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BEARING WITNESS: THE WRITING OF DOMESTIC ABUSE IN A
WORK OF FICTION

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requirements of Bath Spa University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract and Statement of Objectives

My aim in this thesis is to show how the portrayal of abuse in fiction differs from the writing of other fictional forms. And to examine the tools and methods the writer of such material needs to bring to bear on their work as a consequence.

The thesis is composed of two parts – a creative manuscript and a piece of contextualising research.

The manuscript is in the form of a novel, entitled *What Men Do*, about a woman who physically abuses her husband. The woman at the centre of the novel, Connie Williams, a primary school teacher, faces difficulties at school and in her marriage in the wake of a recent miscarriage. The novel charts her descent into violence and mental turmoil, while at the same time presenting a concurrent narrative involving a police investigation into her actions.

The contextualising research, *Bearing witness: the writing of domestic abuse in a work of fiction*, investigates the writing of a work of fiction involving domestic abuse, by means of close analysis of two novels addressing the subject, as well as my own. I take Anne Enright's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Gathering* and examine how Enright depicts the topic of domestic (sexual) abuse in it. I also explore how Roddy Doyle approaches the subject of domestic violence in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. I compare and contrast my own novel and my experience of writing about domestic abuse with these authors' works. For ease, this part is divided into six contextualising areas: *Family, Society, Sex, Patriarchy, Religion, Mental Illness*.

I then turn to the idea of ‘bearing witness’ in these novels, as well as in my own, and investigate how and why Doyle and Enright bear witness in this form, and what implications it has for the success of their writing and the public reception of their work. This chapter is divided into three parts: firstly *A Call to Arms* which examines initial ideas of bearing witness in works of fiction; the next part *The Novel as Investigation* concerns the investigative elements of bearing witness in a novel, using a quasi-legal context or other form of investigative framework; the third part, entitled *Fact vs Fiction* deals with testimony in fiction, contrasted with other forms of writing such as poetry and memoir.

Thus, through fictionalising and examining domestic abuse in my own and others’ work, I hope that I can bear witness not just to those close to me who have experienced abuse but to those others who have not (yet), to adopt the language of *Time* magazine, broken their silence.

For Laura, and with grateful thanks to Nick

No one may speak for the dead, no one may interpret their mutilated dreams and visions. And yet, I sense their presence.

Elie Wiesel

Our job as a writer is to represent the world and to bear witness to it.

J-P Sartre

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Introduction

It began with Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. I found myself in the grip of this intimate account of an abused woman from the outset, and its hold on me did not relax until the end. As a study of violence it is stark and unflinching, yet the depiction of the woman at its heart is extraordinarily sensitive and sympathetic. It seemed to me then, and still does, that this novel achieves everything the novel should, shedding light on unexplored places where people are afraid or unwilling to go.

Later, I discovered in Anne Enright's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Gathering* that same sensitive treatment of a family affected by abuse, as Veronica Heggarty, the woman at the heart of the book attempts to disinter and examine the facts surrounding the childhood abuse of her recently deceased brother. This compulsion to probe, to expose, goes right to the heart of things, to the life examined; indeed it is the very stuff of the novel itself, a 'profoundly serious investigation into the human case,' as Ford Madox Ford puts it (Ford, quoted in MacShane, 1964, p.15).

Abuse in all its forms (I will go on to define what exactly I mean by abuse in the context of this research in the next chapter) is one of the defining issues of our times; and even more so in the 'Me Too' era. In recent years this has encompassed widespread and systemic abuse of the elderly in care-homes; abuse of children in institutions; abuse by high-profile personalities in the worlds of media and sport; as well as domestic abuse of a violent, sexual or psychological nature. But post-Weinstein, this abuse has broadened to include many people in positions of relative weakness vis-a-vis those with power and responsibility, most often young and

vulnerable women subjected to abuse and harassment by powerful males in a corporate or public sector context.

Until recent years this subject has been rarely discussed, until the revelations, about Weinstein and other well-known figures, became public; and still less written about in fiction. The reasons for its lack of representation in fiction are a subject for another thesis, but perhaps there is a clue in Colm Toibin's assertion that '...it's too easy ... almost lazy – and there's something about it that's wrong as well, to use it in that way' (Toibin, quoted in Sheridan, 2014).

For Toibin, then, abuse appears not to have a place in fiction. Initially I found this a surprising statement from the writer of so many profound and intricate novels; and his description of the writing of abuse as 'easy' somewhat mystified me (as well as provoking a wry smile in relation to my experience of writing a novel on the subject). What I began to understand he means is that abuse could be merely a convenient plot mechanism with which to generate emotion cheaply in a novel, for the author's own purposes (which might not include serious investigation of the subject). But that is to overlook the serious intentions of those novelists who wish to invest the subject with its due importance. Abuse of any kind is surely part of Ford's 'human condition', consequently I believe it must be addressed, much as any other human frailty or cruelty must be. There is certainly nothing 'easy' about the subject. Equally, when dealt with seriously it is not 'wrong' to write about (for instance) disease, or illness, or war.

At the very least, Toibin's view provides a helpful starting-point for this research, with its implication that the portrayal of abuse in fiction differs from the portrayal of other subjects, and that it must therefore have a different set of rules to avoid accusations of it being 'lazy' or 'easy' or 'wrong'. All of which begs the initial

question, both in relation to my own novel and those of Doyle and Enright: in what specific ways does the portrayal of abuse in fiction differ from the writing of any other form of fiction? And what tools and methods does the writer of such material need to bring to bear on their work as a consequence?

Several years before I had read either *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* or *The Gathering* I listened while a male friend told me about the abuse he had suffered at the hands of his wife. His large frame crumpled as he related the literal and physical pain of this abuse. The experience was one of shock for me too. That it had happened at all; but also that it had had this effect on this previously confident man; he seemed smaller for the experience now, diminished.

At the outset of *The Gathering*, the protagonist, Veronica Heggarty, talks of her need to ‘bear witness to an uncertain event’ (2008, p.1) in reference to the incident of sexual abuse of her brother, Liam, she believes she may have witnessed as a child. ‘I feel it roaring inside me,’ she says, ‘this thing that may not have taken place. I don’t even know what name to put on it’ (2008, p.1). This is the starting-point for Heggarty: an act she cannot quite identify, cannot even quite place in time, yet feels compelled to lay bare in all its messy reality.

The conversation with my friend came back to me after reading Heggarty’s words and I realised that I too felt the need to bear witness in some way to what had happened to him. Perhaps in part for him, for what he had suffered; but I also wanted to look into this dark place, this ‘human case’, for evidence of meaning, of motivation, of humanity.

To understand the importance of this act of bearing witness one needs to look no further than the allegations of sexual abuse made by actors Ashley Judd, Rose McGowan and others, which led to the implication of film producer Harvey

Weinstein. As many victims of abuse and harassment subsequently found their voices, the testimony of these actors, as well as their own, helped them to begin the process of restitution and resolution.

But of course abuse is not confined to female victims. There are many male victims too. In the United Kingdom in 2015-16 there were 651,000 male victims of domestic abuse, compared to 1.2 million female victims (House of Commons Library, 2017). I felt that this overlooked male group could throw light on the long-term victimisation of women, and so I decided the story I wanted to tell was of an abused husband. However as time passed I realised I wanted to tell the story not from this man's point of view, but from the abuser's point of view. In this way, I surmised, I could examine not just the effects of violence, but the motivation, the darkness, behind it.

The initial questions suggested by Colm Toibin's comments gave rise to many further questions during the writing of my novel. What amount of abuse constitutes an abusive relationship? Can an abuser's state of mind excuse the abuse? Does a victim ever share the blame for their abuse? Can a relationship survive incidents of abuse? And more particularly in this novel: does writing from the inherently unsympathetic viewpoint of an abuser risk alienating the reader? Like Doyle and Enright before me, I was interested in exploring not just the black and white of abuser and abused, of 'right' and 'wrong', but the shades of grey in between and I tried, in the writing of my novel, to address these questions with the particular set of tools available to a novelist. These, too, are the questions I will be addressing in the course of this research.

Chapter 1: Definitions

Domestic abuse

In this research I generally make reference to abuse as an umbrella term for sexual or violent abuse which occurs outside or inside the domestic sphere. Equally this could be any form of coercive or unwelcome behaviour. When examining domestic abuse I will term it as such.

Definitions of domestic abuse vary. The UK government's current definition of *domestic abuse* is:

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional. (Home Office, 2016)

It further defines *controlling behaviour* as:

A range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour. (Home Office, 2016)

Coercive behaviour it defines as: 'an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim' (Home Office, 2016). These definitions are designed to inform the actions of the authorities rather than being legal definitions.

My personal preference when discussing domestic abuse of any type including violence, and/or (sexual) abuse is to use the umbrella term *domestic abuse*. When

discussing particular incidences of abuse detail is of course important but when discussing a coercive or violent act that occurs within the domestic sphere (my definition) I feel it usually suffices to use this catchall term.

The domestic abuse alluded to in *The Gathering* is taken to be the sexual abuse of a child. The abuse in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is primarily physical abuse, but also abusive/coercive behaviour, as is the case in my own novel *What Men Do*.

Bearing witness

Since this phrase is a central element of this research I feel it is important to spend some time discussing different definitions. All of these definitions are relevant to this research and make sense in different contexts.

The phrase is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: ‘To give oral or written testimony or evidence’ (OED, 2018). Veronica Heggarty, the protagonist of Anne Enright’s novel *The Gathering*, expresses a desire to bear witness to the past events of her brother’s life at the start of the novel, saying that she would ‘...like to write down what happened in my grandmother’s house the summer I was eight or nine...’ (2008, p.1). Her explicit intention to document, then, is clear. What is not as clear is who she anticipates the audience being for this piece of family history (apart, of course, from the book’s readers) and what her purpose is in documenting it.

The act of bearing witness often has the function of bringing a matter to public awareness: war crimes, for instance, or other grave crimes of an abusive nature. But although in *The Gathering* the reader will go on to discover that a crime has (probably) been committed, it is not Heggarty’s intention to bring this to the attention of the

judicial authorities (anyway, the person who has committed this abuse is no longer alive). Heggarty's testimony is therefore intended for her deceased brother and for herself (although more for her own peace of mind than for any practical purpose). But of course since this is a work of fiction Enright is in effect talking directly to the reader through the character. Therefore Heggarty's testimony serves a dual purpose, being both for her own personal enlightenment *and* that of the reader. So what starts out as evidence-gathering on behalf of her brother turns in large part into a meditation on the causes and effects of abuse.

In Jean-Paul Sartre's opinion the job of a writer is to 'represent the world and to bear witness to it' (Sartre, cited in Peyre, 1997, p.85). This suggests a certain gravity, the need felt by him, as a philosopher and writer, to try to represent the knotty questions of existence. But Sartre goes further. For him, writing is '...in essence a taking of position' (2012, pp. 230-231). This suggests that this writing is not just an act of objective reportage, but a more subjective involvement; an *engagement*. An attempt to untangle the knots. I think this is also implicit in Heggarty's desire to report what she (perhaps) saw. There is a sense here for me of (moral) engagement. Of this, more later, but it seems to me that of the large number of possible definitions contained in the phrase, these are the two most obvious and relevant to my aims and intentions in this research.

While Sartre's definition (and Heggarty's) might contain suggestions of engagement, Paula Spencer seems to me to bear witness in a somewhat different, but related, way. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests an alternative definition of bearing witness as being 'a witness of one's action' (OED, 2018). This more introspective form of bearing witness is the form Spencer engages in, looking back over her life in an effort to understand the process that took her from naïve schoolgirl

to battered housewife. Again, exactly who this meditation is intended for is unclear, but as with Heggarty in *The Gathering*, this is a first person non-linear narrative; something short of a stream of consciousness, but still indicative of a logical thought process, rather than merely unconnected memories. So it appears to be a questioning of some sort, an examination of a life in search of answers, or at least clues, for herself and ultimately for the reader. It could perhaps be argued that both *The Gathering* and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* are both profoundly philosophical works, looking deep into the human experience and what it is to be alive. Certainly these are preoccupations that I was very aware of when writing my own novel.

I have emulated this more personal, reflective act of bearing witness in the protagonist of my novel, Connie Williams, who looks back over her life in order to examine various incidents within it and to try to understand how they have led her to the position she is in now. There is another factor at work here too, as the police investigation into the abuse she carries out against her husband necessitates the literal provision of evidence. And the unreliability of Paula Spencer and Veronica Heggarty is echoed in the investigation she conducts into her past. Her motivation for this is not completely clear, it may be to escape her post-abuse ‘reality’ or to ‘punish’ the Connie character in the fiction who is guilty of domestic abuse, or indeed her ‘fictional’ husband.

My own aim in making Connie a witness to her own actions is two-fold. In part it is a form of self-questioning, but also it inverts the usual function of testimony as a victim’s tool and therefore examines the very idea of victimhood, posing such questions as: is Connie herself a victim of her husband? Or men in general? Or her past? Or perhaps even her own psychological makeup? In this way it examines the extent and the nature of abuser and victim.

The early context of bearing witness is closely aligned to martyrdom. According to *The Economist*:

In the founding texts of Christianity and Islam (in Greek and Arabic respectively) the word for martyr is identical or nearly identical to that for witness, someone who gives testimony (not necessarily in dramatic circumstances) about something they believe to be true, or have seen for themselves. (Erasmus, 2013)

In Greek the word for both martyr and witness is *marturas*; while in Arabic the word for martyr is *chahid* and witness is *chahed*. Both cultures appear to give a particular weight to the witness of an event, a particular responsibility. Further to this there may be a personal cost to the witness involved in providing this first-hand testimony, which, paradoxically, emphasises its true worth. The cost for Veronica Heggarty, Paula Spencer and Connie Williams is the psychological torment of presenting these stories they feel are so important.

In a psychological context the act of bearing witness is defined in the *Oxford Textbook of Palliative Nursing* as ‘... to be present to [sic] the events and the emotions of another’s life and experience’ (2015, p. 548). In this context it is a demonstration of empathy, the offer of a shoulder to cry on. There is something of this in Heggarty’s desire to demonstrate a retrospective empathy with her brother that she did not while he was alive. There is also a strong suggestion of guilt.

Bearing witness also can contain the idea of disclosure of the act of another, thus improving the discloser’s own wellbeing. For instance the judicial context, whereby immoral or illegal acts are brought into the public arena and those who have committed those acts are duly punished. However as I have already discussed, this is less relevant in this context, given that there is no option for meaningful punishment in these cases.

Testimony

In this research I often refer to the provision of testimony as a phrase synonymous with the act of bearing witness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines testimony as ‘Personal or documentary evidence or attestation in support of a fact or statement; hence, any form of evidence or proof’ (OED, 2018).

Much of the ground has been covered in the section on ‘bearing witness’ but notable in this case is the wide definition of the word. Everything from (sworn) testimony or evidence in court, to putting forward a personal opinion is encompassed in the definition ‘any form of evidence’. In this research I generally take testimony to mean the latter, being aware that such opinion is just that and can be based on truth, half-truth or untruth. What is often important is the strength of an opinion rather than the truthfulness of it, which may be ignored for a number of reasons, (at least) some of which derive from genuinely-held convictions.

Truth

‘It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife’ (2003, p.5) Jane Austen boldly states at the start of her masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice*, as only a novelist can. In research such as this, the word ‘truth’ would require a citation. Questions would need to be addressed. Whose truth? What sort of truth? A novelist, however, can be bold; it is their own fiction, therefore it is their own definition of ‘truth’.

In Austen's case, the truth referred to is of course a diversion from the ironic truth she goes on to reveal. In the novels I am looking at in this research, definitions of truth are equally elusive. Veronica Heggarty says as much: 'I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth (2008, p.2). Paula Spencer tries to arrive at the truth by re-constructing her past, but certain details are contradictory or unclear. For Connie Williams, the protagonist of my own novel, *What Men Do*, the truth is deeply unpalatable and so she tries to construct another truth for herself.

Truth is illusory, subjective. Much of the discussion I will have of 'bearing witness' centres around the perception of truth and the desire to represent it.

Mental Illness

Mental illness and its relevance to abuse, and in particular the specific abuse contained in *The Gathering*, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *What Men Do*, will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter. But a word here on the umbrella term is relevant. There are a variety of definitions of mental illness, but the phrase is defined in *The Oxford Living Dictionaries* as 'A condition which causes serious disorder in a person's behaviour or thinking' (2018). However this dictionary's own definition of 'disorder' is 'confusion' (2018) which could describe a number of psychological states from stress and anxiety at the least intrusive, to severe personality disorder or psychosis at the most extreme. One can only speculate, as I will do, on the degree to which Veronica Heggarty and Paula Spencer suffer from mental illness in *The Gathering* and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. However my own protagonist, Connie Williams, suffers from a variety of temporary and more permanent states of mind all of which have some bearing on her actions but none of which occurs

independently. These range from confusion, to anxiety to possible post-natal psychological illness.

Chapter 2: Context

Much in the way that the protagonists of Enright's and Doyle's novels, and my own, strive for some sort of understanding by laying out all the 'facts' and navigating their way through them, I believe it is important to set out the important elements of these novels first, before reaching any further conclusions. I will be looking at them in the context of the following areas: *Family; Society; Sex; Patriarchy; Religion; Mental Illness*.

i Family

Paula Spencer in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and Victoria Heggarty in *The Gathering* have a surprising amount in common (quite apart from their shared experience of abuse). They are both Irish, both thirty-nine years old, and both intent on examining their respective past lives, from childhood onwards. They are both from large families (in Spencer's case she is one of seven children and in Heggarty's case one of twelve), both come from overtly Catholic backgrounds (albeit in which belief has steadily diminished over the generations), and are both in something of a crisis, searching for something to replace this religious certainty. That is perhaps where the obvious similarities end. Although the two women can both be said have troubled marriages, Spencer is married to a man who physically abuses her, while Heggarty's difficulties are of a more existential variety, the traumatic death of her brother having led her to question her life and its structures, including, most notably, her marriage.

Both women are married and both have children. In Heggarty's case two and Spencer's four ('There could have been five, I lost a baby' (1997, p.86) the latter says in an apparently offhand remark which serves to illustrate the extent of her abusive relationship). In some ways, Heggarty is the woman Spencer might have been, managing to negotiate school and university, and subsequently working as a journalist before becoming a stay-at-home mother. Spencer, however, finds school difficult, through no fault of her own: 'I don't think I learnt one more thing after I went to that school' (1997, p.31). This lack of advancement results in her having little option other than to take a menial job as a cleaner, leaving her without economic power in her relationship with her husband. In Heggarty's case, she has a 'high-maintenance' (2008, p.36) husband with 'an important job' (2008, p. 71), and while her economic power has diminished since giving up work to look after their children, she is able to send her own children to private schools; while the family lives in a new-build house on a sought-after estate. Conversely, neither Spencer nor her children are able, physically or emotionally, to escape their lives of poverty and despair on a sink estate.

Both women are affected by emblematic episodes of abuse. For Heggarty this is the possible sexual abuse that she witnessed in relation to her younger brother Liam, and in Spencer's case the physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband, Charlo. But both women also have experience of abuse by their authoritarian fathers as children. In Spencer's household her father regularly metes out violence as a mechanism of discipline in their household: 'He took his belt to her [Spencer's sister Carmel] in front of all her friends' (1997, p. 46). Spencer often chooses not to recall these events, however, instead remembering her childhood being played out in a 'happy home' (1997, p. 6). But she concedes 'That's the way I remember it, Carmel [her sister] doesn't remember it that way...' (1997, p. 6) It soon becomes clear that

Spencer is creating an idealised version of her childhood, possibly in reaction to her current difficulties or as some form of escapism. Later, she herself recalls Carmel's physical battles with her father. 'I remember the screams and the punches' (1997, p. 46). And says that she too suffered emotional abuse. 'My father called me a slut the first time I put on mascara' (1997, p. 46). In addition to her father, her brother is equally abusive: 'My brother, Roger, called me a slut when I wouldn't let him feel me' (1997, p. 47).

This day to day physical and verbal abuse leads to a diminution of Spencer's self worth as does her life outside the home. 'It was a fright finding out I was stupid' (1997, p.28), she says in relation to her experiences of school. Both are probably factors in her forming a relationship with a man known to be violent, and to her staying in this abusive and coercive relationship as well. 'He couldn't live without me, he said. He loved me. I couldn't go' (1997, p, 209).

As a result of these feelings of inadequacy and guilt she is happy to accept the attention from her future husband Charlo without examining the implications of the man he is, a well-known small-time, violent criminal. 'I stopped being a slut the minute Charlo Spencer started dancing with me' (1997, p.45) she says in an obvious reference to her difficulties in the family home.

Her passivity and acceptance of her husband's transgressive behaviour allows him to exert economic and physical power over her, and this leads to more physical abuse, as well as her descent into alcoholism, which appears to be another form of escape, along with the revisionist approach to her childhood.

These factors seem to conspire to repeat the violence in her family home, as well as a similar dynamic of power to the one between her parents, although it goes on to become something more sinister. Charlo's violence, born of frustration, jealousy,

environment, develops into a form of coercion or ‘gaslighting’ in which an abuser controls the life of another through, lies, deceit and denial.

-Where’d you get that?

-What?

-The Eye.

It was a test. I was thumping inside. He was playing with me. There was only one right answer.

-I walked into the door.

-Is that right?

-Yeah. (1997, p. 181)

Since the novel was published there has been more media focus on abuse, culminating in recent times with the plotline in the BBC Radio 4 serial *The Archers* (2017), in which abuser Rob Titchener controls his wife Helen Titchener to the point at which, like Paula Spencer, she eventually reacts with violence and escapes the cycle of abuse. The strong public reaction to this storyline demonstrates that domestic abuse has not yet overcome its associated stigma, and also emphasises how contemporary Doyle’s treatment of it was over two decades ago.

The Gathering opens with Veronica Heggarty giving her mother the news that her son has died. In the heat of the moment her mother strikes her, leading the latter to ruminate on the violence in her childhood. ‘I don’t think she has ever hit me before,’ she says, ‘I try to remember later, but I really think that she left the hitting to other people’ (2008 p.8). While clearly her mother is grief-stricken, this suggestion of the violence in her childhood should not go unnoted. In her case too, the physical abuse is meted out by her father ‘...my father used to hit his children all the time...’ (2008, p. 226) and (male) siblings. ‘Mossie who was a psycho. Ernest, who was a thoughtful, flat-handed sort of man’ (2008 p.8), and Heggarty herself reacts in turn ‘I had a bit of a phase, myself...’ (2008 p.8). Like Spencer’s father Heggarty’s father’s abuse is also emotional: ‘I was *whoring all over Dublin*. I was *second-hand goods*. I was *turning*

myself into a toilet' (2008, p. 96). And when not being abusive he is (emotionally) distant from his children and wife. Her mother suffers from the demands of bringing up a large number of children on her own, resorting to medication, and allocating care of the children to other members of the family, notably her mother's parents for a time.

It is during this period when the supposed abuse of her brother by her grandmother's landlord and admirer Lambert Nugent takes place and which colours Heggarty's view of her mother as a contributor or even party to the abuse. Although the abuse is not carried out by a family member it is suggested that Heggarty's grandmother is complicit, or at least instrumental in it: 'This is the moment when we realise that it was Ada's fault all along' (2008, p. 223). Her mother, although not directly responsible, is also responsible by extension, in Heggarty's view, as a result of her inability to take care of all her children (the responsibility of her father in this matter is not lost on this reader). '... the year you sent us away, your dead son was interfered with, when you were not there to comfort or protect him...' (2008, p. 213). Thus the novel charts the demise not just of Liam, who goes on to take his own life, but the rest of the family as well, from her grandmother, to her mother and Heggarty herself, who have to live with the effect it has had on her brother and therefore those around him.

A major preoccupation of the novel is the effect of the actions of previous generations on their descendants. One result of this is that:

In Veronica's struggle to define her own ideal of motherhood as less about reproduction and more about nurturing, Veronica rejects the choice her mother has made to have many offspring...' (Pizzetta, 2013 p. 201)

She rejects 'quantity' for 'quality' in parenting, even while feeling that she is not the perfect mother either. In part this is a conscious reaction to the causes and effects of

events she is reflecting on in the present. And in part it is because she, Veronica, has survived, physically, but Liam has not, a fact which seems to induce some survivor's guilt in the former. 'It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too' (2008, p. 173).

Paula Spencer has no such thoughts of changing these aspects of her life, certainly initially; she is seemingly happy just to escape her childhood home and the physical and verbal abuse she suffers. While Heggarty is dragged back into the past by her brother's death and propelled into something of a mid-life crisis of guilt and regret, Spencer is weighed down by the very real presence of an abusive husband in the present. This colours every part of her life and as she succumbs to the numbing effects of alcoholism, she is dragged into a cycle of abuse and depression. This state of affairs continues for many years, in spite of her sister encouraging her to leave the family home, with no one else acknowledging, professionally or domestically, what it should be obvious is happening to her, even her mother. 'My mother looked and saw nothing. My father saw nothing, and he loved what he didn't see. My brothers saw nothing. His mother saw nothing' (1997, p. 187).

The defining point for her is a moment when she realises that their daughter Nicola will be the next target of her husband's abuse. This is the catalyst of change for her and she turns on Charlo, somewhat ironically attacking him with a saucepan, and ejects him from the family home, helped by her daughter. This is the moment she finally overcomes the demons of her childhood and adult life and is both highly significant and transformative. 'He'd killed me and now it was Nicola. But no. No fuckin' way' (1997, p. 213).

In this sense, family is both a help and a hindrance for Spencer. While '... Paula cannot collapse into the arms of a lovingly supportive family... she uses the strength

derived from her maternal and sisterly feelings to eke out an independent existence’ (White, 2001, p. 18).

In fact, Spencer directly credits her sister Carmel for her epiphany, in a tacit acknowledgement that her sister’s version of history is the right one: ‘Carmel saved me; Carmel was the one. Carmel saw what was happening and she made me see’ (1997, p. 188). This transformative effect of children and sister(s) has echoes of the realisation by Veronica Heggarty at the end of *The Gathering* in relation to her deceased brother’s son that the boy’s existence and his continuation of her brother’s line gives her own life some kind of meaning.

In my own novel *What Men Do*, family looms large in Connie’s mind. She has formed a habit of escaping into different scenes from her childhood in order to evade the difficulties of the present, a habit she shares with Paula Spencer and Veronica Heggarty too. But Williams, like Spencer, may be an unreliable narrator, who uses (supposedly) real scenes from her past to inform her actions in the present day. Key within the childhood scenes is a moment of violence by her father against her mother which she chooses, consciously or unconsciously to misinterpret. ‘...then she heard her father shout something and saw him move quickly across the gap. Suddenly there was the noise of a slap, like a gunshot, an explosion, and she could hear him marching towards the door’ (2018, p. 90). She chooses now to re-interpret this event, which she was unable to see with her own eyes, as a violent act by her mother against her father, even though all the evidence points to it having been her father who was the aggressor. This revisionist angle on events seems designed in some way to justify her own behaviour, given that violence on the part of her mother could mean there is an origin – and therefore a reason – for her own violence.

Whether Connie's acts of abuse are a repetition of the one flashpoint in her family background is open to interpretation, but her preoccupation with it and her embellishment of it suggest a link. Connie and David have tried to start a family, something which is important to both of them in light of the perceptions they both have of having had troubled upbringings, but their efforts have so far resulted in 'only' a miscarriage, which has affected Connie's state of mind. 'Their baby. The baby they loved. She and David. She cannot. She does not want to think about it. She must think about something else' (2018, p.18). Not only is she understandably distraught about losing her baby, but, having seen it as something of a salvation, her frustrations lead to an emotional eruption when she is denied it.

Given the unreliability of Connie's viewpoint, the reader cannot be sure of the exact state of Connie's marriage and where the fault lies, but it is clear that the poor state of the relationship, as well as the somewhat atomised family relationships of her childhood help to propel her towards unhappiness and abuse.

The wider social environment depicted in *The Gathering* and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is a factor, too, in these two novels, contributing to the narratives and the characters themselves. Published a decade apart, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* in 1996 and *The Gathering* in 2007, the books reflect the times in which they were written, as well as certain consistent cultural themes. In *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* Ireland is still a rigidly delineated society in which what happens in early life sets the tone for the future. This is the case for Paula Spencer, as under-achievement at school – ‘The brainy ones in primary were told to do the entrance exam for Holy Rosary. No one ever told me’ (1997, p.38) – leads only to work cleaning others’ homes, in an ironic reflection of the deterioration in her own domestic life. Having hoped to escape her difficult background and gain some degree of freedom through her husband – ‘I was Charlo’s girl now and that made me respectable. Men kept their mouths shut when I passed by’ (1997, p.49) – instead she experiences the very opposite as she becomes virtually enslaved to him and in the grip of his violence and bullying.

In *The Gathering* Ireland has experienced the huge economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s but has now ground to a halt, leading to renewed economic uncertainty, which affects Heggarty’s life both practically and figuratively. She reflects regularly on this change, in which society is becoming richer in financial terms, but in another ‘poorer’, as money, status and possessions become too easy to attain, and there is a commensurate decline in morality. ‘... Tom my professional husband engages Mossie my professional brother in some political talk about the way

the country is on the up and up. *Ha bloody ha*, says the corpse next door' (2008, p. 204).

This development is further explored by Doyle in *Paula Spencer*, the 2006 sequel to *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, which depicts Irish society and its change in the wake of the *Celtic Tiger* boom amid increases in wealth and immigration, with Spencer now cleaning bigger and more expensive properties, even while her own domestic situation, living in a council-owned home has not changed: 'But everyone starts at the bottom, she supposes. But that's not true either. She knows it. There's nothing fair about the way things work. She didn't start at the bottom. It was hard work getting there' (Doyle, 2007, pp. 39-40).

When considering these novels I feel it is impossible to separate them from the Irish context in which they were written and set. There is of course something universal in these stories of abuse, which is what drew me to them in the first instance, but the Irish context is a very particular one, most obviously with regard to the abuse of young people by adults in positions of responsibility within the Catholic Church. The culmination of these revelations was the publication of the *Ferns Report* in 2005, documenting clerical sexual abuse in the Ferns Diocese. And then, later, a broader investigation, the *Irish Child Abuse Commission* of 2009, after nine years of investigation found that abuse was 'endemic' in Irish Catholic church schools and orphanages' (McDonald, 2009). It also concluded that more than 2000 of the 35,000 children sent to religious institutions were believed to have been abused, sexually, physically or verbally in a scandal that perpetuated for years and in which the perpetrators were seldom brought to book (BBC, 2009).

It is against this backdrop that Enright's novel exists, although published some two years before the publication of the broader 2009 report, but reflecting the

widespread knowledge that these events had taken place over decades. This is how Veronica Heggarty believes her brother Liam to have been treated, as a disposable object of sexual gratification, or perhaps a vehicle of emotional revenge against his grandmother and/or a demonstration of economic power over both her and her family in a form of covert coercive control. In addition there is a suggestion that the abuse may have been more widespread than just this man. 'I don't think Nugent was the last' (2008, p.163).

While not obviously related to the sexual abuse scandals, the context of Irish society is very important to Doyle's study of a working-class woman in an abusive marriage. It could happen anywhere, but in Ireland, with its '... rigidly traditional Catholic ideas, as represented in, for example, the 1929 Censorship Act...' which '... had far-reaching effects on Irish life and culture well into the 1980s' (Persson, 2012, p. 140), it perhaps has a greater impact.

The novel derives from an Irish produced television series entitled *The Family* (BBC/RTE, 1994), written by Doyle, which followed the life of four members of the Spencer family in a flat in a tower block on the outskirts of Dublin. This depiction of a working class family, and its poverty and abuse, had an immediate impact on broadcast, with criticism and excoriation from many corners, culminating in death threats for Doyle (Crown, 2011). Doyle himself cites the final episode, related from the point of view of Paula Spencer, as the point at which he realised there was the start of a novel (Crown, 2011), and indeed it was the genesis of *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. These characters seem to be invested with a concentrated dose of Irish identity and sensibility.

'The problem with being Irish... is having *Riverdance* on your back. It's a burden at times' (Doyle, quoted in Salter, 2009). What I believe Doyle means by this

is that there is a superficial perception of the Ireland which does not reflect its true nature. Religious intolerance, cultural ignorance, domestic abuse, gender inequality, are just some of these unknown factors, not to mention the tendency towards large – quite often dysfunctional – families, which are at the heart of many of the issues in both *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *The Gathering*.

The most important part of this Irish context in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is perhaps its inequality, its hidden poverty, its murky underbelly, areas Doyle often visits in his writing. What is depicted in the novel is a vicious circle of poverty and disenfranchisement, leavened only by the survival instincts of the protagonists. In *The Gathering* Enright starts in similar territory but as a result of the country's economic progress this picture broadens into a more middle-class context in which, with more material wealth, attention turns to more existential woes. '... there is something so bare about our little estate at night; the neighbours, each in their madness, asleep in a row. Nothing matters' (2008, p. 149).

Both *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *The Gathering* are located in and around Dublin, a Dublin from time to time re-imagined by *The Gathering*'s Veronica Heggarty in the 1920s, the time of her grandparents' lives in their early years as adults, in an acknowledgment or examination of the past (as well as a nod to the Dublin of James Joyce). The story of Ada and Nugent could be a glamorised version of the past, but instead we see the inequality, and ultimately the incident of abuse at the centre of her investigation. However, there is a caveat to this narrative thread, with Heggarty reminding us that this is in fact her fiction 'I write about Ada and Nugent in the Belvedere endlessly, over and again' (2008, p. 38). She constantly re-writes these familial characters in order to try to create a context for what happened to her brother,

but in another sense this endless re-writing is a metaphor for her own existential questioning.

The abuse of Heggarty's brother by Lambert Nugent could also be seen as '...a betrayal of Ireland's future.' (Smyth, 2015, p. 200) That is, it signifies the 'past' holding back the 'present'. This finds its reflection in the contemporary public reaction in Ireland to *The Family*. There was a widespread opinion that Doyle was in some way betraying Ireland with a portrayal of the negative aspects of life in this country. 'There were accusations that I was suggesting this was working-class life, that I was undermining marriage. I was the subject of sermons, editorials, political programmes on TV' (Doyle, quoted in Crown, 2011).

I too wrote my novel in an era of the unveiling of abuse and scandal, exemplified first by the Operation Yewtree police investigation detailing sexual abuse by men in positions of power in the media, and then the welter of revelations of sexual abuse and harassment coming in the wake of the initial allegations against Harvey Weinstein. And concurrently increasing levels of domestic abuse of a physical, verbal and sexual nature, exemplified by the plots of several popular television programmes such as *Coronation Street* (ITV, 2012), in which a male partner suffers abuse at the hands of his female partner, and *The Archers* (BBC, 2017), in which a woman is the victim of 'gaslighting' and abuse by her husband in a sustained example of marital coercive control and abuse.

I was interested at the outset in writing about the subject of middle-class abuse, since, until the plotline in *The Archers*, it was not widely seen as a problem affecting all parts of society. My own knowledge of it, however, suggested that it was indeed prevalent in all areas of life. And a remark by Fay Weldon (2013) also made an impression on me. Mentioning to her my idea for the novel her first question was:

‘Working class or middle-class?’ When I told her that the context was a middle-class one, she expressed the forceful view that this was a valuable area to explore.

Something I also wanted to explore in my novel was the wider occurrence of violence in society and differing reaction to its various forms. Connie’s husband is a keen amateur rugby player, with its legal and illegal violence; her father she imagines to have been a soldier (his supposed barracks being ‘Deepcut’ with its own allegations of bullying and abuse); while casual violence on the street and in real and fictitious crime contexts, as well as the ‘innocent’ violence of the children at her school, all contribute to Connie’s confusion and confluence on the subject. This is voiced at one point by DI Johnson, who says: ‘Then he thinks of Mr Williams, blood spurting from the cut on his forehead. It doesn’t seem like the same thing. But it is, really. All this violence. He sees it all the time’ (2018, 202).

Paula Spencer has a somewhat uneasy relationship with sexual matters in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. When she initially experiences the changes of puberty, her mother's reaction '...left me feeling like I'd done something terrible to her...' (1997, p. 16). This reaction leads to her discovering about sex before her friends: 'I was the first person to have really heard them, the Facts of Life. I'd got there first. The first time I'd ever won anything. It was one of the best things ever to happen to me' (1997, p. 16).

And this equivocal experience continues into her sexual relationship with her boyfriend and then husband, Charlo. At first, 'I couldn't get enough of him. I was tired and sore but I didn't care' (1997, p. 155). However as the relationship becomes abusive she suffers not only physical abuse but also sexual abuse and rape. Although this is not explicitly stated, it is strongly hinted:

We had sex before he went out; I still wanted that, always. He loved me. I was mad about him. Behind that terror and cruelty, he was still there. But I had to get him before he went out. Then I could black out before he got home. If I was lucky.' (1997, p. 212)

These lines are notable firstly for the degree of terror Spencer experiences, the serious and continual nature of the abuse, but also there is the fruitless desire to see the best in the husband whom she still loves and her conflation of their physical relationship now with the one they had in the early part of their marriage. In spite of the abuse she experiences, she still loves Charlo and in spite of the abuse he metes out to her, she feels he still loves her. I note also that Spencer refers to the act as 'sex', not 'making

love'. This reference seems to be indicative of her subconscious attitude to their physical relationship and the identification with abuse. This recurs in her reflection on the facts of her husband's death, a botched robbery during which he physically assaults a hostage. 'But why did he whack poor Mrs Fleming? He wasn't married to her' (1997, p. 158), Spencer says, with quite some irony, before going on to speculate whether he sexually assaulted the woman, associating his treatment of this woman with her own normalised relationship with her husband.

'You don't kill someone by having sex with them. You kill them with a knife, or a rope, or a hammer, or a gun. You strangle them with their tights. You do not kill someone with a penis' (2008, p. 145), Veronic Heggarty muses in *The Gathering*. However, the ironic implication is that in fact her brother died in just this manner, as a result of the sexual abuse he suffered as a young child.

Heggarty's attitude to sex is complex, as a result of having possibly witnessed this abuse as a child, herself; and for her sex is closely bound up with the visceral. Initially the feeling she has when informing her mother of the death of her brother is '...somewhere between diarrhoea and sex...' (2008, p. 7), an intriguing description of grief and a bizarre one in equal turn, indicative of an intense set of feelings and the wildly vacillating set of emotions that Heggarty experiences throughout the novel. It also implies a loss of control, an inability to marshal her emotions in the face of an event with so much weight attached to it, specifically the sexual abuse of her brother she now identifies as an adult, but which happened when she was a child. Tancke argues that this loss of control signifies a 'breakdown of corporeal boundaries' (2015, p.121), which seems to very accurately describe Heggarty's physical and mental state in relation to both sex and her existence in general. There is also the possibility that she herself was abused by the same man who abused her brother, somewhat cursorily

alluded to, but a possible contributory factor to her demons: 'I am facing into that darkness and falling. I am holding his old penis in my hand' (2008, p. 221).

As a result of Heggarty's worsening relationship with her husband, sex becomes a contentious issue. She has '... tear-streaked sex, once in a blue moon...' (2008, p. 82) with him, '... not knowing whether to hit him or kiss him' (2008, p. 82). While instead she harbours increasingly fond reminiscences of Michael Weiss, her boyfriend at university: 'But it is not just the sex, or remembered sex, that makes me think I love Michael Weiss from Brooklyn now, seventeen years too late' (2008, p. 82).

Finally, she '... went upstairs and had sex with my husband for the last time.' (2008, p. 218). While the sex between the two of them is consensual, it develops into a mechanical and somewhat unenjoyable process for Heggarty, even as the memory of sex with her lover at university becomes more idealised.

If it is the demise of her marriage which has a bearing on her diminishing appetite for conjugal sex, it is also in part the increasing memories of the sexual abuse she witnessed in relation to her brother (and possibly her) which seem to insidiously work their way into her mind, and this abuse is in part responsible for the deterioration in her marriage as guilt and angst overtake it.

But her attitude to sex is in the end more ambivalent and indicative of an improvement in her mental state and arrival at some sort of 'closure'. She decides finally that: 'I want to make love to my husband again' (2008, p. 260), knowing that this may reward them with the third child she and her husband have been considering: 'Some new soul, with eyes like plums. A boy' (2008, p. 260). This suggests both a rapprochement with her husband and a successful de-coupling of the link between abuse and sex that she has previously been making.

In my own novel, sex is almost absent, as a result of the deterioration in Connie and David's relationship, rather as is the case with Veronica Heggarty. 'And of course the arguments about sex. One of them doesn't want to. Most often her, in the past. But now him' (2018, p.109). There is a foreshadowing of this uncomfortable attitude to sex in her recollection of the relationship with her first boyfriend: 'He was her first proper boyfriend so it had still been new to her, a bit frightening. The first time they'd used a condom it had seemed like a strange ritual, a medical procedure' (2018, p.149). It is perhaps this frustration at how her relationship is deteriorating emotionally and physically that leads to her physically abusing her husband, although the reader cannot know for sure and that is my intention, to blur the lines of accountability and responsibility, much as Doyle's and Enright's protagonists have the lines blurred for them.

In the police thread there is also a focus on violence and sexual assault, which is reflective of Connie's own mental turmoil and her personal examination of violence and abuse. As is her jealousy and the assumption that David is being unfaithful to her. Indeed it is this that eventually guides her actions at the end of the novel at the height of her mental difficulties:

She sees him looking at women; young women. He says he isn't, but she knows he wants them. Or perhaps it is something else he wants, she does not know. She wants to shout at him, scream at him, make him turn around and look at her and take her in his arms and tell her that he's sorry. (2018, p. 229)

At first she feels guilty, but then her thoughts turn to 'punishing' David for this intellectual or physical infidelity: 'She looks down at the table and sees the knife lying on the cheese board... Now everything fits together in such a wonderful way, and she knows what she must do' (2018, p. 230).

This punishment has a double sense, given her perception that David's behaviour since her miscarriage has been unsympathetic, to say the least. In addition to which, since she has recently had a miscarriage there is every possibility that this experience has coloured her attitude to sex and what the act signifies, not just in terms of intimacy but also in the sense of procreation.

In *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* the tone is set early on with abuse levelled at Spencer by her father, her male siblings, the boys at her school:

– Slut.
My brother.
– Slut.
My father.
– Slut.
Everyone. They were all in on it. (1997, p. 49)

She is ‘saved’ from this by the violent reputation of her boyfriend and later husband Charlo: ‘But it stopped when I started going out with Charlo’ (1997, p. 49). However this is a short-lived respite as Charlo takes on the mantle of aggressor himself, and the verbal insults give way to violence. Spencer becomes so accustomed to this treatment at the hands of men, including, later on, the male doctors who turn a blind eye to her injuries, that she begins to adopt this (male) point of view: ‘I began to see what they saw. Nothing’ (1997, p. 188).

