....if the power stays off for a while.....”

“For a while?”

The electricity had been off for over two hours when an obvious thought struck me. I fetched a spade from the garage, opened the back door, admitting billows of snowy air from the dark. I dug out a trench and placed the drawers from the freezer in it. The cold was painful. I quickly scraped back the snow and closed the door.

“Very clever.” she said. “But how are we going to eat without an oven?”

I smiled and told her to pick out two decent spuds from the big sack in the pantry and wrap them in two layers of foil. I went into the garage with my torch and placed the old barbecue beneath the square gap which gave ladder access to the roof space. I took strips of the old wallpaper and some wood shavings. I lit a fire and after a while carefully placed off-cuts on it. It was not long before I had a deep pile of glowing embers into which I could thrust the foil potatoes. There was surprisingly little smoke at my level. It had probably found a point of escape between the roof tiles.

After an hour I returned and tried them with a wooden skewer. It went in easily. A pan of beans was soon bubbling away next to them. Kay grated up some cheese and I brought in a bottle of rather cloudy cider. We settled down to a feast. The cider was drinkable and afterwards we were quite merry.

“We can eat. We can keep warm. We can survive for months!”

“But we might drive each other so mad we might kill each other. And we won’t smell very good.”

I thought this over and dragged our monster saucepan from the cupboard. I filled it with water and put it carefully on the barbecue, poking in more wooden slats in between the bars so that yellow flames began to lick around the base.

“We can have a bath in the sink” I told her.

“As long as I get to go in before you” she said, wrinkling up her nose.

Then I thought about the saucepan and realised that it was an inefficient and long-winded way of heating a couple of litres of water. I poured its warm contents into the stoppered sink and went back into the garage.

Had I got rid of them in my garage clear-out? Most things were arguably worth keeping - and this maxim of course normally proved itself true shortly after those very things had been thrown away. But these definitely came into the useful category - and there they were, a stack of four in their old corner. Bricks. I opened the bag of charcoal I had bought in and banked the fire up, first removing the grill. The mixture began to snap and crackle until it looked like a forge - rose and cream-white-hot. Into this glow I put two bricks and raked coals over the top. How long should I leave them? I went into the kitchen and ran more water into the sink until it was brimming around the overflow slot.

“What are you doing?”

“You’ll see. Get your kit off. You get to go first. Shift the plate rack. You can sit on the draining board. But not yet.”

“The draining board? It’ll be freezing on my behind.”

“Get a towel to sit on. And soap and a sponge.”

I returned to the garage and took the spade down from its nail. Would one brick do the trick? It had been about ten minutes and I was impatient to try. I centred one brick on the blade and carefully carried it in. I shouted a warning and she jumped to one side, shivering by the stove and holding herself tight. The brick slipped into the water like a launched ship, and there was a great hiss, a bubbling and a rumbling. After a few minutes, I put in one fingertip. It was hot! Now, with the fish-slice I removed the brick and put it on a metal saucepan stand. I lifted Kay who was as light as a feather onto the towel. She tried a toe, squealed and withdrew it. I glowed, like the brick, with pride and pleasure.

I washed first her hair and then gently soaped her neck and back. She cooed as the hot water soothed her. I washed her breasts and stomach and she let her thighs open for me to wash her dark lips. Her breathing grew rapid and shallow in a way I recognised. I felt my dick stir and swell. She must have seen signs of this in my expression and her mouth opened very slightly, revealing her teeth. She had that strange look in her eyes, as if focusing on something in the far distance. From the dark strands of her hair there ran dribbles down her blushing throat. I leant forward and kissed her.

“*Do you love me?*” she whispered.

“You know I do.”

“Do I? I sometimes wonder....”

“I’ll show you how much as soon as you have bathed me.”

We lay down in the glow of the stove and slowly, intensely, passionately made love.

Afterwards she said “It’s been a long time since we did it like that.”

I could not disagree. I whispered that we had enough to eat, we had warmth and we could keep clean. “We have each other. What else are we missing?”

But she was already asleep. And at her feet the cat slept too. But I could not.

That night there was no glow over Earlstone. The clear sky was spectacular and awe-inspiring. What a cure for arrogance. When had it last appeared to us like that? Kay’s reprimand had stung me. Of course, I reasoned, as I looked from one great constellation to another, whose names I did not know, *of course* I was in favour of progress - if it meant the *real* improvement of our lot at no cost to the planet. People were being warped and disfigured by our “culture“. It was not so much that I disliked *them* as what they had become. I could not deny that free enterprise had brought and still brought undoubted benefits - to which Kay’s recovery gave eloquent testimony. But did the process have to create mountains of turmoil and despoil? As I fixed on one radiant star in a dark patch of heaven, it seemed to me that progress was as a bright gem - inconsequential beside the huge slag-heap thrown up to unearth it. Kay’s medicines and treatments had been a miracle and had worked a miracle, but were they not spin-offs of the same indiscriminating force which steam-rollered the rain forest? Could not the *ends* be achieved by more intelligent *means*?

I woke early and went back upstairs. An isolated glow on the near horizon - the high ground which Goldingthorpe straddled - puzzled me. It was just before dawn and for one bewildering moment I thought the sun was rising in the west. I breathed hard on the frost inside the bedroom window but made little impact. I scratched it away with my nails just enough to see that snow was falling again. The glow had increased and when, shockingly, an orange flame leapt up and vanished, the answer to the riddle became obvious. A house was ablaze. Perhaps its inhabitants

had been forced to improvise like me, and it had gone disastrously wrong. There would be no sirens and no remedies. It would have to be left to burn and those within would have to save themselves as best they could. I imagined their terror and it made me shiver. I watched for an hour as the higher flames grabbed at the clouds. They showed no sign of diminishing and I suddenly realised the glow was spreading. It ran from the church spire across the entire centre of the village - and it now became clear where it might have started - The Bentley Arms. The whole terrace of houses to the left and right of it, if my calculation was correct, must have caught fire too. I pictured a drunken barbecue party in the back corridor of which led to the pub toilets, as had happened notoriously a few years back during a brief cold snap when power had failed. That risky event had been the laughing talk of the villages. If my insight was accurate, then around twenty houses were at risk, houses cheap and old enough to contain young families and the elderly. Even if they could escape, where and how would they reach safety? I tried to force the window open to listen for distant commotion, but it was glued shut by the frost. In the end I could look no longer and drew the curtain. A yell from below, from Kay, had me hurrying downstairs.

I expected to see her staring out of the window at the scene, but no, she was at the sink in the flickering candlelight, staring in horror at the filthy brown water spluttering out of the tap. She could not make a cup of tea with such mud, she exclaimed.

“It looks as if it’s come straight out of the canal!”

“Well, that’s more or less the truth. I don’t suppose anyone can get out to the treatment plants. But don’t panic - there’s plenty of bottled water in the garage - and even more to be had frozen out there! No sign of the electricity coming back on though... The lines must be down. I think we can be pretty sure they won’t be mended any time soon.”

She turned off the tap and looked at me. “People are going to die, aren’t they? A lot of people.” There was no need for me to reply. She looked intensely miserable. She began to say a prayer, but then broke off angrily. “They said it would thaw! Just look at it! It’s worse than ever! And I’ve only got two weeks left of Immunase!”

This froze my silent complacency instantly. “What? But I fetched you two months supply! Two boxes!”

“You did? Which day? Where did you put them?”

“Where did *I* put them?”

Stupidly I gazed at the worktops where of course they should be but were not.

“Think! You must have put them with your other stuff.”

She opened the cupboard, but the two white boxes did not tumble out of her medicine bag. We searched and double-searched. She accused me of leaving them in the car, or failing to pick them up from the supermarket dispensary, as, she pointed out in perverse triumph, I had once done before after being adamant that I had not. I accused her of putting them “somewhere *bloody* safe” as she so often had done with money and receipts which had turned up years later. I told her to sit and think while I fetched in a load of snow to make tea on the barbecue. I blew on the embers and added new wood. As the snow melted in the pan and began to steam, the silence after our furious exchange was like music. She went upstairs again. Twenty minutes passed in which I grew confident the tablets had turned up.

But here was no sign of them. Of all the tablets she took, these were the most important as they boosted her immune system. I tried to reassure her - but she was frosty, still convinced that I was to blame.

“Look - this can't carry on for another two weeks. There's bound to be a thaw.”

She raised an eyebrow but said nothing. I tried another tack.

“There's plenty of disinfectant in the cupboard. We can keep the place as clean as an operating theatre - germ free.”

Clearly still unimpressed, she examined her finger nails and then gnawed at the corner of one.

