

cover them with or some of her old sheets of marbling. She wondered whether she would be thrown out of the room if she painted it white and grey.

The bed in it was quite large, big enough for two people. It had polished mahogany ends and a mattress with a sag in the middle. In the first month she lay on one side of it. Then she moved over and occupied the sag. She thought, from now on, I will take possession of things and make them mine.

She bought two tins of paint, one grey and one white. She knocked on the door of her nearest neighbour across the landing and asked whether he owned a ladder. He said: 'No, girl, I don't.' He was South African, but his face was whiter than the sky. He enquired: 'What do you need a bleddy ladder for?' Mary told him about the painting she planned to do. He told her his name was Rob. He was young and thin with sandy hair. Mary said: 'What are you doing in London?' Rob said: 'I live here.' The word 'live' sounded like 'luf'. He said: 'Right now I'm running a poetry mag.'

Mary said: 'Oh that's good.' She thought the only person in Swaithey ever to have heard the words 'poetry mag' would be Miss McRae.

Rob said: 'Sorry about the no ladder.'

Mary said: 'That's all right. When I've painted my room I'll invite you for coffee. We get free packets of coffee sometimes where I work.'

She did the room standing on a pile of books on a chair. She painted two walls white and two walls grey. When she'd finished, all four walls looked the same. It was the sombre quality of the light.

Mary bought a pair of jeans. She put them on. She hurled all the skirts she owned out of her window into the sooty airwell. She could see them lying there, yards below: suicided skirts.

She bought the jeans from a shop in the King's Road. It was filled with hot light and music. In the communal changing room, long-legged girls pouted at their reflections. No make or style of jeans was right for Mary: she was too short. But the hard feel of the denim in her crutch was potent. She felt bigger

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than she was. She chopped off six inches from the legs of the jeans. She had seen people wearing them like this, with the ends frayed. When they needed washing, she lay in the bath with them on, soaping them all over. While doing this, she let herself dream of the pale-lipped black-eyed girls in their sleeveless sack dresses and with their sculpted, scented hair. They gave her their dark nipples to suck. They said: 'Let's have fun, Martin.'

She still hadn't seen the Tower of London. Only parts of the city were known to her. The rest was there somewhere, waiting for time to bring her to it. She bought postcards of the places she hadn't been: the Royal Mint, the Greenwich Observatory, Carnaby Street, Petticoat Lane, and stuck them up on the grey-white walls. She supposed you could live in London a whole lifetime and never go to these places.

She wrote letters to Miss McRae and to Cord. She thought it's odd that the only two people who care for me are both aged seventy-one. In two of these letters she said: 'The main thing I first noticed about London is that the people here are mostly young. I don't know where all the older people have gone. I expect they may have moved to Suffolk or to High Wycombe. The only old one I see every day is the newspaper seller at Earl's Court tube station. He's been calling out a two-syllable word for so long that it's become another completely different two-syllable word, like in a game of Chinese Whispers. What the word was that he started with I don't know, but when I get more courage, I might ask him. Then he could return to it. And sometimes the things you first say have more meaning than things you think up later.'

Cord wrote back: 'At a fair guess, Martin, your paper chap was originally saying *News* and *Standard* - so you see, four syllables can become two without anyone doing anything: it's called the Americanisation of the English language.'

Miss McRae wrote back: 'I was very struck by your thoughts on the paper man, Mary. Why not try to write a poem about him that your South African friend might publish?'

She began to hate her job, its repetitiousness, the futility of it,

the smell of the water, being alone all day except for the coming and going of the waitresses with their trays of crockery. And one night, mainly out of her habit of obedience to Miss McRae, she sat at her table and wrote a poem about this – not about the paperman's Chinese Whisper, but about all her endless days and evenings spent at the deep sink. She called it 'Prisoner of Brown'. It was not until the next morning that she saw that what she had written, quite by mistake, was a protest poem.

A few days later, she ran into Rob, the South African, on the stairs. He was carrying a plastic wardrobe. She said: 'Would you like to come for coffee one evening?'

He balanced the plastic wardrobe on the last but one step. He looked round it at Mary. She could see him assessing her: flat face, short hair, short body, spectacles . . . She said: 'I'm not trying to get you to like me. I don't like men. I wrote a bad poem, that's all.'

She could see it was the word 'bad' that interested him. If you tell someone a thing's bad, they want to see it, to decide for themselves.

He said: 'What's it about?'

She said: 'It's about being trapped in things.'

He said: 'I'd better warn you, I don't like much poetry. Most of what we get sent is crep.'

She said: 'This is crap.'

And that made him smile. He said he would come for coffee on Wednesday at nine.

The poetry magazine was call *Liberty*.

Rob said: 'It's meant to be a consciousness-raising mag. All the material in it is meant to have something to say about political repression, but the trouble is there just aren't enough good poems on this subject, so we sometimes have to fill in with stuff about graveyards or Kafka or Leeds.'

Mary's poem, 'Prisoner of Brown', was never published in *Liberty*. 'It's far from crep, Martin,' Rob said when he'd read it and when he'd learned her name, 'but you can tell it's a first-time thing, hey? You're not at ease with the genre, not yet.'

Mary didn't mind. She'd only written the poem for Miss McRae, and as a kind of protest against the monotony of her job in the coffee bar. She didn't want to become a poet.

But she became, as she had somehow predicted, Rob's friend. She repainted his room. The colour he chose was red. They ate supper together occasionally in a Greek café. She told him about her love for Lindsey. He told her about his love for Lindsey's wedding. He described the summer sky above Cape Town. They sat opposite each other in the Greek café, staring at their separate pasts, and then one night Rob said: 'Give up the coffee bar. Come and work on *Liberty*. We need someone to help out. And we'll let you *make* the coffee, not just wash up the bleddy cups!'

Liberty was housed in a two-room office above a hairdressers. The hairdressers played music all day long: the Hollies, Marvin Gaye, Dionne Warwick, the Beatles. The stairs above stank of peroxide. Sometimes there were shrieks, whether of delight or horror, it was hard to tell. A sign on the hairdressers' door read: *This is the entrance to 'Comme il Faut' Salon. Liberty is on the first floor.*

In letters to Cord and Miss McRae, Mary described the *Liberty* office and her role in it. She wrote:

I work with Rob and his partner, Tony, who is Australian. The magazine is international but not many nations have heard of it. I think we have more contributors or would-be contributors than readers. I am in charge of subscriptions. My desk is a drinks trolley that was here when Rob rented the office. I have taken off its wheels. I have been told to have a subscriptions drive.

Rob and Tony are very nice to me. They call me Mart. Tony has yellow hair in a pony tail. He would rather be a poet than a poetry editor and sometimes we publish poems of his. They are about 'Abos' and lost land. The 'Abos' of Australia and the blacks of South Africa are the two groups

Liberty is trying to help. Rob and Tony say the middle classes in England have to be woken up to the plight of these people. Africa, but I didn't know – for all the years I lived in Swaithey – that the Abos were in a plight.

I wouldn't say this to Rob or Tony, but I think the magazine is in a plight. I found a printer's bill for £197.3s on Monday and past contributors write letters all the time demanding the £5 we pay for every poem published. I said to Tony: 'What are we going to do about all these bills and demands?' He didn't seem flustered. He said: 'Stay cool, Mart. Sit down and knock off a few stalling letters, okay?'

I like working here. I like coming in in the morning and opening the window near my trolley and watering the weeping fig plant and putting on the kettle for coffee. I like the smell of paper that is with us all the time because of the piles of unsold past editions of *Liberty* that wait in my corner of the room for new international readers. I like learning to type. I like opening the brown envelopes containing the poems of hopeful contributors and trying to decide, before I pass them on to Rob or Tony, whether they are any good. One came last week that I enjoyed very much. It was about an elephant trapped in a concrete pit in the middle of the Serengeti plain. It raised my consciousness of what elephants need to live their lives. But Tony said it was sentimental and Rob said it was crep. So it was sent back, with quite a few others we received between Monday and Friday. *Liberty* is too poor to put stamps on its rejection letters.