In *The Gathering*, Veronica Heggarty suffers a degree of verbal abuse from the male members of her family at home, although the progress she makes at university and later, professionally, insulates her from many of these attitudes. But she still feels keenly the casual sexism in her relationship with her husband, for the most part in relation to being a stay at home mother. And the abuse around which the novel centres is carried out by a man so that in a sense her life (as well as her brother Liam’s, of course) has been shaped by male attitudes.

Much of the action of *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, *The Gathering* and *What Men Do* takes place in the domestic sphere, an environment more often populated by the novels' female protagonists than the male. This setting is used, often bathetically, by Doyle and Enright to illustrate broader themes, like alienation and loneliness.

Spencer's husband Charlo is not present in this domestic sphere very often, appearing only to claim his (male) requirements of food, sex and sleep. It is to all intents and purposes Paula's domain, and a place of misery, until she eventually reclaims it as hers when she finally ejects him. Likewise, Veronica Heggarty exists in a space bereft most of the time of husband or children where '... most of the stuff that you do is just stupid, really stupid...' (2008, p. 27) and like Paula Spencer before her she begins to see it as a place of sadness and questioning. And like both these characters Connie, although a full-time teacher, spends more time in the domestic sphere than her husband, who absents himself to play sport, spend time with friends, or drink after work, investing his presence with the air of the temporary, the patronising: 'She has not even noticed that he is late. Eight o'clock. For him to be late it would mean he came home earlier at other times. This is the time he gets home now' (2018, p.17).

Paula Spencer experiences literal entrapment, given her inability to drive. 'I never had to learn how to drive' (1997, p. 210), she says, implying that others (men) have always done it for her. In parallel she experiences a figurative entrapment in her marriage, with her abusive husband exerting economic coercive control over her. In *The Gathering*, Heggarty uses her car as a form of escape, driving at night to try to organise her thoughts. Indeed this is not the only mode of transport she uses as an

escape, literally escaping by aeroplane at the novel's denouement, before deciding finally to return.

Both Spencer and Heggarty are dependent on their husbands financially, which puts them in an uneasy economic situation. In Paula Spencer's case, Charlo '...burned money in front of me. – How will you cope? He slashed my good coat. – Where'll the money come from to buy a new one?' (1997, p. 177). He uses money as a form of coercive control, demonstrating graphically that whatever he does she will be unable to leave. In Heggarty's husband's case, it is '... clear that his money was much more important than any money, that his job was an important job, that he couldn't be expected to be doing pick-ups and Pampers and snot and drop-offs with so much importance around' (2008, p. 71). So Heggarty, too, has become dependent on her husband financially, and she, like Paula Spencer, is forced into the traditional role of stay at home mother, whether she likes it or not.

But these characters are not just victims of men, they are complex characters, both self-aware and able to analyse their lives. 'This wasn't a crush – this wasn't David Cassidy or David Essex over there – it was sex. I wanted to go over there and bite him' (1997, p. 3) says Paula Spencer, echoing the visceral, sexual response more commonly associated with male characters. This sort of non-stereotypical female trait helps contribute to a broader picture of Spencer; and indeed she does eventually overcome the oppression of her husband, ironically through violence of her own.

Likewise in *The Gathering* Veronica Heggarty does try to exert her own independence. Ostensibly this revolves around a distancing of herself from her mother and her domestic situation by minimising the number of children she has and therefore her attachment to the childcare sphere: 'What Veronica cannot forgive is excessive reproduction, the kind of overwhelming maternity that many women

experience as potentially threatening to a woman's freedom and self-worth' (Ford, 2008). However, unlike Paula Spencer, it might be argued that she never succeeds in this goal, given that at the end of the novel she both decides to return from her (literal) flight and also reconsiders the prospect of trying for another baby in order to have the son that her husband wants to have: 'Hey, Tom, let's have this next baby. Just this one. The one whose name I already know. Oh, go on. It'll cheer you up, no end' (2008, p. 260).

In my novel too, Connie views patriarchal traditions with deep suspicion. She makes this clear early on:

'...it is always men, men investigating dead women, murderous men, women victims. Women shouldn't be victims, she feels. But they usually are. She is passionate about this sort of thing; cannot understand people who think without questioning. It is why they do not see her husband's old friends anymore. *Worr, look at her; did you see the score?* Won this, lost that.' (2018, p. 4)

And in relation to one of her pupils: 'She doubts the Head spends any time imagining Noah's mother's situation. A single parent with two cleaning jobs. Her son's father gone, his younger brother's too. What is wrong with all these men, she wonders' (2018, p.8).

She also looks askance at some of her husband David's views:

'*Because that's not what men do.*' He is bellowing at her now, his face red, the sinews on his neck straining.

She knows he thinks she should feel happy about what he has said, impressed; but in fact she has to resist the sudden temptation to laugh out loud at this piece of gallantry, this code of chivalry, perhaps gleaned from children's books, or wartime films or God-knows-where. (2018, p. 108)

Like Paula Spencer and Veronica Heggarty, Connie has been affected negatively by the actions of men from childhood to adulthood – most importantly the departure of

her father and the treatment of her by her husband in the wake of her miscarriage.

This is not to say that this entitles her to be abusive, but it does differentiate her from Paula Spencer and Veronica Heggarty in that she achieves some agency, albeit an ill-judged one (perhaps in literal terms).

This is perhaps a good time to address some of the issues of writing about domestic abuse, specifically of a man writing about a female abuser. I feel that a male author writing the line ‘...my mother was too gentle, or busy, or absent, or pregnant to bother’ (2008, p.8), might raise eyebrows, however Enright was not criticized for her depiction of male abuser and abused. Likewise, Doyle did not receive criticism for his immensely empathetic depiction of a female victim from literary quarters, quite the reverse in fact: ‘...Mr Doyle... shows the inner life of this battered housecleaner to be the same stuff as that of the heroes of the great novels of Europe’ (Gordon, 1996).

However, I was aware while writing my novel that there were potential pitfalls, namely that my portrayal, as a man, of a female abuser could be seen to be demonizing women, that: ‘Acting as a woman... is not necessarily a tribute to the feminine’ (Showalter, 2013, p. 123). I did not want to perpetuate stereotypes or write generically about women and as a result removed a passage a female reader suggested was a voyeuristic description of a woman’s body. Otherwise I felt that there was nothing in the novel that (to my mind, anyway) generically or specifically demonized women. And while the novel is not intended to be ‘a tribute to the feminine’, it is meant as a tribute to one particular woman, Connie Williams, a woman with her own set of difficulties and concerns. My aim is to address the mechanics of abuse and the motivations behind it; the set of weaknesses and strengths underlying abuser and

victim. My hope is that this material might enable the reader to understand the individual, to gain a glimpse into (a) life. Connie is my creation. To some degree she is me, so in that sense she is not all female. Likewise she is not all good but neither is she all bad. I hope, like Veronica Heggarty or Paula Spencer before her, that she is not representative of women in general but a rounded character in her own right, who exhibits all the contradictions of the 'human condition'.

As I have mentioned, although the majority of domestic abuse is carried out against women by men, that is not to say that the experience of abused men should be overlooked or accorded less worth. The decision to write my novel was inspired by the direct experience of my friend and I felt then, and still feel now, that it has its own particularity and value. And, as I have also said, it is representative of the overlooked and the disenfranchised, a group which still includes women.

v. Religion

Both Veronica Heggarty and Paula Spencer have a common attitude to religion, existing in a world in which God seems absent. In her youth, Heggarty is told by a nun that she will be ‘...one of God’s little soldiers...’ (2008, p. 128) but as an adult she considers herself ‘Godforsaken’ (2008, p. 222) and reflects that she has ‘...passed little of it on to my children...’ (2008, p. 130). Both Heggarty and Spencer are indicative of the changing views of religion in their respective societies, in which faith has lessened through the generations. They both exhibit scepticism in relation to God and organised religion. For Heggarty, ‘...a mother’s love is God’s greatest joke’ (2008, p. 213).

What has happened in their lives has disillusioned them in relation to religion. But more than that, it appears that the abuse they have suffered themselves or by extension, has engendered this disillusionment. In Heggarty’s case it is the sexual abuse of her brother and ‘...what went on in...churches...’ (2008, p.173) and in Spencer’s case the fact that as an abused adult ‘I could sit in the church at mass... And no one saw me’ (1997, p. 186). (The irony of one incident of abuse by her husband occurring after she ‘... began to raise my eyes to heaven’ (1997, p. 179) is apparent.)

Heggarty’s disillusionment seeps into other aspects of her life: her family relationships, her marriage, her children. Perhaps in previous generations this disillusionment might have been confined to questioning of faith, but now it condemns her to an existential void which affects her life in its entirety. But even in this void, as a non-believer, she is still subject to some of religion’s negative effects.

‘This is what shame does. This is the anatomy and mechanism of a family – a whole fucking country – drowning in shame’ (2008, p. 168). It is not quite clear what this universal, shared shame is but it seems to be associated with the abuse that has occurred within the church. Perhaps even the guilt and shame associated with the Catholic doctrine as a whole.

Spencer’s disillusionment is wholesale. With her childhood, which she tries to invest with a positive tone (‘Rewriting history’ (1997, p. 57), as she terms it), her marriage, her children, her alcoholism and her treatment at the hands of her husband. Religion plays little part in her thinking except in a casual way; but it exists in the past, in the possibly fictitious experiences of her childhood: ‘I believed it when I prayed; I really thanked O Lord for the food he gave me (1997, p. 59), and even, later, in the naming of one of her children after a former Pope. Spencer’s loss of religion is neatly described by Caramine White thus:

Doyle considers the absence of religion in his novels to be a depiction of reality. Because of the aforementioned scandals and the resulting cynicism (which he shares) people do not display the respect and the awe for the Church that characterize Ireland’s religious history. (2001, p.15)

In my own novel religion is also largely absent, replaced by an existential void for Connie Williams, like Veronica Heggarty and Paula Spencer before her. If religion represents certainty, the lack of religion represents the opposite: deep uncertainty, questioning and anxiety. As is the case for Paula Spencer, the only role played by the church in Williams’s life is as the setting for the wedding that she hopes will be her saving grace. For her, religion has virtually no relevance to her life; it might be said that she lives in a cultural environment in which this is the case for a large part of the population and in this way it differs, even now, from Ireland and its Catholic tradition.

However, although the structures of religion are not present in Connie's life, religious imagery features as a sign of her deteriorating mental state. I see this as indicative of her desire to cling on to recognisable cultural references as her state of mind becomes increasingly uncertain. Firstly there is her impression of her husband as he returns home, early on in the novel and in the process of this deterioration:

She can see him, a silhouette against the streetlight coming through the coloured glass in the front door. Ethereal, almost, like a saint standing there in front of her interrogating her. She rolls the image around in her mind. A saintly interrogator. Does such a thing exist? (2018, p. 17)

And on a later occasion on which he returns after having left her:

She turns around and reaches towards the fridge, then starts with surprise as what seems to be an angel appears in front of her, in a blaze of light. As she begins to examine the apparition more closely, somebody steps from the glare and she sees that it is not in fact an angel; it is David.

‘Hello Con,’ he says, and then seeing the expression on her face, ‘Sorry, I did shout, but the music...’

He still seems like an apparition, against the backdrop of the carols, even though she now knows it is him. David the Redeemer. Come back to absolve her of her sins. Hosanna in excelsis. She nods at him, unable to say anything, unable to think what to say. (2018, p. 209)

Finally, at the end of the novel: ‘But of course she is the one who must forever feel the guilt; she is the one who must apologise, over and over again. *Sorry, sorry, sorry*, she says to herself, like a song, like a prayer (2018, p. 229).

Religion exists almost at an unconscious level for Connie: an ‘out of body experience’ which demonstrates her increasing detachment from day to day life, echoing Veronica Heggarty’s experience as a result of her own heightened emotions – ‘Quite literally, I am beyond myself. I am so angry I have a second view of the kitchen, a high view, looking down...’ (2008, p. 10) – as well as her desire for escape,

also evidenced by her interest in astronomical matters and her ‘flight’ into childhood memories.

There is much overt and suggested mental illness in *The Gathering*, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and my own novel *What Men do*. And in all three novels there is a relationship between mental illness and abuse.

In *The Gathering* Heggarty's mother appears to be suffering from an unspecified form of senile dementia and many members of Heggarty's family are referred to in terms of mental illness. Firstly there is her brother Liam – '... mad...' (2008, p. 163) – having committed suicide after suffering a lifetime of the effects of childhood sexual abuse; but it doesn't stop there, there is also her brother Mossie, the 'psychotic' (2008, p. 186), Alice – 'probably always mad' (2008, p. 197) – and 'mad uncle Brendan' (2008, p. 156). Then of course there is Heggarty herself, who refers to her unstable state of mind on many occasions: 'I am officially mad...' (2008, p. 149); 'I have gone mad.' (2008, p. 149). This state of mind appears to be directly linked to her brother's abuse and her attempt to recall what exactly happened and put it into context. Madness is for her to be an umbrella term for many forms of mental illness, including irritation, anger and sadness, but one could perhaps characterize her state of mind as anxious, paranoid and depressive at various points in the novel, in addition to which she also suffers from insomnia, a probable contributory factor to her mental instability.

Paula Spencer is perhaps not traditionally 'mad', but certainly has mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, anxiety and alcoholism, all of which could be symptoms of her abusive relationship. As Lisa Appignanesi notes in her history of women and mental illness, *Mad, Bad and Sad*: 'Trauma, it now seemed to be clear, altered the chemistry of the brain for life... (2010, p. 494). Much as the abuse meted

out against her by her husband is studiously ignored by those around her, including medical professionals, so are its psychological effects, since to acknowledge these would in effect be to acknowledge the cause. Helena Kennedy attests: ‘...male... doctors, trapped in an old double standard about sexuality, were used to blaming the victim for the crime, whether it was rape or repeated abuse, and slow to see the nature of the psychological damage inflicted’ (Kennedy, quoted in Appignanesi, 2010, p. 481).

While much of the mental illness in Heggarty and Spencer could be ‘avoidable’ in that it stems from the actions of abusive males, in my own novel it is rather more complicated, given that the abuser is herself a woman. Connie tries to attribute her own abusive behaviour to an abusive flashpoint involving her parents when she was a child, and an episode which might or might not be true in which her father teaches her how to punch. Underlying this is the ‘vision’ she experiences of her wounded father, from which she goes on to construct another version of the story in which her father is stabbed by her mother, in another attempt to explain her abuse. In the end (probably) suffering from a post-natal illness she appears to be suffering psychotic thoughts, before it is finally revealed that she experiences a moment of clarity and seeks medical help. As such she has more of a definable mental illness than either Spencer or Heggarty. However it could be argued that all three women suffer as a result of childbirth or miscarriage, with them suffering variously everything from post-natal anxiety to depression, or even psychosis.

But I did not want my protagonist to be seen either as generically ‘mad’, without any further insight into what affects and drives her as an individual, or to be investing her with a generic illness confined to her sex, wary of ‘...dismissing righteous female wrath as hysteria...’ (Davis, 1992, quoted in Wirth-Cauchon, 2003, p.172). Equally, I

was wary of portraying Connie as a ‘bunnyboiler’ (the epithet attached to the character played by Glenn Close in the film *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987), and extended in popular usage to describe women displaying behaviour which might be seen as irrational or threatening. With this in mind, my novel does also seek to raise the point that even if Connie were indeed not influenced psychologically by the death of her unborn baby, then her actions might still be understandable, or at least fathomable, as a reaction to the real or even the perceived negative experiences of her childhood and day to day life.

Chapter 3: Bearing witness

i. A Call to Arms

When examining how Anne Enright and Roddy Doyle so sensitively and so successfully portray the difficult and complex events involved in abuse, it appears to me that the idea of bearing witness, cited explicitly by Veronica Heggarty at the outset of *The Gathering*, is a key component of their work, its centrality setting apart this kind of writing from many other forms of fiction. What is the purpose of this act of bearing witness? In Veronica Heggarty's case it is to make sense of the death of her brother at his own hands; and she goes on to try to re-examine his life, with all the tools she can muster. As Eleanor Birne notes in her contemporary review of *The Gathering*, 'She [Enright] re-creates and, where necessary, imagines the events that went towards making his life the life it was' (Birne, 2007). For Heggarty, bearing witness does not mean providing court-grade material. She does not swear to telling the truth; in fact she is more than willing to acknowledge the gaps in her memory and comprehension, in part because she experienced them through the naïve eyes of a young girl, but also because time has elapsed since these events did, or did not, take place.

Furthermore, she even creates a pre-history for her own life, based on a very sketchy knowledge of her parents' and grandparents' lives, which she presents as little more than her own fiction. 'I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth' (2008, p.2), she says, initially, of her intention to investigate the past. For her, bearing witness does not (only) mean representing the 'truth'. She is not (only) acting

as a witness, but also as judge, jury and barrister, trying to tease out nuances, meanings, motivations.

The act of bearing witness also appears to be the motivation for Paula Spencer, although she does not state this as explicitly as Veronica Heggarty. Nevertheless, while she does not frame her story in the same way, her close first person account of her own life aligns with Heggarty's re-examination of her life and the decisions and choices she has made. She appears to feel the same urge to order, to explain; in her case in large part to understand her abusive husband, Charlo, through the prism of her own history. Her own life seems to have lost all impetus; she is in a state of entropy. She shares a sense of guilt with Veronica Heggarty, but while Heggarty's complex feelings of guilt derive from what happened to her brother from an early age, Spencer's guilt relates to her treatment of her children, her alcoholism. Even to an irrational guilt about the abuse she herself suffers at the hand of her husband.

Gerry Smyth notes that 'bearing witness is not a straightforward or easy task – on the contrary, it describes a complex, difficult set of positions and relations, each of which generates its own traumatic resonances' (Smyth, 2015, p.198). This succinctly describes the uncertainty in Heggarty and Spencer's minds as well as that of my own protagonist Connie Williams. All three women share an urge to question, but all three struggle to find answers. This is of course in many ways the human condition. To enquire, to question one's place in the world, more often than not without tangible results.

Both Doyle and Enright's books force the reader to address these questions through the vehicle of abuse, itself a complex and difficult subject. Veronica Heggarty never manages to successfully reconcile the possible abuse she witnessed of her brother with the person he became, or with his eventual suicide, because in essence it

is a 'what if?' question that will never have an answer. Rather than finding answers, she just finds a further set of questions that help her to frame the original question more clearly.

The need to 'bear witness' lies at the heart of the novels I have been discussing, but there is often an equivocacy to it, as Elie Wiesel states so eloquently: '...when you read a book on the Holocaust, written by a survivor, you always feel this ambivalence. On one hand, he feels he must. On the other hand he feels... if only I didn't have to' (Wiesel, quoted in Friedman, 1984). Enright appears to invest in Veronica Heggarty a similar need to bear witness, the desire to tease out the seminal events of her life slowly, deliberately and painfully.

This act of bearing witness is painful for characters, readers and for the author too, but in some way necessary, to put into context, in order to explain, to understand. Enright herself addresses this in a contemporary interview, in which she says: 'There is often a dark secret in books... There is often a gathering sense of dread, there's a gap sometimes in the text from which all kinds of monsters can emerge... So I knew all of this. And I went there anyway' (Enright, quoted in Tonkin, 2007).

The very fact of this ambivalence or uncertainty gnaws away at her character Veronica Heggarty, uncertainty that in fact the abuse she pieces together took place at all, uncertainty over its importance in relation to her brother's death, uncertainty as to what she could have done about it as a child; and as the narrative unfolds, it begins to reflect other more existential uncertainties in her life. As well as uncertainty, she feels a sense of guilt that she did not bear witness at the time to her brother's abuse and that she has survived, while he has not. 'It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too' (2007, p. 172). This guilt is at the very root of her desire to bear witness. For Meaney, 'The need to bear witness and the

uncertainty of the event have a renewed urgency in the twenty-first century as anxiety replaces ennui as the postmodern condition' (2010, p. 124). But if guilt, or its sibling, anxiety, are at the heart of the desire to bear witness, what is the purpose of this testimony? It is in one sense a form of 'disclosure', which gives voice to the voiceless (literally in the case of Heggarty's deceased brother) and allows them the dignity of having their story told. However, the act of disclosure implies that the discloser is in control of the facts, the history and context surrounding them. That they are in some way certain of the truth. This is not true in Veronica Heggarty's case at all: 'All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden conviction that uncertainty spawns' (2007, p. 2). Her form of disclosure is instead something to be teased out, to be fictionalised where necessary, in order to (re)construct important elements of testimony. Heggarty imagines a whole history and context for this testimony: the circumstances of her grandparents, including the moment of meeting between her grandmother and her admirer – and later landlord – that led to the act of abuse she witnessed. The purpose of this 'fictionalisation' is to fill in gaps, to make connections which might otherwise not be obvious in a purely factual recollection, with its inaccuracies of memory and comprehension.

The opposite of disclosure is 'reticence' (del Rio Alvaro, 2010, p.9). While Heggarty's act of bearing witness symbolizes the openness of the 'new' Ireland of the Celtic Tiger boom years, reticence can be seen as a more traditional approach, reminiscent of the Ireland of the past. So Heggarty's testimony is in part for her brother, in part for herself and in part for wider society.

Paula Spencer is also involved in an act of bearing witness in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, although she does not state this as explicitly as Heggarty. Like Heggarty, her disclosure is after the fact, as she looks back on her life from childhood

onwards to try to understand the circumstances of her abusive marriage and eventual death of her husband, Charlo. While the title of the book is a reference to the false public representation of the physical effects of domestic abuse, the novel concerns itself with the depiction of the truth underlying that falsehood, openly related by its protagonist. And like Heggarty she feels a keen sense of guilt, in relation to her children and in relation to what she perceives as her own self-abasement. ‘He beat me brainless and I felt guilty. He left me without money and I was guilty’ (1997, p. 206).

But as with *The Gathering*, there is a wider sense that this testimony has a purpose too. Written ten years before the former, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* reflects the start of a change in attitudes as evidence of widespread institutional abuse come to light in Ireland, culminating in the *Irish Child Abuse Commission* of 2009.

Gerry Smyth suggests that Doyle is intent on ‘...the opening up of the national narrative to a range of traditionally silent voices from the past and the present’ (Smyth, quoted in Persson, 2012, p. 1). Otherwise put, Doyle appears to be bearing witness to widespread iniquity through the particular story of one individual. Indeed he has stated publicly how rewarding it was to see the increased media focus on domestic violence – and the commensurate increase in women seeking help – in the wake of his treatment of it in *The Family* and subsequently *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*: ‘It was the main headline. There were national politicians talking about it. The lunchtime news was about domestic violence. Family was the story. I was very proud that a piece of writing had an impact like that...’ (Doyle, quoted in Mottram, 2011).

In the United Kingdom the litany of abuse over recent years culminated in the Operation Yewtree investigation into sexual abuse by public figures in 2012. And my own novel was written against the backdrop of high levels of domestic violence, culminating in a record one million cases of domestic abuse being recorded by Police

forces in 2015-16 (Briefing Paper, 2017). This is before even the ‘Me Too’ movement gained momentum in late 2017. This widespread abuse, together with the personal testimony I had received, were defining factors in my decision to write about this subject. My intention was in large part for my novel to bear witness for my friend, but also for the thousands, indeed millions, of voiceless victims of violence. (I think it is of note that the name given by *Time* to its 2017 *Person of the Year* (Zacharek, Docktorman and Sweetland Edwards, 2017), awarded to the group of women and men who spoke out about sexual harassment and abuse is the ‘Silence-Breakers’, in a reference to just this sort of voiceless victim.)

The title of my novel *What Men Do*, is on one level an ironic reference to domestic abuse, often seen as an exclusively male form of violence. In my novel, however, it is the perpetrator of this violence, Connie Williams, who feels the need to bear witness to it, like Veronica Heggarty and Paula Spencer before her. To re-iterate Gerry Smyth’s words, the reasons for her desire to provide some sort of testimony are not ‘straightforward or easy’, but undoubtedly have their roots in the fact that she is a complex character, driven by a number of conflicting factors, including a desire to interrogate her own behaviour, and a desire to excuse it, at the same time.

Of course the fact that, unlike Spencer and Heggarty, Connie is the perpetrator of the violence in the novel raised a very real difficulty for me with regard to the lack of natural empathy the reader is likely to have for her. At times I felt this might be an insurmountable problem; the challenge I faced was to invest her with enough depth for the reader to overlook or understand her transgression. In this I can only hope I have been successful.

ii. The novel as investigation

The Gathering is framed as an investigation into the past, specifically the salient events leading to the death of the protagonist Veronica Heggarty's brother, Liam. With the matter under investigation termed a 'crime' (2008, p. 1), early on in the piece, there is no doubt about the seriousness of the event to which Veronica is bearing witness. Heggarty wants to formally commit her evidence to paper; 'I want to write down what happened...' (2008, p. 1). But why this formal process of testimony, this 'gathering' of information? (I see this as one of several alternate meanings of the novel's title.) This quasi-legal framework is what gives the subject its due weight and importance. With both abuser and victim dead, there is no legal basis for this investigation; that is perhaps the point of Heggarty's assertion that 'I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth' (2008, p. 2). She is perhaps signifying that although a matter of the utmost gravity, this is in fact not a legal process, but instead a reconstruction, using the tools of memory, reality, history and fiction. It is not intended to be punitive or to discover the identity of the abuser (this is already known, or at least suspected); but instead it is intended to pose (and answer, where possible) questions; to investigate motivation and human nature. Echoing Ford Madox Ford again, to investigate the 'human case'.

Put another way, Heggarty's need to bear witness '...generates a narrative in which some kind of order may be imposed on the apparently random series of events which, she believes, led to her brother's death.' (Smyth, 2015). In this sense, bearing witness can thus be seen as the imposition of order on chaos and as such reflects the legal process of investigation, in which raw facts and testimony are brought together

to achieve clarity from confusion. It soon becomes clear in their respective novels that Paula Spencer and Veronica Heggarty are not only concerned with putting forward ‘testimony’ or ‘evidence’, they are interested in something more. Their aims seem to be (at least) two-fold: firstly to unburden themselves in some way through the replaying of certain events and, beyond that, to examine them more thoroughly and, through this examination, achieve some comprehension of them.

Carolina Rocha suggests that Paulina, the protagonist of Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* ‘... regains her sense of being alive’ by ‘... finding the words to speak...’ (2007, p. 2). This seems to me to lie at the heart of what Spencer and Heggarty are in search of, a sort of catharsis through revelation. But it goes beyond this, too; they both seem to have an urge to construct some sort of broader explanation for what has happened to them and others in their lives, something that cannot be achieved merely through the act of revelation, but rather through the act of investigation.

I reflect this in my own novel, with its protagonist, Connie Williams, conducting an investigation into her motivation for what she has done. She too is examining the past, like Paula Spencer and Veronica Heggarty before her, in order to understand its nature and implications. But this is not the only investigation in my novel; at the heart of it there is also a police investigation into the abuse which has taken place. In this way the investigative elements of novels of bearing witness are rendered concrete by a subversion of the crime genre.

There is an echo here of Veronica Heggarty’s earlier assertion that she does not know the truth. The truth for my character, Connie, seems to shift; it is hard to find; it might or might not bear relation to events in her life which happened or are

remembered to have happened. She might even be imposing her own truth on the events of her life, for her own purposes, consciously or unconsciously.

For the fictional character of Heggarty her investigation perhaps represents or will lead to some form of catharsis or 'justice' for her and her deceased brother. For Enright, the author of the novel, it is not personal catharsis that is at stake, but a wider investigation into the kind of events which routinely take place in the non-fictional world, in a different but parallel form of bearing witness to Heggarty's.

Paula Spencer in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, does not explicitly state the aims of her retrospective examination of her life, but as in the case of Veronica Heggarty it is framed as an investigation into the events leading to the death of her husband, Charlo. Like Heggarty, she admits that she is not always in control of her recollection of events. 'I'm messing around here. Making things up; a story' (1997, p. 184), she says initially. Then asks herself: 'Did any of this actually happen?' (1997, p. 185), before confirming that, 'Yes. Am I sure? Yes. Absolutely sure' (1997, p. 185). Of course we, the reader, can never be sure what is invented and what is real.

Much as both of these novels are investigations into the events leading to the death of two men, my own novel could also be characterised as an investigation into the events leading to the death of Connie's unborn baby. She 'curates' a series of memories throughout the novel from childhood to adulthood in an attempt to understand the events leading to the death of her baby, much as Paula Spencer examines her own past life.

According to Karl Ove Knausgaard, the writer of *My Struggle*, a six-volume series of 'non-fiction' novels about the 'character' Karl Ove Knausgaard, the writing '...isn't a representation of my life. It's a much more novelistic enterprise, in that I'm searching for something. I'm looking for something, I'm exploring something'

(Knausgaard, quoted in Nance, 2016). I believe it is reasonable to characterize this set of novels as investigative testimony by its author about his own life, in the same way that Enright and Doyle lay bare the facts of their protagonists' lives in search of a vehicle to frame their existence. For all these characters there is an investigation, an interrogation at the heart of their existence. I have tried to incorporate this in my own novel in a literal sense with a police investigation, but as I have suggested there is this element of formal investigation in both *The Gathering* and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, which is what gives the testimony its due weight and importance.

iii. Fact vs fiction

The act of bearing witness is perhaps a more straightforward principle to understand in poetry than in fiction, given that it is a medium in which the writer's experiences and their 'reality' are explicitly at its heart. For Forché, poems of witness 'bear the trace of extremity within them, and they are, as such, evidence of what occurred' (Forché, 1993, quoted in Scarpino, 2014, p. 15). For her, poetry seems to be an evidential medium; much as a historian or a journalist might report on war or some other atrocity. While for Scarpino it '... stands as stark reminder, as memory, as evidence. It stands *against forgetting*' (2014, p.15).

But while the poet or historian may be a more straightforward chronicler of events, I believe that the act of bearing witness has a very meaningful part to play in fiction; perhaps an even greater one, given the heightened and sculpted form of reality the novelist works with. Elie Wiesel wrote memoir, novels and essays, among other forms, but the work underlying all of this was his memoir, *Night* (1958), which was followed by two 'fictional' works, *Dawn* (1960), and *Day* (1961), completing the trilogy. '*Night* is not a novel, it's an autobiography. It's a memoir. It's testimony' (Wiesel, quoted in Friedman, 1984), Wiesel says, seeming to suggest that testimony is restricted to the memoir form. Elsewhere, however, he suggests that his works of fiction are 'not novels but pages of testimony' (1972, p. 40) which I take to mean that he felt he was engaged in refining aspects of his initial work of memoir, giving it further shape, structure and meaning in his later novels. 'His books, even the novels, are autobiographical' (Henry, 2002).

It is important here I think to consider the difference between the testimony of fiction and the genres of writing in which it is more usually represented – memoir, poetry, history. Fiction ‘...gives form, the imposition of shape on experience, a syntax of events’ (Lerner, 2014). This is of course the essence of narrative, by which the novelist structures the story. Thus it seems to me to be a medium ideally suited to the task of expressing testimony, in order to create structure and meaning from raw facts, observation, opinion.

The poem (or memoir, or history) may be ‘...evidence of what occurred,’ as Forché says, however the writer of fiction has a particular palette from which to choose in their depiction of imagined events, which can render this testimony even more powerful. Even Wiesel appears to feel that testimony and fiction are at the very least interchangeable.

This is perhaps what Heggarty is confronting when she admits to the uncertainty of her memory and shifting recollections head on, by stating that she is essentially an unreliable witness and that she may even be fabricating some things. ‘...the only things I am sure of are the things I never saw...’ (2008, p. 66). In one sense this fictionalising is an effort to get to the deeper ‘truth’ of matters, in another it establishes a parallel with history and poetry as a form of bearing witness, neither of which can purport to tell the ‘truth’ every time, given the unreliability of viewpoint, perception and memory, and the subjectivity of truth itself. In a sense the (good) novel is a treatise on fiction itself, and what it is capable of.

For Karl Ove Knausgaard, ‘In a novel there is complexity, there are many layers...’ (Knausgaard, quoted in Kite, 2017). This provides an insight into Knausgaard’s use of this literary form to express his story. The excellence of this series of novels is a result of many factors, but one in particular is perhaps the sheer

amount of detail present in the 3,600 pages, detail which has the power of testimony, in seeming, whether or not true, to be a compelling evidence that the underlying material is accurate. (However, in an echo of Paula Spencer and Veronica Heggarty Knausgaard himself admits that the detail is impossible to recall exactly. ‘I don’t really remember things most of the time...’ (Knausgaard, quoted in Nance, 2016)).

Roddy Doyle often uses extreme detail in his novels, to create convincing personal testimony. While this is true of *The Woman who Walked into Doors* it is perhaps most memorably employed in his Booker Prize-winning novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, narrated through the point of view of the eponymous schoolboy Patrick Clarke: ‘There was dirt in the lines of the plastic front, where the sound came out, like the dirt under your nails, and in the letters of the gold BUSH stock on the bottom corner (1998, p.155).

Julian Barnes describes this methodology as the use of ‘... details that the novelist creates to confirm that what is being told is true’ (2015). For Barnes too, it does not matter much whether the story being told is fiction or non-fiction, the point is to get to the heart of things. ‘The method mimics the purpose: that of absolute truth-finding’ (2015). Blake Morrison calls this ‘confessional literature’ (2015) in which a real or fictionalised protagonist undergoes the autobiographical experiences of its writer. This kind of writing, he says, ‘... always involves strategy – a judgement about what the impact on the reader will be...’ (2015). Often the purpose of this type of writing is ‘... to expose the lies and secrets of a previous generation...’ (2015), which describes perfectly the testimony of Veronica Heggarty, and in large part both Paula Spencer and Connie Williams’ preoccupations.

Morrison also makes the point that the aim of this kind of literature is primarily ‘truth-telling’ (2015), and that this is where its power lies. However, while this

definition might apply to memoir or history, I do not think it applies to the fictional form of testimony. As I have discussed, testimony in fiction – even in fictionalised memoir like Knausgaard's – allows for even greater possibilities, the investigation of grey areas, liminalities. Here even the lie tells us something about the protagonists, and the truths they hide.

But even more than this, where is the 'truth' to be found? By definition it is always subjective. Both *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *The Gathering* are works in the tradition of the postmodern novel, with their iconoclasm, their non-traditional narrative structures and their unreliable narrators. One of their predecessors in this genre is Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, with its suggestion that 'however obsessively we search for "truth", all must be fictional' (Waugh, 1992, quoted in Goode, 2005).

There is more than an echo of this in the accounts of Paula Spencer and Veronica Heggarty, who, like Karl Ove Knausgaard's Karl Ove Knausgaard character, comb their way through detail after detail in order to get to the 'truth'. This is not necessarily a factual truth but a greater, or put another way, a universal truth. In Paula Spencer's case, she uses the 'facts' of her life, which by her own admission are not always as she remembers them, to try to arrive at an understanding of the person she is. In Veronica Heggarty's case she uses the rather hazy 'facts' in her memory, in conjunction with her own imagined 'facts', to establish how one act and the ripples around it has affected her life. In my character Connie Williams's case she is constantly playing with the 'facts' in order to establish her own motivations and actions and eventually her place in life.

All three women are bearing witness, in a fictional medium, to reach certain wider truths, both for themselves and for their audience. All three render the reader a

witness to this too, broadening the experience from the personal to a shared one. I felt when I started to write my own novel that it was important to write stories of abuse to bear witness to iniquity and its victims and I feel even more now that it is necessary to write these fictions in order to continue the process of ‘silence-breaking’.

Anne Enright has said, echoing Colm Toibin, that she is: ‘... aware how important it is not to use what is a terrible human experience [abuse] just for the sake of a book’ (Enright, quoted in Tonkin, 2007). However, I feel that this does the reader a disservice, since it is they who will judge this testimony and discern if it is found wanting. Equally, Scarpino states that bearing witness through poetry ‘...isn’t necessarily intended to bring about political or social change’ (2015). This too, is perhaps to underestimate the power of the written word, which can reflect and accelerate social change. Even if it can be said that the writer is not practically engendering change, in reflecting and communicating it, they can perform a greater function than can any individual action.

Perhaps more than anyone, Edward St. Aubyn embodies the power of this act of bearing witness to abuse through fiction. The author of the *Patrick Melrose* series of novels, himself a survivor of childhood abuse, alludes to its redemptive qualities thus: ‘My psychological problems would overwhelm me at a certain point and I would crash, but all along I felt—absurdly, with no evidence—that I was here to write, that I would either die or I would write’ (St. Aubyn, quoted in Parker, 2014).

Conclusion

In this research I have been attempting to answer the underlying questions – how does a writer approach the writing of a novel of domestic abuse, and to what extent does this involve bearing witness? In order to do this, I have examined the techniques of two authors in particular, Roddy Doyle and Anne Enright, and their novels *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *The Gathering*, concerned with the depiction of domestic abuse. These authors have been successful in creating engaging works of fiction which ‘bear witness’ to humanity’s basest inclinations and move abuse into the realm of public scrutiny. (I am judging ‘success’ here in terms of both my personal appreciation, and critical and public appreciation.)

At the start of this research I found issue with Colm Toibin’s opinion that writing about abuse in a novel is ‘wrong’. But over the course of writing it (and my novel) I have found myself becoming much more sympathetic to his view. After showing my manuscript to one agent, I was advised that it would be an effective novel in the ‘domestic noir’ genre. After considering this change of approach, and the increased likelihood of agent representation and publication, I came to the conclusion that this would result in a novel depending mainly on tension and peril. And like Toibin (and Enright) I felt that it would be ‘wrong’ to use abuse as titillation without considered thought of the issue at the core.

I do feel, however, that writing about abuse in fiction can bring to the fore issues which need to be addressed publicly. These kinds of novels are perhaps different to other novelistic forms, often involving a more ‘serious’ engagement. If done

thoughtfully, empathetically and sympathetically, in short if done *well*, then they are undoubtedly important and useful projects.

I do not (and cannot, at this stage) know if my novel is ‘successful’ – as *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *The Gathering* demonstrably are – in the sense that every novel should be judged, by fulfilment of certain novelistic elements of story, plot, narrative. But it has been a ‘successful’ experience for me as a writer to engage with this novel and the themes inherent in it, to broaden my understanding of the underlying subject matter and to engage with the work of great writers and even greater social themes.

In short, the experience has reinforced for me the value of Ford’s view of novel-writing as ‘... profoundly serious...’ What else should the novelist do but to shine light in the darkness, into the uncomfortable parts of life people would often rather ignore? The relating of the mechanisms and the nature of abuse is the novelist’s testimony to the reader. The urge to communicate, to provide an account of the world; to try, through narrative, to order, to explain, to *bear witness*. And while the novelist is the investigator, the final arbiter is the reader who, armed with this information, becomes judge and jury.

For Forché, ‘In the poetry of witness, the poem makes present to the experience of the other, the poem *is* the experience, rather than a symbolic representation. When we read the poem of witness, we are marked by it and become ourselves witness to what it has made present before us’ (Forché, quoted in Scarpino, 2014, p. 16). The novelist too carries the responsibility of bearing witness faithfully and truthfully to the reader, and in return the reader becomes a confidant of the writer and reflects back the work and invests it with meaning. ‘And in this participation, the reader and writer

work together to resist attempts to silence experiences of atrocity' (Scarpino, 2015, p. 15).

In the writing of my own novel, I have, like every novelist, attempted to balance my own aims, which have themselves shifted and developed over time, with the opinions of others – supervisors, agents, workshop colleagues – to try to produce a piece of work which bears witness truthfully and faithfully. The truth of this has not changed for me over the writing of the novel, but the style of delivery has. It is the reason I decided to put uncertainty at my novel's heart. Much as Connie, the protagonist at the centre of my novel is unclear in relation to what is true and what is not, and indeed invents her own reality much of the time, what the reader is reading is of course in essence a fiction, something imagined by an author for their own end. But while the facts of a novel are by their nature not true, there are underlying truths which I, as a novelist, was always reaching for in my own work.

In a novel that bears witness to the extreme, to the depraved, this truth retains a particular significance, a particular importance, and by extension invests the writer with a certain responsibility to portray it truthfully. I felt this strongly in the writing of my novel. I did not want to trivialise the subject matter by turning it into a psychological drama, or a domestic noir thriller, or a police procedural. Instead I found a parallel in the police investigation, which I deconstructed in order to try to reach the truth at the heart of the matter. Of course this narrative structure was just one of many I could have chosen to tell my story, but for me it both reflected appropriately the degree of seriousness of the task and allowed me to represent literally the idea of presenting testimony, which seemed to me to be at the core of the piece of writing. While the protagonist of the novel, Connie Williams, invents this testimony, it is still part of her story, connected implicitly to her abuse; she is in some

way bearing witness to her own actions, to her own reality, in the vein of Paula Spencer or Veronica Heggarty.

I found writing the novel a difficult process, all but impossible at times, but I was consoled by the fact that this difficulty reflected the gravity of both the subject matter and of providing such ‘testimony’. Not only is the initial ‘witnessing’ of the underlying subject matter difficult, so too is the re-iterating of it in narrative form. The writer is a dual witness. On the one hand I was bearing witness as a writer to the abuse in the novel; but on the other I was also bearing witness to the abuse suffered by my friend and countless others.

During all this time, the words of Elie Wiesel were never far away from my mind: ‘We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented’ (Wiesel, 1986).

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WHAT MEN DO

EUAN STUART

A novel submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of Bath Spa University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

College of Liberal Arts, Bath Spa University

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For Laura

‘Whence came this insufficiency in life – this instantaneous turning to decay of everything on which she leaned?’

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

‘This can’t be true, but I remember it...’

Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*.

She first sees him as she is leaving for work. He is sitting in an armchair: an old-fashioned wingback with scrolled armrests and bowed wooden legs, upholstered in a blue and white material. For some reason the pattern is very clear in her mind: blue diamonds and stars and crosses against the white background, all combining in a stark, kaleidoscopic effect. The chair's arms are worn where the man's hands rest; here the white is dirty, blackened. The way he is sitting suggests he has been reading a book which has fallen to the floor, or has been cradling a cat, which has slid quietly away. His expression indicates faint surprise, but not as much as might be expected given the bloodstain blooming in the centre of his shirt.

Is it a dream? No, not a dream, exactly, because she is awake. What, then? A daydream? But the image is too specific for that. Too well-defined. Perhaps it is the stress, the early starts. Something she watched on television. She likes crime dramas. The ones where they discover a corpse, and a cool, calm pathologist, often a woman, with blonde hair like hers, neatly pinned up, prods it, examines it, dissects it, to discover the cause of death, to understand how it happened. Then detectives interview, investigate, to establish who it was who planned the whole thing, lost control, over-reacted. Or perhaps it was an accident. Perhaps the victim slipped, stumbled, took too many pills.

She likes the ones with a woman investigator. In the older ones it is always men, men investigating dead women, murderous men, women victims. Women shouldn't be victims, she feels. But they usually are. She is passionate about this sort of thing; cannot understand people who think without questioning. It is why they do not see her husband's old friends anymore. *Worr, look at her; did you see the score? Won this, lost that.*

It is an image she cannot explain, yet it feels very real. In the end she puts it down to it being early in the morning. Part of her is still wrapped in sleep, cocooned. Perhaps she was dreaming and woke up and the dream was still lodged there in her mind. Perhaps she was still in a sleep-like state.