“Look - if the worst comes to the worst and you're going to run out, I'll go to the supermarket, break into the pharmacy and grab all they've got.”

She stared at me, incredulous.

“Go to the supermarket? Three miles? In this? How?”

“I'll improvise. There's plywood in the garage - I'll make some snowshoes.”

“And freeze to death.”

“I'll put on every stitch I've got -”

“That's enough! Don't talk to me about it again.”

She leapt up, let the roller blind on the back window express her fury with a zap, and immediately saw the flames dancing over Goldingthorpe.

“Oh my good God! Oh no!.....What a mess we're all in.”

Much later, when first her anger and then her despair had subsided, she said “You know, we should never go to bed again fallen out. How much time might we have left?”

We had eaten a delicious pizza I had “baked” in a frying pan with its lid on. We had drunk cider. She was a little maudlin. I decided not to ask her to clarify her ambiguous remark.

“Tomorrow we'll turn the whole house over - I just know the tablets are here somewhere.”

After we had made love I lay listening to the snapping of the wood in the stove. There was no point fighting it. I now accepted that I did not love Kay as much as I should. . It was not her fault, but mine. My feelings were as irrational as they were unnatural. How many men - and not just of my age - would give their eye-teeth to possess her? At fifty-six she was still a lovely woman. But on what fragilities did sexual love depend? On a feature; the shape, colour or gaze of an eye; on a way of smiling or laughter; an eccentricity of speech or movement; on some idiosyncrasy impossible to define. Or on an admixture of all of these. Sexual love, as intense and impassioned as it could be, was paradoxically so shallow that any alteration to its magic formula might weaken it. Spritual love - much more a deep admiration of the mental qualities of its object - was a second prize. I might admire an individual but have no desire for great intimacy with them - in fact their physical self might be repulsive to me. Kay was a lovely *person* as well as attractive - a hospital visitor and comforter of the local elderly and needy. There was a side to Kay I never saw properly but I knew of it - gloomy, pensive and discontent. It revealed itself when she thought herself unobserved - or over minor issues which generated more anger than they warranted. Which puzzled me. There can be no objective measure of how well we satisfy each other physically, emotionally and morally. I could not gauge these in any other way than by what she said and how she seemed - and of course the same applied to me. I suspected she did not tell the whole truth, but then, nor did I.

*

The days passed painfully slowly, weighted down by the snow and its monotony. There were no distractions. I tried to read and paint by the poor light. Kay divided her time between searching for her tablets, then cleaning the kitchen with a missionary zeal, and staring out at the sky and

blank landscape - joined seamlessly into one - looking, she said, for an alteration. Apart from the passing over of the odd crow, none came. On clear days the sky was remarkably blue. I realised this was due to the absence of vapour trails. On snowy days it became as depressing as watching white fuzz on a broken television. Whenever Kay slept, I jotted in my diary. From time to time I checked on the snow level by opening the back door. It was almost half-way up. How many days did Kay have left of her precious tablets?

*

I stared in disbelief. It *was* a body. I thought at first someone had flung out a pair of trousers onto the snow. I fetched my binoculars and the optical illusion vanished. The cream fleece coat had blended with its surroundings. The head had disappeared into a white dune. There was a bottle. I saw several dark plod-holes leading to the end of the trousers and followed them back to the building in the right hand corner. The hotel. With a pang I realised the body would have to be Martin Squires. But why? He must have had huge stocks of food in his freezer. Where on earth had he thought he was going? I debated whether to tell Kay. She seemed to be growing daily more despondent, so I chose not to. She might possibly come upstairs again to search for the tablets, and see him. So when I went downstairs I told her I had been through the drawers and wardrobe a second time in the spare bedroom, the one overlooking the green.

Two hours later as more snow was falling, I looked out again. Apart from one dark patch, Martin had become its secret trophy, and I felt a strange relief. While I fried some potatoes, I thought about him. An enigmatic character - on the surface cheerful but catchable at times, like Kay, in a pool of private despair - he had never amounted to a close friend. We had infrequently entertained and been entertained by him and his glamorous wife Elspeth, in whom he took a great pride. *What do you think a beauty like her sees in a snub-nosed, balding, florid-cheeked man like me?* - his twinkling eye seemed to say. He was witty, cynical and - for his trade - very well read. *I've not always run hotels, you know. I was a drifter. Dropped out of university. Played drums in a group which followed the Beatles to Hamburg, like so many others...* The laughing and scowling lines on his face, the growing shamle of his walk, his stoop, his wrinkled throat which he tried to hide with a tie - (*posh appeals to me more and more these days, you know - a counter to those shabby vulgarians we're all forced to rub wallets with at the supermarket - bloody scroungers - and please spare us your left-wing pity for their crappy upbringing and en-viron-ment - never heard of free will on the Left?*) - all those imprints of old age, and the flabbiness of his body and jowls - could no longer be toned down by the sharpness of his wit. Worse for him was that, in comparison, the ageing process in Elspeth seemed to be suspended. Her actual ten-years-younger seemed to be stretching. The last time we had dined together - eight of us at New Year - she had sat in her corner talking excitedly about the latest minor celebs and their derring-doings while he made a show of shaking his head in a kind of triumph not to have a clue about them. She read *The Sun* and showbiz magazines. He listened to Radio 4.

It was a shock - but no surprise - when Elspeth left with a guest that spring - a German with an obsessive interest in the Wars of The Roses - and a top-of-the-range Mercedes.

In the garage I sat on a patio chair thinking of him lying beneath the snow. The bottle in the snow came to mind. I judged it to be an act of suicide. I took a pan of warm water upstairs and doused the seam between window-edge and rebate until finally I managed to open it. The air was

intoxicatingly cold. There was a silence beyond any I had ever experienced. If there was misery, it was sealed in everywhere by the gluey frost. Martin had completely disappeared. In the distance a dog began to bark and bark until I could bare the keening of it no longer. I closed the window.

*

“Who is she?” she demanded, brandishing my jotter. She had been looking for her tablets again and had discovered its hiding place. I took three steps forward to grab it, and stopped. She read my own words back to me - “*If I caught myself admiring or thinking about the pretty young woman who had joined my art class in the village hall, I immediately thought of something else - What pretty young woman?*”

“Kay! I can explain -”

“You have explained! It’s all here. It all makes perfect sense. You liar. You cheat.”

“No! If I’d had an affair with her, don’t you think I would have written about it there? It’s all in my mind. Look - read on - I write a bit later - what? - how *superficial* she is!”

“And that makes it alright? You made a pass at her no doubt -”

“I did not!”

“You made a pass at her and she gave you the cold shoulder!”

“No. Nothing was ever said.”

“You pathetic man! You want a younger model. Like Martin Squires! How ridiculous **he** looked next to that.....*superficial*.....tart! But **yours** wouldn’t play ball! Well - you’re not the only one in this marriage to get fed up with the same stale routine.”

She threw the diary to the floor and stomped out. But it was so freezing outside the kitchen that she was soon back. She began to wipe down surfaces with disinfectant in a furious silence.

“What did you mean by that last comment?” I said. But she would not answer.

“Are you saying that you contemplated an affair? Or had one?”

Silence. A cup on the draining board fell to the floor and smashed. She kicked the pieces away into a corner.

“Who was it?”

I racked my brains. There was no likely candidate.

“Are you just trying to hurt me back? Is that it? If you did, why are you so furious if - as you imagine - I did?”

Still, she did not answer. I told her that in my diary I had only been trying to pin down my thoughts. “They were irrational. I was sure that if I could just explore my doubts in black and white, then -”

“I do not want to know! If you’re tired of me, then you know what you can do! Once the snow’s gone, so can you be! I have no wish to trap you here. Against your will. Lying about your aches and pains to get out of having sex. If you lie about that, why should I believe you about anything else? How desperate do you think I am? How wonderful do you think you really are at it? What do you know? You bloody *dare* write that it was my cancer that made you fancy me again! How perverted is that? How bloody shallow! Is that all love and affection are to you? I’ve been totally taken in!”

“Look, let me explain....You *know* romantic love fades, the physical side -”

“The *physical*! Stop being the bloody philosopher, you pretentious bastard.”

She gave a terrible, triumphant laugh. “Look at the state of *you*! You’re no Adonis! But you’ve

still got your beady eye out for some young tart. Like fucking Squires!”

“Fucking Squires is DEAD! Shut up!”

She looked amazed.

“Dead? How do you know he’s dead?”

“He’s out there....on the green. ...He tried to walk out in this....it’s no use looking out of the window. The snow’s buried him....”