It is also too poor to pay me very much. I get £11 a week and three of this is my rent for my room. What I eat is mostly tins of tomato soup, but we still go to the Greek café. And it's a strange thing, but it's in the Greek café, which is called Zorba's, that I have this strong sense of being in London and not just in it any more but becoming part of it.

Mary lay in bed, hearing the fragments of other lives in the dark well outside the window and she thought, I am as near as I have ever been to happiness. She knelt up on the bed and opened her window and leant out into the well and looked down. Long ago the dead skirts had been cleared away but she thought now that the start of her happiness had been there, when her skirts had thrown themselves out into the void.

One evening, when Mary got home from the *Liberty* offices, she found a letter from Cord. It said: 'There's good and bad news to tell you, old thing.' The handwriting was small and shaky. There were brown blobs on the paper, stains of tea or Wincarnis.

Cord wrote:

The good thing is my eye has stopped blubbing on its own and seems to be back in line with its partner. No one has a clue why. Not the doctor. Not me. But that's the way of the times. No one has a clue about anything. Do you listen to that Bob Dylan chap? He has a whining voice but sometimes a whine can be just the thing you want to hear. He says all the answers are blowing in the wind and he's damn right.

Now the bad. Your mother is back inside Mountview. She took herself there. It is called a voluntary admission. I went to see her of course (and selfishly wished you had been with me) and she seemed calm and quiet. We took a walk round the gardens, which she admires. I said, Est, tell me why you put yourself in here, and she said, this is home, my second home.

I had a word with a person in a white overall. He looked like a senior type. He told me that your mother's kind of depression is like an illness, no different from Beri-Beri or measles. And they are going to try ECT as a cure. You know what this is, don't you? Electric business. So I said, I'd rather you didn't do that. I lost my wife in a glider; I don't want to lose my only child. But he said, It's nothing to be afraid of. It's the best answer. I refrained from mentioning

the Bob Dylan fellow. I came away, because there was nothing else to do.

Mary folded Cord's letter and put it away. She walked out into the evening traffic. She had no idea where she was walking to. She was glad of the noise and the fumes and the neon light.

She went into a basement bar. She'd passed its sign hundreds of times. It was called Ethel's. The steps down to it smelled of seaweed. She sat down on a high plastic stool and looked around. The place was painted black, but lit brightly with thin pencil-beams of white light. Music was playing: Joan Baez singing 'Copper Kettle'.

Smoke collected in the light-beams and hung suspended in them. The faces Mary could see beyond the smoke were all women's faces. She ordered a half-pint of Guinness and drank it quickly, like Sonny drank it. And then she began to stare at her surroundings, letting the place fill her mind so that there was no room in it for a vision of Mountview or for any vision of the past. And the women stared back.

She ordered another drink. She saw how the black and white of Guinness matched the black and white of the place. She thought, no one in Swaithey could imagine that a bar like this exists, not even Edward Harker.

At the end of the bar was a woman on her own, older, smartly dressed in a lime-green suit. She was watching Mary like a lioness watching her prey. When Mary caught her eye, she got down from her stool and picked up her drink, which was a cocktail of some kind, and sat down next to Mary. She smelled of perfume. Her hand, holding the cocktail glass, had long, pearly nails. She said: 'My name's Georgia.'

They sat very still, side by side. They breathed the scented air. Mary thought, Georgia is a beautiful name, more beautiful even than Pearl. She said: 'I'm called Marty or sometimes "Mart", as in *Exchange and Mart*.' Georgia said: 'I'll call you Marty, can I?' Mary said: 'Names are important. Don't you think so?' Then she looked intently at Georgia and saw that the name was more beautiful than the woman.

Georgia said she would take Mary to dinner in Soho. They rode in a taxi. Georgia took Mary's hand and put it on her left breast. The restaurant she chose was Russian. There were flickering red candles on the tables and gold icons on the walls. Georgia and Mary sat on two velvet banquettes and Georgia leaned towards Mary and smiled, showing her large teeth. She said: 'Don't look now, but in that far corner over there is Darryl Zanuck.'

They drank vodka in small glasses. Mary felt the anxious part of her mind – the part affected by Cord's letter – fall in on itself and vanish, like a Black Hole.

She stared and stared at Georgia. She didn't resemble the ice-lipped girls of her dreams. She had no real grace. But it was enough that she wanted Mary. Quite enough. No one had wanted her before, but Georgia did. She was flirting with her eyes. Her foot touched Mary's under the table.

Mary thought, being wanted gives you power – just for a while. And this feeling of power is something magnificent. As Rob would put it, it is far from crep.

Estelle:

Sonny gave me a dog. He couldn't give me the baby I'd longed for ever since I held Billy Harker on my lap, so he thought I would be capable of loving a dog instead. It was an Alsatian puppy. Sonny put it into my arms and said: 'It's called Wolf.' I suppose he expected me to swoon with happiness and cradle the dog's head against my breast. But I felt nothing for it, zero, as they say on *Top of the Pops*. I let it drop out of my arms. Sonny swore. He's forgotten he ever had any manners and once held his cap in his hands and stood with his head bowed. I walked away. Then I turned and watched him. He picked up Wolf and sat down and put him on his knee.

He is the one capable of loving a dog, not I. I came to Mountview because I was about to commit a

crime. I planned it. In my dreams and out. I was going to take the train to Lowestoft and take a suitcase full of the things I'd need . . . But I see the magnitude of it now. I see the terror and pain I was going to cause. I saw all of this just in time.

And I have been rewarded. I am in love. My love is far away and never speaks to me but this is the way of the world. He is Bobby Moore, the captain of England. His hair, on the TV screen, is white. He has a dimpled smile. All that I care about now is his destiny and the destiny of what he calls the 'squad'. And that is all any of us at Mountview cares about: football. We have forgotten our lives and what was in them. They are filled up with dreams of England's glory. We sit in the dark and chant with the crowd: 'England! - England! England! - England!' And we have new enemies: their names are Pelé and Jairzinho and Eusebio and de Michele and Weber and Beckenbauer. It is summer outside but we hardly notice it. And even the nurses, with nothing to be cured of and with nothing to try to forget, you see them sidling into the room and standing still and watching and you know their heads are emptying themselves of everything but football. They forget time. They forget to remind you to go to Ops Wing for your treatments. They're sliding away. We're all sliding away fast. And we don't want it to end.

England are in Group One. We drew nil-nil with Uruguay. We beat Mexico two-nil and France two-nil. My love and my hero, Moore, is a visionary captain, so the commentators say. He knows how to read the game, how to turn defence into attack. Only his head is suspect, so they say. He is suspect in the air. So I want to write a girlish letter: 'Dear Bobby, We have this one and only thing in common: our heads are not to be relied upon . . .'

My head took me to a caravan site. I could see it clearly: old caravans with peeling paint waiting in the hot sun. I could see the families occupying their little bits of ground and all the things they left lying about, tricycles, blankets and anoraks. And prams. Sometimes the prams were empty and sometimes they were not. Sometimes they were parked in the square of

caravan shade, with a stretched white net over them, and under the net there was a baby, sleeping.

I know, that if I had gone there, this place would have been exactly as I'd seen it in my mind. My head is not suspect in this way; I can see things in advance of seeing them and know precisely how they are going to be. I was going to steal a child. I was going to buy tins of milk for it and nappies and castor-oil cream. I was going to take it to Scotland, to a wilderness where I would not be found. I knew this was a criminal act, but I also knew that I was going to do it. I didn't think about what would come after.

The quarter-finals are coming. Oh God. If Bobby and the squad lose, there is going to be weeping here. Even among the nurses. So I say to Sister Matthews: 'Have ready all the medication. Have stuff that will send us to sleep for four years until the next World Cup. And in this way, you will save on time and on tea and on the cost of laundry.' I laugh and Sister Matthews laughs. She looks at me approvingly. The staff at Mountview think if you can make a joke, you are almost well again, almost ready to be sent back to wherever you came from.