Perhaps, perhaps.

As she turns the car key and the engine announces itself with a hoarse, hacking sound, she realises that the features of the man in the chair, from the dream-that-is-not-a-dream, are those of her father.

She turns into the school car park. Through the rusty metal gate and past the sign which says *Fairwell Primary School*.

She emerges from the car, coat billowing in the wind, clutching a shoulder bag, and stands for a moment in the empty car park, under the lightening autumn sky. The school is only thirty minutes from her house in Kingston, but it seems further than that; a village school, on the edge of the London suburbs. It stands in front of her: a strange building, she always thinks – squat, a ground floor only, half the height you would expect. In the early-morning grey its large windows look blank. The roof appears flat from this angle but in fact its four sides slope gently inwards, towards an unseen courtyard filled with plastic toys, and sheds filled with more plastic toys.

She puts her key in the lock and pushes the door open. A series of shrill beeps sounds and she presses a code into the alarm panel on the wall. The place seems desolate in the sudden silence. She stands there for a moment in the new silence that has been created, before switching the light on and watching the walls flicker into view with the warming bulbs. There is something crass about the place in the early morning, she always feels. Pictures, photographs, the stuff of school, without the children.

Adrift in the emptiness for a moment, she remembers the image of the man in the armchair. She hasn't thought about him for a while, lulled by her familiar journey, her arrival at school in the grey, early hours. She thought the figure had her father's features, but now that time has elapsed she is not quite so sure. Perhaps because, to the best of her knowledge, her father is alive and well and living in the house he shares with his partner.

She tries to remember what the man was wearing. A shirt, a pair of nondescript trousers. Generic men's clothing. It doesn't help. She remembers the look on his face. She thought the look was surprise, but now she thinks it might have been resignation, the beginnings of a wry smile. She wonders again why he was smiling if there was a bloodstain on his shirt. And why was he sitting so still? As the questions pile on top of each other she begins to feel like one of the detectives in the programmes she enjoys watching. Where would she start her investigation if she was one of those detectives? She thinks of the armchair. She can recall the pattern clearly. She could call furniture manufacturers. How many were made? Where were they distributed? Then she could visit the shops with a notebook. Point to a picture of the armchair. Who bought these? Any notable features? No, notable isn't the right word. *Distinguishing*. That is the right word for those circumstances. *Distinguishing* features.

But she is not a detective. Instead she would have to settle for the internet, putting the description into the box, watching the page second-guess her as usual. She has no idea how it all works, that set of super-quick digital calculations. The briefest of pauses, then it all springs onto the page. There, ready, as if really it has been there forever. What would come up? Thousands, no, millions of results. But probably not the answer, the one answer she needs. And if not, what then? She would have to scour old catalogues, brochures. She could probably spend a lifetime on this one small investigation. And then what would she have? How would it help her?

‘Morning, Connie.’

She realises she is still standing in the hall and turns to see the Head in the doorway, now bending to pick up post from the mat.

Connie smiles back at her, the way that everyone at school smiles: eager, friendly.

Her Reception classroom is square and brightly lit, with display boards on each wall edged with brightly-coloured paper borders and filled with children’s pictures and paintings. Low tables and chairs occupy the gaps between the cupboards and shelves of books and toys. The windows look out over the grey of the playground on one side and the grey of the inner courtyard on the other.

The year is coming to an end. And it feels to her as though something else is coming to an end too. Something she cannot quite define. In fact it is a time of new beginnings: a new school year, a new class. But at the same time she is reminded of all the children she has lost. For a year those children were hers, her *babies*.

She stands by the low children’s sink with a glass of water, a paracetamol in her palm, and looks into the empty classroom. She sometimes feels she can see the

beingness of the room. Not just what is in it but what it *is*. If she were a scientist and understood time and space and the speed of things it might make sense that she sees things in this way. But she is an Early Years teacher and so it does not make sense to her.

~

She separates the children into groups at different tables set up with playdough, pipe-cleaners, whiteboards. There are two groups: *Lions* and *Tigers*. *Lions* can write letters themselves. *Tigers* can only make the shapes with the playdough and re-arrange the letters. Their parents do not know what the different groups signify.

She had a poor night's sleep and does not feel the usual tiredness, but something more than that: a brittle fatigue. And there is the man too, the man from the dream-that-is-not-a-dream. She feels as though everything is happening at a distance, as though she is slightly too slow to react to everything. That is how it feels when she is in the middle of saying something to Polly, and she looks over towards the corner of the room, the corner with the rugs that she bought with her own money, two stripy rugs from *Ebay*, because she wanted a nice place for the children to read and feel comfortable, although now they are dirty and threads are detaching from the edges, and she sees Noah and George just at the moment the teaching assistant turns away from them to deal with Ruby. She sees George take the plastic locomotive Noah is holding and then with the slow unfolding of time that always accompanies the inability to intervene, she sees Noah look up at him with blank disbelief and a second later punch him; an adult punch, right in the middle of his face.

There is that terrible moment of silence as George draws breath – the longer the moment the worse it always is – then eventually lets out a scream, a shriek, while Noah calmly retrieves the locomotive from his lap.

The assistant turns back towards the two boys and George starts to cry, drawing in gulping breaths and expelling loud, snotty bellows.

~

‘You can imagine my situation,’ the Head is saying, later, in her office. She is twenty-five years older than Connie, perhaps more. A greying bob, tapering into her neck. Bulging eyes that follow you around the room; the result of a thyroid problem, the gossip suggests.

Connie can imagine the Head’s situation, but that doesn’t stop her feeling that it is not her fault. Just her and the assistant, for nearly thirty four-year-olds. A second of distraction, and this is what happens.

‘Standing in front of his parents, having to defend myself.’

Of course it is George’s parents the Head feels she must appease. Professional, serious people, with a brand new estate car and a sense of purpose. She doubts the Head spends any time imagining Noah’s mother’s situation. A single parent with two cleaning jobs. Her son’s father gone, his younger brother’s too. What is wrong with all these men, she wonders.

‘It is completely unacceptable for a parent to be told their four-year-old has been punched in the face.’

She nods, looks at the ground, apologises, the way she always does. In this situation apologising seems to be what is required. There does not seem to be any other option. But she knows whose fault it is.

There is some finger-wagging now; some final words.

The Head looks at Connie for a moment, an expectant look. Then she flaps a hand at her, as if not only dismissing her from the room, but also from her sight, from her life.

Connie feels she has apologised as much as she can, but apologises once more, before turning and leaving the room.

She sometimes wonders if all this might be some sort of workplace abuse. But she is not sure who she would complain to, what it would do to her career. So she says nothing, smiles, tries to avoid the worst of it.

DI Johnson sits in front of a computer, on a desk where other men work too. But the others are not there now. It is late and it is just him. There is so much to do. And he likes to have a reason not to go home, if he is honest.

There was a time when a DI would have had his own office. A place to sit and leaf through files, make telephone calls, gaze out of the window. But not now. Now he sits at the end of a row of wood-laminate desks with flat-screen monitors on them, like a salesman in some call centre.

He sees himself reflected in the big, dark windows. Ghostly, pale. He looks tired, he knows that. Every day there are more lines; his skin looks like it is becoming thicker, as if the layers are piling on top of one another with age.

Fifty-four this year.

The space is usually occupied by twenty, thirty other people. DC Turner among them. He looks over at her desk and has the familiar feeling. A leap inside him, a fragment of excitement, hope. A feeling he only has when he thinks about her. She left an hour ago in an excited flurry, for drinks with some girlfriends. Lipstick; hair arranged. Beautiful.

He sighs and reaches towards the pile of case notes in front of him. He has dealt with half a dozen since everyone else left and aims to get through the same again

before he goes home. He picks the top one off the pile, clicks a button on his computer absently then looks down at the notes. A drug-related stabbing. There are pictures. A woman's torso, neck, legs, head. A mass of dark bruising and congealed blood, dark against the white skin.

There are notes on the screen in front of him. Fourteen stab wounds. There seems to have been some romantic link with the man who did it. *I loved her*, he told the arresting officers. There is nothing romantic about the photographs. She survived the attack but is suffering the consequences.

The man confessed at first, then, when a solicitor arrived he retracted the confession and now he isn't saying anything. There is a picture of him staring straight into the camera. He looks as though he has lost his wallet, not stabbed a woman more than a dozen times. DI Johnson always wonders what goes through their heads when the pictures are being taken. They usually look calm. Calm and unmoved. He does not think that is how he would feel if it was him.

After three more files he has had enough. He leans back, removes his reading glasses and passes his palm across his forehead. He can still remember needing his first pair. Was he forty? One day he couldn't read the newspaper, found the world closing in on him, right in front of his eyes. He imagined all sorts of things, thought it must be the first sign of something worse. So he went to the Optician's and the young woman looked at him and said with a smile that it happens to everyone, *in the end*. An attractive girl, in the way that all young women are, to a middle-aged man who finds himself in need of reading glasses. Yes, he wanted to tell her, but the point is it's not *you* who needs them. *That's* the point. But instead he just smiled at her thinly and she looked at him as if he was just vapour, as if there was nothing to him at all.

And of course it was the first sign of something worse.

He thinks about going home, but the thought is no more appealing than it was before. He could walk for a while, instead; perhaps drop into one of the pubs along the route home. Yes.

It is his sort of pub. *The George*. A battered sign outside; familiar interior. Loud carpet, the sort he remembers from his childhood. A welcoming bar; behind it the barman, about his own age, visible through the row of taps and handles. Low round tables, stools.

At one of the tables there are two young women, dressed in dark clothes. On their way back from work too, no doubt. In front of them are two wineglasses, half-filled with white wine. At a nearby table there are two men in suits. A thicket of empty pintglasses. One of the men rises to his feet, moves in the direction of the bar. Big bugger.

He arrives at the bar just before the man does.

‘Evening,’ the barman says to him, without a change in his expression. ‘What can I get you?’

He doesn’t come in often enough to recognise him. The man shows no sign of recognition, either. Or friendliness. It is almost as though he knows he is a detective inspector.

‘Evening,’ he says, looking along the line of taps. ‘Pint of *Carling*, please.’

The barman, nods, whisks a pintglass from above the bar and starts filling it. ‘Three ninety, he says, without looking up.

‘Two more of those, when you’re ready,’ the man says, beside him.

‘I’m serving at the moment,’ the barman says, still not looking up.

‘It must be true, what they say,’ the man says.

The barman shows no sign of wanting to engage in further conversation.

DI Johnson turns towards the man. He always feels the need to be involved in situations like this. It is his job, of course.

The man smiles back at him. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up and the material flexes across his chest. He must be six five, at least.

‘What must be true?’ DI Johnson asks him. He wonders if he can tell that he is police.

‘About the multi-tasking,’ the man says, the smile still on his face.

DI Johnson smiles back. The man doesn’t look as though he is going to be any trouble. But there is something about him.

He sits down on a stool, opens the newspaper on the table then realises he can’t read it without his glasses and closes it again. He takes a sip of lager.

There is laughter from the tables across the other side of the room. It feels like a set, awaiting some kind of action. A villain bursting through the door, an angry lover. It is as though he is on stage behind the curtains, waiting for it all to start. He often feels like this. As though his life is scripted, but he is not sure of his lines. He used to understand things better than he does now. He is older, but seems to be less wise. Finds that he craves certainty. The News. The past: that is what is certain. The future he finds increasingly uncertain.

He hears a noise, and looks over. One of the young women is talking to the man and his friend in a raised voice from her position on her stool. Thirty perhaps, blonde hair in a sort of pile on her head, vibrant lipstick in some shade of red. She gets up and continues, straining towards the two men as though on a leash. He wonders if the two groups know each other, but decides not. The barman is watching as well. It is the

most interested he has looked all evening. The woman's friend is trying to calm her but this appears to be making her more angry. He doesn't know which of the men she is directing her anger towards, but from the expression on the big man's face, he supposes it is him. He is watching the woman with an expression of amusement, as if watching a child having a tantrum. Her face looks as though it has been moulded by a sculptor into an expression of hatred.

DI Johnson is preparing to get up and do something when the woman spits out one last angry mouthful and sits down again. The two men look at each other, then the big man looks over at DI Johnson, smiles, shrugs his shoulders, as if DI Johnson is his friend, his fellow.

Instead of smiling back DI Johnson looks down at his unreadable newspaper. The room re-asserts itself. For some reason he thinks of the woman in the photographs. Sees the man stabbing her in a frenzy, then stopping. The action is over, the woman lies in a pool of blood. The curtains close.

She sits in the armchair in the bay window of the living-room. The room has been darkening gradually and she feels she can actually see the blackness in front of her. This is what it would be like to be on the moon, she thinks. Except on the moon there would not be the small sliver of light coming in through the wooden slats at the top of the window, picking out the corner of the framed print on the far wall that she bought from an art gallery with her husband a few years ago. Five hundred all the same, only one of which is here now, on her wall. But not exactly the same, on each one there is a small pencil number in the lower right-hand corner - hers is one hundred and seventy-seven. Perhaps some have been lost, damaged. Perhaps only four hundred and eighty are left, perhaps four hundred and fifty. Perhaps in a few decades there will only be a couple of hundred left. Two hundred dancing dogs with lolling pink tongues, hanging on walls somewhere in the world. She tries to imagine all the other walls the prints decorate, then catches herself doing it. It is something she often does: becomes lost in a line of thought and then comes back to herself, not sure where she is or what she is doing. A little like concentrating very hard on something. But not quite that. A feeling of being disconnected. As though she is apart from things, as though she is inside her memories. In the past. An escape of some sort.

She called her father, of course. On the landline. He likes to have a telephone on a table that he can pick up and announce his number into, the way she was taught to when she was young. It was a strange feeling, listening to the ringing, not sure if he would answer; for those few moments wondering if the man in the dream-that-is-not-a-dream was perhaps a sign of something. Like the parents who wake up in a sweat, with a feeling of dread, only to find out later that something unspeakable has happened to their child. A mother sitting in a chair with her hands folded in her lap, shaking her head, tearfully recounting the story to the detective who earlier prodded her child's corpse, examined its extremities; who now writes in a notebook, puts his hand on her shoulder, mouths some platitudes.

In the end her father answered the phone, in that abrupt way people do. Yes, he was very well, thank you.

So what, then, of the man from the dream-that-is-not-a-dream?

There is a sound. In front of her the darkness seems to waver slightly. The sliver of light has faded and now it is just the nothingness, and beyond that the contents of the room, which she knows are there although she cannot see them. The sofa, upholstered in a light blue material with a wine stain on it – every time she sees it she is annoyed that they didn't get it in a darker shade – a small mahogany table pressed close to the wall, with stereo on top, an iPod emerging from it, a few CDs marooned nearby as though artefacts of a different age; a low bookshelf with pictures, ornaments, photographs, all with some connection to her. It is all there, she knows that, even though she cannot see any of it.

There is a noise at the living-room door and it creaks open. Then a voice. Her husband's.

'Hello? Connie?'

‘Yes, I’m here.’

‘Why are you sitting there in the dark?’ The words could suggest concern, but instead there is annoyance in his voice. Why he is annoyed by these small things, she does not know.

She can see him, a silhouette against the streetlight coming through the coloured glass in the front door. Ethereal, almost, like a saint standing there in front of her, interrogating her. She rolls the image around in her mind. A saintly interrogator. Does such a thing exist?

‘I’m just thinking,’ she says. It is true, she is thinking; but probably not the way her husband thinks.

He makes a face. Of scepticism, disgust. They seem much the same in relation to her. ‘Are you upset?’

‘About what?’

‘About me being late?’

‘No.’ She has not even noticed that he is late. Eight o’clock. For him to be late it would mean he came home earlier at other times. This is the time he gets home now. He was right though, if she thinks about it, it makes her sad. But she was not thinking about it.

‘About the baby, then?’

He sounds frustrated, now. She cannot work out why that is. What she has done to make him so frustrated with her. It is not her fault, what happened.

She shakes her head.

‘Well, *what* then?’

He sounds quite angry now, as though she should have ready answers for all his questions. She didn’t marry him to be interrogated by him. She married him because

she loved him; because she wanted to spend her life with him. Well, perhaps she didn't think of things in that way. A whole life is difficult to imagine, after all; but certainly she wanted to spend her time with him. He wasn't like this, then, in the days when she felt like that about him. He seems to her to have changed into a different person, now.

She shrugs. She does not know why she is sitting in the dark, thinking. She has always been thoughtful, but she cannot remember sitting in the dark in the past. She tries to recall an earlier version of herself. She feels like a computer scanning a hard drive. On her laptop there is a little torch which searches the files; she enjoys watching its little pulsing arc of light as it attempts to find a document containing some mundane phrase or other. She cannot locate the file, however, cannot remember sitting in the dark, thinking, but she has never been one to turn the lights on, the way people do. She remembers her mother switching on her bedroom light in the mornings. Telling her to get up in a tone that sounded unfriendly. Now she thinks about it, she seems to inspire that tone in people.

Her husband sighs, shakes his head and turns, the coloured light rippling around the outline of his body kaleidoscopically. She supposes he is sighing at her, but he could be sighing at something else: at his own inability to understand her, or at the unsatisfactory nature of the exchange, or perhaps just at the sheer imperceptibility of things.

His large frame retreats towards the kitchen; the coloured light licks along the hallway. She hears the clattering of pans, as though faraway.

She is thinking about their baby, after what he said. She does not want to think about it, tries hard not to think about it. Tries not to think about it every time she hears a friend is expecting, every time she sees a pregnant woman in the street.

She does not want to think about the trip to the hospital. They talked about it in the taxi. It would be all right, because it had always been all right up to then. There had been blood in the past, as there was now.

She does not want to think about the smell of the room at the hospital. David said it smelled of antiseptic, but to her it smelled of *matter*.

She does not want to think about the nurse with the sceptical smile and a repertoire of noises. Readyng, fussing, wheeling machines into place, pressing switches. Pulling at her, attaching her with wires and clamps to machines with their own repertoire of noises; strapping on this and that, here and there.

She does not want to think about the doctors, studying screens with raised eyebrows and hands on chins, not telling her what was happening, when that was what she most wanted to know. And only when the noise stopped, the one that really mattered, the one belonging to their baby, did they tell her what was happening.

Their baby. The baby they loved. She and David. She cannot. She does not want to think about it. She must think about something else.

SuperTed was her favourite. She liked the bit when he said the magic word and put on his special costume. Today it was the one with the man who stole the bird's eggs, but it was okay because SuperTed threw him off the mountain.

It was nearly finished now, and she was sad because she didn't want it to end. The music at the end was on and Mum hadn't come, and now the News was starting. She wasn't meant to watch it, but Mum hadn't come and it was about Northern Ireland, where Dad was. It looked like it did here, except for the smoke everywhere, people running around with blood on their heads. It made her scared for Dad, but she

couldn't say anything to Mum, because she wasn't supposed to be watching and Mum would be angry.

Dad was something to do with carpets. That was why he was away so often. He travelled a lot, sometimes for a long time, and she missed him. Belfast was in Northern Ireland, which was the same as England, Mum had told her. Mum missed Dad too. She didn't say so, but Connie had heard her talking about it to Granny on the telephone, hunched over the receiver at the bottom of the stairs, the coiled wire stretched like a snake between her and the part of the phone that was fixed to the wall. Mum said she missed Dad, although she sounded as though she was angry with him really.

She didn't know if Marcus missed Dad. He didn't really seem to like him very much. She didn't know why. When you're a man you'll be able to leave and do your own thing, she'd heard Mum say to him. He didn't seem to like Mum very much either. She knew all about boys though, from school. She knew they were difficult and when they got older they went through adolescence. And everyone else has to go through it as well, Mum said.

When Dad came back after being away it was always difficult. He and Mum weren't very friendly; it was as if everyone had to get to know him again.

The News was scary; it made her want Dad to be at home, so that he could watch SuperTed, there with her on the sofa.

The overhead light goes on and she feels as though she has just woken up. She turns towards David. He is by the light switch, with a glass of red wine in his hand, still dressed in his suit, tie, shoes; he looks as though he is about to give a presentation.

'It was just bad luck,' he says.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just one of those things.’

He won’t talk about it to her properly, just refers to it like this. *The baby. One of those things.*

He moves into the room, sits down in her favourite armchair; raises the glass to his lips, hand reaching for the remote control.

She is filled with a sense of injustice, for her, for their baby. That he is more interested in watching *Eastenders* than talking about what happened.

Getting up abruptly, she moves to him and swats the glass from hand with power so that it flies into the wall and smashes. A wave of red wine sprays across the wall and a shower of glass splinters falls towards the skirting-board.

He looks at her with an expression of surprise, first, then of disgust; the same look he gave her before.

She draws back her hand and slaps him across the face. She can feel the hardness of his cheekbone and then the soft tip of his nose against her hand, but before he can react she is at the doorway and then out of the room.

The door to the Head's office is half-open, so she knocks lightly and peers inside.

'Can I have a word?' she asks.

The Head is standing in front of her desk examining an unopened letter. She looks up and sighs, then returns to the letter, eyes bulging. She is wearing those trousers that overweight women wear: black, stretchy, made out of some synthetic material and a floaty top designed to disguise her stomach.

She moves behind her desk, sits down and picks up what looks like a silver knife. She holds it in the air for a moment, as if debating whether to impale Connie with it. 'So,' she says, passing it instead through the envelope. She does not offer Connie a seat. 'What is it?'

Connie hesitates, then moves further into the room. 'Noah,' she says. She feels it is obvious what is needed, after what happened. 'More help?' She tails off. She was determined, but the expression on the Head's face is not encouraging. Mouth pinched; the lines around it gathered in painful-looking defiance.

The Head makes no attempt to control a lengthy sigh. 'I've told you... the boy does have additional needs, but he's just not far enough behind to justify any more help.'

She thinks of *the boy*, Noah, and identifies a strong feeling in herself. The feeling that her father wasn't there was because she had done something wrong, that she was being punished for something. Often, she feels as though she is still being punished. She would like to escape, now, into her memories. But she knows she cannot.

'But he needs help,' she says.

'*You* need help, you mean.'

She looks at the Head, unsure of what to say. It feels as though it is a challenge of some sort.

'What happened the other day was down to a shortcoming in supervision. It has been noted.' The corner of the Head's mouth twitches; she looks at Connie now as though she is the stupidest person ever to stand in her office. 'As I have said before: There. Is. No. Funding.'

In the staffroom the kettle starts to jostle on its stand. For a moment Connie feels like throwing it against the wall, watching the plastic buckle, smash, the water spray over the wall, leaving it gently steaming. She can see herself doing it, can feel the weight of the kettle in her hand, the drops of scalding water on her face. But. She must get on. There is no time. There is never any time. It is the children who matter. The children they are here for, after all.

~

She is talking to her class about the Golden Rules. Her predecessor left the laminated messages on the wall and she has been using them ever since she started at the school.

There are six: *We Show Good Listening on the Carpet; We Are Kind to Each Other; We Look After the Toys; We Use a Quiet Voice Inside; We are Gentle; We Walk Inside*. Although *We Walk Inside* has recently fallen down the back of the heavy set of drawers below it.

Every day she talks to the children about these Rules, although she is not sure how often she should do it. No one has ever told her. Today it is the turn of *We are Gentle*.

‘How do we feel about hitting?’ Connie asks the children, who are sitting cross-legged in front of her on the two stripy rugs. ‘Is that gentle?’ The children shake their heads, sadly.

‘That’s right, it makes us feel all cold and prickly doesn’t it,’ she says, putting her hands on her arms as though she is cold. ‘Brrr. We want to feel all warm and fuzzy don’t we?’

They all nod.

‘What other kinds of behaviour aren’t gentle?’ Connie asks.

George puts his hand up.

‘Yes, George.’

‘Biting?’

‘Good, George; that’s not gentle,’ Connie replies. ‘What else? Yes, Polly.’

‘Kicking?’

‘Well done, Polly.’

Noah puts his hand up.

‘Yes, Noah?’

‘Head-butting,’ he says, a smile of satisfaction on his face.

~

She needs to make the dinner. But she cannot gather the necessary momentum to get out of her chair. She often feels like this. As if her mind is full, somehow; overflowing. It makes her want to bang her head against the wall and keep banging, until there is blood in her eyes and nothing in her mind. But of course she knows that wouldn't help, really.

Perhaps she should get some sleep instead. She thinks about the bed upstairs; the bed where she and David sleep. But she often cannot sleep, lies watching the room pass through shades of grey, willing the clock on. But he sleeps. She wonders what dreams he has, do they contain her?

She does not know. She has begun to feel that she does not know much about him at all. She knows only his routines, the information he has chosen to give her. He likes Japanese food. His favourite sport is rugby. He feels that his father does not love him.

He likes to keep things to himself. She knows that. He didn't want to talk about the baby. It made him angry when she tried to talk to him about it. She knows that he finds it difficult, feels he has to deal with things himself. But not talking to him about the baby made her feel as though she was pretending that nothing had happened, when what she wanted to do was to say that there had been a child and that it had been her child and that she had loved it.

She is thinking about it again. After what he said. But she cannot. She does not want to think about it.

She was really excited about them going away, all together. The last holiday had been so boring. Dad had been away, as usual, and they'd gone with Mum to stay with Grandma and Grandpa. All the grown ups did was sit around talking, drinking cups of tea. She and Marcus played with some toys from a box they found in their bedroom, read the books with brown spots on the pages. There was one called Swallows and Amazons. Connie read it in a day, then the two that came afterwards – Granny said there were twelve all together, don't know where the other ones are, could have sworn I had them all at one time, can't remember anything nowadays; you enjoy being young, Connie – and Mum said she would buy her more of them when they got home. She wanted to go to the bookshop straight away, but she wasn't allowed to, although she had three pounds she'd saved up from her pocket money. Three golden coins she kept in her skirt pocket so that Marcus couldn't get them. He always took her things when she hid them around the house, so the only place was her skirt pocket. She couldn't work out how he always knew where she kept them. The crumpled paper bags of sweets from the newsagent: chocolate éclairs, pineapple chunks, aniseed balls. Or Cherry Drops, sometimes sweet, sometimes sour. Or Tunes, which were really for coughs, but Mum didn't mind if she bought them occasionally. But not every week, don't be so silly, you haven't got a sore throat, have you? Marcus always managed to find them, she didn't know how. But he was older and he seemed to know more about everything than her.

She pushed the last of her clothes into her suitcase. It was pink with fairies on the front and a zip that went all the way round. Mum had put the clothes in piles on her bed and said when she had finished packing she could go downstairs and watch television. Connie had just nodded, although she didn't want to do it. But she didn't like it when Mum got angry. People said she was a quiet girl. At school the teachers

were always telling her to smile more. Their palms resting on her head, pushing down on her. You've got such a nice smile Connie. You'd be so pretty if only you smiled more.

She pulled the zip around the final corner, then ran down the stairs, thud, thud, thud. She loved the part of the hallway where the stairs finished and the front door and the living room opened on to. It seemed like a magical space to her. Everyone had to pass through it to get somewhere, upstairs, downstairs, out of the house, into the house. She would often keep an eye on it from the landing to see who was coming and going. Sometimes when she was meant to be in bed she'd creep downstairs and look through the gap between the living-room door and the frame, by the hinges. She could see a good sweep of the room from there, nearly all of it, until she got too far round and all she could see was the white of the door paint.

She pushed the door open and saw Dad sitting in his armchair in front of the television. The chair was a light shade of blue, a boxy shape, with a footrest that came up if you pushed back the right way. When Dad wasn't sitting in it there was still a dent, as though The Invisible Man was sitting there.

She liked to imagine that he wasn't away, just invisible.

‘Cup of tea, sir?’

DI Johnson looks up from his desk. He nods at DC Turner, smiles. She is nice to him. He’d like to think that it is because she likes him, *fancies* him. But he knows that is ridiculous. She is a pretty thirty three year-old woman, he is a grey-haired fifty four year-old man. No, she is being nice to him because she is nice. Or perhaps because he is her senior officer and she wants to get on.

‘Yes please, Anna.’

He calls her Anna, she calls him sir. He’d like it if she called him Steve. He imagines them in the pub. Arriving back at their table with a pint for him, a glass of white wine for her. *Thanks, Steve.* Her hand on his knee under the table. Smiling at him. Looking into his eyes. *I don’t mind the age difference. I don’t even think about it. It’s not important.* Looking into his tired, old eyes with her young eyes.

He is only six years away from retirement, now. It seems five minutes ago that the children were little. That they lived in that house on the new estate, where the cake factory used to be. He still remembers it from his childhood: a long, low brick building with a wide iron gate which opened every morning when he went to school and again every afternoon when he came back home. A hooter to summon the workers to their posts.

The houses look old now, the red brick greyed with rain and time, the windows peeling or replaced by PVC ones. Whole estates of PVC windows. That is what he should be doing. A nice little window replacement business. But it is too late to do anything else now. He is just going through the same routine now, day after day. He won't get another promotion; Anna will probably outrank him in a couple of years. She is still a DC, but he knows she will soon be fast-tracked to DS.

She brings him tea. Puts it on the desk in front of him and smiles. A smile, just for him. A moment of pure pleasure. He thanks her and she returns to her desk on the other side of the room. He watches her beyond his screen as she moves delicately into her seat. Wonders if she knows what she's doing, how she's doing it. Or is it just natural? Beautiful women have a way of doing everything with elegance.

The mug is white with a red cat on it, giving him a thumbs up. It seems to have become his, now, but it was just in the cupboard when they moved offices. DC Turner has held it, carried it. Now it is a memory of her. Everyone has their own memories here, on their desks: photo; picture; souvenir. Reminders of a different life. There is a different life he would like, with Anna. Cottage. Vegetable patch. Fireplace. But he cannot allow himself to think about that. He constantly fears discovery. It sometimes seems impossible to him that she does not know how he feels about her. That everyone does not know.

He tries to return to his work, but Anna is there across the room, there in the mug on his desk, there all around him.

~

DI Johnson looks at his watch. He has an appointment with the DCI shortly. A cheery man with a booming delivery and rosy cheeks, DCI Ross looks as though he should be in panto. He does not appear to be affected by the stresses of the job, but he is near retirement, past retirement age in fact. And DI Johnson has seen him down triple whiskies without pausing. That's what gives them away. The ones who stagger around, fall over, they're not the ones. It is the ones who always seem to be in control who are the real drinkers.

'Come in, Steve,' booms the DCI when DI Johnson knocks on his door. 'Sit down, sit down.' He makes a big thing of fussing with the papers on his desk. There is a big pile of them on the desk: rapes, assaults, robberies, being shoved this way and that by the DCI's hefty fingers.

'So, how are things?' the DCI booms.

'Fine, thank you sir.'

'How is our star pupil coming along?'

'DC Turner? Fine, she's...' He has to do that thing where he tries to keep his face expressionless, when underneath it the blood vessels are straining, his body is lightening.

'Good, good. Destined for great things.' The DCI leans forward. 'If she sticks around, that is.'

DI Johnson's body stops lightening and feels suddenly very heavy. What does the DCI mean? Is she thinking of leaving? Does she know how he feels about her? Does the DCI know? Perhaps DC Turner has said something. Or perhaps the DCI can tell, just from looking at him.

He has the terrible feeling that everyone knows; that everyone is laughing at him around the station. *That poor wife of his*. The glances from his colleagues, the thin smiles.

And Anna. Anna, disgusted at an old man's stupidity. But surely better this, in his imagination, than an affair with some woman he meets in the course of his duties. He knows what goes on. They have a certain power over people. But he has never done anything like that. He wouldn't. Instead, just a harmless, imaginary love affair.

'There's... so much temptation.' the DCI continues.

DI Johnson wants to shut his eyes; he can feel the final blow coming. Sexual harassment. Misconduct. Instant dismissal.

'So many other careers out there. Retention. That's the key.' The DCI makes a face. 'Are you all right, Steve?'

'Yes, a bit... stuffy in here,' he says.

'Yes I suppose it is.' He smiles. 'I never know what's going on up here with you, Steve.' The DCI taps his temple with a stubby index finger.

DI Johnson smiles. The DCI has no idea how relieved DI Johnson is that he does not know what is going on inside his head.

~

He turns the key with the necessary jiggle and steps inside the hallway; shouts hello, although he doesn't expect a reply, and goes upstairs.

The bedroom smells of perfume, talc, air freshener: a sickly smell that he always notices. It is like being in his grandmother's bedroom: the flowery prints on the walls, the framed photographs on the dresser, the collection of china ornaments on the

windowsill. He opens the wardrobe and takes out a hanger with a pair of jeans and a checked shirt on it, removes his work suit, puts it on the hanger and replaces it in the wardrobe. It is what he has been doing for the last ten years or so. Since she started to complain about him bringing the smell of work home with him.

That was when he first noticed her standing in the kitchen by the draining-board with a cloth in her hand, just staring out of the window. He was worried she was ill. Parkinson's or something. Then one day he saw her putting down a glass. She turned around, and he knew. Soon he began to find the bottles around the house. In all the cupboards and hidden corners.

She is sitting at the table in the kitchen. It is clean, tidy; she never lets it slip. There is the vague smell of lemon and antiseptic in the air and she is sitting at the table with a copy of the *Daily Mail* and a cup of coffee. The coffee is for show, he knows that.

'Hello love,' he says and puts his hand on her shoulder.

'Hello,' she says, without looking up.

He has never said anything to her about it. It is her decision. He sees it all the time, in his job. Skin like sandpaper, an expression as if looking at you from a great distance. *They've got to want to help themselves*, that's what the doctors say. But they hardly ever do want to help themselves. There is always a reason, if you look hard enough.

'Chicken pie okay?' he says.

She nods.

He will warm the pie in the oven, boil some potatoes, maybe a few carrots. He is not much of a cook, but over the last few years he has become the one who does the cooking.

‘Good day?’ he asks.

She nods.

She does not ask about his work anymore, but even if she did, he would not talk to her about the serial arsonist, the man who has admitted serious sexual assault. The woman who was stabbed fourteen times.

And of course he would not tell her about DC Turner. How his feelings for her make everything worthwhile. How he cannot imagine going to work every day without her.

That she is the light in the darkness.

While he is peeling potatoes he decides to invite the boys for Sunday lunch. Chris can come down on the train, John can pick him up from the station. He can’t deny thinking about them makes him jealous. Chris and his law degree. John and his IT company. It all seems so *easy* for them.

It is part of this middle age difficulty, all this. This downslope, towards, well... That is why his wife does what she does. She knows about the slope. She knew about it before him in fact.

He remembers when he was young he thought that the drunks in the churchyard understood some great truth. Why else would they congregate with only bottles and cans and others like themselves for company? He used to try to talk to them when he’d had a few. To find out what it was that they knew. He never got any answers, of course; just requests for change, the odd story about a desperate turn of luck. He never got to the heart of it. But he feels as though he is there now, with them on that downslope.

It is their anniversary next week. Five years of marriage. Seven years together. But it could be one year or fifty, really; it does not feel like five years to Connie. She is not sure what five years *should* feel like. It makes her feel a little confused, when she thinks about it all. The days, the moments. How they add up. Like the Year 5 children who used to be in her class. She cannot understand how they have got from there to here.

She sometimes finds herself gazing up into the sky, and beyond, where time doesn't seem to exist in the same way and instead it is just *things* that exist. She is suddenly aware that everything in the living-room will probably outlast her. The coffee table, the television guide, the door-handle, for goodness' sake.

Anyway.

Five years. She wonders what to do. A meal in the West End. Japanese, perhaps, since David likes it. Or she could cook a meal. Wine, candles, a film. She looks forward to evenings like this, in spite of the difficulties between them at the moment. Perhaps this will help with the difficulties. That is probably part of the problem. They don't spend enough time with each other. They did five years ago. Perhaps they need to do it more now.

Then, as she prepares to get up, she becomes aware, suddenly, of the man in the armchair, from the dream-that-is not-a-dream. The man with her father's features. His re-appearance is not worrying, exactly; disconcerting, perhaps. He is sitting in the chair as he was before, with the wound to his chest. She wonders again how it happened. A knife, she supposes, but there is no evidence of a weapon, no indication of how something like that might have happened. He could be dying, this man whom she doesn't know, whom she had never seen before all this; who has her father's face yet who she knows is not her father. She has a sudden urge to care for him, this man, to try to help him get better. She wants him to get better, but doesn't know why that should be. She doesn't know what to think, doesn't understand why she is seeing him again. It feels as if he is following her. Trying to communicate with her, in some way.

She tries to rationalise it, to explain it. Perhaps it is a recurring dream she somehow forgets having when she wakes up. Perhaps it is just that she is tired. She feels very tired, when she stops to consider it.

She needs to do something. Investigate. Try to find out what it all means. She will start with the internet. Perhaps the answer is there somewhere.

She gets a bottle of white wine from the fridge and the heavy bottle-opener from the drawer. The kind with a lever and prongs, like some sort of industrial tool designed for something more than just extracting a cork from a bottle-neck.

With her laptop and a glass of wine in front of her on the kitchen table she tries to picture the armchair from the dream-that-is-not-a-dream: a dirty white colour, with a kaleidoscopic pattern of blue shapes, some geometric and some that look more like snowflakes. A strange jumble. She still doesn't understand how she could have made up something so particular. Maybe it was something she saw in a second-hand shop,

or an antiques market, in the days when she and David were trying to furnish the house cheaply.

She enters a variety of words and descriptions, but the chairs that fill the screen look clean and attractive, the sort she would like to have in the house. She would not like the chair from the dream-that-is-not-a-dream in the house. There are so many of them, sold by shops she has never heard of, at showrooms in central London, or on websites with Scandinavian-sounding names. She wonders what sort of jobs people must have to be able to afford these kinds of chairs. Not a teacher's salary, certainly. Probably not even David's salary; although she does not now exactly what his salary is.

She continues to search for a while, sips at her wine; but she cannot find anything in the hundreds of pages of images that resembles the armchair she is looking for. So she decides instead to investigate the dream itself. She puts words into the box and presses the button. She discovers many illnesses, diseases, syndromes, but can find nothing that matches her own exact experience of the dream-that-is-not-a-dream. She could look through medical papers, journals, of course, try to find out more; that is what a researcher would do, look through all the documents, try to piece together the answers. Like the police. But she doesn't have the time, the dedication required. She has marking to do, dinner to make, a restaurant for their anniversary to find.

She shuts the lid of the laptop and looks out of the window into the darkness, as it clicks and purrs and then falls silent.

Dad liked this sort of programme. She couldn't understand why. It was just words to her. She would keep an eye on him as he watched, and when he laughed she would

laugh too. Sometimes you could see the audience, mouths wide open, dabbing at their faces with a hankie. She loved being there with Dad. Loved it when he sat her on his lap, held her hands and pulled his knees apart so that she slithered down on to the ground. It made her giggle and he would tickle her tummy and she would laugh so much she sometimes felt sick and then Mum would come in. Honestly, she's just had her dinner, John; sounds like a pack of hyenas in here. Connie had looked up hyenas in the encyclopaedia. They looked scary and it made her frightened, thinking of a pack of them in the living room.

She sat down on the sofa and Dad looked around and smiled.

'It's your favourite,' he said, winking.

She grinned back at him. It was the one with two men who lived together in a house. They seemed to be friends, but they were always arguing. Dad would laugh at it from time to time, a sound that was a little like a bark. Sometimes he'd slap his thigh. He seemed to see things in the programme that weren't actually happening. What was actually happening was very boring.

Marcus was upstairs. He had an old electronic game with buttons and flashing lights. He was saving up for a Game Boy. That was the best thing ever, he said.

Connie wasn't interested in games. She liked books about space; dreamed of escaping into it..

Mum came in with a tray and put it on the coffee table. 'Here we are. A few snacks.' It was brilliant when Mum did this. Wearing an apron, bringing in cheesy puffs and a glass of Coke for her and Marcus; crisps and a beer for Dad.

Marcus seemed to sense from upstairs that there was food and Connie heard him jump down the stairs. Thump, thump, thump.

It was so exciting. All of them in the same room together. She hoped Mum would sit down with them. She sometimes did. But usually there were things in the kitchen to do. Things to do with the meals, or the clearing up. Or cleaning. Well it doesn't get done by itself, does it? I don't see you doing it.

Mum sat at one end of the sofa, Marcus at the other and Connie between them. She and Marcus took it in turns to reach into the bowl for the cheesy puffs. Dad was the only one who was laughing at the programme, the rest of them were just sitting there facing in the direction of the television. It felt like Christmas to Connie. She was so happy.

When the programme finished, Mum went back to the kitchen and Dad stood up and put his hand on Marcus's shoulder. 'Come on then, son.' That was what he called Marcus. He never seemed to use his actual name. 'Are you going to help me pack the car, then?'

Marcus nodded, grabbing the last of the cheesy puffs.

'Coming, Connie?' Dad shouted over his shoulder.

Marcus and Dad pushed the big square suitcases into the belly of the sky blue Volvo. It seemed to take forever to fill up, that car. Dad winked as he closed the boot and put his hand on Connie's shoulder. It made her feel proud and happy at the same time.

She thought she had the best family in the world, on days like this.

‘Can you think of some *kind* behaviour?’ she asks the children. ‘What makes you feel all warm and fuzzy?’

Hands go up uncertainly. Always the same children, the same order. She points to Polly. ‘Yes, Polly.’

‘When Mummy says she loves me?’ Polly says.

‘Yes, Polly. That’s lovely, isn’t it. Anyone else?’

The hands go up again, more quickly this time.

‘George?’

‘When my sister collects me from school.’

‘Very good, George.’

‘Now what *unkind* behaviour can you think of? What makes you sad. All cold and prickly,’ she continues. ‘Shall we start with you, Noah?’ she says.

Noah thinks for a moment, then his face brightens. ‘When my mummy smacks me,’ he says, a look of pride on his face.

She knows immediately that she must report it to the Head. She doesn’t want to, she feels sorry for Noah’s mother; but these things must be reported. Who knows what else happens at home. Who he is left with and what they do to him.

~

The Head must have a meeting later, perhaps with the governors. She is dressed in a dark suit and is looking at her laptop in mild confusion, the way older people do when they try to engage with technology.

She looks up at Connie and the confusion turns to something more unfriendly. 'Yes?' she says, brusquely.

'I wanted to talk to you about Noah,' Connie says.

'Again?' The Head says. 'I've *told* you, there is no-'

'No,' Connie says. 'I know. It's not that. He said in class today that his mother smacks him.'

She sees the Head considering what she has said. She is sixty. Connie suspects that she does not think about smacking the way Connie does. The way you must think about it, now. She often thinks that the Head secretly approves of it, that she probably smacked her own children.

'Just report it to Sally.' The Head turns her gaze to her computer again. 'She's responsible for child protection.'

'It's just. I thought you would want to know,' Connie says. 'After... what happened.'

'I'm still trying to forget what happened,' Jenny says, her eyes still on the screen.

Connie hesitates, before turning to leave. She feels as though she should say something. Another apology. But another apology would be ridiculous, now, surely.

'Try not to bother me with these things in future,' Jenny says as Connie reaches the door.