Even so, she looked out. Snow was falling steadily, but on the eastern horizon the cloud cover ended with a ruled edge bordering the palest of blue skies. At that far distance had a thaw set in? Perhaps from that quarter help was already on its way. I tried to change the subject with this theory but she turned her back on me.

She went upstairs to get a better view of the green and I followed her.

“I’ll sleep up here tonight” she said quietly, hugging herself against the cold, after she had gazed out long enough in vain.

“What? And catch pneumonia?”

The cough she had ascribed as a side-effect of her medication had recently worsened. She told me bitterly that she had no wish to impose on me.

“You’re being charitable. You don’t *love* me.”

“You know I do.” I grabbed her. First she resisted, then stood impassive and finally dissolved into tears.

“What I wrote about that woman - her name is Jennifer - was exaggerated and...novelistic. I feel nothing for her. She’s pretty but empty-headed. I look upon her as I would, as an artist, on any pleasant object. It doesn’t mean I want to possess what I see. I love *you*. You know I do. I just analyze myself too much. I examine my motives too honestly. It was meant to be as private.....as your private thoughts. I get a glimpse of them when you’re angry..... I’m sorry.” She began to cough and I ushered down into the warm kitchen out of the freezing air.

“Kay, if I’m a phony, if I’m just pretending, how come I loved you like I did the other night, after all these years?”

I poured out water to make some tea while she sat gloomy and exhausted in the armchair. I rummaged through the medicine drawer and found to my great relief an unfinished course of antibiotics.

“Here - take two of these. And then two more tomorrow morning. There are enough for a few days....”

“But you have no idea whether they’re compatible with my other drugs!”

“Look - all I know is you’ve got a cough and a sore throat. You can’t afford to get worse.”

She swallowed them. I felt her forehead. Did she have a fever or was it the heat of the stove? I felt my own. She was hot. I found a thermometer. Her temperature was a degree or so above normal. I made her some soup and warmed up some bread I had managed to “bake”. She had six days of Immunase left. I faced a terrible choice if she got worse in her weakened state: to do nothing and watch her deteriorate or to risk my life in the open and leave her alone while I went for medicine I had no guarantee of obtaining. Even if a miracle were to occur and a drastic thaw set in, how many urgencies and emergencies would there be out there in competition with Kay’s needs?

“Perhaps I can sweat it off. Make me hot water bottles and fetch another duvet down. I’m cold.” I felt a chill of fear. “But how can you be cold? It’s baking in here.”

She sweated. She moaned in her sleep. In the dim light I saw her hair matted to her face. I prayed. Eventually I must have somehow fallen asleep and as I woke I could hear she was breathing more easily. Her forehead felt normal. I slipped out of bed, built up the fire and went upstairs to look for a sign of change.

To the far north-east there were dark blue clouds promising rain but above us stretched a clear blue sky. I fought the window open and placed a glass with a small quantity of water on the sill. Within five minutes it had turned to ice. The dark clouds did not approach as if repelled by the freezing air. Then I heard a clatter from the direction of Earlstone. I picked up my binoculars. It *was* a helicopter! But my joy turned to despondency as quickly as the water to ice. What could even a hundred helicopters achieve against these elements? The noise slowly abated and the terrible silence returned. I knew then that I would have no choice. By the trees and telegraph poles rising from the invisible hedgerows, I traced and measured the narrow lane which led to the ring road. I raised my binoculars again and studied the hypermarket, recognizable only by the huge diamond of sun in one window and the snowy mounds of its roof. Could I get there and back in one day? Could I get there at all, never mind back? If a blizzard descended, was there a place to wait it out? I scanned the road and remembered. Like most farms, the one which bordered the road possessed an outbuilding whose function had long passed into oblivion. We had in fact taken shelter there many years ago in a thunderstorm. If I took a sleeping bag surely I could creep into a corner far enough from the entrance and the icy blast. My son had camped with the Boys Brigade - was his sleeping bag still in the loft? I climbed up with a torch and could not believe how bitterly cold it was up there. My fingers were soon bloodless and I struggled to move more and more junk and suitcases out of the way. At last, I found it jammed in its plastic bag inside a tiny rocking chair my daughter had occupied in her infancy.

“What have you been doing? Why have you got that old thing down?”

I spread it out to air then made us some tea. Into a bowl of oats and water I added some powdered milk to make her porridge. She took her tablets and said she felt a little better - her throat was not so sore and her cough had loosened. I fed her with a spoon and told her what I was going to do. She protested but gradually I managed to persuade her by telling her what measures I had decided to take.

“I’ve thought it all through. Did you think I was just going to put a coat on and go!? Let’s be honest - this is your only chance of surviving the snow. You’re weak and low. Warm air is always full of germs....catch one more nasty one and.....”

My voice trailed off, strangled with emotion.

“You *do* love me.”

“You know I do.”

“Until I’m past it.”

“No. Until hell freezes over.”

She stared at me and smiled weakly. “I think it already has.”

I spent the day proving and baking bread. She would have enough for many days. Plastic bags would keep it reasonably fresh. I would have my rations too for the journey. I made sure there was plenty of water to fill the cistern in the downstairs toilet which shared the warm air of the kitchen. I had already turned off the stop-cock and run the system dry in case of a burst pipe. The filthy brown water was not merely unusable, but posed a genuine threat to Kay.

Kay sewed two rucksacks together. Into one I placed my tools - a pruning saw, a lump hammer and chisel to break into the supermarket - as well as the vicious sharp knife from the kitchen block for any dangerous eventualities, animal or human. I added bread and water, paper, matches and wood shavings, a metal pot, a mug, tea bags, spare socks, pants, shirt and gloves and - into my coat pocket - a cloth to clean my glasses. Into a plastic garden sack I loaded a shovel and as much small wood as I could drag behind me, then tied the end with a rope. In the other rucksack went my sleeping bag.

The tennis rackets we had bought the kids in France were still in the attic. I sawed off the handles and pondered how best to secure the rackets to my hiking boots. Glue alone would be nowhere near strong enough. Into the frames - three on each side - I partly drove in six good screws, taking care not to split the wood. I wound a lattice of plastic washing line around and between the screw heads and under and over my boots which I had placed dead centre. I drove the screws in then as far as they would go to tighten the lattice. In the garage I found a tin of varnish. I applied it liberally to the screw heads, knots, to the plastic line on my boots, turned the rackets over and poured more onto the soles and strings, and, so as to spread my weight further, fixed two oblongs of plywood onto the sticky goo.

There were garden stakes in the garage. I sawed four more squares of plywood and with a craft knife cut a hole in the centre of each just big enough to allow the pointed stakes to penetrate them. I glued two each together for extra strength and slowly forced the stakes through by three inches. The rest of the varnish went just above and below the junctions and, finally satisfied, I left the snowshoes and ski poles by the fire to harden up.

As soon as I dared, I wiggled my feet into the boots and gingerly at first, then with increasing confidence walked around the kitchen while Kay watched, and finally I jumped up and down in them. They held.

I put my clothes ready to warm for the next morning - a pom-pom hat, a scarf, two shirts, gloves, two woolly jumpers and jeans. I put newspapers ready - luckily the snow had fallen the day before they were due to be collected - to pad my clothes for insulation and to provide an additional tinder supply as well as toilet paper. It would also soak up my sweat and help keep me dry. I debated whether to take money. If the shop had been broken into, I might need to pay its occupants for what I took.

“Have I forgotten anything?”

We talked over every eventuality until it began to grow dark again.

“Take plenty of painkillers for your joints.” she said. “And keep a bottle of water in your coat pocket to swallow them...”

The twilit blue sky was streaked with pink - a beautiful sunset above the silver-pewter land. What an irony its lethal beauty was. I came back downstairs and baked more jacket potatoes. We had a feast. The last thing I did was put some bread ready to eat at dawn.

*

“You must - whatever else you do - keep both fires in and make sure you eat and drink plenty. If you run low on water for the loo, fetch snow in the bucket. Keep the bottled stuff for drinks. Use snow for washing. Careful with the hot brick. Keep taking those antibiotics. And keep warm.” She was torn between hilarity and despair - laughing at me for my Bibendum impersonation and crying because she was sure she would never see me again. I told her not to doubt it - I was

coming back safe and sound.

“But you can’t even do the garden these days - with your joints and all! How are you going to walk six or seven miles in this?”

“Easy, by putting one foot in front of the other until I’m there. Every ten minutes I shall rest for five. I’m not going to try and make it back today - I’ll sleep at the shop. I’m not going to let you down.”