The place I came from has changed, changed. Even Grace Loomis has started to complain that the weeds on our land seed themselves in her fields. It is harvest time and Sonny and Tim and the combine and the dog, Wolf, are alone with it and it is beyond what they can manage. I said to Sonny, on the morning he drove me here: 'Sell the land. That's the best hope. Sell to the Loomises and then we can all rest.' He drove and said nothing. He's fifty, but he looks like an old man. At the gates of Mountview, he said: 'Never.' Then we stopped and he got out and handed me my suitcase and he said it again: 'Never, Estelle.'

We are playing Argentina. They have beaten Spain, West Germany and Switzerland. We are told they are football-mad. In all the slums and back alleys of their cities, day and night, winter and summer, their lunacy goes on. When they line up on the Wembley turf and their national anthem is played, they cross themselves. Like Timmy, they believe in a Creator. But

their Creator doesn't save them from a header by Hurst. Their goalkeeper kneels on the ground. He wishes he was not here but far away in his own country, in some hot street hung with familiar washing.

On the day of the final, England v. West Germany, I was due for one of my treatments, but I didn't want to go. Because, after a treatment, you wake and you feel nothing, no anger, no joy, no longing, no sadness, nothing. All the love you had for anything has gone. You are still and empty and white. You have no desire. You cannot believe you ever stood up in the TV room and shouted: 'England! - England!'

I went into one of the greenhouses and hid. Tomatoes were being grown in it and they scented the moist air. I sat in a sliver of shade by the water tank. I felt afraid for England and for Bobby Moore and his smile. My mother was a person who dreamed of glory and she passed those dreams to me. I'd wanted Tim to be a high-diver. I never noticed he was afraid. And now I was waiting in a greenhouse for the hour of England's trial to arrive. I thought, the worst thing to happen would be a power cut. Not to see this, not to suffer it, would be worse than seeing it and seeing it lost. For it is only infrequently that I am able to care, one way or another, about something in my life.

I had cared about the child. I had the room waiting - Mary's old room - painted blue and hung with mobiles made out of balsa-wood and glass. For two years, I endured Sonny's attempts at impregnation, until I saw they were futile. Then I planned my crime. The only thing that stopped me from committing it was a memory. It concerned Mary. It was a memory so distant, it seemed to belong in another life, not mine. It was a memory of losing Mary in a field, in darkness. She was lost for three hours - one hour for every year of her life - and Sonny and I were in despair.

So I remembered how it was going to be for the mother of the stolen baby. I saw her come to the pram and find it empty. I saw her snatch up the pram quilt and hold it to her mouth. I saw the ugliness of the terror. I sat down and packed

up our black telephone. I dialled the doctor's number. I said: 'I want to go to Mountview. I want to have my old room, please, with its view of the garden.'

They came and found me in the greenhouse. They were understanding. They said I could have my treatment another day. They asked me kindly whether I had eaten many tomatoes. I replied that I'd eaten none because I was so sick with fear for the squad. And they said: 'Well, come along, Estelle. It's nearly time.'

Now, we're into 'extra time'. The score is two-all. 'Extra time' is a different quality of time, hung with doom, as if the whole world were about to end. There is suffering in the room. There are no more cries of 'England - England!' There is a smell of urine and sorrow. An old man who used to be a postman says: 'They're finished. Look at them.'

But I can see that Bobby is still urging them on. He shouts at them. His face is streaming with sweat, his socks are down, but he still wants them to attack. And they haven't given up: Jackie Charlton, Bobby Charlton, Nobby Stiles, Martin Peters, Ray Wilson . . .

I turn round to say to the man from the GPO: 'They're not finished. Not yet.' And in that second, while I have turned away, Geoff Hurst scores. His shot has hit the bar and dropped behind the line. A cheer goes up, round Wembley and round the room. A cheer and then a hush. The goal is disputed. The Germans appeal against it. On the faces of Haller and Weber and Beckenbauer there is a petrified look. The goal is allowed. Another, mightier cheer goes up. In the room, Sister Matthews is weeping. The postman has climbed onto his chair and is waving his arms in the air. And we see it come towards us again: glory.

We are at the end of what we can endure. 'Extra time' passes more slowly than ordinary time. Extra is short for extra-ordinary. I say aloud: 'They should resume normal time.' Someone screams at me not to speak. I put my fingers over my eyes exactly as I remember doing when I was told that Livia had died in the sky.

Then it's over. In the dying seconds of it Hurst scores again. It is won. It is safe. My love, Bobby, and his England are at the pinnacle of the world and all the mad of the shires and the counties and the cities are shouting and weeping their hearts dry.

I want to hurl myself, like Livia, into the clouds. I want to dissolve and become suspect in the air.

A Nose for It

Walter felt confused. His own feelings confused him. They weren't what he'd expected.

He'd thought, on that Sunday in Tunstall Forest when Gilbert Blakey had first touched him, and then later in the room next to the surgery, the room with a sign on it saying *Waiting Room*, he'd thought, I'm letting all this happen only in order to become an outcast, to separate myself from the world of polite front rooms and babies in salmon bonnets. He waited to feel the self-loathing that would follow.

What followed wasn't loathing, but elation and a feeling, at last, of being grown up. And here was the confusion: Walter felt happy. He hadn't expected happiness.

When he looked at Gilbert - every single time he looked at him - he found him entirely beautiful. Compared to him, Sandra had been pretty only, pretty like a gift-box of assorted marmalades, never for one instant beautiful, not even on the day in the boat with the bottle of Tizer.

He now saw his feelings for Sandra and his afternoons with Cleo as maladies of his late adolescence. He'd known nothing, only craved romance and then mistaken it for love. But it wasn't love. This was love: Gilbert. This was Eden.

But then - and this was why the happiness he felt began to slip away - he began to realise that his love for Gilbert wasn't returned. Something was returned, but it wasn't love. And so his confusion was compounded. Gilbert had started it all; he'd

bought the convertible car, he'd talked about Kennedy in a personal way, he'd put his slim hand on Walter's thigh, he'd leaned over and kissed his mouth. These things Walter recognised as a kind of courtship, a carefully planned prelude to a love affair. And the affair was of long duration. Gilbert referred to it, after a while, as 'necessary'. But there was no love in it. Only what Walter felt. And now when Gilbert kissed him, Walter had a feeling of choking.

One evening, he tried to describe this to his lover. Gilbert was lying naked on the waiting room couch with his head turned away. Walter was kneeling beside him. Without moving his head, Gilbert said: 'It's because you let yourself feel things. Try not to feel. Try just to be.'

Walter couldn't not feel. He could slaughter a heifer without feeling or empty a chicken of its bowel and heart. But just to see Gilbert was to feel. He ached with him everywhere, behind his eyes, in the stoop of his shoulders, in his heavy feet. What he lived for was to be touched by him. It was not logical. He'd expected revulsion and an ending and neither came. Passion came and stayed. It wouldn't leave. A new summer started and passed. There were no drives in the MGB. There were only the meetings in the waiting room and Walter's obstinate, confusing love.

And he could tell no one about it. Not even Pete. Once, he would have tried to write a song about it, but a country song didn't seem appropriate to someone of Gilbert's class and sophistication. And lately, Gilbert had even started to complain about life in the country. He said Suffolk people were narrow in their hopes, he said they had no vision, he said it might soon be time for him to be moving on.

Walter's thirtieth birthday was coming. Sandra Cartwright had two children now. A hired man, with the word 'Mother' tattooed on his neck, had been taken on to help Pete in the slaughtering yard. Aunt Josephine came to stay in the house for long periods of time, scenting it with talcum powder, boiling milk in the middle of the night. Walter endured these things, but felt the awfulness

He said to Gilbert: 'Couldn't we go away somewhere?'
Gilbert said: 'Where?'

Walter said: 'I don't know. I don't know the world.'
Gilbert said: 'No, you don't. If you did, you wouldn't have asked the question.'

Once every six months, Walter had to have his teeth scaled and polished by Gilbert. He sat, tilted backwards, under the Miralux lamp. The nurse crackled and sighed somewhere to the left of him. Gilbert's face was near to his, yet upside down, unrecognisable, as though Gilbert were wearing a mask. The touch of his fingers was familiar enough, though, and his clipped, lispng voice criticising the way Walter neglected his mouth. And these quarter-hours in the dentist's chair confirmed to Walter that he was at the mercy of something he would never fully understand.