~

From the outer door she gazes at the grey playground, lying flat beneath the grey sky. It is like an old television programme: shades of black and white and everything in between. She looks up, but there is a layer of cloud and she cannot see beyond it, to the place where there is no time, and no children. And no Head.

She turns back into the room, goes over to a display board and slams the heel of her hand into it. It jars her wrist and pain travels up her forearm, but as soon as she has done it she feels a lot better.

She is watching *Waking the Dead*. It is the final episode of the series and things seem to be moving towards some sort of resolution. She is not sure, though; she is tired and does not remember this particular story. A man sits in a driver's seat, talking to himself, seemingly on the verge of a confession. He thumps the steering-wheel, holding back tears.

She finds her mind moving in other directions and begins to think again about the man in the dream-that-is-not-a-dream. It makes her think of her father, sitting in the living-room in his own armchair. But that is not the armchair from the dream. The one in the dream had that strange pattern, like something from an old people's home or a doctor's surgery at some point in the past, before the seats became low and plastic.

But perhaps before that, when she was younger, when she saw things she can no longer remember now. Perhaps there was another armchair, then. She can find that out easily. All she needs to do is to ask her mother. Or her father. It feels strange thinking about him. As though it really was him who was sitting there in that chair with that look on his face; somewhere between life and death.

There are some gunshots; the car shakes with the force of the bullets and the man slumps back in his seat. His eyes glaze over. *I loved you.*

There is a sound at the front door. Then footsteps, stopping in the hall; some rustling. She expects David to come into the living-room but the steps continue to the kitchen and she can no longer hear any noise.

When she goes into the kitchen she sees him getting something from a cupboard, then sees a bottle of red wine in his large hand. His other hand reaches for the bottle-opener.

‘Oh, hello,’ he says, as if he’s forgotten he has a wife whom he lives with, in this house.

When she moves to kiss him, he turns his head away slightly, a small movement, but enough to discourage her from continuing. She wonders if there is someone else he does allow to kiss him.

She makes herself a cup of tea while he fiddles with the wine-opener, pulling the levers apart, the metal parts clinking lightly against each other. There is silence as he manoeuvres it around the bottle; it looks like some sort of engineering exercise. There is one glass on the table. She wonders why he has not offered her any. In the past, she didn’t usually drink red wine, that’s true. But for a while now she’s had the odd glass. David seems still to be stuck in earlier times. That is the generous explanation, at least; she does not want to consider the alternative.

He sits at the kitchen table, still in his jacket, as though he is about to bring a meeting to order, or something. It makes her think of meetings with the Head, always asking Connie questions she knows she hasn’t prepared for, with that look in her eyes, shutting everything down, allowing no argument.

David takes out his mobile phone, focuses on it and starts to push buttons.

‘Have you thought of anything nice we could do on our anniversary?’ she asks, turning away and putting the kettle on.

David looks up and after a moment shakes his head, as if he has had to remind himself what the significance of the occasion is.

‘What would you *like* to do?’

He sighs, as though annoyed by the question. ‘I don’t know... a meal?’

‘Yes, but where shall we go?’ She is finding the conversation tiring, is reminded of speaking to one of the children at school.

David looks down at his phone again, as though he has not heard the question.

‘*David!*’

He looks up, confusion on his face. ‘Yes?’

She feels so alone, in that moment. *Yes?* And the loneliness makes her think about her baby. But she stops herself, before she starts to cry, starts to fall into pieces in front of him.

She liked the journey because the whole family was together. The others seemed to dislike it for exactly the same reason. It took a very long time to drive to Cornwall. Sometimes on journeys like this the car would limp to the side of the road, and they would be picked up hours later by a man in an AA van, who would scratch his head and look at the car as if he was in pain. Dad drove extra slowly now so that wouldn’t happen. They stopped for lunch for them, and some water for the radiator, and then a few more times for her and Marcus to go to the toilet, honestly why you two can’t go at the same time I just don’t know.

The cottage was down a bumpy lane with grass growing over it. You’d have thought we could afford somewhere decent after all this time. It was like a fairytale, in

the middle of nowhere, with just fields and cows around it. Mum would have liked it to be somewhere rather than nowhere, but there was nothing Dad could do about it, so they unpacked and went to explore.

That holiday was the best ever. They went to the beach every day, bumping down the grassy track, laughing as Mum's head banged the roof and Dad wrestled with the steering-wheel.

They would sit near the rocks on the beach, with an umbrella to shelter from the sun, which was out most days, but even when it wasn't it was still warm enough to be on the beach, don't want you skulking around the house all day getting into everything.

They swam, caught crabs in rockpools, lay on their towels reading; separate, on their towels, but together too. Mum in her black swimming costume, Dad with his hairy chest, like a hairy blanket. He used to joke that he was losing it on his head and getting it on his chest.

At lunchtime they'd have sandwiches and cans of Coke, although Dad would have cans of beer, and then Dad would help them make a sandcastle, or he'd dig a hole and they would sit in it and he would fill it in with more sand and make it into a car, or a boat, or a rocket around them. Mum would carry on reading because she didn't want to get sandy, which was strange really, because she was on the beach. But she didn't seem to think it was strange.

Then, when they were all glowy in the afternoon, and it was just starting to get cooler, they would pack everything up and put it back in the car and bump their way back to the cottage. They would all have a shower and she would feel cold, even though the water was hot, because of the glowy feeling.

They'd play in the garden. 'Come on, you two,' Dad would say and they would all run outside with badminton racquets. They played while Mum did the washing up. It was nice having Dad there every day. Marcus ran around like a little version of Dad, and she would try to keep her eyes on the shuttlecock as it came down from the sky, a bit like a bird; but even so she would never manage to hit it. The other two would laugh, and because she didn't want to be left out she would join in as well.

After a while Mum would come out of the house as though they'd all done something wrong, and tell her and Marcus to go to bed and Dad would wipe his forehead with his sleeve and look happy that he could stop.

She never felt as though she'd had long enough outside. She wanted it to go on forever. Marcus would say something, but it wouldn't get him anywhere. Dad would just put his hand on his shoulder and Marcus would look at the ground as if he was searching for something he had dropped, but really it was because he knew he couldn't change anything by arguing, don't you dare, after everything we do for you.

Marcus slept on the top bunk bed because he was older and she slept on the bottom, happy because she knew Marcus was there above her. It was hot in the bedroom so she just had a sheet covering her and she would watch the sunlight slipping down the wall opposite her, listening to her parents talking in that serious way grown ups seemed to, with the occasional clinking of wineglasses, a few words sometimes drifting in her direction, until she finally fell asleep.

'It's ok,' she says. 'I'll find something.'

She found a restaurant in the end. Looked at reviews, checked customer comments. A Japanese place in Soho that has not been open long. The comments were all good and it is not expensive. They can have a drink in a bar on Old Compton Street first. She likes it there. Everyone sitting outside at tables. It seems to her to be a place where people are always smiling. David does not like it; shakes his head and says that he prefers a pint somewhere without plastic seats and barmen in waistcoats.

She looks at her phone as she goes upstairs to get changed. It is six o'clock. David is getting back at seven and the restaurant is booked for eight-thirty. Plenty of time for a bath.

She arrives back at the bedroom with a towel around her. The room is a mess, as usual. She leaves before David in the morning, and he does not seem to see what she sees. The bed is unmade, the wardrobe door open, a rugby shirt draped over the back of a chair.

She clears it all up, then takes off her towel and puts on her nice underwear – pink, with a black lacy border. As she fastens her bra, she imagines David's hands on her neck, her breasts. She imagines him kissing her stomach and the insides of her

thighs and when she runs her hand along her arm she can see the hairs standing on end.

But he does not do that anymore.

She turns and looks at herself in the mirror, trying to ignore her hips. Then she puts on her red dress and shifts to one side, watching herself over her shoulder; the material lies flat across her stomach.

She feels an urge to pick up the nail scissors on the dressing-table in front of her and drag them across her stomach, watch the blood bubble from beneath the dress.

Instead, she ties the thin belt in a bow and leaves the room.

It is nearly seven o'clock now and it has been dark for some time. She is sitting downstairs in the armchair by the window, the lamp on beside her. She is reading *Anna Karenina* for perhaps the tenth time; it is her favourite novel and she always returns to it. How she loves poor, tortured Anna.

It is their wooden anniversary. Not as strange as some: wool, salt, paper. She has bought David a nice wooden frame and put a picture in it of them on their honeymoon. They are standing on the beach with palm trees behind them. David has his arm around her, she is leaning against him. Both of them are smiling into the camera. She has wrapped it and it is lying on the kitchen table with his card. Next year is sugar, for goodness' sake. She has no idea what she'll get him. Chocolates perhaps. Last year was easy: flowers. The year before, she gave him a leather wallet.

Her mobile phone rings. It is David.

'I'm really sorry, Connie,' he says. 'I'm stuck at work. There's a presentation we need to finish and everyone has to stay on. I'll try to get back as soon as I can.'

She can hear the sound of women's voices. It sounds as though he is in the pub, but it could just be work colleagues. She takes the phone from her ear and looks at the screen. It is half past seven.

‘Connie?’

‘Yes, I’m still here.’

‘I hope you’re not too upset.’

She is upset, of course, sitting here in her nice dress, looking forward to going out and knowing they will not be able to have a drink beforehand, now. She had been looking forward to a cocktail. ‘No, that’s okay. I understand,’ she says. ‘We can always go straight to the restaurant. I’ll phone up and re-book for a bit later.’

‘Thanks, Con, that would be great. See you soon, then.’

She puts the phone down and gazes over towards the other side of the room. The print of the dancing dog suddenly annoys her and she switches off the lamp. The room darkens and she feels the beat of her heart in her chest. She breathes in, long and slow, and thinks about being a long way away in space. Tries to slow down time until there is only the pinprick of the present: not long enough to feel sadness or happiness or anything else, but just enough time to exist in that moment when there is nothing.

It calms her and she reaches for her phone. The screen lights up; a comforting sight, suggesting impetus, purpose. Like a car dashboard in the middle of the night. She calls the restaurant and puts back their reservation to 9.30, then closes her eyes to wait for David.

When she hears the sound of the door, she jumps in her armchair and looks around the dark room, unsure for several moments where she is and what she is doing. Then she remembers the anniversary, David’s call, the restaurant booking.

The door to the living-room opens with a rush of light from the hallway.

She screws up her eyes and David appears in a halo of illumination, as though suddenly transported there from a different place.

‘I’m really sorry,’ he says from the centre of the brightness. ‘We had to stay later than I thought and then the trains were delayed.’

‘Oh.’ She rubs her eyes. ‘What time is it?’

‘Nine forty.’

‘We were meant to be there at half past,’ she says. ‘It’s too late now.’

‘I’m really sorry. Perhaps we can do it another night.’ He gives her a neutral sort of smile.

Perhaps they can do it another night, he says. *Perhaps*. She is troubled by his lack of conviction on this point. *Of course*, would surely be more reasonable. *Definitely, absolutely*. It occurs to her that he is actually pleased that they are not going to dinner. And that in fact he would rather they didn’t re-arrange it for another time.

‘Anyway, I’m going to get a glass of wine,’ he continues, turning and leaving the room. ‘Can I get you one?’ he asks from somewhere along the corridor.

She opens her mouth to reply. Her eyes have become accustomed to the light now, and through the open door she can see the hall table with a pile of post and pizza leaflets on it. The sleeve of David’s brown raincoat, hanging on one of the hooks. She becomes aware of *thingness* of these things. She feels like tortured Anna, condemned to sit amongst these inanimate objects, to live a life that is unfulfilled. She sobs, unexpectedly, her stomach heaves, and she starts to cry like one of the children at school, unable to control herself.

She pulls herself up from the armchair and goes out into the light, along the corridor and into the kitchen, in a mist of tears. David is opening a bottle of red wine and turns to look at her as she stumbles in.

‘What’s wrong?’ he says.

She fights with her tears. ‘I’m wearing this dress,’ she says, her arms by her side, her palms facing David, as if to draw in his gaze, ‘because I wanted to look nice for you. I wanted to spend the evening with you.’

‘Oh, right,’ he says with the usual look, and turns to take a wineglass from the cupboard next to him.

There is something about that look. It makes her feel embarrassed to be standing there in her dress that she is wearing just for him. She feels anger somewhere deep inside her, then it is at the surface and she moves forward to the counter, grasps the bottle-opener and takes a swipe in his direction with it just at the moment he turns back towards her with a glass in his outstretched hand.

‘Have a-’ he is saying as the bottle-opener hits him near the temple. There is a light thud and they both recoil.

She sees the blood straight away. She does not know if it is the lever or the corkscrew that has done it but there is a lot of blood very quickly and she is no longer crying. She does not seem to be able to move in fact.

‘Fuck, *fuck*.’ He grips her wrist tightly, as if expecting her to do it again. Then he puts his fingers to his forehead and examines them.

‘I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to do that,’ she says, unsure exactly what she meant to do in the moment of rage. She feels calm now, or perhaps something beyond calm: absent.

‘Fucking *hell*,’ he says. ‘What did you do that for?’

He looks at her with an incomprehension that *she* cannot comprehend. It occurs to her for a moment that he cannot possibly understand relationships if he thinks that what she has just done was unreasonable. But then she realises that she is the one standing there in her nicest dress with a bottle-opener she has used as a weapon; he is the one with blood leaking from his head and a look of shock and fear on his face.

‘Well? *Well?*’

‘I didn’t mean to.’ It is true; she didn’t mean to injure him like this. But she did want to force him to look at her, to appreciate her, to *love* her. Perhaps she even wanted to cause him some pain. But it was all theoretical; just a moment of rage and sadness. This reality is not what she wanted. Now of course she appears to be the unreasonable one.

He makes a noise a bit like the low roar of an animal, raises his fist and balls it in front of her face. It looks huge, a couple of inches from her nose. ‘I know what you’ve been through... But I don’t know what you think gives you the right.’

She didn’t think she had a *right* to hit him with a bottle-opener. She didn’t think about it at all. She is disgusted with herself, in fact. She looks at her husband’s red, insistent, increasingly bloody face. She does not know how to apologise for this, or explain it. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says. Even to her this does not seem to be enough. She always seems to be apologising, so often that it even seems to have lost its effect on her.

‘*I’m sorry?*’ he repeats. ‘*I’m sorry?*’

‘Yes.’ She does not know what else he expects her to say. She has the urge to run away.

There is a silence. David shakes his head as if it is beyond understanding, what has just happened, what she has just done.

He pushes past her on his way to the hall and she is afraid that he is going to leave the house, to leave her. Here and now.

She turns and follows him.

He is putting his raincoat on by the hooks, laboriously inserting his arms into its sleeves while swapping over the hand with which he is holding a tissue to his head. The movements look vaguely comical to Connie, or like an illusionist's act.

'Where are you going?' she says.

'To A & E, of course,' he says, not looking in her direction.

'Oh, I see.' She thinks for a moment, then realises that there will be questions about what she has done. She considers asking David if he really needs to go to hospital. But in the end she just says 'I'll come with you.'

He turns and looks at her. A look of surprise. Then he gives a little nod and opens the door for her.

'This is how you do it,' Dad said, showing her his clenched fist. 'Squeeze tightly, like this.'

There was a girl, at school. Whispering with the others. Pulling her hair. Pushing and pinching.

She made a ball of her own hand and looked up. Beneath her, pink princesses rode green dragons, orange fire curling from their mouths. She often imagined being in their duvet world with them.

Dad shook his head. 'No, not like that.' He opened her fist and took out her thumb and replaced it over her index finger. 'You'll break your thumb if you do it like that.'

She tried again. Her fist looked small and pink compared to Dad's bony, hairy hand.

'Okay, that's better. Now tilt your wrist and hit with your knuckles. These two, here. Then your fist is level with your arm; otherwise you'll hurt yourself.'

He offered her his open palm to hit.

'Yes, that's it. Good girl. When you punch, go for this place here.' He put the tips of his fingers on her chest, under her chin. *'Don't go for the face unless you have to.'*

She nodded. It sounded a bit scary. But she was starting to enjoy the feeling of changing things around, of making the other girl feel sad, so that she didn't need to any more.

Dad winked at her and picked up his newspaper. 'See you at lunchtime.' A look passed across his eyes, as though he was thinking hard about something. *'And don't tell Mum.'*

She looked down at her hand and made a fist, as Dad had taught her. It made her feel happy. Happy and safe.

She can see the cab driver looking back at them in the rear-view mirror. He probably wants to ask what has happened. He can probably see the concern on their faces. She can see the concern on his. Concern and interest. A couple on their way to casualty late at night. A blood-soaked tissue. It's the time that makes it seem worse. Things always seem worse at night.

Outside, drizzle is falling in a thin film between them and the lights of the few restaurants and pubs that are still open. By a kebab shop a small group of men huddles together. A little further on, another group of men walks away from a pub in a line, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched. It is only a ten minute ride. They could have walked, if it was the middle of the day, if David didn't have blood spilling from his head.

The cab drops them off outside the hospital's accident and emergency department, a square, modern building that reminds her of school, its entrance jutting out at a jaunty angle. The driver looks at them warily as they stand by the half-open window of the taxi. Connie envies this balding man in his v-neck jumper and shirt, sitting there in his growling black cab. This man who will finish his shift soon and go back to his house in the suburbs and get into bed next to his wife, his wife whom he has never attacked and who has never attacked him.

‘Keep the change,’ she says, handing him a ten pound note.

The driver thanks her, without smiling and turns his gaze to the windscreen. The cab grows away.

At reception, the woman looks up, takes their details without further comment and directs them towards a set of seats occupied by prospective patients. A man with his hand wrapped in a bandage studies them, the rest concentrate on phones, magazines.

A nurse passes by and looks at them with a scowl. Perhaps she is just tired. Or perhaps she thinks they’ve come straight from the pub; that they are the sort of people who have fights in pubs.

They sit there for what seems like hours. The people who were waiting when they arrive are gradually called away in the direction of the wards. They leave but they do not seem to return. Connie keeps trying to tell herself that she didn’t mean to hurt David like that. She was just angry.

Finally, a nurse appears by the reception desk and calls David’s name. Connie tries to smile, then sees the look on the woman’s face as she catches sight of the blood-stained tissue that David is still holding up to his head.

In the treatment room, the nurse snaps on some gloves, takes the tissue from David and throws it into a bin. Connie sees the gash, the layers of skin exposed, blood weeping from its insides like a red, crying eye.

‘That’s a nasty little cut,’ the nurse says, her latex-encased fingers resting on either side of the cut. ‘How did you do it?’

‘Does it matter?’ David says, a little too quickly.

‘I need to know so that I can assess the likelihood of infection,’ the nurse says, the expression on her face unchanged.

‘Oh, I see,’ David replies. ‘I just tripped over. In the kitchen.’

The nurse turns to Connie and smiles. She is dressed all in hospital blue: blue shirt over blue trousers. Hair in a blonde bob. A little like Connie might look herself in ten years’ time, she thinks. She can’t hold the woman’s gaze.

The nurse says something about stitches and David nods. Seeing him there, sitting on the bed, bulky and injured, makes Connie feel protective towards him. He looks like a confused child. It reminds her of being at hospital with one of the children from school. It happens sometimes. They trip over, or are pushed over; she has to take them to hospital and sit there until the parents arrive. If they arrive.

When the nurse offers him an anaesthetic, David says: ‘Oh, you don’t need to bother with that,’ with a smile and a wave of his hand.

‘Sorry?’

‘We usually just get stitched up and go straight back on.’

The nurse looks at him blankly.

‘Rugby,’ he says with a smile.

Connie expects the nurse to smile back, but she doesn’t.

‘Oh, yes,’ she says. ‘We get a lot of rugby injuries here. Every weekend. I’ll give you the anaesthetic anyway, if you don’t mind.’

David smiles back at her weakly.

When she has given him the injection she picks up a needle from a metal bowl on the table next to her. She works in silence, in the clarity of the lights. When she has finished, she puts a plaster over the top of the cut. It makes David look like a boxer who has had a hard fight.

‘That’ll impress them at work,’ he says to the nurse with a smile.

The nurse doesn't respond. Perhaps it is just the time of night. Perhaps she is late finishing her shift.

'Right, that's you all done, Mr Williams,' the nurse says. 'You're free to go now.'

David thanks her and Connie is turning to leave when the nurse says: 'Mrs Williams, could I have a quick word?'

They both stop and the nurse continues 'On your own? Perhaps you could wait in reception, Mr Williams.'

She imagines the nurse is going to give her some advice on how to look after David. Perhaps she is old-fashioned like that, expects a wife to take care of her husband.

The nurse turns to Connie when David has left. 'This is a little delicate,' she says. 'I have to tell you that I'm worried that something's happened here.'

Connie watches her. 'I'm not sure I quite-'.

'That there's been some sort of... abuse.'

Connie has the feeling in her stomach she sometimes gets when things go wrong. A sort of falling away.

As the nurse watches her, she feels tears come. She feels around in her bag for a tissue and wipes her eyes. 'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I'm sorry.' It feels like the end of everything. She deserves it, she knows that of course.

She feels the nurse touch her shoulder lightly. 'I noticed your arm,' she says.

'My arm?' Connie repeats. She looks down at her right forearm and remembers David taking hold of her. A red mark extends from beneath the sleeve of her coat. She does not know what to say.

‘If you’ve been the victim of abuse, there are things you can do. Things we can do.’

The nurse’s hand is on Connie’s arm now. It feels pleasant. As if she is being looked after. But she knows she needs to give her an answer. She wipes her eyes again. ‘It’s fine,’ she says. ‘Everything’s fine.’ She tries to smile.

The nurse continues to watch her. ‘I’ve heard a lot of women say that,’ she says. ‘As I say, I’ve seen it all before. There are people who can help.’

She feels confused, wishes now she hadn’t come to the hospital. Everything has gone wrong. A few hours ago she was looking forward to cocktails and sushi. Even now she is still wearing her nice dress; the nurse must be able to tell she is all done up. ‘No, I’m fine,’ she says, wanting the conversation to end.

‘I have an obligation,’ the nurse continues. ‘If I suspect that something of that nature is happening I need to discuss it with my colleagues and then they make a decision.’

‘Decision?’

‘About whether to take it further. To involve the relevant authorities.’

Connie realises how hard the nurse is trying to help her. To protect her. And she does feel a sense of gratitude. Not for herself of course, but on behalf of all the other women who might need it. ‘No. Thank you,’ she says, with a smile, trying to be firm to show that the subject is over now.

The nurse keeps her eye on her for a few moments then moves towards the door. ‘All right, Mrs Williams, but as I say, I’m under an obligation to raise my concerns with the team here.’

‘What was all that about?’ David says, in the taxi.

She turns to him and sees the pink plaster covering his temple. ‘Oh nothing,’ she says quickly, ‘she just thought she knew me, from school.’

David raises an eyebrow, then turns and looks out of the window, into the darkness.

She stands on the sidelines in a pink woolly hat, scarf pulled up over her chin, hands pushed deep into the pockets of her coat. It is a dull day; the grey is deep, layered. She shifts from one foot to the other, then back again. It didn't look cold earlier, but she has learnt that after an hour standing on the touchline she will feel as though she has stepped into a fridge.

It is an away game, in Richmond; Putney, really. A funny place, like half a stadium, but better than some of them. David is in the third team; he has never played for the firsts, but is proud of having been in the seconds for a while.

There are other women there, dressed similarly to her. She recognises some of them from drinks, social events. Some have babies in slings on their fronts, or toddlers in buggies; there are a few older children, running up and down beside the pitch. She goes to watch every other week. Perhaps every few weeks, recently, but she felt she should come today.

She still doesn't understand the rules. To her it is just a group of overweight middle-aged men banging into each other. She wonders why David still carries on; perhaps it would be admitting defeat if he stopped now. There is the constant sound of shouting. It sounds like some sort of military operation; a battlefield. And there is a slap, a crack, as they tackle each other. She tries not to listen. Before she started

coming she pictured David flying down the pitch and scoring a try, winning the match for his side. But of course it isn't like that. He plays in the scrum and never flies anywhere. Most of the time he is grabbing on to other big men, trying to drag them to the ground. She has seen him punched in the past. He has told her that worse things go on: biting, *gouging*. He doesn't seem to mind though. None of them seems to mind. Afterwards they all shake hands, head off to the changing rooms chatting. They all seem very happy together.

When they got home from the hospital, they made love, she and David. It seems strange to her now that they did that. But there in the darkness, it was as if nothing had happened earlier on. In the darkness she could not see David's plaster, or even his face. It occurred to her, then, that he was trying to regain control of things, in some way.

Afterwards she lay on her back, gazing at the ceiling, trying not to cry, willing herself far away, light years away, to a place where nothing had happened and where there was still a normal tomorrow.

She thinks she knows what went on, there in the kitchen, but when she tries to recall it exactly she finds it difficult, without proof, without video footage. Even if she could watch it back, she still doesn't think she would actually believe it. David was about to pour her a glass of wine. She cannot now remember the exact feeling she had at that moment, but of course it was anger of some kind; anger that he was ignoring her, that he didn't care about her. Now she feels that was probably unfair, since he had been in the office working, and afterwards stuck on the Tube. She should probably have been making *him* a drink, instead. That is probably the way other people would see it. She was thinking about herself, when she should have been thinking about her husband. What she did was inexcusable. She is filled with

embarrassment when she thinks about it, wants to escape from it all. But there is no escape.

She tries to think of some cause, some explanation for her behaviour. The anger seems to her to have been getting worse since the man in the dream-that-is-not-a-dream first appeared. She cannot tell if the man is the cause of her anger or the result of it, but it is the only thing that she can think of.

She needs to conduct an investigation into it all. There must be an answer. She can interview all the members of her family: mother, father, brother. Then she can put all this behind her; everything will be explained and she and David can begin again. When she thinks about this, she feels better; investigations are something she knows about, after all the years watching them on television.

When the match ends, the men are all covered in mud and exhaling great clouds of steamy breath, like a field of cows.

David plods over to Connie on his way back to the dressing-rooms. She sees the plaster on his head, no longer pink, but muddied. Now it looks like something that might have happened during the course of the match: a rugby injury.

‘Well played,’ she says. It is the sort of thing she has heard other people saying. She knows they do not mean it literally. It is more to do with the effort of shuffling up and down a muddy pitch, wrestling with big, strong men, when there are other, easier, things they could be doing.

He nods, breath curling from his mouth. Since the other night he has had a certain look in his eyes when they talk, as though he is far away. ‘What time are we out with Sam and Nicki?’

‘Seven thirty.’

He nods and follows in the direction of the others, breath wreathing his shoulders.

~

He had already been drinking after the match; she could smell it on him when he came home and she kissed him. There was a moment's hesitation before he bent down for the kiss, and she smelled it then, as though his breath were flavoured with beer. He is drinking again now, opposite her in the restaurant, his shoulders hunched over his glass as he picks pieces off the papadoms on the plate between them and smears on chutney.

Sam and Nicki are running late: she got the text in the restaurant. When she told David, he looked up from the plate and nodded, then turned his gaze downwards again and continued with the smearing. The occasion now has the feel of one that has been overtaken by events; she and David seem unprepared for it; they do not seem to have enough to say to each other. She feels a sudden sense of *aloneness*. Not just the two unused place-settings next to them, but the feeling that she is on her own, even though she is here with David.

As she tries to understand why she feels like this, the others arrive with shopping-bags and smiles, and come over apologising and pulling off coats. Nicki is wearing heels and a dress that shows off her waist. She smiles a red lipsticked-smile when she reaches the table and Connie watches David's cheek rest against hers as he kisses her, watches the palm of his hand on her hip.

'So,' Sam says as he hooks his coat over the back of his chair and sits down. He is blond and lanky, and is wearing jeans and a T shirt with the logo of a real or

imagined American University on it. Connie always feels there is something a little insubstantial about him, as though someone gave up designing a sportsman halfway through. He and David were friends at university, but he didn't play rugby like the others, all of them now long gone from their lives, thanks God. 'How was the match?'

'Good,' David replies with a grin. 'We lost seventeen-three.'

Sam laughs and Connie realises she didn't think to ask the score. She wonders if that is something she should have done or if it is enough to stand by the side of the pitch in stoic support.

'Well, it was twenty-eight nil last week,' David says, and this time Nicki joins in with the laughter.

'Looks nasty,' Sam says, motioning in the direction of David's plaster. Connie looks at it with the rest of them. Seeing it earlier, during the match, she had almost convinced herself it *was* a rugby injury.

David looks up from his papadom and grins. 'Yeah,' he says 'I'm a real hero.'

The others laugh again, but Connie finds that she is unable to laugh with them. She wonders what he meant; if it was just a joke, or a remark meant particularly for her. She has the feeling suddenly that she is an outsider in the group. What happened the other night seems to have created a distance between her and David. She is not *sure* of the two of them anymore. Despite the seven years together, the five years of marriage, the countless intimate moments. The baby.

She feels tears coming and looks down at her plate and the blurry pile of papadoms on it, picks off a corner, trying not to give anything away. All the laughter somehow makes it worse. She would like David to be talking to her, but he seems intent on telling jokes, making their friends laugh. She wonders if he is perhaps punishing her for what happened then thinks again about the rugby; all those big men

smashing into each other then drinking together. *No hard feelings*. If he is happy to have a drink with those people afterwards, then why would he punish her? The thought makes her feel a little better. She is his wife, not some stranger he plays rugby with on a Saturday afternoon. It is probably just in her mind, this feeling.

‘You’re quiet, tonight.’ Nicki says, turning to her with a look of concern on her face. ‘Is everything okay?’

For a moment she imagines telling Nicki what happened, and tries to picture her reaction. She cannot work out what it would be. A look of shock, disgust. Or perhaps a sympathetic nod. Arms thrown around her neck in sympathetic embrace. She is struggling, herself, to work out the importance of it. It seemed like the most shocking event of her life, at the time, but perhaps it wasn’t, to a man like David. Perhaps he is not even thinking about it now.

She looks at David then back at Nicki. ‘Oh yes, everything’s fine,’ she says with a smile, ‘it’s just been a hard week.’

~

She lies on her back in bed, listening to David’s swift intakes of breath and slow, rasping exhalation. In the end the evening seemed like a celebration of some sort, rather than just another Saturday night. A kind of hysteria. She drank too much white wine and has the beginnings of a headache. David struggled to get his key in the lock and then fell against the wall when they finally got in through the door. She knows why she drank more than usual, but not why David did. Perhaps for the same reason as her, because of what happened the other day. She cannot know, without him telling her. But he is like this anyway, sometimes, when he has a few drinks after the rugby.

In the past, they would always have made love, on a Saturday night, after going out. But that all changed after the miscarriage. When she considers it, other things changed then too. She felt as though some fragment of her was still there in the hospital for months afterwards and when that fragment returned there seemed to be a stranger living with her in the house. What happened the other night wasn't the start of the distance between them, she realises now, it has been there ever since the miscarriage.

It is the wine that helps her to see these things. She hopes that it will not get any wider, this distance; she worries that it will, but there is a good chance, if she conducts a thorough investigation, that it will begin to close again.

She turns over so that her cheek is against the pillow, her elbows bent and her palms downwards, as though she is pushing the bed away, pushing everything away; and almost straight away is asleep.

The classrooms are named after famous historical figures. Hers is *Fleming*. Then there are *Logie Baird*, *Stevenson*, *Newton*, *Shakespeare* and the rest. All men.

She raised it a number of times, in the early days, but the Head didn't seem to think it was important that all the teachers were women, yet all the classrooms were named after men. She still cannot understand why the Head doesn't think it is important that the children are being taught it is men who discover, invent, write. And that women nurture, teach. But that is what the Head is like. Perhaps it is because she is sixty; or perhaps it is just because of who she is. It must be hard to change when you have had one view all your life.

She stopped bringing it up, after a while. She had the feeling that to the Head it was an important battle she could not afford to lose; that if she gave way on this then her entire hold over the school would collapse.

And so every day she opens the door to *Fleming* and feels a small moment of anger.

'My daddy's coming to get me today,' Noah says after the register, his face flushed with excitement.

‘That’s nice, Noah,’ she says, wondering if he has made a mistake. Noah’s father has never been to the school. His mother didn’t mention it earlier, but then she doesn’t mention things like that. She doesn’t blame the woman. Not like some of the others, who just don’t seem to care. She is unsure whether Noah’s father is allowed to collect him at all. She makes a note to check.

‘Mrs Williams, don’t forget my daddy’s coming to get me today,’ Noah says again, when they are clearing up before lunchtime.

Connie smiles at him. ‘Thank you for helping to tidy up, Noah,’ she says and shows him the laminated badge with a thumb pointing upwards, that hangs around her neck on a nylon necklace. She has a sad face on the other side for a bad choice, too.

Before the children go to lunch, she sits them down in front of the *Rules*. Today it is the turn of *We Look After the Toys*.

‘Does anyone know why it is important to look after the toys?’ she says.

A few hands go up among the children assembled on the stripy rugs in front of her.

‘Yes, Rose?’

‘So that other children can play with them after you?’ the girl says, twirling a plait.

‘Yes, very good, Rose, well done,’ she says. ‘So, if I give you this fire engine, how will you look after it?’ She hands the girl a foot-long plastic truck all the children she has taught over the years have played with.

The girl puts it gently in her lap and opens and closes the doors of the cab with care.

Connie is smiling at her when Noah suddenly leans across and snatches the truck. 'Give me that!' he shouts, then brandishes it above his head before bringing it crashing down onto the floor. A piece of the extending ladder detaches and falls on to the rug.

There is a moment of silence as the children all stare at him, in which Connie realises that she has not made even one movement to stop him. The truck was just a few inches from Rose's head. It could easily have hit her, or anyone. She wonders if she was too slow. Is she thinking too much about other things? The dream-that-is-not-a-dream? David, and the distance?

Or is it just that a five-year-old can do anything they want, whenever they want; and that at any moment there are a thousand accidents on the verge of happening in the classroom. A thousand poked eyes, broken fingers, cut heads.

She thinks of David and his cut head. That was not an accident; that was something else.

To calm herself, she clears the truck away and tells the children a story; she is good at making up stories.

~

When Noah's child-minder arrives to collect him at the end of school, he bursts into tears and runs into the role-play area. Connie bends down to talk to him in his hiding-place under the play-sink.

'I want my daddy,' he whimpers through tears.

She'd checked at lunchtime, but no one had his father's details in the office and they'd heard nothing about him coming to collect Noah. But she hoped they were wrong.

'I'm sure your daddy will come another day,' she says. 'Perhaps he was busy at work.'

The other parents peer down at them with passing interest as they come and go, and when Noah still refuses to come out, the child-minder rings his mother and gives him the telephone.

He emerges when the call is finished, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. He lets Connie give him a hug and when she feels his heart beating against her she feels like weeping.

~

Spots of rain start to appear on the windscreen as she turns into the Kingston one-way system. She switches on the wipers and watches as they smear dirt around the glass. People think they live in a leafy spot by the river, but it is mostly concrete. The water is there, around corners, at the end of streets, but she only sees it at the weekends, from some bar or a restaurant.

She hears the loud blare of a horn. There is a van in the lane next to her and in the light from the streetlamps she can see three men, shoulder to shoulder across the front seat, with frayed T shirts and paint-flecked faces. One of them looks across at her, raises his middle finger casually and laughs. The van accelerates with a growl and is gone. She can feel a flush of anger and embarrassment make its way up her neck, as she watches the smoke from its exhaust hang in the air.

She drops her bag at the front door and hangs up her coat, then takes a few steps into the living room and switches on the table lamp. It sends dark fingers of shadow up and across the ceiling. She turns the television on and there, waiting, is a new episode of *Waking the Dead*. She feels comforted. She supposes that what people like about this sort of thing is that everyone has problems. She can forget everything when she is watching. Even what happened the other day.

She feels for the woman who has to identify her young daughter, gone for so many years. She looks like the girl's grandmother rather than her mother, but that's what it would do to you, Connie thinks. The woman breaks down in tears, but there is nothing anyone can do. She is not much older than Connie, this woman. Forty, perhaps. It finished her marriage. She has nothing left to live for.

Find out who did this, she whispers.

There is a knock at the door. She looks at her watch. Sometimes David forgets his keys. But it is still early. Not seven o'clock yet.

Another knock sounds as she approaches the door. 'Okay, okay,' she says into the gloom.

When she pulls the door open, instead of David there are two people standing in the silver splash of the street lamp. She switches on the outside light and their faces resolve into features. A man and a woman, both dressed formally, as though about to offer her religious leaflets. The woman looks about Connie's age, her blonde hair neatly pinned up. The man is middle-aged, hair flecked with grey and a bulbous nose, as though it has been made by a child out of play dough.

'Hello,' she says. 'Can I help?'

The woman takes a leather wallet out of her bag. Inside, there is a photo of her, looking less serious than she does now; next to the photo it says *Metropolitan Police*. ‘I’m Detective Constable Turner,’ she says. ‘And this is Detective Inspector Johnson.’

The man nods.

Connie forces herself to smile. She didn’t think the nurse at the hospital would make this happen, even with her concerns and her obligations and her *relevant authorities*.

The woman responds with a smile of her own. ‘Can we come in?’

She tries to convince herself that the two of them have just come to give her some advice on home security, or a neighbourhood scheme. ‘Yes, of course,’ she says, wondering if she should have asked what they wanted before letting them in. Perhaps she appears too relaxed; or perhaps not relaxed enough. She does not know. She tries to think of the crime series, what they would do. But then some of them are guilty, some of them are innocent. For a moment, she feels like telling them that she is about to start her own investigation.

She leads the pair into the living room, switching on lights as she goes, and when she gets to the living-room turns off the television. She directs them to the sofa and they sit down.

‘Can I get you some tea?’ she asks.

The question seems to make them both very happy. ‘Yes please,’ they say over each other.

It is the first time she has heard the man speak. He has a Midlands accent, rather than the woman’s flat London tone. They seem a bit like a couple, the way the man looks at the woman, although she doesn’t look at him in the same way.

She locates the teapot at the back of the cupboard. She imagines it on the kitchen table at breakfast. She is laughing at something David has just said. They are younger, dressed in clothes they no longer wear. Their lives are unclouded by difficulty.

But she cannot be sure if it is an actual morning, a real memory. They all seem to have merged into one in her mind.

As she pours the tea, her guests eye the selection of biscuits with interest. Steam funnels from their cups as they reach over.

‘We’re sorry to come unannounced like this,’ the woman says.

Connie watches her, suspecting she knows what she is about to say, but trying not to look as though she does.

‘We didn’t want to do it over the telephone; it’s better to do it in person,’ the woman continues.

Connie makes an effort to smile. ‘So, what is this about?’

‘We have concerns...’ the man says, as if he is choosing each word very carefully ‘... based on information we’ve received...’ He is holding his biscuit in the air now, suspended between the cup and his mouth. ‘...we believe you might be...’ The biscuit reaches his mouth and hovers there for a moment. ‘...the victim of physical abuse.’ The biscuit enters its destination. The man bites into it, grinding it between his teeth.

Connie tries not to look down at her wrist. She knows the mark is there, emerging from her shirt. But her guests aren’t looking in that direction. They are looking at her, with expectation on their faces.

She pulls her cuff down. She needs to say something. She should have worked out a response in advance, but she didn't expect this to happen. 'Abuse?' she repeats.

'Yes.' The woman leans forward a little. 'Your husband was treated for a head wound at the hospital.' She pauses. 'They reported an injury to you too.'

She doesn't know what to do. Should she say as little as possible? Should she ask for a solicitor? Or is it just on television they do that? She wonders if people have special solicitors for that sort of thing. She imagines ringing up the firm they used when they bought their house. *I just wondered if you could help me with a criminal investigation...*

'We're just here to help,' the woman says, leaning back again, the look of concern replaced by a fragile smile.

'It's really nothing like that,' Connie says. 'My husband tripped in the shower.' The lie comes easily. It sounds perfectly plausible.

The woman puts down her cup of tea. She looks as though she doesn't believe Connie. She looks as though she listens to people telling her stories like this all the time. She glances at the man then back at Connie. 'There... seems to be a difference of opinion about that. Your husband told the nurse he did it...' The woman removes a notebook from her handbag and looks through it for a moment. '... in the kitchen.' She looks up at Connie, in expectation.

'That's strange,' Connie says. She is beginning to feel hot and can feel her cheeks reddening.

'And you?' the woman continues. 'Are you okay?'

'Oh, yes,' Connie says, trying to force a smile, hoping she won't ask her for any more details.

The woman's eyes travel down towards Connie's wrist for a moment. 'It looks sore,' she says.

'It's fine,' Connie replies, pulling at her sleeve.

'Is *Mr* Williams going to be home soon?' the woman says. 'We'd like to speak to him too.'

'Yes, he should be back soon,' Connie says. 'He's probably gone out with his colleagues after work. For a drink.'

'Does he often go to the pub?' the woman asks.

'Yes,' Connie says. 'Well no. Just after work with his colleagues. And at the weekend. After rugby.'

She wonders about the woman's life outside work. If she is married. If her husband is at home on his own now, wondering what she is doing. Or perhaps he is in the pub as well.

The woman nods, keeping her eyes on Connie. Connie can see her piecing it all together. The stress. The late nights. The alcohol. David getting back drunk and taking it out on her. It is certainly possible. Completely credible.

She begins to feel as though she is trapped here with these people, in the armchair where she likes to read, to relax. It makes her feel breathless and she tries instead to imagine she is outside somewhere, the wind blowing in her face, air rushing into her lungs; while above her, millions of miles away, solar winds swirl, planets gently orbit. The thought calms her.

The man shifts a little in his seat, and as if in response the woman looks up at Connie again.

‘Well, if you could tell Mr Williams that we’d like to have a word with him. He can call us and we’ll come to see him. Or he can come to the station if he prefers. We’re happy to fit around his... schedule.’

She paused before that last word. As if she wanted to use a different word. Connie wonders what that word would be. *Drinking?*

They finish the rest of their tea. It feels to her as though something has been achieved. A piece of business has been concluded.

At the door they shake hands. Perhaps that is part of their training. To leave the victim with some physical reassurance. A link that will make them want to re-establish contact in the future. The woman hands Connie her card with a smile, as if she is selling something.

Connie watches them walk up the road and stop beside a dark-coloured car. As she goes back inside she hears its doors close, with a solid thump. It seems fitting for the business they are in.

David arrives home at nine o’clock as usual and when she goes to the hallway to talk to him he does not look in her direction. She can smell the alcohol as he takes off his raincoat and hangs it on the peg. Finally he does look at her. A grimace, perhaps, more than a look.

‘What?’ he says.

She was about to tell him about the police, but when she hears the tone of his voice, she is afraid to. If she tells him, it will just make things worse. She knows, of course, that he will find out in the end, but even this short period of time is something. ‘Oh, nothing,’ she says, instead. ‘Would you like some dinner?’

He shakes his head. ‘I got something on the way home. I’m going up to bed.’

It is as though he wants to be anywhere but with her. Yes, there is a plaster on his forehead, where she hit him. But this is how he treats her.

She steps towards him, sees the look on his face change into the suggestion of fear. She thinks again of her father teaching her how to change things around. She wonders if that is a little strange, now she thinks about it, that a man in carpets would know how to punch like that. Or, perhaps it is something that all men know.