I opened the front door and put my wood-bag and ski poles outside. The snow came up almost to my belly. How could I possibly climb out? In all my planning this had not occurred to me. I closed the door and looked at her with my palms extended in a gesture of helplessness. She shook her head. I needed to be above the snow in a sitting position in order to plant my feet down squarely on it. Standing on a chair I would be too low, and I would not be able to put my boots on. A contortionist with a steady balance might be able to manage.

“Why not jump out of the bedroom window?”

I could not help it. I burst out laughing. She joined in, seeing the same image as I did - of me stuck up to my waist in the snow.

“Why don’t you lower me down on the rope?”

“Oh yes! I’d finish up in the middle of the green! You could get on a chair and ...and....sort of *roll* out.”

“And how would I stand up? I’d lie on my back zapping like a beetle”

This new image provoked more hilarity in her. She laughed until she was on the verge of tears. I stood and looked at her with my eyes raised, though roaming in my mind through all the rooms of the house, seeking inspiration. Now she became serious.

“You won’t be back the same day? A good one that! You can’t even get out of the bloody door!”

I had it! I went up to our bedroom and emptied all the stuff out of the chest of drawers. I dragged it to the landing, sat down in front of it and little by little eased it down the stairs. I opened the door and pushed it up to the wall of snow. Kay had already fetched a chair for me to climb up on, and I sat down on the chest with my legs dangling in the hallway. She helped me to put on first one shoe and then the other. I swung round to face the doorway and planted my shoes onto the snow. My thighs were slightly above level and I could not get enough momentum at that angle to stand up. I pressed my palms against the wood below me, rose a little and then fell back.

“This is madness! How can you walk - if you’ve not even the strength in your knees to stand up?”

I knew she had a point but I was sure that, if I once could get going and into a rhythm, it would be alright.

“Don’t just stand there despairing! Help me!”

“How?”

“Get up behind me and push against me with your back.”

I pushed up again with my hands and her pressure threatened to make me lean forward.

“Stop pushing - just hold it there - I’ll fall forward else!”

I reached up and got my fingers around the top of the door frame, still leaning backwards. I was near the point of no return. If, when I straightened, my full weight made me sink down in spite of my snowshoes, I could at least sit back down again and get back in home. A fall a few yards beyond that and I would surely be lost. Yet the snow had not given way below me - and now inch by inch I leant forward and allowed my full weight to bear down on my feet. My heart was racing and I was hot with fear and exertion, although my ears were burning with the cold. I had only sunk in about two inches. I surveyed the snow field and wondered if there were spaces out

there - akin to crevasses - into which I might plunge. The few steps which would take me away from home caused me to see myself as a parachutist plucking up the courage to leap out into space. Then - relief! - I remembered I had the shovel at arm's length to dig myself a path back to safety. Reassured, I looked over my shoulder. It was an experience beyond bizarre to look down through the top half of my front door at Kay's upturned face staring at me in love and terror. The cat had come to join her and was looking at me with an expression which uncannily mirrored hers.

"Pass me the rucksacks and my scarf!"

She climbed up onto the chest of drawers and knelt. She reached up and put the straps over my bent arms to rest on my shoulders. She wrapped the scarf around the bottom half of my face and ears, tucking the end into my collar.

"Can you reach out for the rope and tie it around my waist?"

She was shivering and her fingers struggled to pass the rope around me and make a knot. She put the binoculars over my head and passed me first one pole then the other. Suddenly it occurred to me I would have to keep prodding in front of me to check for those treacherous holes in the snow, like a soldier with a blade in a minefield. I prodded the area around me and it was solid. I took several deep breaths, threw my weight onto my left foot and the poles, then tried to lift my right foot. For a second it did not seem to want to budge, but then it was astonishingly in the air and I took my first step of about a foot. The poles stopped my fall but I realised immediately that the long paces and speed I had imagined were utterly unrealistic. If I fell, I would be unable to get back to my feet. I would have to keep my balance - me, the holidaymaker who stumbled so often on alpine paths! - and feel my way forwards - slowly - at all times. Now I began to have a new unforeseen worry. Would the weight of the wood-bag drag me back? I closed my eyes, leant on my right-hand pole and threw my left foot forward. I was learning to walk all over again. Keeping my feet the right distance apart would be vital - too narrow and I might overbalance - too wide and I would not be able to move.

The sack slid smoothly behind me. To my surprise I did not feel the cold. Perhaps it was adrenalin. I stood still and thought over what lay in front of me. There was an avalanche of despair in my head and a surge of disbelief. How absurd to imagine that a man in my condition could walk to the North Pole! With mend-and-make-do equipment....and ordinary clothing... I had to get a grip. My brain instantly supplied me with images of my jogging days - long gone - and I remembered how, in the agony of the final mile or two, I had doggedly fixed my gaze on a fixed point - never thinking of home - a tree, a post, a corner - and then on another, until I was there. Now I fixed my eyes on the hedge of the corner house. I imagined Kay wheezing with a chest infection.

"Are you just going to stand there? If you think you can't do it, then for God's sake, come back in. I won't hold it against you.....I'll be alright.....You don't have to do this just to prove to me that you love me - and to yourself. If that's what it's about, I'd rather you came back in. I'll take my chances."

I pretended I had not properly heard this. Silencing voices of doubt and commonsense, I made sure of my balance and carefully looked over my shoulder at her. I forced a smile, said I loved her and told her to close the door. She moved the chest out of the way and the door shut.

To begin with I would count thirty steps and rest. I set off, painfully slowly at first, but gradually growing in confidence as my body established a routine. There were now only slight depressions where Martin Squires had plodded, and I made sure I avoided his grave at the point where they stopped dead. I paused after thirty steps and, now at a better angle, turned my head easily to look

up at our bedroom window. Behind the frost I could just catch Kay waving. I raised a ski-pole. I heard a banging and looked at the house next door. Marjorie Knowles was screaming noiselessly at me and waving frantically. I raised my shoulders in a dismissive shrug, meaning *I can't help - what do you expect?* I turned away and walked on, reminding myself of a great turtle. The snow squeaked and crunched beneath me. Then glass was breaking. Marjorie was yelling. *Help me! Jack's ill! Get a doctor!* I walked steadily on as her voice faded away. When I reached the last house on the green and could see neither Kay nor Marjorie I felt a strange relief. I swivelled around the hedge and the broken parallel lines of the lane and its borders stretched out in front of me. In the garden to my left was a frozen body with an arched back, staring with open mouth in a dead scream. The front door was open and the hall looked like an entrance to Santa's grotto. Another body, glistening with frost, lay there, one arm stretching forward like a swimmer. They were near neighbours but I did not know them, or of them. It was impossible to tell whether they were young or old, male or female. A dog came to the door, barking weakly, disappearing gradually from view behind the wall of snow. The tableau was nightmarish. I fixed on a thirty-mile-an-hour sign and moved steadily on between the row of houses, ten each side, which made up the southerly edge of Dadlingcote. I glanced at the windows for signs of distress but they all were opaque with frost. I could not begin to imagine what scenes of horror might lie behind them. The yapping of the dog faded. I stopped at the road sign and looked all around me, noticing for the first time bleak clouds drifting in on my left from the east. I pulled back my sleeve to look at my watch. It was nearly eight thirty. How did I feel? I did a mental check of all of my systems. There was pain as usual in my elbows, but I could cope with that. I was not cold anywhere - due to the strenuous effort. I was getting the hang of snow-walking and needed to guard now against overconfidence.

"Where are you going?"

The shock of a voice nearly made me fall. I looked to my left and a woman's pale face was in the open bedroom window of the last house. It was Elizabeth from my art class. I pointed with my pole quickly and let it fall.

"Can you tell the police to come? I think I've killed him."

I was muffled but could think of nothing sensible or useful to say anyway. Of course, in my rig-out she would not recognize me. I plodded on and after a few steps I glanced back over my shoulder. The window had closed.

As each tree, bush or post crept past me I cheered. A few flakes fell, stopped and every so often there came a few more. The sky above me was now white. I could not turn to look at the village but knew it must be disappearing. I blew my breath downward so that my glasses did not steam up. A trickle of water from a melted flake was beginning to annoy me but dared I stop, balancing on one pole, while I fetched out the cloth from my pocket? The way was no longer flat. Snow had drifted into a series of waves and I planted my shoes down with extra care. The lane bent round to the right and began its long ascent to the junction at the top of the hill where an even narrower lane led towards Stapleford, a hamlet even sleepier than ours. To my right, set well back, stood a farmhouse. Smoke rose in a straight line. In an emergency could I seek refuge there? Or would I be unwelcome? I recalled a debate I had had once with a friend whether towns or farms harboured the greatest dangers..... I stopped and cursed myself. I could not afford one distraction. Listening to my ever more rapid breathing, I climbed the hill. A great crow cawed and amazed me from a branch not far ahead. Was there a sound more desolate than a crow on a wintry day? But how on earth could it survive in this freezing emptiness? To my left, in the

distance where the ground rose, I saw patches of squirming blackness, well over twenty, within oases of green. Somehow, much of the snow had been blown from the top of the rise. I pushed my glasses carefully onto my forehead and put the binoculars to my eyes.