Meanwhile, the ghost of old Arthur had stopped visiting him. Walter was grateful for this. The sight and smell of him had been grotesque. Yet sometimes Walter found himself thinking that it might have been possible to confide in his ancestor and that this ghost, with its rude behaviour, would not have died a second, astounded death from shock. The need to confess his love to someone was growing very strong.

Margaret Blakey noticed changes in her son's behaviour and in his habits. She thought he was attempting to conceal change from her and that he'd forgotten she had a nose for such things. They'd lived together a long time. Forty-seven feet of cliff had fallen in that mass of years. A woman who lived on a precipice was sensitive to alteration. But Gilbert seemed to have let this slip from his memory.

He was restless. He stayed at his surgery very late some evenings. He talked condescendingly to her, like someone returned from a far place that she would never visit. He appeared to her as a person on the edge of catastrophe. He had begun to dye his hair and his moustache. They were a brighter yellow, like sherbet.

She said to him one evening: 'I know you don't like me to say things like this.'

'What things?' he said wearily.
'I'm worried about you,' she said. 'I can't put my finger on it, but you're not your old self.'
He couldn't bear the way his mother so often spoke in clichés, as though she had never really learned how to use the English language.

'I don't know what you mean by my "old self",' he said.
'Yes, you do,' said Margaret. 'When you were calm and content.'

'I don't know when that was,' said Gilbert.
Margaret sniffed. 'If something's happened,' she said, 'I think you owe it to me to tell me what it is.'
Gilbert was silent. He let the silence last. In it, they could both hear the sound of the sea. Gilbert allowed himself to imagine the silence that would arrive when he finally left the house and began his life again somewhere else. It made him feel both exhilarated and afraid.

'Nothing's happened, Mother,' he said. 'Only time passing.'

On a November evening, after their hour in the surgery waiting room, Gilbert said to Walter: 'I'd better tell you, I'm winding up everything here in Swaithey. I should have done it years ago. I was too cowardly. But this decade is different.'

Walter felt as though he'd swallowed a stone. It was about the size of a potato. Its surface was smooth but its weight enormous. It was lodged above his heart.

He dressed himself. He watched Gilbert put on his trousers. He thought, the real Eden died from failure and shame, but this one is alive and sailing forwards. He will never give this moment another glance.

'Where are you going?' he asked. His voice was faint, impeded by the stone.

'London,' said Gilbert. 'I'm joining a practice in Flood Street.'

'Where's Flood Street'

'In Chelsea. The swinging part of London.' Then he smiled his dreamy smile. 'It's time to swing before I'm too old. Don't you think?'

Walter had never been to London. He thought of it as a red and black place: red buses, black churches, red guardsmen, black gates, red telephone boxes, black water. He knew this image was inadequate, childlike. He said: 'What I think isn't of any importance.'

Gilbert took out a comb and began combing his hair, that he now wore much longer than before. He said: 'Perhaps it's better if we put an end to these meetings, is it? It's you I'm thinking of, mainly.'

Walter sat still, without blinking or moving any part of him. The stone was weighing him down. And he felt half-blind, as if there were murk behind his eyes or in his head; smog somewhere. After what seemed to him a long time, he said something. He said: 'What will happen to my teeth?'

He heard Gilbert laugh. Then the laughter died. Walter imagined it re-surfacing again in London, on the top of a red bus. Gilbert stood beside him, very tall-seeming, and touched the bald space at his crown with one of his long caressing fingers. He said: 'All of that is up to you, Walter. Everything is up to you.'

Walter dragged his stone-weighted body out of the chair and then out of Gilbert's waiting room and out into the black evening. The air hurt him. He felt his windpipe freeze. He wished he had had the final word. He wished the final word had been a curse. He cursed now, silently, yet knowing that Gilbert was far beyond reach: beyond reach of his words and beyond reach of his power—such as it had ever been—to touch or wound.

When he got home, he told Grace he was feeling poorly, with a pain in his chest. She threw him a fearful glance. 'It's not that thing you had before, Walter, is it?' she asked.

'What thing I had before?'

'That vocal thing. In your throat, after that Rose Marie business?'

'No,' said Walter. 'No.'
He said he didn't want anybody to fuss. Grace put her hand on his forehead. It felt cool, cold even. She said she would bring up a hot-water bottle.

Walter got into his pyjamas. He could still smell Gilbert's body on his hands. He lay on his back in his bed like a corpse, with his arms crossed over his chest. Grace brought the bottle and gave it to him. She kissed his head. She said: 'At least you can sleep late, love. Tomorrow's Sunday.'

He lay in the dark, weeping. He heard his mother and Aunt Josephine come upstairs and go into their bedrooms and then later he heard Aunt Josephine get up again and go down to the kitchen to boil her milk. She had told him that night starvation could kill you when you were old. You could wake and find yourself on the ceiling, looking down at your own corpse. His weeping dried up and he closed his eyes. He felt faint with tiredness. He waited for sleep to enfold him, like a lover.

The following evening, he went to see Pete. He didn't mention Gilbert. He said: 'I'm in a life I don't understand. Nothing makes sense to me.'

Pete made strong coffee. The night outside the bus was silent. The white whisper of the Tilley lamp was the only noise. Pete said: 'Anything in particular?'

'No,' said Walter. 'Only everything. I don't know where I'm going or why.'

'You're not alone there,' said Pete.

'I'm serious,' said Walter.

'So am I,' said Pete. 'Shall we put on some early Elvis?' These days, the old gramophone looked like something that belonged in a museum. The sound it was capable of getting was old sound; it felt thin, night-starved. Walter wanted to give Pete a proper record player, but there was no electricity in the bus and Pete said he was happy without it. He said it was a mistake to believe you needed something only because others did.

They listened to a song called 'Workin' on the Building'. It was a Spiritual. Elvis had hired a backing group of gospel singers. Pete knew the words and sang along:

I'm workin' on the building,
It's a true foundation,
I'm holdin' up the bloodstained
Banner for my Lord.

Pete shook one of his wide, grimed hands in time to the beat, as if he were holding an imaginary tambourine.

Well, I'll never get tired of
Workin' on the building.
I'm goin' up to my Heaven,
Getting my reward!

It was while Pete was singing, when he leaned forward nearer to the gramophone and his features were harshly illuminated by the lamp, that Walter noticed for the first time the change to Pete's nose. One side of it had put on flesh. The flesh was pocked and fat. It looked stuffed, like a chicken's arse. Walter stared at it. It horrified him. It looked as if it contained something that was going to burst out.

Pete stopped singing and Elvis began a melodic number.

In the early morning rain
With a dollar in my hand,
And an aching in my heart,
And my pockets full of sand . . .

Walter said to Pete: 'What's happening to your nose, Pete?'

'Oh, nothing,' Pete said. 'Nothing.'

'One side of it's grown bigger.'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

'That's what a nose can do, grow irregularly. It's the only bit of us that doesn't stop growing. Knew that, didn't you? The rest of us shrivels but the nose expands - even in the grave.'

'Someone ought to look at it, Pete.'

'Why?'
'In case there's something wrong.'

Pete began singing again: 'Out on runway number nine/Big 707 set to go . . .'

'Are you listening to me?' asked Walter.
'Yes,' said Pete, 'I'm listening, Walt. But there's nothing wrong. It's just my nose doing what it's doing.'

Walter felt moody, defeated. He'd come to the bus to talk, not specifically about Gilbert, but about the way things confused and astounded him, about his inability to predict how anything was going to turn out. And now, with this fat nose of Pete's visible above the Tilley flame, he found himself confronting yet another mystery. He drank his coffee and was silent and Pete sang on, ignoring his sulking. Walter thought, it's *cause* I never understand. Cause and effect. I haven't the least idea why I wanted to marry Sandra. I have no answer to why I feel love for Gilbert and not loathing. And if I can't understand cause, then of course I don't understand effect.