The sun was still shining on the journey home, but everyone looked sad, staring out of the window next to them as though they were counting each mile.

They stopped at a service station and sat around a plastic table with egg and cress sandwiches and cans of Coke. Dad had a dark tan now and his hair seemed lighter from the sun. He had a packet of cigarettes he called holiday cigarettes. There were only a couple left now, but she didn't think it could be the same packet he'd started with. He took one out and bent his head to the side and sparked a match under the table and held it to the tip. The smoke smelled nice to her, but Mum made the face she always did, turning her head as though she wanted to get away from him but couldn't, honestly you're like a bloody teenager behind the bike sheds. Mum was still pale from being under the umbrella. She looked exactly the same as she had before the holiday, as if she'd been on a different holiday to the rest of them.

Connie looked down at the white band on her wrist where her watch had been. She'd taken it off now, and the skin was starting to bubble into little peeling patches. She was fascinated by the before and after of her skin. It was as though the two colours couldn't both belong to her. As though the person with the white skin was a different person, not her anymore.

'Cheer up you lot,' Dad said. He narrowed his eyes and released some smoke over his shoulder. It reminded Connie of what the teachers at school said to her.

The smoke drifted up and across the restaurant. Dad stubbed out his cigarette on the ashtray in the middle of the table and Mum muttered something under her breath Connie couldn't hear.

'Come on then, you miserable bunch,' he said, 'let's go home.'

DI Johnson prods the ground with his toe, through the paper shoe that he is wearing over his own. He had seen something he thought might be a bullet casing, but in fact it is just a small sawn-off section of copper pipe.

A crimson patch, which at first looked like a dark puddle, colours the towpath beside him, and the muffled sounds of footfall echo below the damp underside of the bridge as he moves back into the light. He is investigating the shooting of a young boy; in fact he is supervising the investigation but he can't help getting involved, after all these years.

The boy is still alive. He is lucky, after three rounds from a handgun were unloaded into him. At first he was in a critical condition but is now stable. He is calling him a boy, this fourteen-year-old, but really he is a man. You would look at a boy like this and instead see an adult, six-foot or so, with strong limbs and an adult expression of distaste for the world. He is a boy, but he does what men do.

Of course they all have parents these boys, these men. In the old days, when his boys were little, this thought used to comfort him. He could go home and be away from it all with his boys and their hair smelling of summer and gardens. Now that they are no longer there, the thought upsets him. The parents who come to the station

to identify, to collect. As he himself would have to do in their place. He is a witness to the end of dreams.

One of the DCs shouts over to him and holds something up that looks like a bullet casing.

He nods. 'Bag it up,' he shouts and turns once more to the ground, reconstructing, gauging, trying to picture the victim and his assailant in their dance of violence.

He remembers a young man a little older than this one, fifteen, sixteen perhaps, with a spray of acne across his nose. It was the first case he worked on with DC Turner – a missing person case. The man was sitting on the pavement, back against the wall, hands over the knife wound to his stomach, fingers crimson with blood, face pale, as though it was the middle of winter, although it was a pleasant summer's evening. DI Johnson sensed DC Turner crumple at the knees and reached out for her, pulling her to him as she slumped. The smell of her, as he pulled her close, the smoothness of her skin, her youth and promise and beauty.

After a while she was able to stand up again and gave him an embarrassed smile. He knew it wasn't a smile of love, of course it wasn't that. But it was gratitude, and with that came a certain sort of affection. She stopped going to crime scenes for a while after that, but now she is fine with it. Other things have changed since then, though. Now it is all knives and guns, even in this part of London with its big houses and expensive cars. But like everywhere else it also has its canals and bridges and dark corners.

The DC passes him the bag. Lying at the bottom is the casing, oddly inert, with a few crumbs of earth attached to it. They will send it back and forensics will match it

up. And then they will have to start the process of investigation. One more to add to the pile of cases on his desk. One more victim among the many.

~

When he gets back, there is a message saying DCI Ross wants to see him. He worries it is because the DCI knows about DC Turner, then tells himself that everything is all right. Of course it is. But even as he knocks on the DCI's door and walks into his office his legs do not seem to be working in the usual way.

'Sit down, Steve,' the DCI booms. He looks as if he is not thinking about him as he says it, but about something completely different.

'Steve, orders from above.' The DCI rolls his eyes upwards in a gesture which could either indicate those more senior to him, or his poor opinion of them. 'We're *prioritising* domestic abuse,' he says, leaning across the desk towards him.

DI Johnson hardly notices what he has said, in the relief that he has not, after all, been discovered.

'Got anything like that at the moment?' the DCI continues.

'Sir?'

'*Domestic abuse*, Steve.' The DCI is looking straight at him now, and not in a wholly friendly way.

'Oh. Yes.' DI Johnson thinks for a moment and thinks of the Williams woman.

'Yes, there's one I'm assisting DC Turner with at the moment.'

'Ah, *perfect*,' the DCI says, smiling now. 'As I say, we're *prioritising* that for the foreseeable.'

DI Johnson wonders about the foreseeable. There is not much that is foreseeable, in his experience.

‘The numbers aren’t good,’ the DCI continues. He looks through the papers on his desk, pushes a couple aside and picks up a dog-eared piece of A4 with his plump fingers. ‘Instances up sharply... significant weaknesses... *major improvements required*,’ he reads from it. He looks up at DI Johnson. ‘Do you see?’

DI Johnson nods, still thinking about the foreseeable. Then it occurs to him that it will be a chance to work more closely with DC Turner. He smiles at the DCI and nods, with what he is surprised to find is enthusiasm.

‘There’s some bloke in Hollywood, apparently. *Me Too*.’ The DCI raises his eyes to the ceiling again, then shakes his head.

Again DI Johnson does not know what he is shaking his head at. The DCI has built a career on it this inscrutability. He is all things to all people. Immune from criticism. But, DC Turner supposes, without that he would not be sitting in that chair.

~

DC Turner stands next to him looking at his computer screen. So close that he can actually feel her presence.

‘Is that the Williams report?’ she asks.

He can smell her perfume. It reminds him of the soap in the toilets of a nice hotel.

‘Yes. Thanks for sending it over. It’s a priority for us at the moment, domestic abuse. I’ll be spending a bit of time on it with you.’

She smiles, nods and his heart lurches in time with her movements.

‘Fairly straightforward I would think,’ he says looking at the report. ‘He got hold of her; tried to attack her. She grabbed something. Hit him.’

He is always surprised how he sounds: professional, keen. Inside it’s different. Inside he doesn’t care anymore.

She purses her lips. ‘Yes, you could see her arm,’ she says, making a ticking noise with her tongue. ‘Self-defence,’ she continues, looking at his screen.

If it was anyone else he’d be annoyed.

‘What did you think of her?’ she says.

‘Difficult to tell.’ He tries to picture the woman. ‘She seemed nice enough. I wonder if the husband goes to the pub every night.’

She nods. ‘Did you see what she was watching? *Waking the Dead*. Not my personal favourite.’ She laughs. That tinkling sound that seems to lighten the office, make everything bearable.

He smiles. ‘I haven’t seen it, myself.’

‘Quite literally one of the most depressing things I’ve ever watched. I could only manage one episode.’

He loves her little turns of phrase. Everyone seems to speak like this nowadays. He notices it. Little by little he is losing touch. He often hears people saying things he doesn’t understand, realises how little he knows, now. ‘Well if I had to choose, it would be *Rebus*.’

‘I don’t know that one.’

‘Scottish. Grumpy sod.’

She laughs.

‘Do you watch any of the others?’ he asks.

She thinks for a moment. When she thinks, she has a thinking expression on her face. She has a definite expression for every emotion. 'I've seen a couple of episodes of *Silent Witness*.' She pauses. The answer does not seem to satisfy her. 'Oh, *Line of Duty*.' She looks relieved.

He nods. He has not heard of either of them, does not know what his response should be. Instead he says, 'You can imagine it: the husband coming home after a few drinks and losing his temper. Work, stress. That sort of thing. '

She nods. 'I really hope nothing else happens to her,' she says. Now the expression on her face is concern.

He tries to look concerned, himself. That is the difficulty with these kinds of cases. They are always behind events. Scared young women. Often with children. Frightened little things being dragged around from one place to the next. At least there aren't any children in this case. This one is different to most of them. There is substance abuse, usually. Drugs, nowadays. In the old days it was mostly just drink.

'We'll get him in; see if he cracks under questioning,' he says.

She smiles. She knows all about his sarcasm. Been around long enough to realise it goes with the profession.

~

There is more urgency now in the shooting case – the boy deteriorated quickly and died overnight. The DCI will be going to see the mother. DI Johnson does not envy him. He has done it himself, of course. Some cry immediately; he feels it is acceptable to embrace them, although it is not in the guidelines. Some do not want to be hugged, seem to hold the police responsible for the death. Some do not cry; they just sit there,

thinking about their child, about what they could have been, what they were. The toddler, the baby. Some get up stiffly to go and make a drink. Arrive back some time later with stewed tea and tear stains.

Now there is a death it will be investigated by the specialist team. They will hand over all the evidence and let them get on with it. Interviews, CCTV, bank accounts. There are two killings every week in London. You take your life in your hands just walking out of your front door. It makes him wonder what good there is in the world.

The feelings he has for DC Turner are the best thing he has in his life. He peers over the top of his screen, looks in her direction. She is one of those people who move with purpose, who seem to have a reason for everything they do, a plan. If someone were to look at him, what would they see? Someone who has accepted his place on the downward slope; who knows it is just a handful of years and then he is finished.

This is the kind of case DC Turner will be given, soon, when she is made up to DS. For the moment it is burglaries, robberies, domestic violence. He knows she likes the woman, Mrs Williams. They are similar ages; he supposes she can imagine herself in the same situation. He will give her whatever help she needs. After what the DCI said.

She is tidying up at the end of school when she sees the Head's grey hair appear at the window of the classroom door. She looks in without smiling and jabs a finger in the direction of her office.

'Right,' she says when Connie moves inside her office. 'The boy's parents have been in touch. They aren't going to take things any further.' She looks up at Connie with an air of expectation.

'Okay,' Connie says. She does not know what exactly the Head means by *further*.

'I think we should be very grateful,' the Head says, 'or rather *you* should be very grateful.'

'Thank you,' Connie says.

'You will not be subject to an official warning this time, but it goes without saying that this must not happen again.'

Connie nods.

'You can go now.'

Connie leaves, feeling, as she always does when she leaves the Head's office, a little less substantial than before.

When she gets home, she sits down with a cup of tea and a packet of biscuits. She can easily eat half a packet of *Hobnobs* at a time. She has finished a whole packet, before.

More than ever, now, she feels she needs to understand the importance of the man in the dream-that-is-not-a-dream. She has drawn up a list of questions for her mother, revolving around the armchair itself, of course, but also any violence she might have experienced when she was a child. She feels sure that the figure is at the heart of everything that has happened to her recently. Things between her and David, things at school; perhaps even the miscarriage might have been influenced by him. She is convinced that when she works out who he is, it will help her to work everything else out.

She draws a picture of the chair first, trying to represent the pattern faithfully. But she finds it difficult to draw the shapes; when she tries to recall them exactly they shift and change in her thoughts. She has not had the dream-that-is-not-a-dream for a few days now and she needs to get the facts straight, the contents of the room exact. What she draws looks inaccurate, child-like, just blobs on a white background. She tries to draw the man's face next, but she isn't good at drawing people. She remembers that his expression was one of calm, of slight surprise. But she cannot now remember what that expression exactly looks like.

She goes to the hallway and switches on the light, looks in the mirror. She is surprised for a moment to see herself reflected back. She half-expected the man from the dream-that-is-not-a-dream to be looking out at her instead. She makes different expressions of surprise, shock, calm, but it doesn't remind her of what she saw. She

imagines for a moment what she must look like in the hallway, standing there, shifting from expression to expression.

She sees from the clock that it is half past eight. David is already upstairs in their bedroom. She was surprised when he came home early. She hoped he would come into the living-room but instead she heard him take off his coat, then his muffled footsteps on the stair-carpet and the firm closing of the bedroom door. Once she would have been pleased that he was home early, but now there is something strange about it.

The last few evenings have all been the same. When she goes up to bed he is already asleep, a look on his face of distaste, as though at something in his dreams. Perhaps her. She wonders if this is some phase of a marriage, or if it just theirs; just what happens when a wife attacks her husband with a bottle-opener and then has to live with her guilt and fear. And with a husband who has started to retreat to the bedroom, retreat from her.

They hardly exchange any words now. She wonders where it will end. Are these the early stages of a marital break-up? The end of a relationship? She does not know, does not feel she possesses the necessary information to work it out. Feels as though she is lost, with no map and no points of reference; no way of getting to where she is going. And above her, the sky is dark and unhelpful.

Mum spent the afternoon in front of the washing-machine when they got back, looking annoyed, of course you all have to use every single thing in your suitcases.

Dad was in the garden. He said he liked to relax before he went back to work. Sometimes he would be away for a few weeks, sometimes a few months. They were always difficult, the days before he left. It was as if there was a fog of sadness that

everyone had to walk around in. So the garden was the best place for him, because he and Mum would just end up shouting at each other otherwise.

Connie watched him from the kitchen window. He was kneeling on the old cushion, by a flowerbed, prodding the earth with a trowel, moving along an imaginary line making regular jabbing movements. After a few moments he stopped and looked up at her, as if he'd known she was watching all along. She didn't know how he knew that.

He got up and stumbled backwards. 'Dead leg!' he shouted in her direction, pointing at his thigh, and she smiled back at him, a smile that was so big she could actually feel it.

She knew what would happen tomorrow morning. A car would come for Dad that looked as though it had been specially made to look ordinary. More ordinary than any other car she had ever seen. No signs on it at all, no badges; a man in the driving seat with a face she couldn't see. Dad would wave goodbye to them with a smile that didn't look quite right and she would feel sad.

Mum said Connie had to go to bed early. But she couldn't sleep, and after a while crept out onto the landing. She saw Mum going into the living-room and when she shut the door, she slid down the stairs to her favourite place. She could hear music coming from the television and moved to the door hinges, breathing heavily, knowing the trouble she'd be in if she was discovered.

At first she couldn't see anything through the crack, apart from the room itself. Yellowing wallpaper, bookshelves, armchair. There was just the sound of the television and the murmur of a conversation she couldn't quite make out; then she heard her father shout something and saw him move quickly across the gap. Suddenly there was the noise of a slap, like a gunshot, an explosion, and she could hear him

marching towards the door. For a moment she felt as though she was stuck there, unable to move, but she managed to pull herself away and ran upstairs to her bedroom.

In bed she tried not to breathe, tried to understand why Dad had lost his temper like that. Things were always bad the night before, but not like this.

When Dad left the next morning there seemed to be something strange between him and her mother. And it was the same when he came back. She thought that was just grown-ups, that it would all change back to how it had been before, but things were different after that holiday. It was as though it was the end of something for them all.

She couldn't understand why Dad had done it. Why he'd spoiled everything like that.

She decides to ring her mother.

There is silence when the phone is answered. 'Mum?'

'Oh, it's you,' her mother replies. 'I thought it might be somebody *selling* something...'

They exchange conversation for a while, she arranges to go round for lunch at the weekend. Her mother seems pleased.

'By the way,' her mother says, as they are coming to the end of the call, 'how was your anniversary? You never told me about it.'

'Oh fine,' Connie says, thinking about the kitchen and the hospital and the police. It is a ridiculous description.

'Oh, I *am* pleased,' her mother replies, with that emphasis. The way people do.

She thinks of her mother sitting in the chair in the hallway next to the telephone, not suspecting for a minute that Connie is someone who could attack her husband, *on their anniversary*.

She is glad that she will soon be getting a chance to interview her mother, to try to understand what has been happening. To make everything better.

There are no spaces near her mother's house, so she parks a little way up the street instead. It has become very popular, this set of small terraced roads on the edge of the Downs. People have moved in and converted attics, opened up basements, flattened front gardens into parking spaces; but her old house is still the same: a red-brick Victorian terrace with three bedrooms upstairs, a kitchen extension downstairs, and the fenced garden with the shed and the cherry-tree at the end. When her mother finally leaves, the new owners will no doubt pull down the rotting shed and dig up the tree, replace them with paving, a trampoline.

Connie is greeted with a kiss by her mother, pale and slight; as always a strangely insubstantial figure compared to the one she remembers from her childhood. She ushers her through into the kitchen, where the table is already laid.

Connie looks out at the lawn and for a moment sees her father kneeling by the flower-bed, gripping a trowel in his hand. He pushes up off his knees with a smile and a stagger.

But of course he is not there, now or ever.

She watches her mother. Her skin is still smooth, but has recently started to concertina a little around her mouth. She always feels a little scared when she is here. Scared that she is going to do something her mother doesn't approve of, scared her

mother is going to become angry, tell her off, slap her. It is ridiculous of course. She is a thirty-three year-old adult woman, with her own life, her own problems. Her mother is not going to slap her, now, but still, that is how she feels.

As she watches her, she tries to understand her, to imagine what she is thinking, how *she* feels. And when she was younger, when she was Connie's age, what she thought and felt then.

'Coffee?' her mother asks, interrupting her thoughts, and when Connie nods, she reaches up to the cupboard where the mugs are kept, have always been kept. Connie doesn't drink instant anymore, apart from when she comes to see her mother. With a lot of milk it tastes comforting, like a memory.

'So,' her mother says, sitting opposite her at the kitchen table and smiling. 'Tell me more about your anniversary.'

It is a reasonable question, of course, but Connie can't help making a face, remembering the evening, thinking of what happened.

'Or would you prefer to talk about something else?' her mother says, the wrinkles around her mouth concertinaing. 'How's work?'

Connie knows her mother expects her to answer these questions positively, enthusiastically, but then of course she thinks Connie has an easy life: a nice job with long holidays, a husband who is good company. The same things everybody else assumes.

Connie sighs, 'Sorry, Mum. I'm just tired. It's been a long week.'

When her mother goes upstairs to the bathroom Connie wanders in the direction of the living-room. She surveys the door frame near the hinges, remembers her position on

the outside, looking in. It has been repainted since then. Now it is a yellowy-white. Perhaps the same colour as their walls. *Pointing*. She remembers white gloss.

Inside, she is struck, as always, by the modest dimensions of the room. The place where she spent so much of her life is very different in her memory. Bigger, certainly, but also with an importance beyond its size. Because of what happened there, once. Now, there is a new sofa with a floral pattern, a small desk placed against a wall. Really it is just a room for piling utility bills. It makes her feel as though part of her has been lost, somehow, and that makes her think about her own baby. But she does not want to think about it.

‘I’m in here, Mum,’ she says, when her mother comes back down.

Her mother looks surprised to see her standing there in the middle of the room, but the expression quickly passes. She smiles, and together they both walk back along the dim hallway to the kitchen. Connie notices a red light on the front of the cooker, whirring coming from the oven.

As she sits at the kitchen table waiting for the lunch to cook, she reminds herself why she is here. The questions that she needs to ask her mother. In a way that is probably what everyone wants when they go home, she thinks. Answers to what happened when they were children, things they found difficult to understand then; things they cannot understand, even now. But her investigation is more particular, there are things that other people would not understand, and the answers are more important.

When her mother has taken their empty plates to the sink, Connie pushes her chair away from the table and reaches for her handbag.

‘Mum,’ she says, ‘there are a few questions I want to ask you.’

Her mother turns to her, looking surprised, but nods, cautiously. ‘Yes, of course.’

She takes her notebook from her handbag and turns to her drawings. The shapes she has sketched. ‘I had a dream. Well, not really a dream, but...’

Her mother is looking at her with concern on her face now. The sort of look Connie imagines she might give her if she had just told she had lost her job.

‘Anyway, there was an armchair,’ she says ‘with a strange pattern on it. Like this. Do you recognise it at all?’

Her mother turns down the corners of her mouth and shakes her head. ‘No, I don’t think...’ She looks up at Connie as if she is a small child she is indulging.

‘So, you’ve never owned a chair like that?’

Her mother looks at the notebook again and then shakes her head. ‘No, Connie. Why do you think this is important, exactly?’

‘As I say, I had this dream, at least at the time it seemed like a dream, only I was awake at the time. A man, with a wound of some kind.’

‘Oh dear,’ her mother says.

‘There was blood.’

‘That sounds frightening.’ The concern is something more now.

Connie nods, but *frightening* is not the right word. To someone else she can see how it might sound, however.

‘When I was young, did I witness anything strange that you can remember?’ she says. ‘Anything violent?’

‘I don’t think so,’ her mother says. ‘I can’t remember anything like that.’

It occurs to Connie that interviewing is not as easy as it seems on television. On television the questions are really just the preparation for the answers. But in reality

her questions do not appear exact enough; it is difficult to convey her own feelings about the events in question.

Already her mother is looking around the kitchen. 'Is that everything?' she says.

It reminds Connie of how the Head talks to her, impatient; eager to move on to something more interesting.

'Yes, yes it is...' Connie begins, '...but if you remember anything, later...'

'There is one thing,' her mother says, leaning forward slightly. 'After your father left, you used to have bad dreams. You said there was a scary man in them. I thought it must be related to... all that. To *him*.'

'Thank you,' Connie says, writing in her notebook. 'That is very interesting.'

She cannot remember those dreams. She finds it difficult even to remember the dream-that-is-not-a-dream, now. But this is a useful lead, an interesting development. It seems a likely explanation, but of course she cannot make any assumptions until she has interviewed all the relevant witnesses, gathered all the evidence.

On her way home she drives past the local barracks. Over lunch her mother told her that it has been closed down and is going to be redeveloped into a housing estate. At the time she thought it odd that her mother brought it up. She still does not know why she mentioned it.

She pulls over by the side of the road. The buildings are deserted now, a group of rotting prefabs behind unravelling fences and barbed wire, almost obscured by the encroaching trees and bushes. Grass is sprouting from the base of the walls. A door is hanging by one hinge.

As she tries to imagine the new housing estate that will soon be here, she suddenly has the feeling that there is something of her father in these derelict buildings.

~

She hears the front door open and shut, then David appears in the living-room. She watches him as he walks over to the bookshelf and stands in front of it, searching for something.

‘Hello,’ she says.

‘Hello,’ he replies, without turning around.

‘Aren’t you speaking to me?’ she says.

He turns around and his jaw lowers slightly, the way she recognises from when they argue.

‘What is there to say?’

He appears calm, but she can see the specks of saliva as he speaks and there is an intensity about him that she finds frightening. She has thought many times since their anniversary how strange it is that she is the one who is frightened, yet he is the one with the injury.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. As soon as she has said it she senses the emptiness in the words.

‘*I’m sorry?*’ David says again. ‘You can’t just keep saying that and hoping everything will be all right.’ He is more animated now, as if telling off a child. ‘What do you expect me to do?’

David the interrogator.

‘David, I’m afraid. About what’s going to happen to us.’

‘So, it’s *you* who’s afraid, but I’m the one with this,’ he says, pointing at his head.

Yes, she wants to tell him, *that’s exactly what I’ve been thinking!* It reminds her of how things used to be between them for a moment, but then she sees the scar, no longer covered by a plaster; a fresh pink, with ghostly commas on either side where the stitches were. She tries to remind herself that one day she will no longer notice it, but she knows that until then it will be the first thing she sees when she looks at him.

She shrugs. There is nothing more she can say.

He shakes his head. ‘You do know what you did, don’t you?’

‘I said I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘Can’t we... move on?’

He makes a noise like the hiss of a lorry’s brakes.

‘I was upset, that night. We were meant to be going out. It was our anniversary.’

‘I had to stay at *work*.’

‘Did you?’

‘What’s that meant to mean?’

She thinks of him always looking at his phone. Tries to imagine the people on the other end of his messages, emails. Tries not to think that one of them is a woman, taller than her, with shiny dark hair and a knowing smile. One of the women in his office, perhaps, or someone he has met in the pub after work.

‘I don’t know.’

‘I work. I go to the pub sometimes. So what? You can’t just do what you did every time you’re upset.’

She nods. ‘I know. But if it was you, I’d forgive you.’

‘But I wouldn’t do it in the first place.’

‘Why not? Can you really say you would never do anything like that?’ she says.

He stares at her, looking bewildered. ‘Yes.’

‘How do you know?’

‘*Because that’s not what men do.*’ He is bellowing at her now, his face red, the sinews on his neck straining.

She knows he thinks she should feel happy about what he has said, impressed; but in fact she has to resist the sudden temptation to laugh out loud at this piece of gallantry, this code of chivalry, perhaps gleaned from children’s books, or wartime films or God-knows-where. Perhaps other people would be flattered by it. Instead she feels a faint sense of revulsion. It happens sometimes. Mostly she loves him, but there are times when she feels this same, slight, sense of disgust. At the shape of his feet, the strange banana of a little toe he has, at the way he swipes his gaze across her without even seeing her. At his pint-holding in the pub; his easy way with people he doesn’t even know.

But it wasn’t disgust, that time on their anniversary when she attacked him; that was anger. What does it take to go from one state to the other, she wonders. What would it take for it to happen again? She wonders this, while caught in his gaze, as if awaiting a response. Her lack of response, she now realises, angers him as much as his lack of response does her.

She shrugs slightly, in spite of herself, although she is aware that this is not an answer. But then, did he ask a question?

He appears to groan, although she cannot absolutely be sure the noise is coming from him, since there is no movement in his lips. She thinks of all the arguments. So many of them. Money; dishwasher-loading; three way arguments with the satnav; the

never-ending new carpet argument. And of course the arguments about sex. One of them doesn't want to. Most often her, in the past. But now him.

The whole fabric of their relationship seems to be one of dispute. It is her fault, she often feels; feels now. She is on the edge of it with everybody. Either holding herself back from it, or falling headlong into it.

She slipped through the door under the stairs to the basement, switched on the bare bulb and made her way down the wooden staircase. She could smell the damp as she passed the old coal-store at the bottom. It wasn't a nasty smell; she quite liked it, in the same way that she quite liked the smell at the garage when they were getting petrol, although she knew it wasn't something you were meant to like.

She pushed between a pile of old suitcases and a wardrobe with a cracked mirror, heading for the window that was always open a little to let out the damp. When the anger came she couldn't help it. When the anger came she wanted to push everything away and go where no one could find her.

When Dad had come home all she had wanted him to do was to lift her up and hug her like he used to do, but instead he and Mum went into the kitchen and soon the shouting started, you come back and you expect everything to be the same as usual, well I'm sorry, it isn't. It was always like that when he came home now. She hated him and she hated Mum and her only friend was Marcus.

She squeezed out of the window that only she was small enough to fit through and made her way to the main road. The lights were bright and there was a constant throb of cars and buses. She was used to going there with Mum in the daytime, but at night, on her own, it was different.

Some men came out of the pub shouting. It was where Dad sometimes went to buy cigarettes in the evening. She had been in there with him once. He had sat her on a stool and bought her a lemonade and she had felt really grown up.

She was beginning to feel more scared than angry now. She wondered when they would notice she was gone. When Dad stopped arguing with Mum he would probably go to her room and find she wasn't there. Then he would ask Marcus if he knew where she was and he would shrug and they would search the house together, but they wouldn't be able to find her. They might think she was hiding in the airing-cupboard, right at the back, behind the water cylinder and the clothes drying on hangers. She sometimes hid there when they were playing hide-and-seek. But of course she wouldn't be there. Marcus might tell them she sometimes went to the shed, with its smelly cans and rotting wood. She knew he went there, to try to smoke cigarettes. He might tell them about the shed. But of course she wouldn't be there either.

She didn't want them to call the Police. She was starting to think she would rather be at home now, putting on her pyjamas, sitting on her bed with her soft toys all around her.

Just as she was beginning to feel she might burst into tears, a car horn sounded behind her, and she turned around and saw the shape of the Volvo, lights flashing as it approached. It slowed down and stopped next to her, then the window lowered with a squeak and her father's head appeared.

'Off somewhere?' he asked with a grin.

'I've run away,' she said, with all the anger she had left.

'Ah. Well how about coming back and having a bit of dinner before you go?'

'I don't want to.'

He looked at her for a moment. 'We'd miss you if you went.'

'No you wouldn't.'

'Yes we would. Come on, Connie.'

She made a face, all sort of scrunched up. 'Well...' She looked at Dad's face, smiling at her, while all around her were people she didn't know. She looked down at the pavement and pushed her toe into one of the cracks. 'Okay then.'

Dad smiled and she went round to the other side of the car, pulled the heavy door open and got in. The seat squeaked as she shuffled across it. Black leather, scuffed and smelling of cigarettes and polish.

'I'm glad I found you,' Dad said, still smiling.

Then the anger was no longer there, and she knew it was time to go home. She didn't know where it had gone, just as she didn't know where it had come from earlier. It just seemed to appear and disappear, without any help from her.

DI Johnson stands by his desk waiting for silence. People continue to talk to colleagues, take calls on phones. There is seldom silence in this office.

‘The boy in the shooting has died...’ he begins.

No one appears to acknowledge this fact. It is not lack of respect, he knows that. They are just busy. But. A fourteen year-old boy has died. He thinks about the parents. All those years. He feels as though there should be a minute’s silence or something; has to catch his breath. Not like him at all.

‘We’ll be handing over to the Major Investigation Team, now. Pete, John, please organise handover.’

Pete looks up and nods, then looks away again; the first recognition DI Johnson has received that he is standing there in front of them speaking to them. It is a tradition, the morning meeting, meant to bring them together but ignored, mostly. But DCI Ross wants it to continue. He is keen on *tradition*.

‘DS Smith and DS Roberts will continue with the aggravated assault case.’ He thinks of the photographs of the woman’s bloody body again. For a moment he feels as though he is going to be sick. He pauses until he is sure he is not going to vomit, there, on the smooth floor beneath him, with the unconvincingly floral smell of cleaning fluid to it.

DC Turner watches him with a smile on her face. In fact it actually has the appearance of a sneer, but he hopes it is just the effort of keeping the smile on her face. She alone watches him. He has to try hard not to address his comments to her, but to look around the room.

‘DC Turner will continue with the Williams abuse case. I will be assisting, as well as liaising with DCI Ross on other active investigations.’

Sometimes DCI Ross comes out of his office and watches for a few minutes, then leaves with a look of disgust on his face. Perhaps at DI Johnson’s lack of authority. Or perhaps at the lack of respect he is given. They both come to the same thing, really.

‘Thank you everyone. Be careful out there.’

It is a joke. He doesn’t know if anyone realises it is a joke. Has ever realised. Most of them are not as old as him.

No one looks up.

He sits down in his chair. DC Turner has turned away now. He gazes at the back of her head, then suddenly sees himself as she must see him: an old man, slipping gradually down the downslope.

~

It turns out that the DCI is too busy to go and see the boy’s mother, so DI Johnson will have to do it. He has become used to it, over the years, doing the DCI’s work. He never knows if the excuses are real, but of course he has his suspicions. Breakfast meeting? *Hangover*. Business trip? *Job interview*.

The flat is in a guileless red-brick block of indeterminate age that he has not visited before. It is always a surprise to find himself somewhere new in the area, after so long. When he knocks on the door it takes a while for the woman to arrive. It is already a hint of grief, weariness. She knows about her son. It is not a visit to inform, thank God, but merely to offer sympathy, perhaps try to glean some information, depending on what he finds.

The woman answers the door eventually, accompanied by the wholesome smell of cooking. She looks at him blankly, grief around her eyes. She is a black woman of about forty, dressed in grey trousers and jacket. Lipstick a shade darker than her skin, hair straightened into a short bob. She looks at him with a trace of suspicion, as he finds many black people of her age do. He understands why, of course. He introduces himself and she invites him in.

He is shown into the living-room and sits in the armchair indicated to him. He accepts the offer of tea. While she is gone, he looks around the room. He has a great interest in people's houses. What they tell you about them. She is British, this woman, but there is evidence of the Caribbean in the flat. Pictures on the wall, mementoes that look as though they have been collected on holiday. Shells, pebbles, small ornaments made of natural materials. There are several pictures of the deceased boy. One in school uniform, in which he is smiling. A later one in sportswear, in which he is only half-smiling. Older, wiser. It is sad, seeing these pictures, of course, but he knows they must be a comfort to his mother. She only has one child. *Had*. She is no longer with the boy's father. He tries to imagine the grief. He always tries to imagine it. But he cannot imagine it, of course.

He sips tea from a china cup, balancing the saucer on his knee. The woman's eyes are narrowed to nothing by the crying. She is only not crying now out of pride; a

feeling that she will not be beaten by this, that her deceased son deserves some decorum. He does not know this of course; he just suspects it, after many years of observation.

The woman remains quietly sitting on a chair, watching him as he talks to her about grief. It is ridiculous, of course. He is experienced in these situations, understands something of them. But it is *her* grief.

He hopes she will be able to talk to someone else about it. About how proud she was of her son. About how much she loved him. He feels tears coming to his own eyes as he thinks these thoughts, his mouth continuing to move automatically. It is not like him to be so moved by one of these visits. But now he finds he has to stop, as the woman continues to watch him; he finds a handkerchief in his jacket pocket and blows his nose. He feels as though he wants to cry for this woman, for her son; to grieve for them on their behalf. It is too much, all this, really too much. This disregard for life.

The visit is at an end, now. He knows it is time to leave. Time to let the woman circulate noiselessly around her small flat, examining the pictures of her son; go to his room and pass her hands over his belongings, open his wardrobe door and take his clothes between her fingers.

At the doorstep, he takes her hand in his and utters some final condolences, and she suddenly fixes him with her narrow eyes.

‘Find out who did this,’ she says.

~

DI Johnson prods his baked potato with his fork. It is topped by a mound of baked beans and grated cheese – the woman behind the counter always piles it on, thinking she’s doing him a favour, when really he’s having a baked potato to try to lose weight, or more accurately, to stop putting on any more weight. Beside the potato there is a small heap of wilted green leaves. A ‘garnish’, they call it. He can remember when it was all fried food, when the idea was just to fill your stomach.

He sees DC Turner come into the canteen, look around. He always hopes she is searching for him, feels a burning in his chest when she waves at a friend, sits down with them, smiling. But today she does look in his direction. He pretends he has just seen her, smiles, nods in greeting.

She smiles back, not the sort of smile she gives her friends, but friendly, all the same. ‘Okay if I sit here?’ she asks, putting her tray down in the empty space opposite him.

He nods, feeling like one of the popular boys in school. A waft of her perfume reaches him among the smells of lunch and he feels the familiar cartwheel of excitement.

Even the things on her tray look more attractive because they are hers, because she has put them there with her delicate fingers. A salad – he can’t bring himself to have salads, although he knows he should – a small carton of milk. An apple, which rolls around in a bowl for a moment, before coming to a stop.

It is ridiculous, all this, he knows. She does not feel the same about him, there will never be anything between them; but the feeling he has is almost enough, the feeling he has reminds him of what it is to be young.

‘So,’ she says, smiling, ‘how was your morning?’

It is a banal question, but coming from her lips seems to be something more than that.

‘Oh, you know...’ he says, toying with his garnish. He often feels like this, doesn’t really know what to say to her, feels like he did in a playground long ago, sitting on the swings next to Mary Parker, not able to tell her what he really wanted to.

‘I’ve been thinking...’ she says.

He is caught between the playground and the present for a moment, and thinks she is going to say something about the two of them. About what she feels towards him.

‘...about Mrs Williams?’ she says instead.

She has a habit of raising the tone of her voice at the end of a sentence. He notices people doing it nowadays. His boys both do it.

He thinks for a moment and remembers. ‘Oh, yes, the domestic abuse case.’ He has not been thinking about it, distracted by the shooting.

She nods. ‘I was wondering if you could take a look at it. She seemed... vulnerable.’

He nods. ‘It’s been a few days now, hasn’t it,’ he says churning the insides of his potato with his fork. She is probably right; the woman probably is vulnerable. But everyone is vulnerable nowadays: women; children; people with special needs; the poor; the sick; foreigners. They have presentations about it. *Vulnerable groups*. In his experience these cases usually play themselves out. There is little they can do until something more serious happens. That is the nature of these things. Until there is evidence of something actually happening, they can’t get involved. That is why the criminals always have the upper hand.

But of course there is DCI’s *foreseeable*.

‘See if we’ve got a telephone number for the husband; call him, tell him we’re happy to go and see him at work. That usually does it.’

She nods again, looks pleased. ‘Thank you, sir.’

If it was anyone else he would smile, tell them to call him Steve; but with her he cannot do that. With her he has to remain at a distance, avoid any suspicion. He cannot afford to let his guard down for a moment.

But then, seeing her smiling at him across the table, his mind wanders; he contemplates something more. After all, the DCI suggested it himself.

‘I’m a bit busy at the moment,’ he finds himself saying. ‘But if you’d like to talk about it; perhaps after work one day?’

He cannot believe he has just said it. Let his guard down. It goes against all his instincts.

But to his relief, she just smiles at him, gratefully.

‘Thanks, that would be great,’ she says.

She and Nicki are having cocktails – cocktails with fruit and *umbrellas* – at a bar near Nicki’s office in Victoria. Nicki is an architect and wears those heavy, angular glasses you see creative types in on television. She watches Connie, her blue eyes framed by the dark rims. Connie wonders, her mind idling after a day at school, why Nicki wears the glasses during the week, but not at weekends. Is it something to do with *vanity*?

It is a time of the week she usually enjoys, looks forward to. But today the occasion has an emptiness to it; it feels to her a little like the prelude to something else. So it is not a surprise, really, when Nicki leans forward and says, abruptly. ‘Is David okay?’

Connie tries not to allow her face to collapse as she feels it must be in the process of doing. ‘Yes, yes,’ she says, ‘I think so. Why do you ask?’

‘Well,’ Nicki says, conspiratorially, ‘Sam says he’s stopped playing rugby. It seems so unlike him. Has he got an injury, or...?’

The *or* is her, Connie realises. She knew, of course, that David hadn’t played rugby over the past couple of weeks, going, instead, on unspecified errands in central London; but she did not know it was part of a plan. That he had planned to stop playing rugby. But Nicki knows. She imagines her talking to David about it, about other things. *Nicki and David*. Her hand reaching for his knee in sympathy. Her lips

nearing his. She has to make an effort not to shake her head in an effort to dismiss the image.

As far as she was aware David had stopped playing rugby because he had other things to do instead. She was pleased by the lack of extra washing. All those big shirts and tops and towels that take over the washing for a day at the weekend. All the things he leaves in a pile by the machine, because she has told him she would rather he does that than put them in the laundry basket with the rest of the things she is also responsible for. Now she realises it was not that. And she feels embarrassed, because he has not told her. She knows less about it than his friend's wife does. She feels angry, too, that David has put her in this position; but of course what right does she have to be angry now, or ever, after what she did to him.

She realises that Nicki is waiting for an answer. 'He's had some things to... do... I think,' she says and takes a sip of her cocktail. The ice has melted now and it tastes like cocktail-flavoured water.

Thinking of the washing makes her think about their roles at home. She and David have argued about it (of course). She does the washing and the cooking, he does the dish-washer and the driving. But, still, it feels wrong to her that she has to do the washing. It is as if he has picked the jobs he wants to do and left her with the ones he doesn't want.

Nicki looks at her as though she can see the argument she is having inside her head. 'He's been meeting up with Sam instead,' she says. 'I thought you knew.'

She feels herself blush now. She is sure Nicki must be able to see. She feels as though she has been caught out in a lie, although she has just been caught out in a lack of knowledge. However it is one layer upon several others, which, if stripped away, would in the end reveal what she did on the night of their anniversary.

‘Sam says he doesn’t seem himself,’ Nicki continues. ‘He thought it must be because of an injury. The frustration of, you know, not being able to play. But David wouldn’t say...’ She tails off, as if realising only now that she is in difficult territory.

Connie thinks she can see *her* blushing now. At least David hasn’t said anything, true to his code of chivalry.

Some terrible tinny dance track has started. It has reached that designated moment in the evening when the staff turn up the music in an attempt to encourage a sort of drinking mania, which is usually their cue to leave. Her attention is drawn to a group of young women who are whooping just a bit too loudly, wearing just a bit too little. She looks at the makeup, the shoes and she feels a little disgusted by them, by the knowledge that the girls she teaches at school will turn, inevitably, into women like these, existing in a world of glossy magazines and vlogging and *The X-Factor*. It makes her think about the parents. Do you they realise? Do they care?

It makes her think about her baby, too. And when she closes her eyes she can feel the alcohol and she can feel the pain, but she does not want to think about it.

There had been no arguments for a while, no shouting. There hadn’t been any shouting for ages.

She could hear the rain spilling off the corner of the roof where the gutter had come away, and spattering on the top of the water butt. She knew it would be time to get up soon. The heating had already come on, with the usual creaking and groaning; a reassuring sound, reliable, constant.

Her nose felt cold in the morning chill and she was enjoying the last moments of warmth in her bed when she heard the front door slam. She jumped out of bed, ran to the window and pulled the curtains apart. Dad was striding down the path, a bag on

his shoulder. She could see the top of his head, his dark hair thinning at the crown. He seemed strangely close to her, although her bedroom was on the first floor. She felt as though she could open the window and reach out and touch him. But now he was at the gate. He looked one way along the street then went the other, pulling his jacket around his neck, not looking up at her. She wanted him to look up at her, but she couldn't shout, couldn't seem to do anything except stay there by the window, the pane cold and wet against the tip of her nose.

Downstairs, Mum was sitting at the kitchen table in her flowery nightdress with the thin straps. The breakfast table was set with bowls, plates, packets of cereal, just like always. But nothing else was normal. Mum wasn't wearing a dressing-gown, that was one thing. It seemed strange that on a cold morning like this that was all she was wearing. She looked small and thin, like a girl; pale and confused.

Marcus arrived in the kitchen a few seconds after Connie, and she could tell he didn't know what was happening either. Then Mum started to cry, holding onto the table as if she was afraid someone was going to try to take it away from her. She told them that Dad had left and wasn't coming back, but that he still loved them. She seemed to accept that he'd gone, as if it was something that couldn't be changed. Connie wondered why she hadn't tried harder to make him stay. She should have tried. It was better to have a dad, even if he was always away. There was a girl at school whose dad had gone; she was different to the others, always a little sad.

She still remembered what he had done, that night. Things seemed to have got better, over time, but that must have been why he'd gone. It hadn't been the same since that happened.

Grown-ups were supposed to solve problems, make everything better.

Sometimes she felt as though she was the one who had to make things better. That her mum and dad relied on her for all that stuff. She envied her friends their parents.

Mums who didn't always look as though they were about to cry, dads who made jokes all the time. Even a dad who didn't do that was better than no dad at all.

She sits the children down on the rugs before lunch as usual. She discovered earlier that one of the cleaners has rescued *We Walk Inside* from down the back of the set of drawers and she is going to talk about it today for the first time in a while. To be able to do this gives her something of a thrill, which she is aware is slightly ridiculous.

‘So,’ she says, ‘can anyone tell me *why* we walk inside?’

George puts his hand up immediately. ‘Yes, George?’

‘So that we don’t fall over.’

‘Yes that’s right, George, she says ‘and what else?’