It was an horrific scene. Dead sheep had either exploded or had been prised open and carrion crows were pecking into their innards and flesh. They squabbled, danced around each other, flapped away and landed again in a macabre ballet. The crow above me took off in a flurry of snow to rejoin the fray. I turned away in disgust to survey the hilltop in front of me. Beyond its brow the lane would descend gently for two miles or so to the new road. If I could surmount this obstacle, I would be past the worst. I looked at my watch. Just gone ten. It would grow dark at four thirty - if the clouds did not thicken. I imagined Kay's delight and surprise at my unexpected return with the precious tablets and again lost my temper with myself. Distractions. *Concentrate Concentrate Concentrate*. As I came, panting, within twenty yards of the summit I became convinced that the incline had never been as steep as it now was. I had jogged over the hill many times in my forties. I decided the snow must have drifted in, and that there would certainly be less dense pockets below, dangerous hollows, into which I must not stumble. *I must not stumble, I must not stumble, I must not stumble*. I reached forward with one ski pole and tested the surface, took a small step and probed with the other. I heard the snow crunch reassuringly below my boots. Down came the left pole again - and this time struck something hard - and slipped unexpectedly away into a void. Leaning too far forward, with too much weight on the pole, I fell.

The hole I lay in was deep and my eyes would not adjust to the meagre light. I overcame my instinct to struggle and panic and lay absolutely still. Luckily I was not on my back, but facing forward at a good angle, rather like a ski-jumper frozen in mid-air. Had I fallen in head first, I would have had no alternative but to wait impatiently to die. If I kept calm, I had a good chance of getting out. *I must keep calm I must keep calm*. The pole which had slipped was still in my left hand. The right one was missing but would not be far away. I prayed that my boots had not disintegrated. With my right hand I felt down and found the rope still tied to my waist. If necessary I could pull in my wood-bag, take out the shovel and dig myself an upward escape tunnel. The thought made me laugh out loud. I was hot with sweat. What should I do first? I tried to locate the missing ski-pole to my right but to my dismay it was not there. I tried to remember whether I had let go of it as I fell - in which case it would be above me. I knew there was little point, but I burrowed anyway across my chest to my left. I felt a sharpish edge - but my surprise and relief soon turned to puzzlement. It was not the pole - it was far too narrow, and it was not rough wood but smooth and metallic. The edge ran down as far as I could feel.

I tried to think with my body. Obviously I needed to push up. The road surface could not be far below and I might even be standing on it. I went to push with my feet and stopped. If I broke the seals on my boots, all would be lost. Astonishingly, my glasses had stayed on and it dawned on me now why the light had not improved. Condensation. I managed to hold my panting breath, but the mist would not clear. I would have to try and take them off and hope that my short-sighted eyes could adjust sufficiently to allow me to get a better appraisal of my predicament. I brought my right hand up, clearing the snow away from my face, having twisted my neck around to the left as far as it would go so that my glasses would not fall away, and managed to unhook them from my ears. I had no choice but to put them between my lips. Instinctively, I had kept my eyes closed for concentration's sake. Now I opened them and found myself eyeball to eyeball with Martin Squires. I dropped my glasses when I yelled. He continued to frown. His dead eyes were opaque. His sardonic mouth was frozen open, as if he was about to tell me one of his

dinnertime stories. I took a series of deep breaths, telling my bumping heart to slow. I put the pole into my right hand, continuing to push down with it as I had been doing unconsciously, and with my left shoved hard at Squires' shoulder until he fell back and I could close his door. I looked down and could see my feet at an angle. My shoes were still on. I was leaning against a wall of snow into which the bonnet of Martin's treasured red Jaguar was disappearing. With both hands I pushed against the pole with every ounce of strength I could summon. And stood up. I was looking up at a huge sloping drift. I reached down for my glasses and stuffed them in a pocket. Snow was beginning to fall and soon it was threatening to turn into the blizzard I had feared. I rubbed the snow away from Martin's window. He was staring at the dashboard in disbelief, as if a warning light had come on. The weariness in my muscles and the ache in my joints were terrible. If I could push him into the passenger seat, I could shelter for a while. Maybe get some sleep. Kay's face flashed into my mind, all anger at such a stupid plan. I took out the water and swallowed painkillers. I eased the ski pole slowly out of the snow and leant it against the car. Looking up, I saw the other one just behind me but within reach. I grabbed it. I pulled my wood-bag in and took out the shovel. I had to get to the cowshed and light a fire. *Light a fire Light a fire Light a fire.* The thought was so delightful it brought tears to my eyes.

With a final look of farewell to Martin, I began to cut steps in the snow slope and sooner than I had ever imagined possible, I was climbing out and walking to the brow of the hill, looking down to keep my face out of the stinging snow and wind. I brought my watch close to my face and saw it was nearly eleven. All crazy hopes of reaching my goal and getting back home in the day were dashed. I was close to exhaustion and needed to eat, sleep and build a fire - as much to boost my morale as for warmth. Perhaps I could resume by one or two o' clock, and with less than two miles to walk I could break into the supermarket before nightfall, sleep there and set off back for home early the next day. I thought of a warming brandy or two from the booze section, and biscuits, crisps, chocolate, fruit..... *No! Concentrate - test the snow - take a pace - ignore the pain in your left elbow - keep going, keep going.....*

The hedge tops on the right stopped at the gap I had been focusing on as my next objective. And there, a few paces back from the road, in the corner of the snowfield stood the outbuilding. My Grand Hotel. The last ten or so paces were incredibly hard. I counted them down out loud, and at FIVE began to laugh uncontrollably, as the pain in my joints - the pain I was thinking of as "the enemy" - made a last malicious effort to defeat me. I saw it personified absurdly as the evil djinni behind all our woes - my depression, Kay's illness, my obsessive doubts, my arthritis - and with a final stab of my ski pole I skewered it, tongue flapping, eyes rolling as it breathed its last. *There - you bastard!*

I yelled with triumph to have arrived and slid down the gentle slope into the interior. Almost doubled up, I panted to get my breath back as my eyes tried to see into the gloom. There were no windows and I was blocking the entrance. I pulled down my scarf and detected the faintest smell of dung. I switched on my torch.....a hard, clay floor.....dark green stains.....a few strands of straw.....rafters.....streaks of white at the tops of the wall.....swifts' (?) nests.... A scurrying sound! I flashed the torch rapidly around but saw nothing. I had no objection to sharing the place with other creatures. It was, after all, their place.

I had completely forgotten that there was a second compartment - it could hardly be called a room - through another doorway. The concrete floor there was clean and dry. I took out some paper and tinder and lit a fire in the corner - and decided to make a good blaze, using most of the

wood in my bag. I had my pruning saw and the nearby hedges would provide plenty of wood for a stopover on the return leg, should it be necessary. By retracing the path I had made - if it was not covered by more snow - I was hoping I could walk back much more confidently and more quickly. I made some tea, ate some bread, removed my coat and snowshoes - they were intact - climbed into my sleeping bag and fell instantly asleep.