Then he said suddenly to Pete: 'I want to write a song. I want to go back to that. Can you help me?'

Pete nodded. He stood up stiffly and went to his small kitchen to fetch some whisky. He had the feeling that this was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1967

Mary:

My lover, Georgia Dickins, was thirty-nine. She worked for a weekly magazine called *Woman's Domain*. She ran the Problem Page. Her nom de plume on the Problem Page was D'Esté Defoe. She thought this a wonderful name, far superior to Georgia Dickins. And her readers liked it. Especially the barren readers. They sometimes put, as a kind of footnote to their Problem: 'I hope you do not mind my saying that if God is good enough to give me a beautiful baby daughter I shall christen her D'Esté.'

I thought it a ridiculous name. It sounded like a corrupted word, short for Destitute. But I didn't say this. I had to say enough hurtful things already. I had to say: 'I don't know whether I love you, Georgia. I would like what I feel to be love, but I have a feeling that it isn't.'

She would cry sometimes and her mascara tears would make her face stripy. And then she would catch sight of herself and say: 'My God, I'm a wreck. I look like a badger. No wonder no one fucking loves me!'

She taught me to swear and to drink Campari. She showed me St James's Park and Heal's department store. She tried to get me to love my breasts. She invited me to live with her in her flat in Notting Hill Gate, but I refused. I'd become fond of my building and of my grey room. And I didn't want to wake up somewhere else, in a Heal's bed, lying with Georgia.

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She was proud of the Problem Page. She said: 'D'Esté Defoe is a woman with empathy. Her readers trust her. And she's a professional. She has a team of doctors and psychiatrists advising her. She offers genuine solutions.' She talked like this, Georgia. As if she were always advertising something. She told me her flat was nicely situated. She said London was the toast of the world.

I was going to be twenty-one. I was still small. Sometimes I made myself hang from a door lintel, like in the old days. I wanted to reach 5 foot 4 inches. I hadn't given up on any possibility, not even on growing. And now I saw that a moment had arrived for action. I remembered Cord saying: 'Without action, Martin, nothing can be begun, what!' He said this sitting beside me on the hearth rug making a paper chain. We were both of us drunk. Drunken words sometimes get remembered because they're unexpectedly wise.

I wrote a letter to the Problem Page. Every letter had to begin 'Dear D'Esté Defoe'. I made several drafts of my letter and then I typed it out in the *Liberty* offices, during a lull in rejections. This is how it went:

Dear D'Esté Defoe,

You may feel shocked by the contents of this letter. My problem is not one shared by any of your other readers, as far as I can tell.

I am a woman of twenty-one. Or rather, my body is a woman's body, but I have never felt like a woman or colluded with my body's deceit. In my mind, I am, and have been from childhood, male. This belief is an ineradicable thing. I am in the wrong gender.

I dress as a man. I loathe my breasts and all that is female about me. I have never been sexually attracted to a man. I do not even dream of Sean Connery.

Please help me. Please tell whether anyone else has ever felt this? Please tell me whether it could ever be possible to alter my body to fit my mind. Since the age of six, I have suffered very much and I want, at last, to take some action. I have no friends in whom I can confide.

I signed myself 'Divided, Devon'. I thought D'Esté Defoe would be attracted by the letter D. I had no faith in Georgia, but it was the team of doctors and counsellors she had mentioned that gave me hope.

The following evening I spent in the nicely situated flat. Georgia showed me a new kind of grapefruit she had discovered, with pink flesh. She loved new things. As she cut my half of the pink grapefruit she said: 'D'Esté had an extraordinary letter today. From a transsexual.'

I had never heard this word before. I thought, if there's a word for this, then it exists outside me, it exists in other people. I'm not alone.

Then I thought, is the time actually coming, is the date actually coming at last for the invention of Martin Ward?

It was difficult to concentrate on anything, on the grapefruit and then on Georgia's lips, tasting of Revlon. I wished I was in my grey room, sitting absolutely still.

Two weeks later, an answer to my letter appeared in *Woman's Domain*:

Dear Divided, Devon,

I have given a great deal of thought to your problem, and no, you are not unique. Others have suffered as you are suffering and have been helped by counselling and, in some cases, by surgery. The first male-to-female sex change operation was performed on an American GI, George Jorgensen, in 1952 and he/she is now living happily as Christine Jorgensen. In 1958 it was revealed that ship's Doctor, Michael Dillon, had been born Laura Maude Dillon and had changed herself surgically.

But a word of warning, Divided, Devon. The route to surgery is long. And it is not a route that all can take. Your first step must be to see your GP and ask him to refer you to a psychiatrist specialising in sex counselling. Only he will be

able to ascertain what path is the right one for you. Only he will be able to discover whether you could adapt to life as a member of the opposite sex. Put yourself in his hands and he will help you towards your future.
Good luck and *bon voyage!*
D'Esté Defoe

The person in whose hands I put myself was called Dr Beales. The teams of experts at *Woman's Domain* found him for me. I had thought all people like him had consulting rooms in Harley Street, but Dr Beales did not. He had his consulting room in Twickenham and the journey there from Earl's Court took an hour and a half. Twickenham isn't really even in London, but in Middlesex. By the side of Dr Beales's house flowed a slow bit of the Thames, brown as tea. The smell of it was rank. It reminded me of the smell of the Suffolk ditch where I'd found my green tennis ball. And after my first visit to Beales, I had a dream of my childhood on the old farm. I was

Dr Beales had a face like a kitten, squashed and small but with bright eyes. He was about forty. His hair was black. He had a habit of pinching the slack skin under his chin. He dressed like a school teacher, in brown corduroy. He sat me down, within sight of the water, on a leather chair. He stared at me. He said: 'You're very small. There aren't many men of your height.'

I said: 'Growing is something I've been trying to do for years and years.'

He smiled. He had one of those smiles that vanishes the moment it's there, like English spring sunlight. He began to write notes on a pad. I imagined he was describing me to himself - the open-neck shirt I wore, my jeans and my jeans jacket, my heavy-frame glasses, my brown hair cut in a Beatles style by Rob, my look of dread.

He invited me to relax, to make myself comfortable in the chair, to look out at the water. I felt tired and far away from anywhere that I knew. The dirty river wasn't a consoling sight.

I thought, if Rob were here he would say: 'It's a bleddy cesspit, Mart. Nothing can stay alive in it.'

Dr Beales began asking me questions. He asked me whether I could mend an electric fuse and whether I knew the rules of cricket. He said: 'Do you enjoy or repudiate domestic tasks, such as Hoovering?' He said: 'Are you jealous of men's superior strength?' He said: 'Have you ever been train spotting?'

I kept one eye on the water, imagining shrimps and water snakes trying to have an existence there and drowning in sewage and floating to the surface, like feathers and like rope. I said that I had never possessed a Hoover. I said that I thought men used their strength to annihilate women, as my father had tried to annihilate me. I said: 'If I'd let myself be a true girl in my childhood, I would have been destroyed.'

Then Dr Beales said: 'I'd like you to tell me about your parents.'

I turned from the river and stared at his kitten face. I was about to say that I still had dreams of being Sir Galahad and going to rescue my mother from Mountview and from Sonny when Dr Beales gave me one of his fleeting smiles and said: 'You know that they're going to have to be brought into this, don't you? Family support for what you're attempting to do is vital. Patients whose families are opposed have to fight an almost impossible battle.'

So then I saw them arriving here: Sonny in his farm clothes, smelling of beer; Estelle in a polka-dot dress with her grey hair in a tangle.

I said: 'They're dead.'

'Ah,' said Dr Beales and he wrote this down - parents dead.

I was going to tell him that my father had been killed on the Rhine, but I realised in time that if he had died in the war I wouldn't have been born. So I thought then, I won't tell him about my life as it's been, but as it might have been. I'll tell him a story.

I said: 'I was six years old when they died. They died in a plane going from Southampton to Cherbourg. The airline was called Silver City. You could put cars into those planes and fly

them to France. My parents' car was a Humber Super Snipe and it died in the plane also.'