Polly puts her hand up. ‘So that we don’t push anyone else over.’

‘Yes, well done Polly,’ Connie says. ‘Aren’t you all clever. That is exactly why we don’t run inside.’

She looks around the group of children, twenty-five of them today due to absence and illness. They nod, gravely, then look at her expectantly. Even Noah. As time elapses, they begin to look around, cough; Noah fiddles absent-mindedly with his shorts. But nothing else happens. She realises that she is always on edge, always waiting for something, expecting some accident that she will have to deal with, that she will have to tell the Head about. But now, today, they all sit there in front of her

happily. And she is filled with love for them. Love and gratitude. And, at the same time, love for her own child.

When the children have gone to lunch she crosses the classroom and stands by the door to the playground. She watches as a collection of sweet-wrappers and crisp packets eddies in a corner, then spirals into the air and chitters across the tarmac and out over the gate.

They said there was no longer a baby. Instead there was an infection. And so she had to lie there while men in blue, masks pulled over their noses as though she had some disease, put a tube inside her.

There was a pain and then it was done. There was no longer a baby.

She realises that she is nearly ready, now, to think about it.

~

When she considers it, the interview with her mother was not a great success. Just one small piece of information, one tiny lead. But what else could she have done without threats, without consequences, without intimidation? Without sitting in an interview room, reading her rights to her?

She has assembled everything carefully on the kitchen table. The questions she asked her mother, the pictures she drew of the armchair (like some sort of inanimate photofit); her mother's answers and her own notes.

Her mother's suggestion of the dream is plausible. However, she cannot remember having the dream when she was young. Perhaps her mother made a mistake; or perhaps she made it up just to make Connie feel better. But she is not discounting it.

She is not discounting anything. She is keeping all her avenues of investigation open, at this stage.

She will ask her brother, he will know. They spent all that time together when they were children, after all. More than they did with their mother. When they were young their orbits coincided, collided. Their mother's orbit was wider and did not seem to contain either of them very often. Connie supposes she was concerned with weightier matters, things with more *gravity*.

Anyway.

She has spent a lot of time trying to understand the feeling she had, sitting in her car by the barracks near their house. The strange sensation that those old buildings had some connection to her father. The man who was something to do with carpets. Who was often away in Belfast. Who taught her how to punch.

And then she realises. The reason they lived where they did; the reason he was always in Northern Ireland; the reason he knew how to punch. She does not know why she was not told; he was in the intelligence services. She wonders if her brother knew, then, or her mother, even.

She is very pleased with this realisation. It is a breakthrough in her investigation. Something she will be able to talk to her brother about. She is looking forward to what else may come to light when she interviews him.

~

She sees the pub when she comes out of Tuffnell Park station, a trace of the Tube still in the back of her throat. She has arranged to meet Marcus on a Saturday morning

since David is no longer available at the weekends, preferring instead to spend them with Sam, doing whatever they do (which is probably just drinking).

She sits down opposite Marcus, with a cup of coffee. He has recently grown a short beard and it gives him a sort of spikiness, which separates him from the boy he was. He runs his own website design business and doesn't have to shave or wear a suit like David; David, who often seems to be distracted, who often seems to be considering other things, things he tells her are connected to his work but about which she has no knowledge.

They chat for a while. Kate, Marcus's wife, has recently gone back to work; his business is going well; their daughter is about to start pre-school.

'Marcus, I hope you don't mind,' Connie says, after a while, 'there are some questions I'd like to ask you.'

He looks at her in surprise. 'Questions?'

'Yes. I had this dream...'

Marcus watches her, taking a sip from his cup.

'...there was a man with some kind of injury in it. Mum thinks it's from a dream I had when I was young.'

A frown passes across Marcus's face.

'Do you remember me having any dreams like that?'

He appears to think for a moment, then shakes his head.

'It felt as though it was important in some way.'

'I see,' he says. 'Well, I don't remember you talking about any dreams like that.'

'Okay. Was there any violence you can remember, in our childhood?' she says.

'Television? Films? Something we watched?'

‘Not that I can remember...’ he says, after a pause.

‘There’s something else...’ she says. ‘I think Dad might have been in the army. Intelligence, or something like that.’

Marcus looks at her for a moment then bursts out laughing. ‘I’m sorry, Connie,’ he says, when he sees that she is not laughing. ‘I’m pretty sure he sold carpets.’ Then he scratches his head. ‘Why do you think that?’

Because he was always away in Belfast. Because of where we lived. Mum mentioned the barracks near us the other day; do you know why she would do that?’

He shakes his head.

‘No, I don’t either. I went there and that’s when I realised.’

‘To be honest with you, Connie, this all sounds a bit strange,’ Marcus says.

‘I think something happened to him, Marcus,’ she says. ‘I think it’s him in the dream.’

‘Well,’ Marcus says, ‘you can always ask him.’

~

That evening, David makes a grand entrance. He only comes into the living-room now when he has some interrogation or reprimand for her. He and the light burst into the room together and for a moment are one, before separating into two different entities. *Tadaa!* she almost expects him to say.

‘I can’t handle all this,’ he says, instead.

She looks at him for a few moments. ‘Why wouldn’t you talk to me about the baby?’ she finds herself saying.

‘What?’ he replies.

‘Yes, I’m sorry about what I did on our anniversary and everything. But there was a baby. And it died.’ She feels a tremendous happiness as she says the words. Happiness at having said the words, of course, not because of what happened. That, she knows she will never forget.

‘I...’ he begins. After his grand entrance he now looks as if he is trying to reverse out of the room. It looks like the most uncomfortable situation he could ever imagine himself being in.

‘Our *baby*, David. It died. Why wouldn’t you talk to me about it?’ She realises she has just re-arranged the same words into a different order, but feels that he needs some help, some time, to understand what she is saying.

‘I didn’t want to keep... raking it over,’ he says.

‘*Raking it over?*’ she says. ‘Is that what you call talking about our baby? Our baby, who died?’ She feels better than she has for a long time as she says these words, forbidden for so long. *Raking it over*. It would make her laugh, were it not for the situation.

She gets up out of her chair and sees David take a half step back. His features seem to be collapsing in on one another. His nose and his eyes and mouth all seem to have gathered in the centre of his face, and there is a low sound coming from him, which, it takes a while for her to realise, is him crying.

She steps forward and he looks as if he is going to run away; but when she puts her arms out he responds and they hug.

After some time they part. She does not know what to think about what has just happened. Standing there, looking at David, it doesn’t really seem like the start of anything. In fact it seems more like the end.

He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand, as if embarrassed about being caught in this state. 'I can't be here anymore,' he says.

Now it is her turn to cry. Just when she has been able to talk about her sadness, to finally tell him how she feels, he is leaving her. It is as though they have been playing a game of cruelty, which he has just won.

I'll be at Sam and Nicki's,' he adds, as she sobs into a handkerchief, and he turns and leaves the room, appearing to suck the light out with him as he pulls the door to.

She hears the thump of his feet on the stairs and noises from their bedroom, then she pushes the door open and steps into the light.

David appears at the top of the staircase with a bag and thumps his way down, pushing past her.

'Please,' she says, on his way to the door.

He shakes his head.

'No,' she says, 'I'm not letting this happen. You're not leaving.'

He looks at her and reaches for the latch, but she gets to the door and he stops and his jaw slackens.

'Get out of the way,' he says.

'No, why should you be the one to leave? What about me?'

'What about you?'

'Yes, what about me?'

He just looks at her, and she moves towards him and slaps him in the face. When he doesn't move she does it again.

She can see the red marks on his cheek, in the shape of her fingers. Her fingers, that will still be there, on his face, even when he has gone.

‘Have you finished?’ he says.

She nods, sobbing.

‘Okay then.’

He turns the latch, his bag scrapes against the wall, cold air funnels in from the street, the door clicks shut, and he is gone.

She stands in the stillness of the hallway, feeling his absence, listening, she doesn’t know for what. After a while she hears a buzzing noise and traces it to one of the coloured panes in the door. A spider’s-web stretches from one side to the other. Inside, a fly bounces frenetically, a spider moving astride it in a horrible sort of embrace. Then the spider is still and the movement and the buzzing stop, the scene captured in the bottle-green glare of the pane.

She returns to the living-room, trying to remain calm but worried she is going to lose her mind with all the sadness. She tries to imagine that she is far away from all this but instead she still is crying and finds it impossible to imagine an end to the crying; a time when she will no longer be crying.

Among the tears she hears the muffled *pop* of a firework and realises what day it is.

‘Connie smells. That’s why her dad left.’

For a moment she wasn’t sure what was happening. She couldn’t tell whether she had overheard something she wasn’t intended to, or whether she was meant to hear it. Then she felt the anger. She had told Beth about her father when they were friends. And now she was using it against her.

‘What did you say?’ she asked. She still couldn’t understand why she had said it, but she did know that some girls would pick on anything to use against each other.

Beth turned around. 'I was talking to my friend, if you don't mind.'

'What did you say?' Connie asked again, and as she said it she realised that she was not so much angry at what Beth had said about her, as at the mention of her father. Even if she was angry with him, even if he had done something stupid, thoughtless, other people weren't allowed to talk about him. He was hers, he belonged only to her.

'I said you stink,' the girl repeated deliberately, 'and that's why your dad doesn't want to be with you any more.'

She saw the surprise on the other girl's face and it was enough to convince her that she was right.

'You... bitch.' She had heard her father calling her mother that once, and it seemed right for this occasion.

She balled her fist, as she remembered her father showing her, and launched herself at the girl. Her knuckles landed high on her chest, but the girl just rocked slightly, as if she was stuck in the ground. So she swung her arm and hit her again, this time on the jaw. It was enough to knock her backwards, and she subsided against a bookcase, put her hand to her face and started to cry.

'You hit me!' she said, looking at her hand, as if it was the most surprising thing that had ever happened to her.

Connie stood still, panting a little.

Then all of a sudden Miss Lewis was there and she was speaking in a low, urgent voice to Beth.

She turned to Connie. 'Right you, come to the Headmistress's office with me.'

'What were you thinking?' her mother said, her head in her hands.

Connie looked at the ground. 'I don't know.'

Her mother stayed like that for a long time, then lifted her face, her eyes red. 'I mean where on earth did you even learn to do that?'

Connie shrugged her shoulders.

'Well?'

'Dad.'

'Your father?'

'Yes.'

Her mother rolled her eyes. 'No, no,' she said to herself and put her head back in her hands.

For a moment it seemed as if she was no longer interested in Connie but was involved in something inside herself.

'Get out,' she said, in a strange high-pitched voice.

Connie ran to her bedroom and fell on to her bed. Then she remembered her father teaching her how to punch, long ago, and it made her feel better, just as it had then.

The DCI is standing outside the door to his office when DI Johnson passes by. He beckons him in.

‘How’s that domestic abuse case going?’

‘Oh, fine, sir.’

‘We need a result on this one. In the *current environment*. Do you understand, Steve?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘We need to show that we’re on the side of women.’

DI Johnson nods.

‘Good man,’ the DCI says, with a wink.

DI Johnson goes to DS Turner’s desk, waits for a second while she finishes what she is writing. It makes him so happy to have a reason to do this.

‘Hello,’ she says turning to him.

‘That domestic abuse case. Have you arranged to get the husband in?’

She nods, smiles. Bliss.

‘Good. I’ll take a look at the file.’

He can see her out of the corner of his eye as he turns the page. If he was attached to a monitor you'd see the jump in his heart-rate.

David Williams. It is the ordinariness of the names that always make him pause. Otherwise normal people who end up in their investigations. As he suspected, there is nothing on this man. He has led a blameless life. Not like the others he sees pass across his screen: lengthy criminal records, lives in disarray; things done which cannot be undone.

But he will look. Try to find something that might help. He glances across the room again. He can see the back of DC Turner's head, the angle of her neck suggesting concentration. She is not much older than his sons, but in his mind he is still that age himself. Not when he looks in the mirror and sees the creases and the folds, of course, but in his mind he is still the same young man who started out in an office full of old-timers, now all retired, or worse.

Now, like them, he has seen it all himself. Every day he sees it. He is so tired of seeing the worst in everyone, the worst in life. He didn't think it would be like this when he joined. He thought he would be some sort of hero; but he has been dragged down by it over the years. He still remembers his first night on patrol: a young woman, in the river. Her swollen face when they pulled her out of the water.

He examines a grainy photograph containing a thirteen-year-old Mr Williams at a rugby tournament. There are more recent entries too: professional qualifications; a couple of projects the man is involved with. He works for a firm called *J L Lambert Associates* it appears. An accounting firm.

There is one more entry, in the *Times*:

The engagement is announced between David, son of Mr and Mrs John Williams, of Egham, Surrey, and Connie, daughter of Mrs Jill Robinson, of Banstead, Surrey, and Mr Gordon Robinson of Midhurst, West Sussex.

He feels a moment of sadness, as he always does at the relationships that have not gone as hoped. It makes him wonder what will happen with him and Sheila. It is as though he is her carer now. He supposes that they will just carry on like this until the end.

Someone looking from the outside might think they are just somewhere on the same arc that all relationships follow. To his sons they probably just seem old; they probably they don't expect anything else from them, at their age. But really it is because of her illness. That is what they call it now; he has been to presentations. Now it is an illness. An illness for which there is no cure. Usually people want a cure for illness, but his wife does not seem to want that. She wants to drink; the drink is her medication.

They've got to want to help themselves.

He doesn't blame her. She brought up their two boys; without him most of the time. He was either in the office or drinking with colleagues in the evening. And then he realised he wasn't going to go any further in the force, after all. Something in him gave way, then. He didn't even have that any more. Not the force; not his family.

~

They sit at DI Johnson's desk. The office is not yet empty, but to DI Johnson it feels as though they are alone. DC Turner is leaning towards him; any closer and they

would be touching. He could easily reach out, put his hand on her neck and stroke her smooth skin.

‘I’ve looked at the file on Mr Williams,’ he says. ‘Haven’t found anything you haven’t.’

She looks pleased. It is a compliment, of sorts. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘The problem is evidence. *Reasonable grounds.*’

She nods.

‘But I’m confident we’ll find something.’ He is less optimistic than he sounds, but he wants to make her happy.

‘Friends, relatives?’

‘Exactly.’

Things seem to have been concluded, and he is feeling the sadness he always feels when their time together comes to an end, when she says ‘Are you going to DC Robertson’s drinks?’

‘I didn’t know about it,’ he says, shaking his head. In fact he doesn’t even know if DC Robertson is a man or a woman.

‘It’s just next door. I’m going now if you fancy coming along?’

He doesn’t get the invitations any more. No longer goes to that sort of thing. It is because he is old, of course, but lovely DC Turner does not seem to be concerned about that.

‘Yes, why not,’ he says, feeling wonderful.

It is a familiar, but distant, sensation in the bar. People standing around cradling drinks, animated. DC Robertson turns out to be a woman and DC Turner kisses her on both cheeks before producing a card and a present from her handbag.

DI Johnson hangs back, feeling concerned, suddenly, after the first rush of excitement, that he is there, with DC Turner. But no one seems to be looking at them. No one would suspect that there was anything between them.

DC Turner introduces him to DC Robertson, who smiles at him, although he knows it is just his rank. He nods and wishes her a happy birthday. There is no one older than thirty-five there. He doesn't recognise any of them.

They go to the bar and he buys the drinks. A pint and a glass of wine, just like the daydreams.

As he sips from his pint glass he feels once again that after all there might be *possibilities*. He remembers the feeling from the past. In pubs, smiling with friends, with Sheila.

He finds it impossible not to comment to DC Turner on the youth of all these people. DC Turner smiles in sympathy, but he instantly wishes he hadn't mentioned it. As they talk, he notices her begin to glance over his shoulder. There are people she would probably like to talk to, whom she should talk to. He doesn't want her to feel she has to talk to him because of who he is. He would like to stay, of course he would; he would like to have another drink. But he knows he should go home.

He says goodbye, skirts the bar and leaves, feeling happier than he can remember feeling for a long time.

He is taken aback by the man's height at first, imagines having to wrestle him to the ground. He'd need help. If it was just him and DC Turner, she'd have no chance. One sweep of his arm and she'd be knocked to the floor. Concussed, probably.

'Please sit down, Mr Williams,' he says, and as the man turns to him he thinks he recognises something in his expression.

The man folds himself into the plastic chair, banging the underside of the table with his knees.

'How tall are you?' he asks on the spur of the moment. 'Six five?'

'Six six,' the man says with weary certainty, as though he tells people this fact all the time.

There is definitely something about him. DI Johnson feels sure he has met him before. 'Can we get you anything to drink?' he says.

'No. Thanks.'

And then he remembers. The pub. He *knew* there was something. He imagines the man does not remember him. He is not the sort of person people remember.

He waits as DC Turner sits down beside him. He catches a trace of her fragrance, so faint it could be soap or shampoo, but he thinks it is perfume. He pauses, enjoying the feeling of her sitting there, so near to him.

‘Thank you for coming in today, Mr Williams,’ he says. He now remembers the woman in the pub, her reaction to this man. The knowledge gives him an advantage. Any knowledge does.

The man shifts in his seat elaborately, as if it is the most uncomfortable place he has ever had to sit. ‘That’s all right.’

He doesn’t seem annoying now. In fact he seems almost docile.

‘This isn’t a formal interview,’ DI Johnson says. ‘We’d just like to ask you a few questions. Do you understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘About what happened the other week.’

The man looks at them, cautiously.

‘We received a call from the hospital you attended for treatment to a head wound.’ He looks at the man’s forehead. There is a fresh-looking scar with small pinpricks either side where the stitches would have been. It is obvious now, but will no doubt calm down over the coming months. Probably become unremarkable with time.

‘Yes, I hit my head in the kitchen.’

DI Johnson nods.

‘Well actually, there seems to be a difference of opinion over that,’ DC Turner says.

The man stops fidgeting now and looks at her.

‘Your wife told us you did it in the bathroom. Can you tell us why the two accounts are different?’

He shrugs. ‘I don’t know. She made a mistake. It happened in the kitchen.’

‘Are you usually clumsy around the house?’ says DI Johnson, leaning forward in his chair.

‘Sorry?’

‘Do you have a lot of accidents? In the home?’

‘Yes, I do, actually.’ The man looks pleased, as if he has got something right.

‘You play rugby I believe,’ DI Johnson says.

‘Yes, I do.’

‘I’m a football man myself,’ DI Johnson says, looking at the man, who looks back at him blankly. ‘I imagine it might be a disadvantage to be clumsy.’

‘Sorry?’

‘It’s a game of skill isn’t it, rugby? Catching, throwing?’

The man gives him a half-smile, more like the man in the pub, now. ‘No, I play in the scrum. It’s more... physical there; not so much skill.’

DC Turner looks up from her notebook. ‘The hospital reported that your wife has extensive bruising to her forearm. We saw that when we visited her at your home.’

The man says nothing. Looks at them both.

‘Can you tell us how that happened?’

‘I’m not sure. I think she probably. At school. One of the children.’

DI Johnson raises an eyebrow. ‘That’s a big bruise for a small child,’ he says. ‘I understand that your wife teaches four and five year olds. *Reception*, they call it now.’

‘Yes, she does.’

The man looks tired now, or unwell, as many people do in this room.

‘Do you know what happened to her?’ he says. ‘At school.’

‘You’d have to ask her.’

‘We will Mr Williams. Thank you. We will.’

‘What do you think?’ DC Turner asks DI Johnson when they are back at their desks. She is standing next to him, holding a plastic cup of coffee. Even the coffee smells better when it is in her hand.

‘Looked as though he had something to hide,’ he says. ‘That business with the bathroom. And blaming a child.’ It always pays to be suspicious, in DI Johnson’s opinion. He does not think highly of people after twenty-seven years in the force. And he does not think highly of this man after what he saw in the pub.

‘She seems so nice,’ DC Turner says, shaking her head. ‘Awful.’

He nods in agreement. But he has seen many things over the years. This does not qualify as awful, in his opinion. Not compared to the rest. ‘Did you find anything on either of them?’ he asks.

‘No, nothing.’

‘Okay, we’ll have to play it carefully. If there is something going on, she’s not letting on.’

DC Turner nods.

If it was just him, he would probably leave it for a while, let it sort itself out. There is so much to do, so many cases. But there is also DCI Ross, the *foreseeable*.

~

DI Johnson sees an email from DC Turner appear in his inbox and sits back in his chair. As ever, he feels a lightness in his chest at the possibilities. *I really enjoyed the*

other night, how about doing it again some time? It is as though he is very still, as though everything around him is moving and he is not.

He leans forward and clicks on the message. Scans the two lines quickly. She wants to have a coffee, to discuss something. Of course she would not put anything more than that in an email that could be read by anyone in IT. She would want to tell him over a coffee, instead. Of course she would.

He sends a message back, calm as usual on the outside, but light inside, as he tries to imagine what she is going to tell him. He can hardly keep the smile from his face.

They sit in an interview room with plastic cups of coffee in front of them. DC Turner's is decaf; she is healthy like that. Personally, he cannot understand the point of it.

She has perhaps had her hair cut. He is not sure; it might just be that she is wearing it up. He remembers when Sheila used to complain that he never noticed her hair, never commented on it. He notices DC Turner's hair, but he cannot comment on it.

'Thanks for sparing the time, sir,' she says.

He smiles at her. She cannot possibly realise what these moments mean to him; being alone with her like this. He would like to sit in this room with her every day. He would spend all night sitting in this chair if it meant that he could continue to gaze at her. 'That's okay,' he says, 'so... what did you want to discuss?'

'This,' she starts, gesturing with her hands in a way that he cannot quite understand. He is unsure whether she means their meeting, or the two of them. He can hardly breathe with the *possibilities*.

‘Everything...’ she continues.

He opens his mouth with no intention of saying anything. Thankfully she interrupts him.

‘Sorry, that must sound ridiculous. I mean the police force.’ She pauses. ‘I just don’t think I’m cut out for it.’

‘Oh, I see,’ he says. He is disappointed. Of course he is. And from DC Turner’s expression he realises he probably looks disappointed too.

‘It’s nothing to do with you,’ she says quickly.

He is scared that she will leave. He wants at all costs for her to stay. To be near to him. ‘I didn’t think...’ He tells himself he must maintain his calm. He remembers the DCI’s words. *Temptation. Retention.* ‘You’re doing a great job. You’re very well thought of.’

She smiles. ‘That’s very kind of you. I just feel. It’s a different world; I’m not sure I can cope with it all.’

He has such a strong desire, then, to put his hand on her forearm, resting there lightly there on the table between them, pale and inviting. He feels himself shaking with the effort of preventing himself from doing it.

‘It *is* different,’ he says. ‘That’s true. But you’re doing very well. And like everything, it gets easier with time.’ He smiles. He does not believe any of this. But because it is DC Turner, because he is desperate for her to stay, he does almost believe it for these few moments.

She looks at him, smiles, sips her decaf. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘There are some personal things. I’m probably not thinking straight at the moment.’

He smiles back, wondering what she means. He does not know anything about her personal life, has always studiously avoided that subject. Perhaps she is wrestling

with her feelings for him, but cannot tell him. He wants to shout at himself, to tell himself to stop all this. All this ridiculous fantasy. To go home to his wife, instead and apologise for all the years, for everything he hasn't done.

‘If I can help, just ask. I’m sure you’ll be all right, though,’ he says. ‘It’s just a wobble. We’ve all had them.’

Sometimes he wonders where he gets all this. A *wobble*? His life is a head-on car crash. Bonnet folded back like a piece of cardboard; driver unconscious, head buried in a smoking airbag.

For a moment he thinks he is going to grasp her hand. He wants to tell her about the promotion that everyone knows about, apart from her. Because she doesn’t gossip, doesn’t do anything like that. But he can’t. Instead he just smiles a smile he hopes is both comforting and conspiratorial.

She finishes her coffee, looks at him with her brown eyes. ‘Thanks, sir,’ she says.

At first, when she woke up, she thought for a few moments she was doing surprisingly well.

Now she realises she is not doing well.

She closes her eyes again, but that makes it worse. Seeing the things around her is enough to distract her very slightly, and that is what she needs now.

She tries not to think about last night; about what happened. Instead she gives herself little goals. Get to the bathroom. Have a shower. Drive to work. But to get to the bathroom she would need to get out of bed, and she does not seem to be able to do that at this moment.

The line goes quiet when she says she isn't coming into school.

'What's wrong?' the Head asks, with a sigh.

She does not know what to say. She cannot begin to describe what has happened. 'I'm not... I have some things I need to do,' she says in the end. She feels that this was probably not the right thing to say.

'I'm *sorry*?' the Head says, with that emphasis, the way people do.

'David's gone,' she says. This, she realises, is what she should have said the first time. But she is confused; her mind feels slow and stodgy, like a too-thick cake

mixture. Thoughts take a while to locate in the goo. For a moment she is worried again that she is losing her mind with the sadness.

‘Oh I see,’ the Head says, sounding relieved. ‘I’m sorry to hear it,’ she adds quickly.

‘Could I take some... time off?’

‘Well, yes. But we have a timetable, of course.’

‘Yes, I understand.’

‘Please let me know as soon as you’re okay to come back.’

‘I will. Thanks, Jenny,’ Connie says, with the sense that this unsatisfactory conversation is all she has in the empty house.

‘And don’t forget the relevant paperwork,’ the Head continues.

The screw-top cracks promisingly when Connie gives it a twist, and the wine exits the bottle with a glug. She doesn’t really want a drink, but she feels she needs something to help her deal with the sadness.

She drinks some wine but needs something more to distract her, so she picks up the television remote control; but then she changes her mind and instead looks through the pile of CDs next to the stereo. She puts on a *Cocteau Twins* album. One she used to play all the time at university. She used to love the way you couldn’t understand the words, but it didn’t make any difference. It takes her straight back to her hall of residence: a big, square building in Russell Square, always with the smell of vomit and cleaning-fluid about it.

Until I just, carry it in me, carry it in me carry it in me, I wanna get lost, the *Cocteau Twins* sing. She wants to be lost, too. But then she is already lost. Lost on her own, lost here in the house on her own. In her and David’s house. Even the man from

the dream-that-is-not-a-dream is no longer here. She would like him to be here, with his sad smile; even that would be better than nothing. But he is not here. He and David have both left her.

She gets some more wine and drinks some more and listens to some more music and soon she has drunk half a bottle. But she doesn't feel drunk. Just dull-headed; dull-headed and full of sadness. It was her fault. This is true whichever way she looks at it, however she thinks about it. This is true and it will always be true. *Oh until I don't know where you end and, I begin*, the *Cocteau Twins* sing. She wants to begin again, how she would love to be able to begin again.

She holds the glass to her mouth with both hands and tears slide down her cheeks towards the rim. As she tips it to drink, a little of the wine spills, and her stomach heaves and she cries some more and drinks some more, and realises that she is quite drunk now. Her hands are shaking with all the crying and the heaving, and she is finding it difficult to hold the glass. She puts it down on the table, but misses, and it falls on to the floor, spilling and making a dark puddle on the carpet.

It makes her even more sad, this ugly mark on the carpet that she never liked, that David would never let her replace. She tastes the salt in her tears and the sourness of the wine all mixed together, and when she closes her eyes everything seems to be moving in different directions all at once.

She needs to get a cloth for the carpet, but she doesn't feel up to walking, so she crawls along the floor in the direction of the hall. Halfway across, she subsides and just lies there, her cheek against the carpet, saliva collecting in the side of her mouth, then dribbling on to the floor. She can feel the texture of the carpet underneath her cheek, can smell its fibres. She has made a mess of things. It is her fault. She doesn't know why she did it. David didn't deserve to be treated like that. No one does. She

doesn't know why it happened; she can't explain it. Is she really that terrible? Perhaps she is. She must be really terrible. A bad person. A person who attacks people. No, not people. Not just anyone. Just David. He is the only one. The one she loves.

It all started to happen when the man in the dream-that-is-not-a-dream first appeared, the man who looks like her father; perhaps is her father. But even before that, the miscarriage. Her baby. Her and David's baby. It is all so confusing; it whirrs around and around in her head like a washing-machine.

She crawls into the hallway, then to the kitchen, and gets a cloth from underneath the sink. Then she crawls back to the living-room. She can't bring herself to get up. She wants to hide, to sink into the ground, to disappear from sight, never be seen again. As though she is playing hide and seek and has found a good hiding-place and doesn't want to come out. Somehow being here, on the ground like this, signifies her guilt and her shame and her loneliness.

She rolls on to her side. She can smell the vinegary wine, the sourness of the cloth; the synthetic yet earthy smell of the carpet, trodden by a thousand feet, moving from outside to inside, inside to outside. It smells of a lifetime, down here on the ground.

She looked at the special Christmas Radio Times and imagined Dad laughing at something in his usual jerky way, bits of crisp shooting from his mouth. Mum always used to vacuum around his chair, it's like a bloody bombsite around here. Clearing away the little bits that he left behind, like little bits of himself. Connie used to wish Mum wouldn't clean them up, that she'd leave them there, since they were part of Dad, in a way. The only parts of him she had, when he wasn't there.

Her mother had said they'd both decided that it was 'best' if he didn't come for Christmas this year. Instead he was going to spend it with his 'girlfriend'. Connie wanted him to come but she was angry at him too. It confused her: she loved him but she hated him; she wanted to see him, but she didn't want to see him.

She had been there, at the bottom of the stairs, when Mum had talked to him about it on the phone. Yes. No. I see, as usual. Nothing showing on Mum's face, just her mouth moving. Eventually the announcement was made about what she and Dad thought was 'best'.

The funny thing was, him not being there didn't really make a difference to anything. There had been a stocking at the end of her bed that morning. Bacon and eggs. Presents afterwards. It didn't make a difference to any of that. But it did make a difference to how she felt.

She remembered last year: Dad looking out from behind his newspaper as they unwrapped their presents, then watching television with them for a while. Mum sitting between her and Marcus on the sofa with a glass of something, well I suppose so, it is Christmas.

It made her sad to think about it, so she turned on the television. The Wizard of Oz was on but the witch scared her, and that seemed to make the Christmas tree look dark in the corner, ominous. It was a word she had learned at school and it seemed right for this situation.

She opened the tin of Quality Street and unwrapped a toffee penny. She needed to be quick; Mum would be in soon with the sausage rolls and Marcus would come down and they would all eat together.

Perhaps she would feel happier then.

‘Can we get Mrs Williams in, sir?’

DC Turner is standing at his desk, in her plain clothes. In the plain clothes that make her look anything but plain.

She seems to have put her ‘wobble’ behind her. He feels his cheeks redden when he remembers saying that. She sent him an email afterwards thanking him for *listening*. It made him so happy, that word, as though he were her confidant, her intimate.

‘Have you heard from her?’ he asks.

‘No, sir.’

She has taken a shine to the woman. He is not drawn to her himself, but she is probably not drawn to him either. They are just different kinds of people. But DC Turner likes her, that’s what’s important.

‘We’re going to need a statement on this one soon, one way or the other.’ He pauses. ‘Yes get her in, see if she’ll say anything.’

She nods. ‘At least she knows us now, sir. She might feel we’re sympathetic.’

He turns down the corners of his mouth. It is something he does, now. All part of his growing cynicism. *No, Dad, scepticism*, his son, the lawyer, told him once. But he feels increasingly cynical. And angry, too. Finds himself shouting; at inanimate things mostly: broken boilers, leaky taps, blown light-bulbs. He is angry, somewhere deep within himself, at everything. Apart from Sheila; he couldn’t be angry with her, that wouldn’t be fair.

Whatever he feels about Mrs Williams, she doesn’t deserve to be hurt. DC Turner is right. They should try to help her. The trouble is, he has a pile of cases on

his desk and a hierarchy in his mind. Murder at the top, of course, then it gets a little murky. Manslaughter. Child abuse. Rape. Robbery with violence... But of course there is DCI Ross's list.

'Mmm,' he says. 'Just have a look at my diary, put something in whenever is convenient.'

She smiles, as though he is doing her a favour. They are so close to each other at this moment, him sitting on a swivel-chair at his desk, her standing next to him but not quite touching him, and he can imagine lifting his face and touching her lips with his. The thought of it makes him close his eyes for a fraction of a second. He can see it, *feel* it – her breath as he moves close to her, the give in her lips, the smell of her scent. If he was twenty years younger – and it was twenty years ago – he might just get away with it, but of course now there would be warnings, disciplinary procedures, sexual assault charges. Still, it might just be worth it, to feel her lips on his. To feel a woman's lips on his again.

That is all gone from his life, now. He thinks, sometimes, of going to Sheila's bedroom, wonders how she would react. Perhaps if they made love it would bring back the past for both of them. But he cannot bring himself to do it. She has shown no interest for years now. He does not know what happens as a woman gets older. For a man nothing much seems to change, but for a woman it is probably different. He does not know. It is just one of many things he does not know. He sometimes feels as though his life has been dedicated to the loss of knowledge. He will die knowing as little as it is possible to know about life, about everything. Just as possessions become irrelevant in death, so too with knowledge – in death, knowledge no longer has any purpose.

She wakes up, sprawled on the carpet, her head aching and her mouth dry. She looks at the clock and realises it is late afternoon now. Outside, sunlight creeps from the clouds. It seems yellow, old, as if it has tired itself out. As if it too has nothing left.

And then the phone rings. She pulls herself off the ground in the direction of the table. The number is withheld, but it could be David, calling from the office. She jabs at the button, misses at first but then manages to press the right one.

‘Hello?’ She hears her voice in the emptiness.

‘Mrs Williams?’ It is a woman’s voice, not one she recognises. Whoever it is she doesn’t want to speak to them. The only person she wants to speak to is David. David is the only one.

‘Mrs Williams,’ the woman continues, jauntily, ‘it’s DC Turner from Kingston CID. We talked the other day.’

‘Oh, hello,’ she says. She pictures the biscuit-eating woman from her living-room, but she doesn’t want to speak to her now. She wonders why she has chosen this day to call. She doesn’t want to be alone, but she doesn’t want this woman to be here either.

‘Mrs Williams, there are two reasons for my call. The first of which is to ask how you are?’

She almost laughs. How is she? *How is she?* ‘Fine,’ she says. ‘Fine.’ But she wants to scream at her that she is *not fine at all*.

‘I’m very glad to hear it,’ the woman continues, seemingly unaware of the screaming going on inside Connie. ‘The other reason for calling is to ask you to come in and see us at the station. We have a few more questions we’d like to ask you, if

that's all right.' She stops, abruptly. For a moment it seems as though she is going to continue, to say something about there being *nothing to worry about*, the way people do. But she does not mention there being nothing to worry about.

'Yes, of course,' Connie replies. She has a strange feeling of dislocation. She does not know if it is the wine, or the timing of the call. Or perhaps it is the fact that her husband has left her. And now she has nothing. She keeps forgetting this fact and it keeps returning to her again immediately, with perfect clarity.

'Thank you. Next Wednesday? How does that sound?'

She makes the necessary arrangements and presses the button on the phone to end the call.

It is darker now, the landscape of the room is becoming indistinct, blurred. She prefers this ambiguity. In the greyness even what has happened seems a little less stark. She wonders if the call was connected to David's departure. Wonders if he has told them everything. But then David has his codes, his chivalry. She feels guilty that she is still angry about that. It was her fault, she reminds herself. She was the one. She will call to tell him.

His phone rings and rings. She pictures him taking the phone out of his pocket, seeing that it is her, then putting it back again with a frown. The message starts. It is strange to hear him again, as if he has been away and just come home. As the message comes to an end, she realises she doesn't know what to say. Suddenly the beep is going; she can't put the phone down, she has to say something. 'David,' she says, feeling for a moment as if they are strangers, as though they don't even know one another. 'I'm sorry. Please come back. Please.'

It isn't a hangover, exactly, because she drank steadily through the day. Rather it feels as though the alcohol has infiltrated her entire body; her bloodstream is thick with it. When she moves, she resonates. She feels taut, breakable.

As she gets out of the shower she feels a sudden swell of sickness. Her stomach begins to contract and she manages to make it as far as the basin before a stream of pale liquid emerges. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and leans on the edge of the porcelain, panting, while another contraction builds and then breaks.

Downstairs, she tries to eat some toast, but it tastes like wood. Then she tries walking around the house for a while, trying to forget what has happened, looking at her phone every few minutes hoping for a call from David, a message. But she cannot forget what has happened and nothing arrives from David, so she goes to bed and curls into the shape of a comma, her hands over her ears to keep the thoughts out. But that is no better.

She goes and sits in the armchair by the window and stares at the slats of the blinds. The yellow autumn light seems to force its way between them and something about the colour makes her feel sick again. She gets up and walks around the house

once more, looking through the rooms at what they contain – the furniture, the possessions – trying to understand what the importance of all these things is, now.

She does this all day until she begins to feel a little better. Or perhaps it is just that she realises that this is the way she is going to feel from now on. She knows the most important thing now is her investigation, and the witness at the heart of it all.

Her father.

She closes her eyes.

As usual the music was too loud, the smell of stale beer in the air, the floor still tacky from the night before. They were in the Student Union, drinking pints of cider and eating pepperoni pizza straight from the box. A Spice Girls record was playing. She didn't really like them, but she didn't mind the Christmas songs. They were different, somehow. A tradition. What she really liked were the old indie bands: The Cocteau Twins – dreamy guitars, with a voice trembling over the top of them. Alex had introduced her to a lot of music she'd never heard before university – Bruce Springsteen! Oh love me tonight and I promise I'll love you forever...

The cider was supposed to be dry, but it tasted sweet to her. Before university she'd just drunk half pints, or glasses of white wine. At first she'd started drinking to get through the fresher events, but now she enjoyed it.

There were only a couple of weeks to go before the end of term. She wasn't looking forward to going home for Christmas. She remembered how she had felt before she left. Desperate for something else; desperate to get away. Her mother didn't have anyone else. Hadn't had since her father left, apart from a couple of hopeful men in the early days.

She'd had two pints already and Alex had had three. It gave everything the feel of a fairy tale; the kissing, the sex. He was her first proper boyfriend so it had still been new to her, a bit frightening. The first time they'd used a condom it had seemed like a strange ritual, a medical procedure.

'Shall we meet up with the others later?' she asked. At the beginning they'd met up with her friends all the time. She missed that now, a little.

'I don't mind,' Alex said, raising an eyebrow.

She loved the way he did that, his eyebrow disappearing beneath the dark overhang of fringe. But she could tell that he did mind. He didn't want to be with other people like she did. She'd started to notice the differences between them recently. 'Well I'd like to,' she said, taking a sip of cider.

He said nothing, picked up a piece of pizza and angled it into his mouth. Chewed it slowly, seeming to concentrate hard on it.

She watched him.

'I need to tell you something, Connie.'

'Yes?' She felt something in her stomach, a falling away.

'It's about us.'

She knew what he was about to say. It seemed inevitable, as though it had always been going to happen; as though everything had been leading to this. It was what she had always known. That everybody left her.

'Kitty called. She wants to...'

Kitty (why would anyone be called that?) was his first girlfriend. From home. Connie had heard far more about her than she wanted to in the early days, but Alex hadn't mentioned her for a long time now.

She looked at him. His face was flushed, as if he'd been running, and there was pizza topping on his chin. He seemed younger than before, suddenly.

'I'm sorry,'

She felt the anger taking over.

'You've ruined everything,' she shouted. 'You're such a fucking idiot.'

Then she stood up and poured her pint of cider over his head. Nearly a full glass. It seemed to all fall on his head at once and he hardly had time to move. He looked up at her, his arms in front of him, as if in self-defence, his hair flattened smooth, the liquid dripping from his forehead, pooling in the pizza box on the table below.

The other people in the bar looked round, there was some laughter, and Connie turned and made in the direction of the door.

A call comes through to DI Johnson's phone. He sees that it is Gemma in reception.

'Sir, it's Gemma here,' Gemma says, unnecessarily. 'A Mrs Williams is here for you.'

'Thank you, Gemma,' he says. She doesn't need to announce herself. Just give him the information. But she means well. She's serious, with a complexion like pink avocado skin and a shyness to go with it.

He doesn't rush; he finds it an advantage to keep people waiting. There is a certain power in emerging from the depths of the station to meet an uncertain visitor. He still remembers it from the training. *Establish a dynamic in your favour*. He wonders if they still teach them that now.

It is always interesting seeing people a second time. The first time they are unsure, defensive. The second time is when the memories return, the confessions emerge; after they have had time to think, weigh things up. You know what you are going to get from them after that.

He finishes his paragraph (he is writing a report on environmentally friendly working practices – no one can say his job isn't varied) and clears up his desk, then checks his watch. Eight minutes. About right. He will arrive at the front desk at ten past. He should seem busy, even though most of it is really forms, reports, meetings.

He sees her before she sees him. She looks small, child-like; pretty, in a first girlfriend sort of way. She is sitting on one of the plastic seats in the entrance area, arms crossed, looking straight ahead. He is surprised. It is usually a sign of having something to hide, in his experience. The ones who are just there with a complaint sit there reading newspapers or looking at mobile phones. The ones who sit there as if they would rather not be there, they're the ones to watch.

He smiles and advances towards her. Extends his arm. With this sort it pays to be friendly. Up close she looks pale, as if she is going to rush off and be sick at any moment. She shakes his hand; hers is warm and clammy, like the hand of a child in fact. He can tell she is trying to appear calm, unmoved. Different to how she looked when he saw her a few moments ago in her unguarded moments. People would be amazed if they knew what he can tell about them in those few seconds. You can learn more from someone sitting in reception than you can in the interview room, he always thinks. It's not Sherlock or anything. Just observations, made so many times they usually turn out to be true.

'Thank you for coming,' he says, friendly himself.

She smiles, or at least tries to smile. She looks frightened, distracted. He imagines she doesn't want her marriage to fail, doesn't want things to change. He knows how that feels. It is one thing dreaming about DC Turner, another having to worry about starting another relationship.

He remembers going to the pub with a friend who had just got divorced. To show willing. He thought they'd have a couple of pints, look back on his marriage. But all the man talked about was women and dating websites (more about sex than dating it seems to him). He wanted to talk to them, there, in the pub. *Women*. But they were all so young. He thought he was in with a chance though. All DI Johnson could

imagine was the horrified looks. He is still on those websites, his friend. *53 year old man looking for love...* It all seems so undignified. He is too old for all that. Leave it to the young, DI Johnson thinks.

‘Come through, come through,’ he says to Mrs Williams, as if she has just arrived for dinner.

As he ushers her through the turnstile, he catches sight of the two of them in the window. Her reflection seems more real than his, somehow. He looks two dimensional. Flat. Grey.

They go into the rear of the station, past the rows of metal doors, along the corridors that look like hospital corridors.

He opens the door of the interview room. ‘Please go through.’

DC Turner is sitting at the table. She stands up and greets Mrs Williams with the sort of smile DI Johnson gave her earlier. Broad, welcoming. She looks wonderful. The way she moves, the way she is with people. Her even teeth, her glossy skin. He can imagine her buying products at the make-up counters of department stores at the weekend. She is perfect. There is nothing he would change about her.

At moments like this he almost loses the ability to do his job; all he thinks about is going away with her. Somewhere they can be on their own. Walking and laughing and having dinner. It amazes him to think there are people doing that at this moment. Something he can only dream of.