I woke around one and immediately wondered who, in fact, had staggered out drunk onto the green, if not Martin Squires. Had he been entertaining a friend? A lady friend? Was it a rare guest? But why had he driven off in the middle of that snowy night? He must have been sitting there dead twelve or thirteen days. Was it Thursday or Friday? I began to count up the number of bodies I already encountered in a short distance. The countrywide death toll would be staggering. The shameful thought that none of that mattered very much - even my heroic trek for Kay's sake - troubled me like a persistent fly. I ached. I could not move. Involuntarily, I recalled an evening with Martin at The Farriers. In a rare moment of honesty - drunken honesty - a few weeks after Elspeth's departure he revealed to me - me, hardly a close friend - that she had had a brief affair previously. *Went behind the bushes, as we used to say, old Bean - one of our barbecue nights - remember them?* I had stared at him speechless. *You know - in the good old days, before all our dinnertime chats were dominated by our ailments and medicines - you and your joints, me and my angina and Kay and her...problem.....yes,sloped off with a blow-in guest into the warm nightbastard wrote it up in the guest book...that's how I found out...that, and her pretty little hot face when I showed her the book!* I still could not speak. *No need for you to look so worried, old pal! It hurt a lot but I forgave her. Know how I got over it?* I shook my head. *Just said to Yours Truly... "Martin, in twenty years time you'll be dead or next door to dead"So I shrank the earth to a pea in my head, a shrivelled pea, and said "That's where it happened. Way back there. So who gives a shit now?" And who will give a shit about anything happening now in fifty years?* And that was how he planned to get over her departure, he said. Perhaps he had. We barely spoke again. Did he avoid me from then on, having sown the seed - that little pea - to grow in my head? Had he bitterly regretted, once sober, his candour? I had, without being prompted, promised to tell no-one, not even Kay. He had nodded - knowing I could be trusted - and shrugged - saying, I suppose, he didn't care. Poor Martin. A nice man. A dead man. But he had foolishly revealed his secret. And that was why he had shunned me. But his death would remain a mystery, as much as his life had been. For no particular reason, I thought instantly of the agony, the terror, the blood, the stink of that great mediaeval battle in the dale. And of the utter silence of the snow now covering it.

One thirty. The glow of the fire had made the daylight shrink back. Pressing on was vital. It was a painful struggle to unzip my sleeping bag, and, though I only intended to rest a little longer before getting to my feet, the effort caused me to doze off again. And it was that which saved my life.

A shriek awoke me. For a second I thought it was a dream. But there now came a growl and a yelp. A dog? But then a rat - a huge brown rat - scurried in from the first room followed by a huge shadow and in a second was pounced on, snapped up in jagged jaws, shaken dead and devoured. I lay petrified. A Doberman? From the farm? It had its great back to me and seemed not have registered I was there. It turned and trotted back into the other area. I heard it digging and snuffling, then growling again. Another shriek. Another rat. The same bone-crunching act of destruction. Then quiet. Had it gone? I looked at the brick entrance glowing red in the firelight.

For a while there was nothing. I let out a long breath and very slowly took another. I imagined it sitting over the nest, waiting for another scent, another twitch; in my sleeping bag my smell was sealed in. I might be OK.....

Then the black head, a keen eye, erect ears appeared.....it stared at me and smiled with its great fangs. Sphinxlike, it lay down in the entrance facing me. I stared back to gain the upper hand and it did actually look away. Would it whimper and wag its tail in submission? Be my ally at the supermarket? There would be plenty of food for it there. I whispered "nice boy" and bent my knee. The nice boy snarled. I was not his master, nor his ally. I was not to move. I was the next meal. And so a waiting game began which I could not spare any time to play. Which of us would go to sleep first in the warmth of the fire? My rucksack was my pillow. It contained my vicious kitchen knife. And the lump hammer. I dared not look at my watch, but at least twenty minutes of this still scene must have passed.

I swear, I have never killed anything bigger than a spider - and even those creatures I had, of late, preferred to put outside whenever Kay began screaming at them. Now I had to kill this massive dog somehow. It rested its narrow head along its forelegs, eyes upturned, checking on me and looking away occasionally. At last I gasped "I don't want to hurt you. Just go. Go home." Its ears twitched. A great tongue lolled out and saliva dripped and glistened in the fire-glow. I sat up. It leapt to its feet and barked. Deafening. It sat down primly and growled. If it sprang at me, it would go for my throat. My scarf was to my left. I grabbed it and slid down right inside my sleeping bag, pulling the top part over my head. I turned over. Dog - snarling. Me - heart racing. *Breathe slow, breathe slow, breathe slow.* I wound the scarf around my throat. I knew now I had a winning strategy as long as I could keep cool. "Listen, dog, go now and you'll be OK!" The next snarl was right next to my right ear. But in which line lay the dog's body? I had to know. I brought up my right hand to my head - the elbow pain had miraculously vanished - and found the top flap of the rucksack. As I withdrew the knife I felt the wet tongue lick the sweat off the back of my hand. I snatched it back in. I thought of Kay. Kay hated dogs. I rolled onto my back causing a frenzy of barking. Which side was it on now - the unzipped side - my right side - or on the other? A millimetre at a time, gripping the haft as tight as I could, I brought the knife towards the open edge, keeping the top of the bag pulled tight over my head. I began to jerk my left elbow out and instantly the great beast pounced on it with its jaws. Fatally, for itself, it also kicked my left knee, producing an instant image in my head of its body. I calculated where to strike and flung out my right hand, thrusting the knife deep into its ribs, as hard as I could and twisted. The barking turned to a yelp, the body shuddered and went limp. It lay down next to me like an obedient friend. There was surprisingly little blood. I expected to feel terrible, but I was elated. I withdrew the blade and wiped it clean on the fur. I had killed a great dog. What was there now to fear?

My mouth was so sour and dry. I made more tea and nibbled a little more bread. I felt exhausted again by the ordeal, but little by little, I dragged the animal to the entrance and buried it under a great mound of snow. The sky had cleared and I calculated I had two good hours of daylight left. Less than two miles to walk. One mile an hour. Easy. I scanned the distance with my binoculars, half expecting to see the usual procession of cars and lorries on the ring road, but there was no sign of a road. I focused on the supermarket. Surely at least a few enterprising souls had made their way there? How charitable would they be? There was a new housing estate a couple of hundred yards behind it. Perhaps a supply line was in operation. I scanned and scanned but saw nothing and no-one. This absence of people, and the enhanced proximity of the store, boosted my

spirits even more. I would be in and out again in minutes. I swallowed more painkillers, sure that the worst must now be behind me; but nevertheless I transferred the blade to my inside pocket. Leaving the fire to smoulder, I trudged off.

For a while, I judged that the depth of the snow was less, making me think that the villages had had the worst of it, but as the store came ever closer - putting me in mind of a miniature version of a tyrolean mountain I knew well - the hedges plodded deeper in, even at times vanishing completely. As the twilight thickened I stopped and swivelled my head over my left shoulder, expecting to see the northern lights. But there was just a blue vastness, astonishingly beautiful, stretching to the hillier horizon where Charnwood Forest lay. I turned my head back round. Against the darkening southern sky the white roof of the store reminded me now of the nativity stable - a large version of it - above which stars were beginning to sparkle. I raised my binoculars and scanned the doors and windows - and immediately froze. The two sliding doors had been wedged open with a trolley placed sideways. Around the entrance area there were no tracks but I could not see into the car park from my position - it was obscured by the line of trees which had been planted along the new road. I wondered if someone in the foyer was now staring down binoculars at me - with the same level of trepidation that I was feeling. The prospect of explaining, propitiating, negotiating and possibly fighting for the drugs filled me with dread. Needing cover, I edged my way to a tree trunk and leant against it. Surely no-one would expect a person to approach from the villages. Would there be a moon? Could I hang on till the small hours when whoever was within would be asleep?

As soon as darkness fell, I began to move around to the left of the store through a field, stepping over a hedge-top, as if I had seven-league-boots on. The entrance edged slowly behind the tree-line. In the distance, to the left of me, where the road dipped invisibly towards a junction I spotted a stranded lorry. The door was open. I imagined the distressing sequel of its driver floundering and submitting to his fate. I stopped and surveyed the extreme right of the building. The car park was now partly in view and I counted five cars buried up to their windows. A large window - was it the café? - was all in darkness...but as I stared I saw flickers of light come and go. Candlelight. And then the penny dropped. Perhaps there were shelf-stackers, night workers there - trapped by the first snowfall; people striving to make ends meet, perhaps with second jobs in our heartless economy; decent, hard-working people.....

Nevertheless, I would only go in when all within was silent and dark. Silent night, holy night.....and I was the shepherd, jiggling and flinging my arms around to keep warm under a breath-taking sky into which a tiny slice of a moon had dared to rise. I reached the trees and found a sloping trunk against which I could lean and rest. I took off my rucksack and sat on it. In my head I took a tour of the supermarket. I would have to knock the trolley out of the way - I would not be able to climb over it - and put it back immediately the long way round. There were two more sets of sliding doors - one leading directly into the main store and another set to the left, beyond the kiosk, the doors of the pharmacy. If these were also wedged open - and there was surely a high probability that this would be the case, given that drugs of some sort would be needed by those inside - then my task would be simple. Otherwise I would have to prise them apart with my chisel. At least no alarms could go off.