Dr Beales wrote this down, too - car dead. 'What happened to you then?' he asked. I thought of Cord and Miss McRae and I knew that neither of them would want to come to Twickenham. I said: 'I went to live with a family called Harker. They had been friends of my mother's. Edward Harker is a very wise person and he knows about my predicament and he would come and see you if this was necessary.'

'And your adoptive mother?'

'Irene. I've never talked to Irene. Irene is very simple and good.'

'If she's "good", then she might be in sympathy with you?'

'No. It'd be beyond her. Beyond her understanding.'

'You can't be sure of this.'

'Yes, I can.'

'But she'll have to know, in the end.'

'You mean, in the end when I'm a man?'

'You will never be a man. Not a true biological male. It's important that you understand this. Do you understand this?'

'Yes.'

'You will - if you proceed, if I recommend that you proceed with hormone treatment and eventually surgery - be able to pass as a man in ninety-nine per cent of social situations. But you will not be a man. Nor will you any longer be a woman. Have you heard me? Are you keeping relaxed? Stay looking at the water while you answer.'

I looked at the water. A barge was passing. Its cargo appeared to be stones. 'What will I be?' I said.

Dr Beales pinched and pulled his bit of neck skin. I imagined him old, looking like a turkey. 'You will be a partially constructed male. The world will take you for a man and you will look like a man - to yourself. And so your internal conviction of your essential maleness will receive confirmation when you look in the mirror - and your anguish will cease, or so it is hoped.'

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The barge had gone by and was out of sight. The river banks were washed with the brown waves of its wake. I thought, by the time the water is quite still again, my fifty minutes here will be over.

I said: 'Is this what has happened in the past?'
'What do you mean?'

'To other people like me – that their anguish ceased?'
'It is assumed,' said Dr Beales, 'from what they told me. But

we are running ahead of ourselves in any assumption about you. Because for all I know at the moment your idea of your maleness could be a delusion or you could be lying. I know nothing yet.'

I said: 'I lied about one thing.'

'Yes?'

'About cricket. I do know its basic rules. My adoptive father, Edward Harker, makes cricket bats and he taught the rules to me and I used to practise bowling in his backyard.'

'Oh yes?' said Beales. 'What did you bowl, spinners or bouncers?'

'Spinners,' I said. 'I was a spinner and by the time I was twelve Edward was afraid to face me at the crease.'

There was no way of getting to or from Twickenham by any means of transport, as far as I could see. There was no tube station. It was beyond the end of the line. I never saw a bus pass.

I had taken the tube from Earl's Court to Richmond and walked from there, following a map, like a lost tourist.

When I left Dr Beales's house, I decided to walk along the river on the old towpath where the horses used to go up and down long ago. I felt like a horse, trying to pull something, trying to pull along the idea that a surgeon could transform me and I would become Martin. The odd thing was that all my life I had thought this would happen one day, I had believed in it without knowing of any means by which it could happen. And now that I knew the means, I had trouble believing it. I think this happens to the human mind: it

sometimes finds it easier to believe in the dream of something than in the something itself.
And I felt afraid. I thought, will Mary be gone utterly? Do I want her gone utterly, or only parts of her? Is there anything about Mary I should remember to save?

I came to some steps that went down to the dishwater river and I sat on them, watching boats pass. Not far from the steps was an old houseboat slung with tractor tyres as fenders and flying a Union Jack from a metal pole. An area of water between the boat and the bank had been fenced off with chicken wire. In the water, several families of ducks swam in little circles. Duck ladders went up from their pond to the dilapidated deck of the boat. There didn't seem to be anyone on the boat and I thought, well, maybe no one lives there, only these patriotic ducks. We always think a person must be there, at the centre of everything, and sometimes we're wrong.

The sun came out and the water was fingered by an unexpected sparkle. I didn't know what place I was in. It could have been somewhere called Ham. I put my arms round my knees and held on to them. The shine on everything had made me wonder about love. I thought, will Pearl for instance still be fond of me after Mary has gone?

The Sorrow Party

A letter came from Mary to Edward Harker. It was marked 'Confidential'. Irene recognised Mary's handwriting on the envelope and said: 'Is she in trouble, Edward? Is that going to be it?'

Edward took the letter down to his cellar and read it by the light of the parchment lamps. It asked him whether he would come to London and talk to Dr Beales. It asked him whether he would pretend to be Mary's adopted father.

'Well?' said Irene, when he came up.

'Well what?' he said stubbornly.
'What's happened to her, Edward? I deserve to know. I used to house that girl when she was little. I was like a mother to her once.'

'I never break a confidence,' said Edward.
Later, at supper, Pearl said: 'Is Mary really in trouble, Edward?'

He looked at her and at Irene, at their sweet faces. He wanted no harm ever to come to them.
He spoke gently. He said: 'Mary has asked for my help, so that she can make some changes to her life. That's all I can say. She isn't "in trouble" as you put it, Pearl. She's just trying to find the best way through her life.'

That night Irene had a dream about Mary on the hot day of the Beautiful Baby Competition; it was a dream about smocking and beads of blood. She found Edward awake, reading *Gulliver's Travels*. She said: 'If there's anything I can do for poor Mary will you be sure to tell me?'

'Not poor Mary,' he said.
'Will you tell me, though?'

'Yes, Irene. Now go back to sleep.'

'I had a terrible dream. Read me some of your book, will you?'
He began, without comment, to read from Chapter VII of the voyage to Brobdingnag. 'The learning of this people is very defective, consisting only in morality, history, poetry, and mathematics, wherein they must be allowed to excel. But the last of these is wholly applied to what may be useful in life, to the improvement of agriculture, and all mechanical arts; so that among us it would be little esteemed. And as to ideas, entities, abstractions and transcendentals, I could never drive the least conception into their heads . . .'

He didn't have to read aloud for long before Irene had returned to her silent sleep. He knew she hadn't understood a word.

He put his book down and removed his spectacles. He switched out his light and sat there in the dark, as if waiting for someone or something to arrive.

He couldn't get Mary's letter out of his mind. It enthralled him. He was a quiet man with a secret passion for the Billy - these had been minor miracles. His need for Irene, the birth of proposing to do was exceptional, quite outside most human experience. He thought, no one here will understand it, perhaps not even Irene, who loves her. Or Pearl.

He lay down and closed his eyes. What remained of Edward Harker's vanity was flattered to be chosen to impersonate a father. He thought, before I met Irene, I couldn't have played this part, but now I've had these years of practice with Pearl and with Billy. I know what kind of person a father has to try to be.

In her small room next to Edward's and Irene's, Pearl was doing Biology revision by torchlight. She was a person who liked to remember things by heart, word for word.

She was memorising the description of an insect called the Brown Water Beetle. In her Biology exercise book, she had written in her round, clear writing: 'The Brown Water Beetle has a brown, oval body and a yellow line just above the horny wings. It swims quite rapidly about the pond, in search of small flies, which are its preferred meal.' So now she was reciting this to herself with her eyes closed. She tried to make it sound like poetry or like a song. These things were easier to remember than sentences:

The *Brown Water Beetle*
Has a *brown* oval body . . .

When she got to the end of it, she tried to imagine eating a meal of flies. She thought of them alive in her mouth, trying to move, trying to buzz, then being swallowed and dying. Biology was peculiar. It was her favourite subject.

She was fifteen. Her lemonade hair had never darkened. People stared at it and at her, but she was indifferent to them. With her clear blue eyes she kept them away. She wanted to choose, not be chosen. And she wasn't ready to choose. Not yet.

She loved her room, the white curtains Irene had made for her, the pale green walls, her old dolls sitting in a line, her books in a precise order. From it she could see Swaithey church where, every fourth Saturday, she arranged the altar flowers. She was far better at this than Irene had ever been. She could look at a bucketful of greenery and flowers of differing colours and lengths and know straight away the order in which they should go into the vase. She told Irene: 'Flower arrangement has rules. Everything does.'