They all sit at the laminated wood table in the middle of the room. There is light coming in from the grilled window, just enough to illuminate the space. He sees DC Turner watching him with that look that makes his heart ache. At the beginning he thought it was some sign about what she felt for him, before he realised it was just the look she gave him as she waited for him to start proceedings.

‘So, Mrs Williams’ he says. ‘We just have a few questions. Nothing to worry about.’ He smiles his practiced smile, so ingrained that he has almost forgotten he is doing it. Of course ‘nothing to worry about’ usually means exactly the opposite.

The woman smiles, weakly.

She is not unattractive, he thinks, again, watching her smile fade. Her face has a certain roundness to it, which makes her look healthy in some way. But next to DC Turner of course, well...

‘As you know from the time we visited you, the hospital you attended with your husband reported an injury to you. We have spoken to your husband and he says it is something that happened to you at school.’

He looks at DC Turner, who takes this as her cue.

‘Could you confirm that, Mrs Williams?’ she says to the woman and she swivels her gaze in DC Turner’s direction.

‘I...’ she starts, ‘I suppose so, yes.’

DI Johnson raises his eyebrows. So many people feign ignorance, stupidity, memory loss, in that room with them. It often seems to him as if the whole country is afflicted by some sort of degenerative disease.

‘What sort of incident was it... at school?’ DC Turner continues.

DI Johnson is impressed. The tone of her question, the studied lack of urgency. It is exactly the approach he would be taking.

Mrs Williams looks flustered for the first time. As though she hadn’t considered she might be asked that question. DI Johnson imagines her husband impressing on her the need to go along with his lie before she left the house. Otherwise there would be *consequences*.

‘It wasn’t the children. I fell over, outside. On a welly walk.’

He has to stifle the urge to laugh. But he finds it interesting that she isn't afraid to disagree with her husband's version of events. That isn't usually the way with this sort of case. The abuser is usually knowing, manipulative; they generally get their way.

DC Turner nods. Writes in her notebook. She is respectful. That is one of the things he loves about her. She is not cynical like him. She believes what people tell her. Some would say that she is naïve. He has heard it said around the station, along with the other comments. The ones that make him want to take a swing at the men who make them with a knowing leer. He always manages to maintain his composure, though. The moment he starts defending her, he is finished.

Her attitude is respectful. She respects people. Even if they are wrong, deluded, criminal, she still respects them. She is such a lovely person. He feels like shouting, screaming, with the unjustness of it all. The fact that he has to sit here and watch her, think all this without being able to tell her.

He is the same age as *George Clooney*, for God's Sake.

She glances at him, a quick look that Mrs Williams probably doesn't notice.

'I see,' he says. 'Mrs Williams...' The tone of his voice brings her eyes into focus on his. '...if there is anything you would like to tell us, please do so now. We want to help you. Anything... between you and your husband. No matter how insignificant you may feel it is.'

She looks at him. DC Turner looks at her. For a moment he thinks she is about to tell them everything. She opens her mouth, then closes it. Shakes her head. Looks down at the desk.

He wonders what is going through her mind. She must be afraid. They have met her husband of course. The big, rugby-playing man. He remembers the pub again, the

reaction of the woman. Of course his wife is scared of him. But what can they do if she won't allow them to help her.

‘Are you sure?’ DC Turner asks her, putting her hand on the woman’s forearm.

He is impressed. It is something he could not do himself. He would probably be sued if he did that. But it is okay for her to do. It is the perfect move, at this moment.

The woman’s chest heaves, as though she is going to cough. But instead she starts to cry. Pulls a tissue out of her handbag and dabs her eyes with it.

DC Turner looks upset in turn. She is different to all the others. She understands. She is the kindest, most generous person he has ever met. Genuine in every way. But he must be careful. He worries that something in his expression will give him away. She will see it, understand instantly.

‘We’ll give you a moment,’ he says, motioning to DC Turner.

They leave the room and stand outside with the door ajar. DI Johnson loves the intimacy of these small moments.

‘Poor woman,’ DC Turner says, shaking her head.

Inside, he can see Mrs Williams wipe her eyes. ‘We’ll try to get a statement today.’

DC Turner nods.

They go to the machine to get a cup of coffee and then return to the room.

‘Are you okay, Mrs Williams?’ DI Johnson says.

She nods.

‘I know you’re upset, but if you could tell us what is happening. At home. With you and your husband. It might make you feel better.’

DC Turner nods. ‘Yes, if you give us a statement now, we can make sure nothing else happens to you.’

The woman looks shocked.

DI Johnson looks at DC Turner. He'd have thought she would have told them by now, out of relief. Friendly faces, the promise of help. Usually they do at this stage. He can think of no good reason for her not to want to tell them what is going on. But there is nothing they can do if she won't. He thinks of DCI Ross's eager, red face. His orders from *above*.

As if in response, DC Turner puts her hand on the woman's forearm again. 'Please have a think about it. Look, here's my card. Call me any time you like.'

The woman looks as if she is trying to smile, then a few seconds later as though she is going to burst into tears again.

'My husband ...' she says. 'My husband's... left me.'

It isn't what DI Johnson was expecting. But he has seen it before. The abuser, sensing that they are going to be found out, leaving to try to divert attention. Usually they move back in a few weeks later and it all starts again.

If Mr Williams continues to plead his innocence there is very little they can do. There is no evidence, after all. They cannot work on supposition and possibility. There is a stack of paperwork on his desk: sexual assault, conspiracy to defraud, drug dealing. They usually drop their enquiries at this stage, see what happens next. It's what he would do now if it wasn't for DC Turner, DCI Ross.

He has enjoyed working with DC Turner on this case. Knows she has formed a bond with this woman. It happens, sometimes. It is all right to go along with it for a while longer, but there will come a time it has to end, despite DCI Ross.

‘Mr Williams?’ he says when the man answers.

‘Yes?’

‘I hope I haven’t caught you at an inconvenient time. DI Johnson from Kingston CID.’

‘Oh. Yes.’

He imagines the man’s face. Surprise, concern. Looking around to see if anyone can overhear him.

‘Mr Williams, I just have a couple of follow-up questions. Would you prefer to come to the station, or, if you like, I can ask you now?’

‘Now would be fine.’ There is a scraping noise. He is probably getting up from his desk and going somewhere more private. A stairwell, a smoking area.

‘Mr Williams, we have been speaking to your wife... and she tells us you are no longer living together. Is that correct?’

‘Yes, yes it is.’

‘Thank you. And may I ask why you didn’t mention that the last time we talked?’

He has to try. He has a few seconds left now and then it will all be too late. In a few more seconds he will no longer be working on this case with DC Turner.

‘Look. I really can’t go along with this anymore,’ the man says, instead. ‘I tried to, for her sake.’

‘I’m sorry?’ DI Johnson says.

‘I haven’t done anything wrong.’

‘That’s what you’ve told us, Mr Williams... but in that case why move out?’ It is his last roll of the dice. He expects the man to reply with something barbed and finish the conversation.

‘It was her,’ he says, instead.

DI Johnson thinks for a moment he might have misheard. ‘What was her?’

‘It was *her* who hit *me*.’

This is an unexpected development all right. He couldn’t have hoped for more from this phone call. ‘Well it’s an easy thing to say, Mr Williams. But an allegation like that...’

‘It wasn’t me,’ he says. ‘I don’t want anyone to think that. I’m an *accountant*, for God’s sake.’

‘Well, if that’s the case...’ DI Johnson understands now. It happens. Of course it does. He comes across violent women. But usually they live on the street or have addiction problems or mental health issues. This woman is a petite primary school teacher. It is not what he expected. Not what he expected at all.

DC Turner will be surprised too. He is sorry that he will have to tell her; that is his main concern. And he wonders what DCI Ross will say, DCI Ross, who is *on the side of women*. He sighs. ‘Can you come to the station and make a statement, Mr Williams?’ he says.

‘If I have to.’

‘Yes Mr Williams, I’m afraid you do.’

~

DC Turner looks at him as if he has just told her that her mother is waiting to be questioned in interview room G09.

‘What?’ she says, her eyes wide.

‘Well that’s what he says. Who knows?’

She shakes her head.

He wants to hold her, to comfort her. At times like this he finds it very difficult to restrain himself. He knows it is his own wife he should be comforting. But it is DC Turner whom he *wants* to comfort.

‘This job is full of surprises,’ he says. ‘You never get used to it.’

She looks at him and shakes her head.

‘Sadly, it doesn’t always pay to think the best of people,’ he says.

No,’ she says. She takes a deep breath, composes herself. ‘So we get a statement from him. Question her under caution.’

He nods.

She purses her lips. ‘I look forward to hearing what they’ve got to say.’

DI Johnson enjoys his morning commute. A chance to clarify his thoughts, sort the useful from what isn't of use. He could drive, but that would mean thinking about the driving. He likes the walk to the station and then the train to Kingston. A little over half an hour in total.

It is a late November day, lit by winter sunlight. The sun is out, but there is no real heat coming from it. His breath unfurls in front of him as he cuts down Market Place, past the pubs and bars. The windows of Bentalls, the department store, are full of Christmas displays already. A sledge is perched on a snowdrift, presents piled high inside. Father Christmas is in the next window along, with some children and more presents. He is all smiles, so are the children. DI Johnson enjoys the display, despite the fact that it isn't even December yet. He thinks of Christmas with Sheila and the boys. Carols on Christmas Eve; mulled wine; creeping upstairs after midnight with the boys' stockings.

He goes through his morning's itinerary in his mind. A meeting with the DCI as usual. A briefing on a consultation paper. Health and safety stuff.

For no obvious reason he thinks of the smell of the boys' hair when they were young. Fresh, clean, comforting. A great comfort, always.

Beautiful, innocent boys.

He hangs his coat up and puts his jacket on the back of his chair. It is twenty past eight. Some of the others are already in; early meetings, interviews. He can remember when he used to get in at nine. Sometimes half past, if they had been to the pub the previous night. *Now you have to fill in a form if you want to go to the pub.* He remembers someone saying that the other day. One of the older officers. It made him smile.

DC Turner isn't in yet. Said she was going to be late. Hygienist, or something. He doesn't know what that is, hygienist. Sounds like some sort of women's problem.

He glances at her seat. It looks more than empty. Not just empty but lacking *her* in it. It is difficult to explain, but she has an importance in his mind. When she isn't there, something seems to be missing, somehow. It is a lesser place, a room she is not in.

He sits at his desk. He has a little spare time before his first meeting and can do some more checks on Mrs Williams.

No entries appear when he types in her surname, so he tries again with her maiden name - Robinson. Still nothing, although he finds out that her first name is in fact Constance. Constance Williams. He likes the sound of it. It sounds like a friendly aunt, or a nun, perhaps. *Sister Constance.* He enjoys these little finds.

He begins to search newspapers, databases. Presses buttons, scans screens. The Limpet, his colleagues used to call him in the early days. Because he wouldn't stop searching, would go on until he had what he wanted, sometimes after cases were already closed. He just couldn't let go; he had to know.

When he realised he wasn't going to go any further in the force, something gave way inside him. He was no longer The Limpet. Now he is only The Limpet for DC Turner.

He is not really concentrating on his search, not expecting to find anything, when something catches his eye. A small article in a local paper.

The Guildford Times

Friday 18 June 1982

Local hero injured in line of duty

Guildford resident Jonathan Robinson, 39, is recovering in Royal Surrey County Hospital after sustaining injuries while on active duty in Northern Ireland.

Captain Robinson, a bomb disposal specialist serving with 321 EOD Company of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, Blackdown Barracks, is said to be 'stable', with every chance of making a full recovery. His injury is thought to have been sustained in the course of defusing an IRA bomb. 321 EOD's mascot is 'Felix', the cat with nine lives.

Capt. Robinson is married, with two young children. His wife, Tessa, could not be contacted for comment.

DI Turner is intrigued by these local articles from years ago. Little insights into a life. Often just a few lines, like this. If he had gone to university he would have studied history. He likes to look into the past. It is easier than the present. Nothing changes in

the past. Even the worst things that happen are safely locked away. And the good things stay like that forever.

All the addresses tally, although the family moved shortly afterwards. The army would have been sensitive about that kind of thing, he supposes; someone must have got a telling off at the newspaper. But there is a sense of old-fashioned patriotism about it that he likes, pride in a local citizen who has done something for his country.

Summer 1982. He would have been twenty, then. Working at the local factory. He bought his first car that summer. Falling apart, even when he bought it. An old MG, British Racing Green, with light patches of filler. It only cost a couple of hundred pounds. He remembers driving all the way to London in it. When he thinks of that time now, it seems like three hundred years ago, not thirty.

Thirty years. It makes him think. He can get the records about the incident now. It wouldn't be strictly according to regulations, since no one has been charged; but it is only him who will see it. And DCI Ross.

And DC Turner, too. He imagines her smile. *Fascinating.*

He will do the paperwork and hope the file arrives before it is too late.

She is sitting in the tastefully wooden interior of a coffee shop, in the centre of Kingston. She imagines she must look dreadful. As though what is in her mind must show on the outside, too. Around her people seem to be talking too loudly, laughing with a kind of manic intensity. She wishes she was in the gloom of her living-room, being watched over by the dancing dog, in the calm.

Nicki puts two large flat whites on the table, along with two cellophane-wrapped packets of biscuits, which rustle, noticeably.

‘I feel really terrible,’ Nicki says, with a restrained smile. ‘David being at ours, while you’re at home all on your own.’

Connie searches Nicki for signs that she is taking some enjoyment from the situation, finds none and looks down at her biscuit; it is topped with large chocolate pieces, which seem unnecessary, somehow. ‘It’s not your fault,’ she replies.

‘No, I know but... anyway I hope you two can work things out.’

Connie wonders if David has said anything about what happened, but it is clear from Nicki’s look of, what – sympathy? – that he hasn’t.

‘Everyone has their... wobbles,’ Nicki says.

Connie nods, but really she wants to reach across the table and grasp Nicki by the arm and squeeze it hard, until she agrees she will make David ring her. She wants to take her hand in hers and break down in tears, sob into her soft palm.

Nicki smiles at her, a watery smile containing plenty of – yes – sympathy, but no actual ideas about how to make things better. Luckily Connie has her own ideas.

‘I haven’t seen David very much,’ Nicki says, as if in answer to what she is thinking. ‘They’re off in the pub, most of the time.’ She laughs; perhaps a snort more than a laugh.

She wonders how Nicki feels about Sam being in the pub with David *most of the time*. Leaving her alone at home, like Connie. Or perhaps she has more than that in her life? More friends to have coffee with, more friends to have cocktails with.

She imagines David and Sam sitting on a wooden bench in a pub near his office, loosening their ties, coming back from the bar with pints and packets of crisps, talking about old times, the way men do, then getting on to the subject of *her*.

She’s always... She won’t let me... She doesn’t understand...

Even if he hasn’t told him what really happened she can imagine the things he says.

She does not grip Nicki’s arm. Instead, she smiles and thanks her for meeting her. As Nicki says goodbye, looking at her sadly, Connie suddenly sees them as two lonely women.

‘I just don’t want to be part of this anymore.’

It was such a ridiculous thing to say, like a line he’d heard on television or something.

‘You haven’t ever really been part of this,’ she said.

She'd been going out with him for a little over two years, ever since she had moved in with Liz and Lydia from teacher-training. A refurbished flat on the top floor of a big house in Brixton.

Now, she couldn't even remember why they had started going out; what she had felt about him in the beginning. When she had first met him in the pub, she had known they would go to bed together. But now she couldn't recall what that feeling had been, exactly; or rather she couldn't recall it in relation to him.

'Typical, that's so typical,' he said, rolling his eyes and throwing his arms around.

'Go on then, leave,' she said.

'I will.'

He turned and went into the hallway and she followed him, her footsteps clipped on the stripped floorboards. She got to him before he'd had a chance to reach the front door and lunged forward and pushed him hard in the back. He fell against the door. When he turned around the look of anger on his face didn't look quite right. He took a stride towards her and pushed her on the shoulder with the heel of his hand; not hard, but enough to make her angry. She lifted her hand and slapped him around the side of the face. It made the sound of a wet towel hitting a wall.

His mouth fell open, and for a moment he looked as though he was going to cry. Then he turned and rushed out of the flat, slamming the front door behind him.

She stood there for a while watching the back of the closed door; at first she felt guilty but then gradually she started to feel glad that she'd done it, proud. Liz and Lydia had told her she should find someone else, someone who valued her, but she hadn't understood what they meant at the time. Now she did.

She would find someone who valued her.

DI Johnson has bought a joint of beef, and is doing a roast. Yorkshire puddings, the lot. He would do anything for his sons. Of course he would. That is the way you feel about your children. And he feels he has to try even harder, to make up for what has happened to their mother.

He doesn't want them to know. They would be upset, blame her; him too probably. They depend on them to be the same people every time they come home. They can't be allowed to see the vodka bottles in the cupboards, to know the reason their mother looks constantly tired, has that lined, sallow skin, that look of permanent incomprehension.

They think it is something to do with the menopause. He has let them think that by dropping in the odd comment about her *time of life*. Carefully chosen words, so that he cannot be accused of lying. That is enough for them. They blow air between their lips; look relieved. They don't talk to her about it of course, it is not something they feel they can discuss. There is something vaguely distasteful about it to them, he can see that. They just eat the food he gives them, tell him all about their lives. The stories make him feel tired. He can't imagine how they have the energy for it all. Parties. Girlfriends. He used to do that sort of thing himself, of course. But he is no longer that person. That enthusiastic young man, that *optimist*. Optimism is of course

the privilege of the young. To be an optimist you have to have a future. He only has a present, stretching out in front of him, inertly.

He loves his sons, but he can no longer easily remember the time when they were young. The two little boys he sat next to at bedtime, thumbs in mouths, hard little heads against his shoulder. He would put his arm around them, utter some comforting words, but really he would be thinking about something else; about work, probably. In the days when he thought he could *get on*.

Later, he would fall asleep in front of the football and when he woke up in the cold, dark hours of the morning, Sheila would have gone to bed and he would close his eyes again and he would feel a sense of shame that along with everything else, all those other things, he wasn't even capable of that.

The boys arrive together at midday. They burst through the front door together and DI Johnson, momentarily surprised, feels as though he has been caught in the act of doing something he shouldn't. But of course there is nothing; nothing apart from what is in his mind. Nothing apart from DC Turner.

They stop for a moment when they see him in the hallway wearing an apron – a butcher's apron, blue, with vertical white stripes. It is not something they are used to seeing. He didn't cook very much in the old days. Now he's the only one who does it. They narrowly avoid a collision, as they divert their trajectory towards the living room.

'Still got *Sky*?' Mike shouts, over his shoulder.

He keeps meaning to cancel it. His subscription must be costing him hundreds. Thousands. But the number you have to call is one of those ones with *this* option, *that*

option. It takes forever; he never seems to have enough time for it. Anyway, he likes having it, for the boys.

‘Yes,’ he shouts back.

He hears the television go on and peers in on his way to the kitchen. ‘*Hello*,’ he says, raising his voice to match the volume.

‘When are we getting a Christmas tree, Dad?’ Chris says, pressing buttons on the remote control.

‘It’s not even December.’

‘But all the shops have got decorations up now,’ Mike says.

‘Well in this house we wait until December,’ he says. It is a nice feeling standing here, speaking to them like this. As though they are boys again and he is their dad.

Chris makes a disgruntled noise and finds a football match. They both settle back on the sofa.

‘Drinks?’ he asks.

‘Lager,’ they say, together.

He nods and turns and leaves the room.

He likes having them here. But it reminds him what hard work it was. Sheila did most of it, of course. It was all she ever did. Looking after things, taking care of them all.

He divides a can of lager into two glasses and pads back to the living-room. From the hallway he can hear muffled thuds upstairs. He wonders what she does, up there. It sounds rhythmic, as if she is opening and closing drawers, or looking for something in the wardrobe; sometimes it sounds as if she is jumping up and down on the bed.

She might not be doing any of those things. It is just what he imagines.

He checks the joint of beef, the roast potatoes; chops some vegetables. It is at times like this that he wouldn't mind a drink, himself. He stopped drinking at home when he realised what Sheila was doing. A nice cold glass of lager would go down a treat now, though.

He pauses, looking out on to the square back garden, at the whirly washing line, standing saggily in the middle of the lawn; at the shed containing deflated footballs, rusty garden tools, and he thinks about DC Turner. About how much he would like her to be here now, smiling at him, thanking him for inviting her. *Such lovely boys*. It would make everything better. He wouldn't notice the sad washing line, the rotting shed. He would only see her. Because she makes everything better.

Because he loves her.

When he goes back to the living-room, instead of DC Turner it is Sheila who is sitting in the armchair. The boys are still watching the football, ignoring her; but not in an impolite way. It is as though they respect that if their mother wants to come and sit in a chair next to them without saying anything, then that is all right. It is quite touching really. In the light from the sliding-doors to the garden he sees the jagged lines in her skin, the dryness. The boys think she is tired and old. There is some truth in that. But there is more to it, of course.

It is as if he is married to a different woman now. As if he has lost his old wife and is still getting used to the new one. He should get her to go to the doctor's, really, but what can he do? *I think you should see someone*. Everything would collapse, the brittle structure of their marriage, their life. He is not sure if he is doing it for her or for him. She is old enough to know what she is doing, after all. But perhaps there is more to it than that. Perhaps he really wants her to carry on poisoning herself.

Because that's what she is doing, really. Perhaps he wants to be rid of her and to be able to start again. With DC Turner.

'Okay boys,' he announces to the room. 'Ten minutes.' The way he does it reminds him of when they were young. The looks on their faces remind him of that too.

'Okay, Dad,' they say.

He glances at the television. There is something reassuring about sport. The roar of the crowd. Mankind all together, unified in one activity. Something you don't get so much nowadays. Nowadays it is everyone doing their own thing on some device or other. There is no community. Just everyone for himself.

Not like the News. He'd thought that was real, certain. But now they say it's all fake. Just made up.

Sheila looks as though she is in pain as she drinks her coffee, after lunch. He more or less forced her to have it, as he would make a young child have a drink. He has noticed that the more alcohol she drinks the less she drinks anything else. He wonders how she exists on just vodka and one meal a day.

The boys are back in the living room again, with cans of beer now, forget the glasses. He feels a little as if he has lost control of things. They are not bad boys but they don't think about others very much.

That's rich, someone might say, coming from him.

He goes to the doorway and watches them. There used to be so much love in this family. Now there is nothing. He wants love, craves it. But what can he do? It is just the way things have turned out. Others have far worse problems. He sees it at

work. Drugs; violence; abuse. He is grateful for what he has. But of course he wants something more.

That is what everyone wants, surely?

He arrives in the reception area his customary eight minutes late and his initial observations of Mr Williams suggest that the man is not here under false pretences. He is sitting on one of the tubular chairs lined up against the wall, looking unconcerned. The last time he was at the station he seemed guarded. This time he is exhibiting all the signs of someone who is here to make an honest statement. DI Johnson is surprised. He has been harbouring doubts about the man's integrity, and has never liked him, if he is honest. But perhaps he has been unfair. Perhaps his judgement has been coloured by his assumptions; by DC Turner's assumptions.

He extends his hand and the man grips it firmly. There is a look in his eyes that matches his body. Eager, unselfconscious. DI Johnson finds himself warming to him and smiles encouragingly. At this man he thought was a wifebeater.

He ushers him through the turnstiles, as he does everyone who comes to the station by appointment. Not like the ones brought in off the streets. Dragged in kicking and swearing. It often feels as though they are at war with everyone outside. With everyone who isn't police. It is easy to feel like that. As though they are the only guardians of justice and everyone else is bent on criminality.

They arrive at the interview room; the same room they spoke to the man in last time, the room they saw his wife in too.

Seconds later, DC Turner joins them. He imagines she has been watching from some vantage point. They scrape chairs backwards, organise cups of tea with Gemma. In the beginning it was DC Turner who went and made the tea. He is proud of how far she has come.

‘So, Mr Williams, thank you for coming in to talk to us today,’ he says. ‘We’re going to ask you some questions, so that we can get things moving with your statement. I’ll be making notes during our conversation and in due course we’ll have it ready for you to sign. Is everything clear so far?’

The man nods. Some of the conviction that he had in reception appears to have left him, but he seems prepared for what they are about to do. This is always the most difficult time. Persuading friends and family to make statements about someone they love. Loved.

‘I’ll start with the incidence of abuse you allege.’

A look of distaste, or more likely embarrassment, passes across the man’s face.

‘When did it occur?’

He thinks for a moment. ‘It was on our anniversary. September.’ He pauses. ‘September the twenty-first. But it wasn’t the first time.’

He looks pleadingly at DI Johnson. A big man with the look of a child, the DI thinks. He is becoming visibly uncomfortable now. The smooth skin by his nose is beginning to shine with sweat and he is shifting in his chair.

‘Well, we’ll start with that one. Could you describe in more detail the nature of the abuse, please.’

‘It was in the kitchen. She hit me,’ he says, then pauses. ‘With a bottle-opener. One you open wine with. Heavy...’ He makes a pumping motion with his hand.

DI Johnson has to work hard to resist the temptation to laugh. ‘It wasn’t in the bathroom, then,’ DI Johnson says with a smile, in what he considers to be a humorous, collegiate manner. The comment does not appear to be appreciated.

‘Mr Williams,’ DC Turner says, ‘could you explain why you didn’t tell us about this earlier? Why you told both the hospital, and us, that your injury was an accident?’

DI Johnson looks sideways at her. It is a bold move. Not something he would have done at this stage. Of course he is well aware that the man has lied to them, but it could unsettle him, to point it out at this stage.

The man hesitates, looks at DI Johnson, then back at DC Turner.

‘I didn’t want my wife to get into trouble.’

There is a look of such innocence on his face when he says it, that DI Johnson’s first instinct is to believe him completely.

‘Or it could be that you’re fabricating this story, to cover up what has really been happening,’ says DC Turner.

He is not sure, now, about her approach. It seems a bit too much, this sceptical line. She didn’t mention she would be doing this when they discussed it beforehand. There is nothing to say his wife hasn’t done what he says she has. They could just have got it wrong.

‘I could be,’ the man says. ‘But it would be quite an elaborate hoax, don’t you think?’

It is the first time DI Johnson has seen this side of him in the station. The one his colleagues must see at work, he imagines. The one he saw in the pub.

DC Turner looks a little deflected, but not put off. ‘We hear a lot of things in this room, Mr Williams.’

It sounds like one of DI Johnson's lines. In fact it probably is.

The man's smile fades. It is what always happens. They think for a moment they have gained the upper hand, then things quickly re-balance again. It is not surprising really, police officers are used to interviewing; the people they interview are not.

There is a pause. DI Johnson shifts in his seat, merely because the silence needs to be broken. 'You have said you no longer live with your wife, Mr Williams.'

'Yes, I didn't want there to be an opportunity for any more accusations.'

DI Johnson nods and writes in his notebook

'Getting back to the incidents you mentioned, Mr Williams,' DC Turner says. 'What was the context? Was there any provocation?'

DI Johnson prefers this line of questioning. Not allowing Williams to get away with anything, but staying on his side. They make a good team, the two of them. She seems to value his experience. He... well he loves everything about her.

'No, I didn't do anything like that, if that's what you mean.'

He seems to be a little annoyed now. DI Johnson can't tell if it is DC Turner who is annoying him or if he is thinking about the incidents with his wife. Either way, her tactic seems to be working.

'Why did she attack you do you think, in that case?'

It is an excellent question. DI Johnson awaits the answer with interest. Takes a quick sip of his tea, now a drinkable temperature.

'She had a miscarriage. I don't think she's well.'

DC Turner looks at him, as if trying to work out if he's serious or not. 'Well, we can seek a more experienced medical opinion on that. Getting back to the night of your anniversary. What exactly happened?'

‘Well, I’d had to stay late at work.’

‘Is that often the case?’

He thinks for a moment. Whether this is for show or not, DI Johnson is not sure.

‘Yes. Quite often. We’re busy, at work.’

There is a pause. DI Johnson knows DC Turner well enough to know that she is unlikely be impressed that Mr Williams was late home on his anniversary. He can almost understand Mrs Williams’s anger himself. He writes in his notebook again.

‘Did you do anything?’

‘No, she just attacked me. He motions to his forehead.’

DI Johnson leans forward a little. The scar on his temple still looks prominent, but he notices other marks at this distance: on the bridge of his nose, by his eye. Inflicted in the course of his rugby, probably. He looks down at his notes. The nurse does not mention the cut in any detail. Her report is more concerned with Mrs Williams’ injury.

‘And the extensive bruising to your wife’s arm?’ DC Turner says. ‘That was...?’

‘Self-defence,’ Mr Williams contributes, obligingly. ‘I wanted to stop her hitting me again.’

‘Thank you, Mr Williams,’ DI Johnson says to him. ‘We’ll be in touch when your statement is ready.’

As he says goodbye to the man, for the first time DI Johnson realises what it was that he saw in him in the pub that first time. It was *shame*.

Days pass and then weeks pass. She has learnt to take a handkerchief with her whenever she leaves the house; to reward herself with little treats: cups of tea, cakes, chocolate; she has learnt not to think about things for too long, to *dwell*. These are the things she has learnt: *strategies* they call them at school. But of course they are just strategies, not solutions.

Something she does now is to go to pubs on her own and nurse a drink, while around her disappointed middle-aged men read newspapers. That is one of her strategies.

Something else she does is to contact her friends on *Facebook* and call the ones who are not on it. She arranges coffees and drinks. Some of them she talks to about what has happened, others she does not. That is also one of her strategies.

Another thing she does is to go to Sam and Nicki's house in the evenings and loiter in the shadows where it is darkest, by the edge of the arc of light from the streetlamp, and attempt to identify activity inside, beyond half-closed curtains or blinds not fully shut, trying to catch sight of David.

That is not one of her strategies.

She has not spoken to him; he will not speak to her. She does not now hold out much hope of his return. She feels sorry for him, he seems to be very upset, still.

Of course she still loves him, she cannot just forget about him. She knows what she did and she knows what has happened since, and it froths and foams inside her in waves of sadness.

She just happened to be looking in the direction of the door when he came in, it was just a coincidence; but she was the first to see him arrive, ducking under the door frame, a guarded look on his face as he scanned the pub, in spite of his size. She knew who he was straight away. The man Liz had been set up with. But she also knew that she wanted him.

As he neared the group his size became even more obvious. Something about it was comforting. She noticed the bent nose, the scars on his face. But somehow those imperfections made him even more attractive.

Suddenly he was next to her, and she didn't know where to look, felt a lifting in her stomach.

'Hello,' he said. 'I'm David.' He held out his hand and smiled and she could tell he felt the same as her.

'Connie,' she said, smiling back at him and shaking his hand.

When she turned to her friend she saw recognition in her eyes. Liz was being introduced to David now, but of course it was already too late. He was showing only a polite interest in her. Liz knew what had just happened. Everyone must have known what had just happened.

'Can I get you a drink?' David said, turning back to Connie.

She nodded, could tell it wasn't the usual empty offer, that he was interested in her. That made her stomach lift some more. She asked for a white wine and when he offered to buy Liz a drink she knew he was just being polite. If she hadn't known that,

she would have tried to distract him, make him talk to her, keep him to herself. She wanted so much to talk to him, leave with him, spend the night with him. It was an urge rather than a decision. Such a strong feeling. She had never had a feeling like this before.

They left before the others. It seemed ridiculous to stay when they just wanted to be with each other; somehow they had agreed this between themselves, without saying anything.

They skirted around Clapham Common on the way to her flat. Usually she felt a little scared of its dark, unseeable expanses at night, but tonight everything felt different, with David's arm around her.

~

She sits in the living-room with a lukewarm cup of tea in her hand. It has darkened since she sat down but she hasn't the heart to turn a light on. There is a message from David on the phone. She was excited, at first, to hear his voice; hoped that she would hear something reassuring from him. Until she heard what he had to say: *I think it's better if I stay here for the moment.*

She thinks about Sam, Nicki and him all there, together. Her here, on her own. Even the man in the armchair is no longer here. She would like to see him again. But he and David have both left for good, it seems.

Her period has arrived. It was overdue and for a while she thought she might be pregnant, which would have had some sort of poetry to it. She was beginning to wonder what David would do when she told him. But then it came, and all her imaginings vanished. She thinks often about the baby she once had inside her. She

imagines it was a girl. It gives her comfort to imagine that. She can imagine a whole life, for this girl.

It would not to be a life like hers. She thinks of her parents; her father leaving one morning, just like that.

She gazes across the room at the dancing dog. Its expression seems to change, according to her mood. Now, in the lightless gloom of the room there is something about the angle of its lolling tongue that suggests sceptical amusement. A little like the expression on the man's – her father's – face in the armchair.

If it is him in the dream, it would explain why he left. She had always thought it was because of that time when she was watching, through the gap in the door. She tries to remember exactly what she saw, that evening. But all she can think is what she has thought all these years. She tries again, tries to clear the cache from her memory, tries to understand. She thinks again and sees the same thing. Her father marching across the room and slapping her mother. Her father slapping, her mother being slapped.

And then she realises. The blind spot in her view of the room, where it became obscured for a moment. Her father marched into that spot and disappeared and then there was the sound. Of course she couldn't blame her mother, when she was the one she was left with. She had to blame her father - it was the easiest way.

And if it was her mother who did that, then it could have been her mother who left him in that armchair with blood all over him and that look in his face. A look of bemusement, she now imagines.

How could she do that to me?

She thinks of David.

How could she do that to me?

She can ask her father. Perhaps he will tell her the truth and then she can understand and everything will make sense, and David will come back and they can start all over again.

Sheila has been to the shops and is sitting at the kitchen table with the newspaper spread out in front of her, carrier bags still on the floor. In the bags he knows there will be biscuits, crisps, chocolate. Nothing that has any nutritional value to it; things she used to buy as treats for the children, mostly. She stacks them up in the cupboards and nibbles at them occasionally.

He is actually pleased when he sees these packets, since it means she is eating *something*. When she comes back from the shops he always gives her time to take out the bottles before he goes into the kitchen himself.

‘All right, love?’ he says and moves to the fridge.

She nods in the direction of her paper.

He pours himself a glass of apple juice and opens a kitchen cupboard. Dinner tonight will be a tin of some stew, with rice, perhaps, a few leaves of salad if there are any. It’s not something he is proud of giving to someone else. Not that she really eats anything he puts in front of her. She just prods at it, sips minutely from her small glass of water.

He picks up the bags and puts them on the work surface; Sheila doesn’t seem to notice. Then he starts putting the contents in the cupboard. At the bottom of one of the bags he touches something smooth and hard. He looks inside and sees a small

bottle of vodka, a brand he doesn't know. A quarter bottle. He can't just hand it to her. He imagines her face. *You left this in the bag*. He knows they are there – everywhere – but he never sees them. He tries not to see them.

He feels his cheeks redden. He can't put the bag back on the floor; but he can't leave it on the side either. He decides to take it out quickly and put it in the cupboard with the other things. She is not watching anyway. Perhaps she will be embarrassed when she finds it there, but at least he won't *see* her embarrassment.

He considers for a moment putting it quietly in the bin, under the wrappers and the teabags, but what good would it do? She would just buy another one. Wouldn't even notice it had gone, in all likelihood. So he puts it next to the chocolate chip cookies and the *Cadbury's Dairy Milk*. It looks out of place. The thing that has taken away his wife and replaced her with someone he doesn't even know.

He tries to imagine the feeling of unscrewing the top, *crack*, putting his lips to the bottle and sipping the clear, warm liquid. It is an unappealing prospect. He can't imagine what would persuade him to do it. He needs to be in control for work; ready. At his age more than ever. It makes it even more difficult to understand why she does it. Something deep inside her. Some pain.

DC Turner would no doubt be horrified by his life. Bemused that two people can live together without there being anything between them. Any *intimacy*. But it is not his choice. It is just what has happened. He is Sheila's carer now; he has to remind himself of that. He is doing all this for her. For his wife, who cannot do it for herself.

~

Before making dinner, DI Johnson switches on the television, searches the sports channels. The sports channels he pays for and never watches: so many of them. He wants to see what it is all about, rugby. What sort of man Williams is. It is outside his realm of experience. Football, yes. At school. Then *Match of the Day* for a while. The boys have never been interested in playing sport. They watch it on television. And there are the computer games. It seems to be all they do now. Even at their age. But they're not bad boys. Bright lads with university educations. Anything is possible for them, now. Although in twenty years' time the possibilities will be fewer. What happens to all these possibilities, he wonders. He didn't go to university like they did, is unusual in that now. A relic. The type of person people his sons' age call old. Someone they lump in with pensioners, the elderly, people in care homes. But not DC Turner. He knows she sees him differently. Her senior, but not old. Not like her dad or something. If he was George Clooney it would be different again. He would be someone she might want to spend time with, *go out with*. He thinks about the two of them together for a moment. It is too much. He can't bear it. But who knows, he might win the lottery. Become eligible. Some version of George Clooney. It could happen. He shouldn't tell himself it is impossible. Perhaps, even at his age, there are still possibilities, after all.

There is a lot of smiling in the rugby. It is a good natured crowd. Raising their plastic pint-glasses to the cameras. That is the first thing he notices. No chanting, booing, swearing. Nothing you'd mind your children seeing.

On the pitch it's different. The tackling makes him wince. The *hits*, the commentators call them, appearing to relish the contact. The harder the *hit*, the more approving the comment. As if there is some sort of honour in it, or something. *Thud*. A man lies face down on the ground, leaking blood from his mouth; arms and legs

spread-eagled. *Thump*. A limp body is attended to by latex-gloved medics. After a while a sort of golf cart arrives and removes it, strapped to a coffin-like tray. The body raises a hand as it leaves the field. A member of the opposition runs over and grasps it, salutes the body. It is an unfamiliar scene to him. Not like the hopping and skipping footballers. The childish anger, the head-butting. The young ones do it too, now. He sees it. They learn from what men do on the football pitch. *You touch me, I headbutt you.*

It seems to him that rugby players are warriors, without the armour, the weaponry. It is impressive, he warms to it. No pretence. No feigning injury. No talking back to the referee. One big man – he must be six six, bigger perhaps – says something, something meek, not like the snarling of footballers, the pack around the referee like animals; and the referee reaches into his pocket and brandishes a yellow card and the man has to go off. He sits by the side of the pitch on a chair that is too small for him as if he's done something wrong in class, looking penitent, embarrassed.

Yes, he likes it. He can see now what Mr Williams sees in it. Playing it would be another matter, of course. He wonders about the sensation of being tackled. Then he wonders what Mr Williams felt as he was attacked by his five foot nothing wife. Even if he is used to that sort of thing it would be a shock, he imagines, your wife doing that to you.

He feels as though he could watch the whole match now. He particularly enjoys the kickers as they line up a shot at the posts. Looking down at the ball, then up at the posts, then down at the ball again; making strange shapes with their bodies. The moments of stillness before they launch the kick. The jerky, stuttering steps, then a huge swipe of the boot.

But he cannot continue to watch, he has to make dinner; and anyway he would probably just fall asleep in front of the television, wake up hungry in the early hours.

It has given him something to think about, though. Some insight, into the mind of Mr Williams.

She is on the train, on her way to interview her father. She is the interrogator now: first David, then the police, now her. But she is not the only one. Everyone asks questions, everyone wants answers. You just have to switch on the television to know that. *What is? Who was?* The who and the what and the why. The why is the most difficult, of course.

She does not know the why of the man in the dream-that-is-not-a-dream. That is what she is still trying to discover. But she is optimistic that she will be able to answer all these questions soon. That when she has seen her father she will be closer to the answers.

She sees her father's car as her train arrives. It reminds her of coming back from university with a hangover and a bagful of washing, her mother waiting for her in the car park. It was never her father, of course.

He greets her as she gets in. They exchange kisses. He smells of shaving-cream and mints.

'Hello, Dad,' she says.

'You're looking well,' he replies, then disengages the handbrake.

She wonders what he sees when he looks at her. Perhaps just someone thirty years younger than him. But that is the old anger, she realises. The old anger; the new understanding. It is still difficult to remember, to separate.

They move off into the grey morning.

Her father parks outside the building in which he lives with his partner: a square, white thirties' block. She imagines the woman sitting at the kitchen table, having a coffee, reading a magazine, like her mother. She is not invited in, but then again she has never wanted to be invited in.

The old anger, she tells herself.

The pub has a blackboard covered in elaborate chalk writing, mismatched tables and chairs and some sofas in one corner. The clock shows that it is a little after eleven thirty; the two members of staff are still organising things behind the bar.

Connie orders a sparkling water.

'Is that it?' her father says, pulling a face.

She nods, and when her father has ordered his half-pint of bitter they make their way to a table by one of the large windows.

The sun emerges from behind the cloud cover and she can feel its heat through the glass. 'How's Bridget?' she says.

'Oh, fine,' her father replies, looking down at the table. It has become so familiar, this gesture, over the years, whenever the subject of his partner comes up. She used to think it was all his fault, but that was the old anger.

'What about you?' her father says, looking up again with the expression Connie still remembers from when he smoked; as though he was considering something impossibly complex.

‘Me? Oh, fine,’ she says. ‘Look, Dad, there are some questions I’d like to ask you,’ she continues, reaching for her handbag and retrieving her notebook. She has checked through the questions numerous times; even on the train, earlier, she was looking through them, as the other people around her read newspapers, talked on phones.

Connie the interrogator.

It is strange to be sitting there with her father, after becoming used to seeing his face on the man in the dream-that-is-not-a-dream; the man at the centre of her investigation. Disappointing, almost, to see this animated version. She studies him for a while, tries to glean clues from his expression, but finds nothing. He sits opposite her, a little hunched over his beer. He appears to have dessicated, hardened over time. He has lost most of his hair, and what remains floats above his ears like a silvery pair of headphones. In some places his skin seems to have tightened and darkened, in others it has begun to sag. There is a sad inevitability about his appearance now, the hint of so much that is lost.

She thinks about what she suspects her mother did, as she pulls out her notebook, flattens the pages with her palm and picks up a pencil.

‘Dad,’ she says, ‘I have suspicions about certain events that might have happened, in the past.’

Her father looks at her blankly, his drink pausing on its way down to the table.

‘I think you may have been a soldier, involved in the intelligence services.’

For a moment he looks as though he is going to laugh, then instead his forehead wrinkles. ‘What on earth makes you think that?’

‘Where we lived, your trips to Belfast...’

‘Connie, I went to Belfast because I was a carpet buyer and that’s where they were made.’

‘I know that’s what you told us, but...’

‘That was because it was the truth.’

‘What about Mum?’ she says. ‘Did she attack you when we were young? Isn’t that why you left?’

‘Connie,’ her father says. ‘This is ridiculous. I left because your mother and I weren’t getting on any more.’

He looks at her for a moment, then puts his hand on her forearm. ‘Listen, Connie,’ he says, ‘we’re worried about you.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Your mother, and Marcus. And me, of course.’