If I were them, which part of the shop would I occupy? To the left of the second entrance, a few yards back, were all the clothes racks. They would need to make a camp with piles of them to be warm, especially at night. And any intruders would have to come that way. If I was very lucky, I could slip unseen into the pharmacy. Once in the dispensing section, which was self-contained, I

would be able to put on my torch and find the Immunase. Surely to God, the shelves would be arranged alphabetically!

How time dragged! By eleven my impatience had got the better of my judgement and, seeing no more flickers in the window, I began the final leg of my trek. A slope through the trees led down to the road but the poles kept my balance and my footing.

The sweep of the wide road put me in mind of a glacier between the sides of a valley. Beyond a second barrier of trees the white roofs and upper floors of the first houses of the new estate were visible. All in darkness. Surely someone had improvised and survived? All had gas central heating. Then it struck me - without electricity how could hot water be pumped? I wondered how many desperate efforts of fathers - and mothers - to get supplies for their families were concealed by the treacherous snow. The realities beneath its beauty were cruel and ugly - originally of our making and, now, of its own.

There was a dark shape in a drift; I shone my torch on it and saw it was a boot. I bent down slowly to pick it up....but there was more to it...a jeaned leg emerged and I dropped it in horror, nearly losing my balance. *Calm!* The torch showed me a white mould in which the face belonging to the body must be cast. I crouched and swept away the fresh flakes, and both the shallowness of that layer, and the normal tone of the skin beneath- albeit bloodless and frozen - but very different from the rubbery greyness of my neighbour Squires - told me immediately the body had not been there longer than a few hours. It was a young man. More scraping revealed a great gash above the right ear where blood had frozen. I envisaged immediately a vicious quarrel or summary justice - or the settling of an old score. For him to be lying no more than ten feet to the left of the entrance - and there were no footprints to show he had staggered there before collapsing - suggested that he had been given a leg-and-wing, by at least two people. My naïve hopes of a scratch liberal democracy or benevolent dictatorship within instantly vanished. In the meagre light of the moon and stars a smiling Santa Claus, with a MERRY CHRISTMAS slogan, was waving at me from the large window, rendered at once even more glib and idiotic by my grim discovery - and his presence was doubly ironic, given the snowy context and its deadly consequences for our world.

I stood irresolute for ages. At least I had a wall to lean against while I waited for even more time to elapse and for inspiration to dawn. Judging by the number of cars there had to be at least five of them left. There would be women. Could I appeal to them if I were caught? Would I even have time to appeal - or be despatched without ceremony? It was nearly midnight. My feet and fingers were beginning to tingle. I spat on my glove and watched it freeze within seconds. I had to make a move.....

I could not decide if the distant shouts were of laughter or terror - or both - but I felt a kind of relief, realising that those within must have set up their camp not near the entrance but next to the booze on the far right of the store from where a flickering glow was coming. They would, of course, have nightlights from the household section. I crept past the cigarette kiosk, shielding my torch with my hand, keeping its rings of light on the floor in front of me. The glass in the pharmacy doors had been smashed and lay in fragments on the other side. It crunched a little as I walked through and I paused. There came a distant peal of reassuring laughter. Rounding the corner of the shelves where the non-prescription medicines were stacked, I shone the torch around the inner sanctum of the dispensary. How easy! Within seconds I had found the Immunase and within a minute the antibiotics Kay had been taking. I took off my rucksacks and

stuffed all the boxes - enough for months - into the space I had left. I peeled off my gloves and rubbed my hands warm. I wrinkled my toes. It had taken me just over an hour to walk from the farm building. Would there be enough starlight to get back there in safety now? Could I somehow secure the torch? In a sleeve? I thought dismally of the chore of cutting wood and making a fire. How cold and exhausted would I be?

I heard a cough nearby and switched off the torch. A candle. A figure. A teenage girl was taking cigarettes from the shelves not ten yards away. She saw me, froze and let out a great yell before staggering away. My rucksack was on the floor; my gloves were off; I was thirty clumsy strides away from the entrance blocked by a trolley. I needed two or three minutes to escape and I did not have them. I eased the hat up from my ears and loosened the scarf from my mouth. I felt for the knife in my pocket.

Of course the laughter had stopped and a staccato of footsteps were approaching. Six dim figures in coats breathing out fog - three slight, one more substantial, one obese and one - the leading figure - tall and beer-bellied, holding a bottle - now edged into the glow of the candle which the woman had left behind. Instantly, I realised I would appear as a large dark menacing shape to them and to compound that advantage I quickly switched on my torch. Their faces lit up and their eyes closed in the dazzle. I reached for my deepest voice.

"I intend you no harm. I'm on a mercy errand - for drugs. My wife needs them. Just go back to your party.....and I'll be on my way."

"Turn that fucking thing off, mate!" The voice came from the tall man, clearly the leader and clearly drunk. "Turn it off - an' we'll talk."

"No. I have nothing to say. I have to get back. My wife is ill."

"Get back where?" asked the stout figure - a young blonde woman with cheeks like cushions and slits for eyes. "What's your name?"

"Let him go" quietly urged one of the lesser lights. There were five females and this one drunken brute. He had a weak chin and a rip of a mouth.

"Shurrup! Who's in charge here?" he shouted, shaking his bottle of spirits. I reckoned him to be in his early twenties. In spite of his belly, I would have no chance of beating him - unless I could take advantage of his drunken state. Of course he had no measure of me and I kept the torch on him as he moved from side to side, trying to get a better look at his opponent. I thought of the money in my pockets - and dismissed it as useless.

"Tell us who you are.....and then.....you can go!" he said. "*When* you switch that fucking thing off."

"I bet he saw Paulley when he came in" whispered one of the others in the background. She could hardly have said worse. Now he fixed me with menace and a slow-dawning anxiety. Drunkenness makes people a lot louder than they ever realise of course, and his reply to her who had spoken left me in no doubt - I was *going nowhere*, he tried to whisper.

"Go an' get a load of heavy tins. You two. Take a basket each. And *you* - turn that torch off....or else...."

Instantly I read his nasty intention with the tins. I switched off the torch and came out into their light. My main weapon now would have to be his complacency.

"OK. You win. I'm from Dadlingcote. I'm.....Harry."

"An old man! We were all frit of an old git. You two! Leave the tins. He's come out!"

"Look - I'm really tired..."

"*Did* you see Paulley?" asked the fat blonde, blowing out smoke.

“I saw nobody. Who is Paulley?”

“Thought he could keep ordering us about,” said the one girl who had not spoken, now returning. She was the one who had raised the alarm. She looked pale and ill. She had a failed hair dye and a tattoo on her neck. “What’s it got to do wiv ‘im if we tek the fags and the booze? Only on a couple of quid an hour more than usan’ behaved as if he was the chairman. Wanker.”

“Told us we’d get the sack!” said her friend, a sour-faced woman in her thirties and very drunk.

“So who’s gonna come all the way out ‘ere - in this - and sack us?”

Now into the light walked a tall, thin young man. He was steady on his feet and looked intelligent. I would have said he was a student of some variety.

“Hey up! Here’s the professor.” shouted my chief adversary with a lurch and a laugh. “Where you been hiding, prof?”

He joined the girl who had urged the leader to release me, and took her hand. She too had the air of one who had benefited from schooling. He said he had been asleep.

“What do you reckon we should do, prof? Stace reckons he must have seen Paulley. And Big Gobs ‘ere ‘ave more or less told ‘im what we did.”

“What *you* did, you mean” said the quiet girl.

“I already told you, Molly, he fell against the rack when he tried to grab my bottle. Didn’t he Stace? An’ we didn’t want him starting to stink the place out.”

They all stared at me. It was my say now.

“I found the body. I’m not interested in how he died - and if you say he fell, so be it. I just need to be out of here, and on my way.....”

I feigned word-choking emotion. Would he realise that he had just confessed to murder in his stupid stupor? He came towards me. I hung my head. His breath was hot and smelt of brandy, disgustingly sweet and sour. He whispered that he could not let me go. *I knew too much*. I looked at him full in the face with pleading in my eyes. His smile was appalling. But my right hand would not move. I could kill a dog but not a man, no matter how loathsome.

“Listen - I know you’ve been drinking, and I know you think I’m a threat to you overPaulley.....but I have only one thought....to get drugs back to my wife. Do you have a wife - a partner?”

“None of your business. Why you ask?”

“Alright, alright...I’m not being nosey...just try and imagine.....Imagine your mother was ill...and she needed....”

I had said the wrong thing. His face set in a snarl and he lashed out, missing me but causing me to overbalance and fall. I must have looked ludicrous with my tennis racket and plywood shoes sticking up because the fat woman and others laughed.

“What’s my effing mother got to do with you? You leave her out! If we let you go, you’ll bring a load of others. This is our place! Why you have to stick your nose in here?”