Pearl switched off her torch and lay down. Every night, after her revision, she memorised her future. She was going to be a dental nurse. She had already applied to the college in Ipswich where she would train. She was going to wear a brilliant white uniform and fold her long hair into a pleat and attach a nurse's hat to her head by means of kirbygrips. She was going to be the person who put the mauve mouthwash pellet into the glass of water, who placed a little bib round the patients' necks, who cleaned them up and kept them calm. She was looking forward to her life. She knew that every life should have a plan and hers did.

But tonight, she found herself thinking about Mary. Edward had said she was 'trying to find the best way through her life'. And she thought, perhaps Mary, even though she was always clever, has never had a *plan*. And now she's lost. Her mind's gone into a black place like a forest and she can't find any way out again.

The next day, Pearl decided to talk to Edward alone. She waited until Irene had taken Billy upstairs for his bath. She said: 'Edward, is Mary lost?'

'Lost?'

'Yes.'

'What do you mean - lost?'

'I don't know. Can I see her? Can she come here?'

'No. I don't think so. But I shall be going to London. You could write her a letter or a card and I'll take it.'

'Can't I come to London?'

'No, Pearl.'

'Why not?'

'You can't.'

'Is she ill?'

'No.'

'Tell me, Edward!'

'I can't tell you. I've promised.'

'Break your promise. Tell me, just me.'

'No.'

'Is she hurt?'

'No.'

'I think she is. I think something bad has happened, after all And I don't *want* this to happen!'

Pearl began sobbing. She thought, I've been sobbing all day really but it's just come out now. Edward put his arms round her. He found a red handkerchief in his pocket that smelled of linseed oil and he gave it to her. He said gently: 'Listen. Write a letter to Mary and I'll take it. And I will tell her that you'd like to see her and then, perhaps, in her reply to you she'll invite you to London, for the day. If she invites you, you can go. She might take you to see the Natural History Museum.'

'She's had a horrible life!' said Pearl.

Irene heard Pearl's crying and came running down the stairs. Billy came after her, steaming pink like a pudding and trailing a custard-yellow towel.

Pearl felt herself transferred from Edward's embrace to Irene's. She was crying so hard, she couldn't speak and her chest had begun to hurt. She heard Billy begin to howl in sympathy and then she could tell that Irene, too, was weeping. She thought, we're having a sorrow party. There *are* such things.

She felt calmer then. She decided she would write a letter to Mary and she knew how she was going to begin it. 'Dear Mary, we had a sorrow party for you on Friday. We all stood at the

bottom of the stairs, crying. I expect, if you had come in and seen us, you would have laughed.'

Timmy's Angle (2)

Timmy thought, what is to be done?

He was eighteen. He had not become an Olympic swimmer. He worked twelve hours a day on the farm and all around him the farm was in decline. He was in a race with ruin. Ruin didn't keep to its lane, it wore no number, it never tired.

There was no one else in the race. Sonny and the dog, Wolf, spent most days in the barn where the combine sat, covered in sacking against frost and rust. Wolf lay on the earth floor and slept. Sonny patched and mended old broken machinery. He put handles on things. He made plumb-lines. He sat on a straw bale and talked to the dog.

He was very thin. He hardly ate any more, only drank. In the clothes he wore and with his white stubble coming through, he looked mangy. He said to Timmy: 'The farm's yours, every square foot of it. You know that, don't you? I've kept it all going for you.'

Timmy got rid of the hens. Grace Loomis now had three hundred birds laying round the clock in an aluminium shed under bright lamps. Timmy told his father: 'We can't compete any more, not at this new low price of eggs,' and Sonny had stroked Wolf's head and said: 'They're a barmy lot, hens, anyway. Remember the day I saw them all standing still?' He had forgotten his accusations of witchcraft. At times, he seemed to have forgotten Mary's existence.

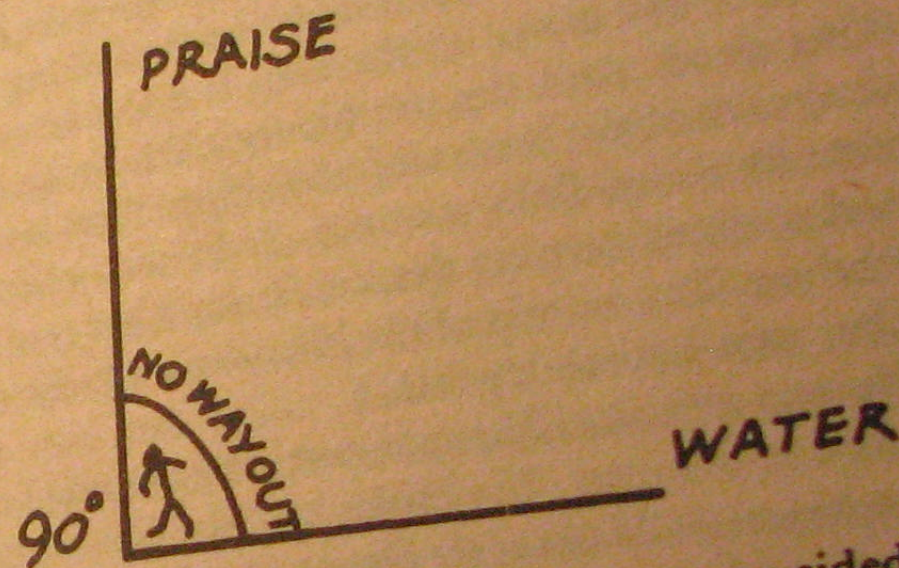
Nothing replaced the hens in their field. Sonny said: 'Put rape in. That's the coming crop.' But the field was simply abandoned. Nettles and horseradish sprang up around the vacant hen houses. Timmy stared at it all. One of his earliest memories was feeding the hens. He and Mary. Mary carrying the heavy pail of grain. The hens running towards them and

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clustering round their legs. Mary saying: 'Imagine if they were people and we were the Shah of Persia.'

One night Timmy remembered how he'd once seen his life as a 90° angle, made by the vertical line of his devotional singing and the horizontal line of his swimming practice. He had never been able to see what filled the 90° between the two arms of the angle, but now he did: he saw it was his imprisonment on the failing farm.

It was late. The house was silent and damp-feeling, as if autumn were seeping into it through the plaster. Timmy put on his dressing gown. He found an old school exercise book and a blunt pencil and a ruler. He made a drawing of his existence.



The sight of himself, a minute pin-man in a one-sided tunnel, choked him. He thought, I'm here because I was afraid to dive. If I could have dared to be a high-diver and not just a swimmer, then my mother would have been enraptured and she would have gone on paying for the lessons at Marshall Street. But swimming wasn't enough. It didn't interest her enough. She once said: 'Butterfly is an ugly stroke, Timmy.' So she let my father step in and put an end to Marshall Street. I'd seen the horizontal line as infinite, but it has turned out to be short.

He sat there, looking at the angle. He could hear Sonny snoring next door in Mary's old room where he slept now, the room his mother had made ready for a new child that never

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arrived. Sonny snored beneath the baby things, a paper frieze of tigers, the balsa-wood mobile that tinkled like mountain bells. Estelle had offered to take them down. Sonny had told her not to bother. He told her he liked them.

Pity for his parents and rage against them alternated in Timmy. Now, face to face with his angle, he saw *them* as the two lines that held him trapped: Estelle the vertical line with her head in the sky somewhere. Sonny the horizontal, flat as the fields, going nowhere but hopelessly on.

It was the time of the sugar-beet harvest. There was good money in beet. People wanted their food sweet and sugary now. Beet and rape, this was where the money was these days – and in the poultry factories. But Timmy loathed lifting beet. The crop stank, it sat heavy in the soil. It was like gouging up something dead. And the machinery often broke. The conveyor that carried the beets aloft and tipped them into the lorry was a cranky thing. Belts snapped. Individual rollers worked loose and stopped turning despite Sonny's hours of tinkering and mending. The wheels of the lifter sank into the mud. The November rain had an icy feel.

Estelle was at home. She had entered a period of calm. She never cried or shouted. She spoke politely. She said: 'It is my intention to watch *Match of the Day* at 10.10.' No one knew how long this period of calm would last.