She is surprised by the *we*. There hasn’t been a *we* in her family for years, just an *I* and a *you* and a *him*. But it has a strange effect on her; she starts to cry, and through the tears, as she is reaching for a tissue and her father is giving her a handkerchief, she finds herself saying ‘David’s left me, Dad.’

And then her father’s arm is around her shoulders and there are tears dotting her notebook and she is thinking to herself that it is all she seems to be saying nowadays, that David has left her. There seems to be nothing else to her anymore. She feels like the debris of some celestial body, arcing through the dark into nothingness.

But that is the old anger, she tells herself again. That is the old anger and she must instead concentrate on the new understanding.

‘We should go down to dinner,’ Connie said, looking at her watch. Her parents had given it to her for her sixteenth birthday. A brown leather strap, the face surrounded

by fragments of glass meant to look like diamonds. A girl's watch on the wrist of a woman.

'Come on, there's still some wine left.' David poured the remainder into her glass, then grinned, leant forward and kissed her.

Three hours earlier, when she'd arrived home, he had appeared in the hallway with a smile and a packed bag. 'We're going away for the weekend,' was all he would say. Then he'd driven her to this hotel in a dip among the hills in the Peak District, with its high ceilings and Michelin star.

It was as though Connie had only become an adult since she'd met David. They went for meals at restaurants, to the theatre, the ballet; things she'd thought only other people did, before.

'There's a story I haven't told you,' David said, as they sat at the low table in the middle of the room, 'about my dad.'

They talked to each other about their families all the time. It was as though it was helping them to clear the ground of their past lives, to build the foundations for what was to come.

'There was one time when he said I wasn't his son,' David said.

'What?'

'In front of everyone. He said I was too tall. So I couldn't be his son. I must be someone else's.'

'Perhaps he was joking,' Connie said. She had met his father. He seemed like a decent man.

David shook his head. 'I can remember it clearly.'

'I'm sorry.'

'What makes someone do that?'

'I don't know.'

'I mean, I was just a boy.'

He was still in his suit, sitting there, tie askew. Big, but there was something about him of the little boy, too.

She shook her head. 'Perhaps he'd had a bad day. It wasn't because of you.'
She leaned forward and put her hand on his arm as he examined the ground in front of him.

'One time my dad hit my mum,' she said, abruptly.

David looked up.

'After we'd come back from our summer holiday, I saw it. Everything went wrong after that.'

‘Mrs Williams is in reception, sir,’ Gemma says.

There is something strange about the way she says it; as if she wants to add something, but doesn’t. DI Johnson wonders what, exactly.

They all sit down, DI Johnson and DC Turner on one side of the table, Mrs Williams on the other. They are not in the meeting-room; this time they are in an interview suite. Mrs Williams looks as though she is unwell to DI Johnson, or perhaps not getting enough sleep.

He unwraps a blank CD and loads it into the machine. Prepares to go through the disclaimer. It is like a monologue, a speech. Some of Churchill’s were probably shorter.

‘Mrs Williams,’ he begins, ‘this interview will be recorded, and this light indicates the recording is taking place. At the conclusion of the interview, you will be given a notice explaining what will happen to the recording.’

‘The date is Friday December 12th, the time is 1.10pm, the location Kingston Police Station. My name is DI Johnson and also present is DC turner who will identify herself now.’

‘DC Turner present.’

‘Mrs Williams,’ DI Johnson continues, ‘you do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, now, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. You are not under arrest and are free to leave at any time. You are also entitled to free legal advice. Do you understand?’

Mrs Williams nods at first, then realises she needs to speak for the recording. ‘Sorry, yes.’

It is what they all do.

‘Please state your full name, address and date of birth.’

The woman looks as though she has forgotten, for a moment. ‘Connie, *Constance*, Alice Williams, 8 Kingston Park Road, Kingston, KT2 6AA. 16th June, 1979.’

‘Thank you Mrs Williams. You are being interviewed today in relation to the statement your husband has made, in which he alleges that you have physically abused him. We would like to ask you some questions about that today. Do you understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘Your husband is no longer living with you, I believe.’

‘No, he moved out.’

‘And was that his decision?’ DC Turner asks.

‘Yes.’

Mrs Williams looks upset, possibly embarrassed. As though the fact that he is no longer there reflects badly on her, in some way. It is a guilty gesture DI Johnson recognises.

‘Mrs Williams,’ DI Johnson says, ‘have you at any time physically abused your husband?’

He looks at the woman. He can feel DC Turner looking at her too. He is sensitive to her movements, to her thoughts. Naturally, since he spends so much time considering them.

‘Yes,’ Mrs Williams says, as though it is a relief for her to say it.

It is often the way; but he hadn’t been expecting to hear it from this woman. DI Johnson takes a sideways look at DC Turner, whose forehead displays a wrinkle of concern.

‘Mrs Williams,’ DC Turner says. ‘Has your husband ever been violent towards you?’

‘No.’

‘We saw the mark on your wrist,’ DI Johnson says. ‘We have a witness from the hospital. I saw it myself.’

‘He was trying to stop me.’

There is a pause. ‘Mrs Williams,’ DC Turner says. ‘Are you covering up for him?’

The woman looks at DC Turner then shakes her head and looks down at the desk.

It seems like a guilty reaction, as if she really is concealing something. Or it could just be shame at the whole proceedings. It is difficult to tell what these nuances are. They can be made to fit any version of events. He knows which version DC Turner wants them to fit. He suspects Mr and Mrs Williams are both telling the truth. But he has seen instances of great deception in his time. Unusually skilled liars, cheats, manipulators. People who can shift any situation to suit themselves. Or who try,

anyway. Some know they are lying; some seem to convince themselves that they are telling the truth. Some are just confused, find things difficult; find life itself difficult.

‘We just want to know the truth,’ DC Turner says. ‘So that we can protect the right person.’ She smiles.

He loves that about her. That she really does care. He only wishes that she cared about *him*.

The woman looks down at the table again. It could be guilt, it could just be sadness.

‘Mrs Williams, if there is anything you need to tell us, this is your opportunity to do so,’ DC Turner says.

The woman remains silent.

Whatever the truth is, it looks as though they are going to get nothing more out of her. He thinks of her husband. The big man. The big rugby player. He feels sorry for him for a moment. He is in a difficult position. Either people will think badly of him because he beats his wife or they will think badly of him for being beaten *by* his wife. That is how these things are. No one wins. He remembers the rugby player sitting on the sidelines after he had been sent off, knowing everyone was looking at him, thinking he’d let his team mates down. Let himself down. Let everyone down.

‘Mrs Williams, can you try to help us understand why you did it,’ he says.
‘Were there any other factors? Emotional abuse, for instance? Mitigating circumstances of some sort?’

The woman shakes her head. ‘I was angry,’ she says in a quiet voice. ‘I thought it was all his fault.’

‘What was his fault?’

‘The baby. He wouldn’t... I couldn’t think about it, but now I can.’

DI Johnson and DC Turner exchange glances.

‘Okay, Mrs Williams,’ DI Johnson, says, after a silence. ‘Thank you for your co-operation today. You are free to go, but please be aware that we will need to see you again if any charges arise as a result of what we have talked about today. Please do not travel anywhere without informing us.’

The woman nods, a hardly perceptible movement, and then, remembering the recording, says ‘yes’. She looks utterly miserable. She reaches into her bag for a tissue, which she wipes her eyes and then blows her nose with.

He wouldn’t have thought it was possible to look much worse than she did when she arrived, but she does now. She looks small and defenceless. He feels for her. She looks like she needs a hug.

‘I’m still not sure,’ DC Turner says. ‘It’s entirely possible she was acting in self-defence.’

‘I don’t know.’

They are having a debrief, after the interview. There are forms to fill in, paperwork still to do.

‘I don’t think it necessarily changes things,’ she continues. ‘Coercion to collude, under threat of violence. I think we just have to get at the truth. But it’s there, somewhere.’

‘Maybe. But it’s difficult to prove either way,’ he says. He is doubtful. After what he saw. ‘Anyway, it’s irrelevant, now. They don’t live together anymore; that should be the end of it.’

It is not as if they are having an argument, exactly, but it is a disagreement; he enjoys the spark between them. It reminds him of the arguments between him and Sheila. Shouting, screaming. In the street. Terrible. But at least they communicated. It was a sign that there was *something*.

There is nothing between him and DC Turner. But this spark of tension helps him to maintain the fantasy that there is. An argument about something small, insignificant. It is the sort of thing that will get him through to the end of the day.

He needs to call the mother of the deceased boy. There has been some news from the investigating team. CCTV footage reveals that the killer is likely to be a close friend, who is now in custody. The DCI is away, so it is up to him to call her. These calls are never easy, of course. Raking over what has happened, just when the first stage of grief is over. But then nothing about this job is easy. He just propels himself into each task with the effort he knows is required for it.

At the beginning he found it difficult. He considers himself a quiet sort of man; as a boy he liked reading, making models. Wasn't one for friends. Found his own company easier, after his parents' divorce. It was different in those days, of course. There was a sense of shame. But more than that, a feeling that his parents just weren't very interested in him.

He thinks about the contained violence of the rugby match. The man taken off the pitch on the cart. He looked as if he'd been in an RTA or something. He wonders what makes people want to do that to themselves. That morning he'd probably woken up full of hope, then a few hours later he was being wheeled off the pitch with his neck in a brace and God knows what else. Perhaps he is still in hospital. Broken back. Fractured pelvis. He might not play again.

As he picks up the phone to make the call, he thinks of one of the other players. Eyes still fixed on the ball even as blood curved its way down his cheek. Then he thinks of Mr Williams, blood spurting from the cut on his forehead. It doesn't seem like the same thing. But it is, really. All this violence. He sees it all the time. A moment's loss of consciousness, a head hitting a curb and a life can end. It can

happen so easily. He remembers one of the rugby tackles, a man's head hitting a knee that suddenly appears at the wrong time. There is nothing in the man's eyes; he drops to the pitch with his arms by his sides. His head bounces on the turf.

He took a punch, early in his career. He should have got one in first. But instead he went down. Broken nose. Fractured cheekbone. Headaches. Even now he still feels dizzy under bright lights. The man who hit him lived on the streets, had addiction problems. He didn't blame him; how could he, a man like that. But he was careful afterwards. It taught him a lesson. He is lucky that nothing like that has happened since. So many colleagues have been seriously injured. And he has been to more funerals than he should have been to, at his age.

It is there in his job every day. He tried to keep it from Sheila. From the boys. Told them if they were ever violent, they wouldn't be welcome in his house any more. They are good boys though. They'll lead good lives, he knows that. It is him he is worried about. He has tried his best. Done his job to the best of his abilities. As for his marriage, he's not sure what happened there. He likes to think he has tried his best with that too. Believes he has. But it is difficult to know. His is not the kind of marriage that his friends have. His marriage doesn't have any of that arm-in-arm, hand-holding stuff. Although it did, once. Twenty, no, thirty years ago.

He cares about Sheila. Of course he does. He doesn't know what he would do without her. He imagines getting the call, going to the hospital. Her parents are dead so it would just be him. Mourning a woman he feels he hardly knows, now.

He'll be home soon. He'll jiggle the key, step inside the silent hallway. Sheila will be in the kitchen. Perhaps she'll say hello, perhaps she won't acknowledge him. Sometimes he greets her and she stares back at him as if she can't even see what is in

front of her. At other times she looks at him as if she remembers him from a long time ago. But he knows it is just the alcohol. She doesn't know what she is doing.

He can no longer remember the old life they led. The young man with a quiff of dark hair; now the grey-haired, sunken-cheeked ghost he sees in the mornings. Without the photographic proof he wouldn't know how bad things have got. When does all that start, he wonders. It hasn't started yet for DC Turner. She is at her peak. But perhaps already there is a minute loss of suppleness in the skin around her mouth, the muscle tissue. But nothing perceptible. Nothing that in any way detracts from her beauty. Not like him. A caricature of himself. He knows that. He is old now; his interests are that of an old man. He can spend entire weeks in the garage, among the toolboxes, the saws, the sets of socket spanners. He's decent with his hands. Not like his father of course. Bringing inanimate objects back to life. Television sets, radios, toasters. In his little corner shop, stacked high with the stuff. His mother hated it. Seemed to think it was a sign of his lack of ambition. But DI Johnson loved it in there. The piles of metal, the smell of electricity in the air. His father peering through his glasses, shirtsleeves rolled up, hair greased back. It seemed to him that people respected his father. *Hello Mr Johnson, How are you getting on with my video?* It always seemed a glamorous job to him when he was a child. He loved his father, loved spending time with him; they were his happiest moments. Probably because they were not frequent. It was generally his mother, complaining about something or other. School mostly, although that wasn't really his fault, it was the boys he hung around with.

The force came along at just the right time for him. Saved him, really. He could do with being saved again, now. If he is honest, he feels a little lost.

When DC Turner comes over to him, it is the best he has felt all week. After their recent disagreement, the hint of something between them that it suggested. She has a way of making him feel as though her smile is only for him. But of course that is just because of the way he feels about her, not because of how she feels. He knows that. It is strange how the brain can play tricks on you like that. But he continues to enjoy the moment as she says hello, the smile still on her face.

‘I’ve got some news,’ she says.

‘Oh, really? What?’

She is still smiling. Now it is beginning to worry him.

‘I’m getting married!’

She looks so happy as she says it. And he realises that is the reason for her smile. Not because she is happy to see him; not even because she is in a good mood, but because of this. Because she is planning to make this commitment to someone, someone he doesn’t know. Some stranger.

‘Congratulations,’ he says with a great effort. He is no longer smiling, is unable to smile now, in fact. ‘So, who’s the lucky man?’ He thinks he must sound sarcastic, but of course that is not his intention. He is sincere in his question. The man is lucky. The luckiest.

‘His name’s Jon. We’ve been going out for a while now.’

The last thing he really wants to know is his name. He wants to grab him by the throat, pin him against the wall, punch him. He wants to break down and sob on his shoulder.

He has never asked DC Turner about her private life, rightly judging the subject to be too painful. Even now he avoids mentioning the man’s name. ‘Is he in the force?’ he asks.

‘Oh no.’ She laughs. It feels like a cruel laugh, aimed directly at him. ‘No, he’s in IT. He owns his own firm.’

He can see Jon, in a suit. An achieving type, with a sportscar. Successful. A man who no doubt would make him look even older than his fifty-four years. He feels hatred for him, but knows it is irrational.

‘You’ll have to come to the wedding, of course; you and your wife.’

He imagines Jon shaking his hand without really seeing him. *A colleague of Anna’s? Great. Thanks for coming.* Sheila, dressed in a floaty dress, high heels, hat. Done up. Although she would not go to anything like that, now. Now she can only exist in the house, a bottle within easy reach. He remembers them going out, after she started drinking. She’d have a couple of vodkas and tonic at first, then it would be white wine; trying to endear herself to strangers, who reacted kindly, but with obvious embarrassment. It would be difficult for him too, now. He doesn’t drink around her. Drinking was for when things meant something, when he had a wife to drink with, friends in the force. The friends have long since been promoted, or moved on. And his old wife is gone, now.

He cannot believe that DC Turner, *Anna* – how he loves her name – has already been... intimate with this man. He imagines them having sex. An ecstatic look on her face. *The noises*. It is too much. He nods at her, trying to smile.

‘Thanks,’ he says, ‘that would be great.’

‘Well, anyway, I’ll talk to you later.’ She turns to leave.

‘Oh, by the way,’ he says, ‘the Williams case.’ As soon as he has said it, he realises he should have let her go, after what she has told him. Let her have her moment. ‘Oh, don’t worry, it can wait.’

She smiles at him again, nods. Before, she would have asked about it, but now. Of course. Not with everything that’s going on. He decides to sort it all out. A wedding present. For her.

‘Congratulations again,’ he says as she walks away, and she turns and smiles at him.

He knows it is ridiculous, but it will take him a long time to get over her; perhaps he never will. He just wants to cry.

It is nearing Christmas. Term has finished and she is in the kitchen baking a cake, with carols on the radio. Of course it is not really about the cake or the carols, but the need to do something to avoid thinking. She is getting used to it, the idea that she is on her own now, but she tries not to think about it.

It will be difficult of course, Christmas without David; she has spent the last seven of them with him, after all. She doesn't know what she will do instead; go to her mother's, probably, or stay with Marcus. Perhaps even her father, now, since the new understanding. She would prefer to spend it in the house alone, really. Hide away. But she knows they will not let her do that.

The interview with her father didn't really happen in the end, what with the crying and the hugging, but she did manage to ask him about the man from the dream-that-is-not-a-dream. To her surprise, he corroborated what her mother had told her. It seems strange that the man was just someone from a childhood nightmare. But at least she knows, now. She still misses him. Along with David, of course.

She turns around and reaches towards the fridge, then starts with surprise as what seems to be an angel appears in front of her, in a blaze of light. As she begins to examine the apparition more closely, somebody steps from the glare and she sees that it is not in fact an angel; it is David.

‘Hello Con,’ he says, ‘Sorry, I did shout, but the music...’

He still seems like an apparition, against the backdrop of the carols, even though she now knows it is him. David the Redeemer. Come back to absolve her of her sins. Hosanna in excelsis. She nods at him, unable to say anything, unable to think what to say.

‘I’m sorry to surprise you like this,’ the apparition, David, continues. ‘But I thought... It’s Christmas.’

It is so like him, to reduce things to nothing like this. He has come back because it’s *Christmas*? ‘Oh,’ she says.

‘What I mean is, I didn’t want us to be apart, especially at Christmas.’ He smiles, perhaps feeling that this attempt has been more successful.

After a seemingly endless pause they kiss, awkwardly; she sees that she has left a floury mark on his lapel.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he says.

It occurs to her that is the nicest thing he has said to her in years. It doesn’t seem like him in fact. She has missed him too, of course. So much, at first, when he wouldn’t reply to her calls, her messages. She finds herself questioning for a moment why *he* is the one who can decide to leave, then to come back again. But of course they are married, it is his house too. These things give him certain rights.

This all goes around in her head while he is standing watching her, waiting, it appears, for a response.

She had the feeling, as her mother busied herself with something by the kettle, that there was nothing special about her. That she was just one of many people getting

married that day. It was strange, she thought, that she should feel this way on her wedding day.

The sun was shining, of course it was. Through the kitchen window she could see the cherry tree at the end of the garden, sunlight ribboning through its leaves. It wasn't nerves, she wasn't panicking, having second thoughts, it wasn't that; it was just the feeling that she wasn't special.

Or, not quite that, perhaps. She remembered the Christmas after her father had left. She remembered how she'd felt then. The sadness in everything. She felt a little like that now.

He had been invited to the wedding, but she did not know if he would come. She had the old feeling that she would like him to be there, but also that she did not want him there.

They pulled up in the old car they had hired to go the short distance to the church. It smelled vaguely of cigarettes and polish, a smell she recognised from somewhere. She felt like a child, sitting in the back with her mother.

'Are you ready?' she asked Connie, with a smile.

Connie smiled back at her and nodded. But of course she didn't feel ready, not at all.

She stepped out of the car, holding the dress so that it didn't drag on the pavement. Cream satin and lace. It felt as though she was leaving everything behind, standing there in that dress. She remembered cycling to school along that same stretch of pavement every day of her childhood. Getting married seemed to be the end of it all, in some way.

The heat seemed to vanish as she went inside the church. She felt the coolness on her arms as she followed her mother down the aisle. She was aware of music playing. There had been a lot of talk about who would give her away. (Such a strange idea, that she was anyone's to hand over like that.) In the end it was her father's suggestion that it should be her mother. It had come as a relief to Connie, who felt that by leaving, by not doing the things that other fathers did, he had given up his right to do it anyway.

It took only a moment for her eye to travel to him, sitting quietly at the back of the church. A blurred, monochrome version of the figure she remembered from childhood, Bridget next to him, her curly hair still suggesting energy, as though it might escape from her at any moment. But in her face too there were suggestions of something else.

She could imagine what must be going through their minds. Marriage was something that had been beyond her father. Surely they must be thinking about that. Surely everyone must be thinking about that. It was just one of the many consequences of what he had done. Here she was on her wedding day, and it was still in her mind. But at least she would avoid those mistakes; her relationship with David was stronger because of what had happened between her parents, what her father did.

In the light slanting in from the church's high windows she saw David waiting near the altar, nervous, but smiling. She wondered then if she might perhaps be special, if David wanted to stand here in front of all these people, to say that he loved her.

She managed to remember what it was she needed to say during the ceremony and kept smiling at David. And he kept smiling at her. And afterwards, when she

turned around and saw her father smiling at her from the back row, she did feel special, for a moment.

‘I’ve missed you too,’ she says.

DI Johnson tries not to think about her, now, but it is difficult. Even if she was not here, he would still think about her. But of course her being here is worse. It is not as if he really harboured any hope for the two of them. Or rather he did, but he always knew it was ridiculous. Now there is *Nick*.

When he smiles at DC Turner now, it is a dead smile. He wonders if she can see that. But of course she just smiles back, noticing nothing. It is his job to make sure she does not notice. And even if she did, he could blame it on something else. Something at work, something at home. There is a lot to choose from.

He can see her from his desk. She looks like a different person now. Distant. A memory rather than a person. He would rather not be working with her now. He might actually consider a transfer if one came up, but of course that is not likely to happen. At his age.

He is adrift in his thoughts when he hears the bleeping of the phone on his desk, sees the red light flashing. He realises he hasn't been there at all. Like going twenty miles on the motorway and then realising you're not really thinking about driving. There must be a special part of the brain that keeps tabs on it all. Amazing.

'Detective Williams?' It is a common mistake. People do not understand how it works.

‘Yes?’ he says, abruptly.

‘It’s David Williams here. I came in to see you the other day.’

‘Ah, Mr Williams,’ DI Johnson says. ‘Yes, we’re still waiting for you to come in and sign your statement.’ He is surprised to hear from the man. He has rung, left messages. ‘How can I help you?’

‘I’ve decided to retract my statement.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘I’ve moved back in, you see. And, well...’

‘Ah.’ At first DI Johnson feels as though he is being made a fool of. But he knows this is how it works. There is hardly ever a satisfactory end to things like there is on television. Ends tied up, killer caught. He knows, as well, that it is unlikely to finish here. Whichever of them is the abuser, it will happen again. It is not over. In fact it will probably be worse the next time. And then there will be recriminations. Why didn’t you *do* something? That is always the question.

‘Aren’t you concerned it will happen again?’ he asks. It is the wrong thing to say, he knows that. But he has seen these things before.

There is silence on the phone.

‘Just give it some more thought before you make any decisions,’ DI Johnson continues, ‘that would be my advice.’ Almost as soon he has given him this advice, it feels useless, like most advice.

‘I think it’ll be all right,’ the man says.

‘Okay. But if it isn’t, please let me know. I’ll be here.’ He discovers that he has warmed to the man, actually cares about him; then wonders, for a moment, if he really will still be there if he calls. ‘There’s just one more thing,’ he says, sensing that

the conversation is coming to an end. 'I saw you, one night, in a pub, with a friend.

There was some... trouble, with a woman. What happened?'

Of course the man doesn't need to tell him, he is under no obligation to do anything, now.

After a short pause, the man clears his throat. 'Oh, I'm always having to get my friend out of trouble.'

'I see,' DI Johnson says.

'Well 'bye then.' And the man puts the phone down and is gone.

It seems such an easy end to it all. 'Bye.

It makes him feel old, all this. Every day he gets up, spends a day in the world, goes to bed. The days all add up. Suddenly there are fifty-four years' worth of them. He can remember when he was five, eleven, twenty-one, forty. He can remember all those moments. But the bits in between. They are just countless days. Decades of countless days.

The man does not understand any of this of course. He is not old enough, has not been doing the same job for thirty years. For so long that he cannot bear to do it any more. He does not have to face the criminals, decades younger than he is. The same cases, time after time.

There is nothing more he can do now. The man can take care of himself. He doesn't know exactly what happened. Probably he never will.

He looks over at DC Turner. He knows her so well. Her slender neck, the pout when she is thinking, the downy hairs on her cheek as she turns into the light. He loved her. And she did this to him. She could have done things differently, he thinks. But then he realises it is not fair, that anger.

~

He gets home, weary as usual. His eyes are pricking with it. All that kept him going was DC Turner. Now he doesn't even have that. He has nothing at work and nothing at home.

He switches on the hallway light, shouts hello. There is no response. He goes into the kitchen. It is dark. Sheila is not there; the room has the feeling of emptiness to it.

He goes into the hall and looks in the direction of the table with the barley-sugar legs, where she puts the post. There is only one letter on it. As he gets closer he sees it has no stamp and his name is written on it in shaky writing. He recognises it as Sheila's.

He wriggles his index finger under the flap, tears it open, unfolds the piece of A4 paper inside.

Dear Steve,

I won't be here when you get back. I've been thinking about it for a long time and I've realised I don't want to carry on like this. I know you think you take care of me. But it's because of you that I do this. It is you who made me like this.

I don't think you're a bad man. But you've made some bad decisions in your life. You chose work over family. I didn't realise it then, but I realise it now. It's taken me a long time to realise it.

Thank you for all the years of marriage, for the good things. For our boys.

Love,

Sheila

PS I know there is someone else. You look depressed. I would see someone about it if I were you.

It seems strangely coherent. Perhaps she has stopped drinking. Perhaps the drinking was not as bad as he thought. He is not sure. For a moment he feels as though the floor in the hall is shifting beneath his feet.

How does she know about DC Turner? What should he do now? He feels uniquely unqualified to deal with this sort of situation. Call her? Tell her the truth? Lie? Apologise? Ask her to come back? Beg? To admit his ridiculous emotional entanglement would be as bad as having had a real affair. He feels stupid. All this for nothing. It kept him sane, but now?

He looks again at the note. The thin handwriting in blue biro. It reminds him of a birthday card from a grandparent. But it is from his wife. Some people might feel relieved, in his position. Before, he might have imagined relief himself. But now he is just miserable. All those years. Twenty-eight married. Thirty-six an adult. Fifty-four years alive in this world.

He wonders if his father ever arrived at this point. Felt like he does now. He died from a heart attack in the middle of the night. His mother two years later. He imagines his father standing in a kitchen like this, with a realisation that his life amounted to nothing, apart from a son who would go on to have a similar moment in a kitchen of his own.

You look depressed. What did she expect, skulking around the place, glugging vodka from the bottle like some fucking teenager in the park.

He goes to the cupboard above the sink. Pulls the door open. Then opens the others, one by one. There are no bottles anywhere. He moves around the house opening all the cupboards. Nothing. Finally he goes to the drinks cabinet in the living room. A boxy wood-laminate construction, predating Ikea, with shelves for books and ornaments. On top there is an unruly plant, fronds spilling down. Pictures of the children on the shelf below. No pictures of the two of them he now notices. He wonders if there ever were any: a wedding photo with them smiling in black and white. He pulls open the cabinet door. It has hinges at the bottom, creating a surface for mixing cocktails and cutting lemons. Inside is a little thicket of bottles, and at the front a brand new bottle of *Smirnoff*.

As he stands there looking at it, he wonders what people will say. There will be pity from the DCI. And of course DC Turner. She will feel she has to say something. *I'm so sorry*. It is the last thing he wants to hear coming out of her mouth. What he wants to hear from her is something about him, about how he makes her feel. He doesn't want her to feel sorry for him. He wants her to love him like other people love each other; to walk down the street on his arm, laughing at a private joke; to go home with him. Kissing on the sofa, fumbling with buttons, catches, clasps; pulling each other into the bedroom.

He grasps the bottle of vodka by the neck, cracks the seal, puts his lips around its mouth and drinks. The harshness of it makes him gag, and he spits the clear mouthful onto the carpet where it makes an uneven splash mark, which he considers for a moment as he stands there, breathing heavily, the fumes still in his mouth. It reminds him of something, this mark, of another time, another carpet. Again, he feels he is not sure of his lines.

He screws the cap onto the bottle and puts it back into the drinks cabinet, then sits heavily on the sofa and feels it subside beneath him. It is old now. Turn around and one day your furniture is old. You are old. DC Turner was the only thing that kept him going. But now DC Turner is someone else's obsession.

DI Johnson takes the file out of the envelope marked 'Internal'. The system never seems to work; files often take weeks to arrive, sometimes long after cases have been closed.

The Limpet.

He lays the yellowing folder on his desk. Inside, the first page is stamped 'Classified' in red ink. Underneath is the name Tessa Robinson and a case number. It is not what he was expecting at all. He was expecting something about Mrs Williams's father, some incident in Northern Ireland.

Attached with a paperclip is a photograph, presumably of the woman, with the date 12/7/82 written across the corner in black biro. The picture is in colour, the tones still sharp; she looks as if she is modelling fashions of the day, her dark fringe flicked up by her temples, a lacy collar, blue eye shadow. The photograph doesn't look as if it belongs in a police file, it looks like a snap taken at a party.

On the next page are the names of the officers involved, with another 'Classified' stamp and a closely-typed page. He remembers sitting at a typewriter writing this kind of report. Before computers, before mobile phones. It is the transcript of an interview with Mrs Robinson.

Interview CLASSIFIED:
Tessa Marianne Robinson

Interviewing Officers: DI xxxxxx, DS xxxxxx

Date: May 24th, 1982
Time: 10.24 am.
Duration 41 mins.
Location: Guildford Police Station.

DS xxxxxx: Can you confirm your full name for me please.

TR: Tessa Marianne Robinson.

DS xxxxxx: And your date of birth?

TR: June the twenty-second, nineteen fifty-three.

DS xxxxxx: Mrs Robinson, this interview will be conducted under caution. You are not obliged to say anything unless you wish to do so, but what you say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?

[Suspect nods.]

DI xxxxxx: Mrs Robinson, will you please tell us what happened last Thursday. May 18th, 1982.

TR: [Crying] I can't... [DS xxxxxx hands suspect tissue.]

DI xxxxxx: Take your time, Mrs Robinson.

TR: My husband was... [Crying]

DI xxxxxx: Whenever you're ready, Mrs Robinson.

TR: He'd just come back.

DI xxxxxx: Come back from where, Mrs Robinson?

TR: From Belfast.

[DI xxxxxx nods.]

DI xxxxxx: Please tell us what happened, if you would.

TR: It's difficult. He's away a lot. We have two children.

DS xxxxxx: Eight and three, is that right?

TR: Yes. [Crying] xxxxxx and xxxxxxxxx.

DI xxxxxx: Where was your husband on the day in question, Mrs Robinson?

TR: At home.

DS xxxxxx: And your children?

TR: xxxxxx was at school, xxxxxx was at home with me.

DI xxxxxx: Thank you. Please continue.

TR: He came into the kitchen. I'd been chopping vegetables. For soup. He made some tea. One cup. For himself.

DI xxxxxx: How did he seem?

TR: Like he always does when he gets back.

DS xxxxxxxx: What does he always seem like, Mrs Robinson?

TR: Quiet. He doesn't say anything.

DI xxxxxx: Did he seem upset?

TR: I don't know.

DI xxxxxx: Has your husband ever been violent towards you, Mrs Robinson?

TR: No... [Crying.]

DS xxxxxx: Tell us what happened next, Mrs Robinson.

TR: He just made his cup of tea and went and sat in the living room. I went to try to talk to him and xxxxxx started crying. You probably don't know what it's like. It goes right through you. [Crying.]

DI xxxxxx: Please continue, Mrs Robinson.

TR: xxxxxx wouldn't stop crying. And he was just sitting there with his cup of tea. I had the washing to do and xxxxxx to collect. He just looked at me. I couldn't bear it.

DI xxxxxx: What happened next, Mrs Robinson?

TR: I just wanted him to talk to me.

DS xxxxxxxx: What happened then?

[TR crying]

DI xxxxxx: Take your time.

TR: [Crying] I still had it in my hand. I wasn't thinking straight. [Crying] Oh God. I was afraid I'd... Then I went into the hall to call the police. Xxxxxx was screaming.

DS xxxxxxxx: Why was she screaming, Mrs Robinson?

TR: Because I'd...

[Suspect continues to cry, is unable to answer further questions.]

Interview ends. 11.05am.

He still cannot make sense of it. Mrs Williams's *mother*, he thinks, again. He turns the page and finds a cutting of the same newspaper article he saw in Mrs Williams' file. A memo attached to it with some scrawled comments in a heavy hand he cannot make out. A series of exclamation marks.

There are more photographs, of the crime scene presumably. A living-room like any other. A black and white picture of an armchair with what looks like a bloodstain on it, but it could just be the lurid pattern. A doctor's statement saying Mr Robinson is expected to make a full recovery. A psychiatrist's report on Mrs Robinson: she is on medication and is *stable*. Some later notes that confirm his suspicions: the family was re-located afterwards.

He reads on, leafing through the pages. There are procedural notes with the same 'Classified' stamp at the top, the occasional brown ring from the bottom of a mug. Some correspondence between the Chief Superintendent and the Ministry of Defence, the most recent of which confirms that no further action will be taken in connection with the case.

Something violent happened, clearly. But not what the newspaper article suggested. He cannot imagine it of this woman, this mother. But then his mind shifts and he thinks of Sheila, turning all her sorrow and her rage inwards, on herself. And he feels ashamed, suddenly, sitting there, bearing witness to someone else's sadness, when he couldn't even bear to look at his own wife, to think about what she had become. To think whose fault that was. He closes his eyes, lets the feeling wash over him and then recede.

No further action will be taken. It seems lenient, kind even, this course of action, but he knows it was merely to avoid embarrassment. That was how it was, in those

days. Offices filled with middle-aged men, ashtrays heaped with cigarette butts, no thought of what you could or couldn't say. No women. Mind you, perhaps that was a good thing. He thinks of DS Turner, and feels an ache somewhere in his diaphragm.

He closes the file, puts it in an envelope and writes DS Turner's name on it; she has been promoted now, he feels great pride in her. On his way out he leaves it on her desk. He has the sense that she still inhabits the space, even though she is not physically there. He wonders what she will make of it. It is not evidence. But it is information. Like mother, like daughter? Perhaps.

He sets off for home, still thinking about DS Turner. Usually, he tries not to think about her; the days, the hours, the minutes, spent not thinking about her. It is a full-time job, not thinking about her. When he thinks about her it is as though there is a tearing in his insides. It hasn't got any better in the few weeks since she told him she was getting married. Since she left him.

First her, then his wife.

DS Turner didn't leave him of course; he has to remind himself of that. But that is how it feels. He thinks of her and her fiancée sitting at home planning their wedding. It won't be long now. And then she won't even be DS Turner anymore; she will have a new name, she will be someone different. To him she feels like someone different already. But she will still be Anna, at least.

He rebukes himself for thinking about her. It isn't good for him. The more he thinks about her, the worse the pain is.

It was Sheila who was his wife. He has to remind himself of that too, after twenty-seven years of marriage. It is ridiculous, he knows that. He is ridiculous. Sheila, whom he thought he was looking after, like some bloody saint. When really it was all his fault. He almost feels like laughing. There might as well have been

someone else now Sheila, *his wife*, is no longer there. He accepts it. The loss of Anna was the bigger one, if he is honest with himself. Lovely Anna. Now he has no one. The boys took it badly, of course. She has told them not to blame him. But naturally they side with her. Give them some time, she said. But he does not have much time to give.

On his way to the station he passes the old winebar. A bold sign, above a big window with slatted blinds that don't prevent you seeing inside. Wooden tables and chairs, a small bar in the corner. He recognises the husband and wife who run it. He used to go there all the time in the old days, with colleagues from work. He can see the man laughing as he nears a table holding a tray of drinks; his wife behind the counter. A smile on her face too. They seem happy in there, together.

He imagines DS Turner and him sitting at one of the tables, hand in hand. She is smiling at him, such a lovely smile. He is smiling back, unable to comprehend his good fortune, that this woman loves him, this young woman, twenty years younger than him. Then he is back on the outside, walking past. Inside he sees a middle-aged man in a leather jacket, a woman with strangely blonde hair.

He reaches the main road to the station and pauses, hears a train rattle by. He imagines the platform, a breeze from somewhere up the line; imagines taking a step forward, no one will notice until he gets to the edge of the platform; imagines crossing the yellow line as the train nears: one last step.

The squeal of the brakes, then nothing. It won't be so difficult.

After all, he has nothing else.

~

Half an hour later he is still standing on the corner, examining the peeling sash windows of an end-of-terrace house under the pale light of a street lamp. He has been standing in that same spot for what seems like an endless, an elastic, amount of time, as if repelled by the railway station, by what it means.

He was about to turn the corner when he was surprised to find himself thinking about his father. Sitting in the shop with his head down, picking away at a box of electronics, hair flattened to his head with the aid of some shiny substance. After a few moments he looked up, and smiled in DI Johnson's direction. He had the feeling, then, that his father was willing him on, somehow. This man doing his honest work. A man everyone liked. *His father.*

If he is honest, he only joined the police because he thought it was what men do. If he is honest, he has not enjoyed a single day he has been in the force.

His mind wanders again and now he is dressed in a suit, opening the gate of the house, knocking on the door and, with a salesman's smile, listing the benefits of UPVC windows.

Perhaps it is not too late, perhaps he could take voluntary redundancy when it comes around again, as it always does. He is fifty-four after all, not seventy-four. Perhaps Sheila would come back if he made a success of it. It is Sheila he wants, of course it is.

Decent hours, better holidays. They could move. It could be a new start. He cannot believe he has not realised before that this is what he should do. Years of not realising it spool behind him like escaped cassette tape. All that time not realising it, wasted.

But there is still time; he realises that now. Forward. Forward is the only way.

She is laying the table. Something nice for dinner. Steak, vegetables, potatoes sliced and laced with rosemary. And afterwards, cheese. She slides the tablecloth over the table, smooths out the creases with the flat of her hand. Sometimes she imagines the man from the dream-that-is-not-a-dream sitting there in the room with her. He didn't come back, but she knew that he had a place in her life so she moved him into a corner and opened his eyes and gave him a smile, and he keeps her company now.

It is during the night when she is most glad of him. There are new images which pass through her mind without continuity, like slivers of film spliced together wrongly. She is in the darkness, then in light; there is a smell, perhaps of cooking. There are loud noises: raised voices, or a television with the volume up high. And there is the fear, often so intense that she thinks she is going to be sick.

None of it fits together, she cannot piece it into one, but she goes on with her investigation, deep into the night. She is sure that once she solves this mystery, the rest will all fall into place. She has pages of notes now, notebooks full of notes. She always seems to be thinking, questioning. Sometimes it feels as though her mind won't stop. She hasn't told anyone about it, of course. It is best to keep these things to yourself, she has always found. She and David used to talk about it, in the days they

talked. He said he did that when he was a child, when things happened that he didn't want to think about.

David's eyes were closed, his head against the back of his seat. As she watched him sleep, she realised that she had no idea what was going through his mind. Earlier, at the airport, when they had been sitting on the conjoined plastic seats in the departure lounge, David concentrating on his phone – although it was still their honeymoon – texting somebody, not looking at her, seemingly not interested in her anymore, the same thing had crossed her mind. And before that, on the beach one day, she had started to wonder how she had come to be here with this particular man; Connie, who shared flats with friends and went to the pub and got drunk and went home with men she thought she loved but later disgusted her. David didn't disgust her, but she had begun to suspect that one day he might.

The window next to her was veined by threads of ice, like silvered cobwebs. Below them she could see cars crawling at glacial speed, shapeless towns and villages; people living their lives just as she would be now, in a tiny tile-topped box, just like all the rest of them.

They slipped down through the clouds, bumped about a little then steadied. They seemed so fragile up there, plummeting slowly towards the safety of a tiny patch of tarmac on the outskirts of London. She could feel pricking in her skin and a sort of painful heat. Not fear exactly, but anticipation of the worst. She didn't know if it was the landing she was concerned about, or the future.

She had started to wake in the middle of the night towards the end of the honeymoon. Not for any reason she could identify; she would just wake up, still tired

yet unable to sleep, jealous of David asleep next to her, somewhere else in his dreams, her there on her own. She put it down to drinking too much, the rich food.

It was reassuring, coming home: cups of tea, the Evening Standard. There was something unreal about a place where it was always sunny. She looked forward to pavements shiny with rain; the smell of pubs as you passed by; hardware shops selling dozens of different sizes of plastic boxes.

But she was worried too. Worried that she didn't feel the same way she used to about David. Worried about somehow being trapped by the future, by a man she had realised she didn't know. She'd fallen in love with him, had married him; now there was this new sense of emptiness. Of course it could just be the usual feeling of coming home. Excitement giving way to familiarity. The sense that things could always be like they were on holiday, of another life, not quite within reach.

There was an electronic chime and the signs above her head illuminated. A few seconds later, the voice of a stewardess. They would be landing in ten minutes. Blinds should be opened. Seats placed upright. Bags stowed. She loved that word. You only stowed things on aeroplanes, boats. She imagined herself on a ship, bound for somewhere far away. The low chugging of the engines, a room with a porthole, the constant sense of movement that somehow signified the thrust of life itself.

The aeroplane lurched downwards and David opened his eyes. 'Hello,' he said, with a smile.

That one word seemed to change things. It made her feel desired and comfortable at the same time. She realised she had changed someone's life; David wanted to be with her, to spend his life with her. Of course things wouldn't be perfect but they would be a long way from what she'd had before.

She smiled back. 'We're landing now,' she said and hoped those words too conveyed something more than their meaning; a message with some special significance.

He yawned and rubbed his eyes. His hand looked a little like an adult's passing across the face of a child. His fingers were huge: he could pick up a rugby ball with one hand, flick it around as if it were a child's rubber ball.

She smiled, imagining herself on the ship again, with David; the two of them travelling somewhere far away, at the beginning of a great adventure.

She sees him looking at women; young women. He says he isn't, but she knows he wants them. Or perhaps it is something else he wants, she does not know. She wants to shout at him, scream at him, make him turn around and look at her and take her in his arms and tell her that he's sorry. But of course she is the one who must forever feel the guilt; she is the one who must apologise, over and over again. *Sorry, sorry, sorry*, she says to herself, like a song, like a prayer.

She sits next to him in the counselling sessions. It was his idea. He was full of suggestions after he came back, and found someone nearby. Every Tuesday night they go to the woman's house in a dimly-lit side-street and file into her front room. She listens to them with pencil and paper, in sandals and white socks. Nodding, taking it all in. As though she has the answers to everything in her head but she is not telling them what they are.

Sometimes Connie loses track of it all, looks around at the ornaments, the paintings, a framed certificate signifying some qualification or other. But what can this woman really know about them, about what has happened between them?

David thinks it is going well, she can see, as he talks about his childhood, stories about this and that; while inside she thinks about her baby.

And then, as she turns to go back to the kitchen, a moment of insight, as if coming from a place beyond everything; beyond the sky and the planets and space and time itself. She feels a rush of relief so great that she thinks for a moment it might knock her off her feet. All her problems seem to vanish with this sudden understanding. She feels light and free. And happy. It is a feeling she hardly remembers.

She looks down at the table and sees the knife lying on the cheese board. A wedding present: antique, with a straight blade, two little prongs at its tip and a handle made of some sort of bone. Antler, she thinks. Such an insignificant thing, before, but now with such purpose. Such a well-constructed tool.

Now everything fits together in such a wonderful way, and she knows what she must do.