“Don’t you care if my wife dies?”

He took a swig of brandy, belched and screwed the cap back on. What other option could I try?

“Look” I said sitting up straight “Can’t *any* of you persuade your friend to see sense? You *know* him and what -”

The girl Molly came forward quietly and spoke to him.

“Craig...please let him go. I’ll swear Paulley hit his head like you said -”

“You stupid bitch!” He sent her spinning backwards. “Now you told him my name! I was going to let him go. Now he’s going nowhere.”

He came forward and crouched down about a foot away from me. He told me stupidly that the

snow had changed everything. *It was every man for himself now.* He put the bottle on the floor and grasped the neck of it like a club. I had one last card to play
“No, young man” I shouted past him. “Stay where you are. Please don’t interfere.”
Craig bought my bluff and turned his head to see. I reached into my coat, leant forward, closed my eyes and thrust the knife into his windpipe. He staggered back and fell juddering. The bottle rolled out of his grasp.

“Will you help me up please?”

The young couple unfroze, came forward and took a hand of mine each. I reached down, withdrew the knife slowly in case the blood spurted out - it did not, only seeped - and I wiped it clean on his sleeve.

“I killed him in self-defence. He was going to hit me with the bottle just like he hit Paulley. You heard him more or less admit it. And *you* - Molly, is it ? - *you* said he did. Now - if you don’t mind - I’m going to settle down amongst the clothes over there and get some sleep. I’ll be gone at dawn.”

The others had not budged. They continued to stare at the great body. The blonde put her pudgy hands to her mouth and sank to her knees. Now the young man spoke to the rest.

“He would have killed us all in the end. He was a moron and a bully who got a bit of power. Come on. Leave it. Let’s go.”

One by one they retreated from the candlelight like phantoms. The brandy bottle had not broken and the cap was on. I took it, gathered my things together and settled down amongst a pile of clothing.

When I woke the young man was standing over me. I reached for the knife and he held one hand up, palm outwards in reassurance.

“It’s OK.” He offered me a tin of beans, a spoon and a slice of bread. “It’s pretty stale, and the beans are cold, but it’s the only thing on the menu this morning.”

I thanked him and ate greedily.

“I feel ashamed.” It was the voice of the large lady - Stace - emerging from behind a clothes-rail.

“It was the drink. I’m sorry.”

I told her that I felt ashamed too. “But your friend gave me no choice.”

She grimaced. “He could be a nice lad you know. He was alright - until the snow came and he started boozing. It just brought out the worst in him. He’s been drunk for days.”

I got onto my knees, then to my feet and carefully put my boots on. Stace asked me if I had heard any news. I told her that the electricity had been off for nearly three weeks. I asked her what day she thought it was. She told me and I said it could well turn out to be a white Christmas. The joke fell deservedly flat. She wandered away sobbing.

“She’s got young kids. She took the job just to pay for Christmas. Her mum babysits while she works nights. She tried to get out of here but we stopped her.”

“And you? He called you prof.”

He laughed. “I’m saving up to do a post-grad. In forensic psychology. Expensive.”

“I see. So when did you spot that Craig was a latent psychopath?”

He shook his head. Now Molly joined him. She had brought some fruit juice and we shared it round. He told me that when he had qualified they were getting married. I remembered the wad of notes in my pocket.

“I’d like to buy you a wedding present for your support. No - please - don’t refuse it.”

We lingered around Craig's body over which a coat had been tossed.
"I'll phone the police when this is all over." I said.
"I expect they'll be pretty busy. Good luck."

As I tramped away across the wasteland all my thoughts were with Kay. I imagined returning home to find her dead. I waited for a cloud of buzzing doubts to pursue that thought and the pang it caused.....but my head remained as pristine and clear as the empty air around me. I rejoiced and quickened my pace. Clouds rolled in from the west, from beyond Goldingthorpe, and snow began to fall. A few yards from my outbuilding I chose to press on into the thickening blizzard, wondering if that was to be my fatal mistake. My previous tracks were starting to disappear. Surely it would stop. Was there no pity? I imagined the same scene at its sunniest and most glorious. How could such a friend become such a foe?

I walked more carefully than ever. Squires' pit was filling as I skirted around it. The crows to my far right seemed to have found new carcasses to plunder. Or had the snow receded there? The farmhouse emerged from its hiding place amongst a clump of trees on the left. Smoke billowing from its chimney reassured me. The snow flurries began to thin and then stop. I kept my eyes on the surface, placing each foot in its previous print like a man obsessed with avoiding the cracks in a pavement. I saw a tiny hole appear. Then another. And another. It took a while to realise what it was. I became aware that my cheeks were warm. I stopped and peeled back my woollen hat, letting rain trickle down my scalp and my face. Low dark clouds had covered the entire sky. There was no wind...just steady, vertical, wonderful, transforming rain. My yell of exultation stopped dead within yards of me, unechoed and unanswered. Snow was tumbling, ousted from branches, and from far away I heard a sound I had missed without realising it: the monotonous cooing of a woodpigeon. And there it was, drawn in no doubt on the warmer air - as big as a turkey - sitting in the green tip of a fir tree ascending to Goldthorpe. Those notes which formerly drove me to distraction now made me whoop. Then I wondered again how those people in the distant village had coped after the fire. Had they rallied round or had each defended what each had? I thought of Craig and the young man. Out of the blue I recalled a Christmas panic in a supermarket one year when a riot had nearly broken out in the bread aisle. What had Squires said? *Three customers and ten loaves - no problem...other way round....well, scene's not hard to imagine, is it?*

I heard a shout and looked over my left shoulder back at the farmhouse. I held up my binoculars. A young woman was waving in despair and shouting. - *Please help me!* I thought of my neighbours who I had ignored the day before. This woman's plea was so heart-felt that I could not proceed. I turned, walked back the many yards I had come past the farm and made my way up the long drive.

"It's my Dad. He's ill. Can you have a look at him?"

"But I'm not a doctor!"

She sobbed in the doorway. She pleaded with me. I heard the sound of dreadful coughing. She told me she thought he had the flu. Did I have any idea of what she could do for him? I recalled what Kay had said - *If I catch it, I'll die.*

"Who's here with you?"

"Just me and him. My husband's up in Shrewsbury, buying livestock. I haven't seen him since the snow.....*Please help me!*"

I could slide in but could I climb back out of her hallway? There was a sideboard I could use.

“Listen. I can’t afford to chance picking up a virus from either of you. My wife has had cancer and has low immunity. I’m taking her back drugs from the pharmacy.”

“But he’s in such a state...covered in his own...mess. I can’t lift him. To clean him.”

I looked down at her as I had at my wife the previous day. I felt my resolve weaken as she looked up at me in renewed anguish. I thought of all the hazards I had overcome. Here was an unexpected one - the danger of sympathy.

“ Look. It’s thawing. In a few days things will be....alright.”

I swung off my rucksacks, fished around and threw her a box of antibiotics.

She called me all the vile names she could think of as I walked away. I pulled down my hat to blinker all peripheral images as the houses of Dadlingcote began to approach. It would be a terrible irony indeed if, after the resolution of my stupid doubts and the avoidance of distractions, the death of Kay were to be my reward.

I avoided the temptation of looking into the window of my art pupil and the doorway of the dead couple and their yelping dog. There was utter silence apart from the rain falling on my shoulders. At last I was on the green. Our house had not burned down but the windows - now free of their frost - were ominously dark. Surely she should be there on the lookout for me? I imagined her unable to move from her bed. How would I get in? I cursed myself for not having a plan for this very obvious eventuality. But wait! The back door was unlocked - at least I had left it so - and she would surely have had no reason to lock it for fear of an intruder? I reached the front door and shouted and banged with my ski. Over and over again. It was nearly one o’clock . Had she slept badly in the night and since fallen into one of her deep sleeps? I remembered a terrifying occasion when I had not been able to wake her when the children were small. I looked around the neighbouring houses. Not a sign of life. With a thumping, despairing heart I made my way slowly around the back. I pushed at the back door but it refused to budge. Was it iced up or locked? Furiously I put all my weight against it - and went sprawling in through darkness, banging my head on the cold stone floor.

I must have been unconscious for hours. The dawn was breaking when I felt her stir.

“You came back to me.” she whispered.

“Yes. I came back. I love you Kay.”

“Is it still snowing?”

“No. Thawing.”

My eyes, adjusting to the gloom, saw a smile slowly bloom across her weary face, and after a moment, as a tear trickled down her cheek, she whispered. “We should count our blessings.”