Sonny seldom went into the house at dinnertime. He sat on his bale in the barn, scratching the dog's ears and drinking Guinness from bottles. But Timmy always came and sat by the Rayburn and Estelle put food in front of him. Since Mountview, she no longer baked bread or made meat stews. She liked tinned things and soft sliced white loaves in plastic bags. She was fond of Salad Cream.

On the day following Timmy's drawing of his angle, Estelle served him a plate of tinned spaghetti. It was too hot to eat. The slimy sauce had a skin on it. Timmy put his spoon down and waited. Estelle was eating radishes. She had spread a slice of bread with Primula. Her grey hair was in a bun. All her

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beauty had disappeared and Timmy thought, where is anything beautiful to be found?
His mind returned to Sundays in Swaithey church. He saw and heard the choir and saw the light coming through the Sower Window. And he realised in that moment that his original vertical line might still be in place. He could no longer sing like a girl, but he could pray. It didn't matter how prayer sounded. It could even not sound at all.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Estelle. 'The hens' field? Those little houses all still there?'
'No,' said Timmy.

That night, Timmy rummaged in the cupboard where all his childhood seemed to have been flung, item by item. He found a little leatherbound book, given to him by the Rev. Geddis when his voice broke and he had to leave the choir. It was called the *Daily Light on the Daily Path*. It described itself as 'a devotional text book for every day in the year in the very words of the Scripture, with additional readings for special occasions'. One special occasion was headed 'Disappointed Hopes'. Timmy turned to this and read: 'Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labour of the olive shall fail and the fields shall yield no meat . . . yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.'
Timmy wanted to laugh. He knew that somehow, unexpectedly, he had stumbled upon a source of hope.

Something Different

Pete Loomis had said of his altering face: 'It's just my nose, doing what it's doing.'

What it was doing was growing a cancer. It grew the size of a fat strawberry, then the size of a lime. Pete had always thought cancers were internal things. He

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thought they never showed. He thought anything that showed couldn't be a cancer, but something else of no consequence.

He was taken to hospital in Ipswich. The hospital was on a hill and looked down on the ugly town. Pete stood at the window of his ward and thought, what if this is the last view I see?

To take out the huge cancer, the surgeons had to cut away half of Pete's nose, including one nostril. They said that by doing this, they had 'contained' it. What remained of his nose was wrapped in a bag of bandages. He looked like a snowman with some white vegetable – a parsnip or a turnip – stuck into the middle of his face.

Walter and Grace came to visit him. Grace clasped her handbag on her knee. She had brought him some yellow chrysanthemums. She said: 'When you get out of here, Pete, you'd better come and live with us over the shop for a bit, till you've got your strength back. You can have Josephine's room.'

Pete didn't want to do this. He knew Grace was a good woman but she was good in ways that he found wearisome.

He said: 'That's a kind offer. But it's not as if I'd lost a leg, is it? I can manage in the bus.'

'I think I shall insist,' said Grace. 'Won't I, Walter?'

Walter had been very quiet. He had just stared sorrowfully at Pete. His eyes were wet.

'You'd better come, Pete,' he said now. 'Only for a bit. It's winter, remember.'

'What's winter?' said Pete, grinning. 'I could've woken up in my grave.'

'Ssh,' said Grace. 'No more deaths, Pete. One in the family was sufficient.'

Pete looked at her. The bandage bag made an obstacle in the middle of his vision. He looked round the obstacle at her lined white face, like a dried lily, at her neat grey hair, at her hands holding the handbag bought at Cunningham's. It's that I find repulsive, he thought, the awful precision of her, a word like 'sufficient', her mouth closing so tidily after it.

The Ward Sister had said to them: 'Don't stay too long. He's much weaker than he thinks he is.' They didn't talk about how Pete was going to look with half his nose missing. Grace talked about the battery hen house. She said bulk orders were starting to come in from lorry drivers' Pull-Ins. She said she had begun to wonder whether a second hen house shouldn't be built.

Walter said little. His bull's head seemed to droop. But he said he'd finished his song, the one he'd been struggling with for so long.

'Good,' said Pete. 'Want to sing it to cheer us all up?'

'No,' said Walter. 'Not now.'

'It wouldn't cheer us up,' said Grace. 'Walter gave me a rendition. It's a morbid song.'

'Is it?' said Pete. 'Morbid, is it, Walt?'

'And I don't, I suppose?' said Grace.

'No, you don't,' said Walter.

Then they left. Pete waved from his bed, but Walter followed Grace out and neither of them looked back.

While Pete was in hospital, Walter went to London. He took an early train. He told Grace that Gilbert Blakey had invited him there, to show him the Crown Jewels. He knew the Jewels would impress her. It was a Wednesday, half-day closing in the shop.

He got on a Sightseeing Bus. He sat on the top deck, in the open, with a drizzle coming down. He was given a little map of the route the bus was going to take. He saw that it passed down the King's Road, near to which he knew Gilbert to be. Part of him prayed to see Gilbert and the other part prayed not to. He didn't know which prayer was the truthful one.

He went to London because he had to get a glimpse of a new place. He had to remind himself that a world outside Swaithey existed. Swaithey had started to kill him. He knew that if he stayed there, working in the shop, living with his mother, he would one day pick up a filleting knife and stick it into his heart. He'd known this for a while. He'd tried to recover from

the loss of Gilbert by writing songs, but this hadn't been enough. He was thirty-one. Either he had to find another destination for his life or end it. He chose London because of the dark colours it was in his mind – red and black.

With Walter on the top deck of the bus was a group of Canadian women, wearing rain hats. Everything amazed them. 'My-oh-my!' they said. 'Will you look, girls!'

As the bus came down Whitehall, Walter decided that it was mainly the solidity of London that was so unfamiliar, so foreign. In Swaithey, when the October mists sat on the village and the tops of the hedgerows merged with the sky, you could imagine the whole place fading away in the dusk, never to reappear. But London felt eternal. It cast square shadows, black and wide. It felt like the capital of the world.

Walter began talking to the Canadians. The rain had stopped. They patted their permed hair. They told Walter they were from Medicine Hat, Alberta. They said Medicine Hat had no Tower and no Abbey; it had a good school and an ice rink. They told him their names: Mavis, Jane, Cecelia Ann, Beth, Nettie and April. They said: 'This is our first trip, Walter. We didn't want to delay it any longer.'

'It's my first trip, too,' said Walter, 'but I'm thinking of coming to live here for a while.'

'You are?' they said. They had a habit of saying the same thing in a kind of chorus. Walter thought, they could've been backing singers when they were young.

'What's your line of country?' they asked.

Walter grinned. 'Country it is,' he said. 'Country Music.'

'My, that's interesting!' This was Nettie on her own. 'I didn't know English people sang Country Music.'

'Not many do,' said Walter.

'You shouldn't be coming to London, dear,' said Nettie. 'You should be going to Nashville, Tennessee. I have a cousin in Nashville. Married a Southern girl. They run a pharmacy. I could you give their name.'

The bus was travelling down Knightsbridge, past the Mary Quant shop, past Harrods. Walter imagined going into

Harrods and being swallowed up by an awful yearning and never coming out again. April and Jane said: 'There it is, ladies. Lit up for Christmas. Wow!' It was freezing cold on the open bus, but the fear and excitement of the Canadians kept them warm. Walter was glad he wasn't alone, especially when they reached the King's Road. He would have hated Gilbert to see the tourist bus go by and notice one lonely head sticking over the parapet: his.

He said to the Canadians: 'I have a friend living not far from here.'

'You do, Walter?'

'He's a dentist.'

'Yes?' said Beth. 'Well now, that's a thing I was once told in Medicine Hat, that the British don't care for their teeth. Is there any truth in that?'

Walter smiled. 'Yes,' he said, 'I reckon.'

'You don't floss, is that it?'

'We don't what?'

'You don't floss?'

Walter remembered these were words Gilbert had once used. He shook his head. Then he turned away from Nettie and Beth and looked down at the street. It was noisy and bright with people. Walter's heart began to thump. At any moment, one of them could turn into Gilbert. He might be wearing a bomber jacket or a fur. He would have changed, become more beautiful than ever. This happened in the romances his mother read: when the hero returned from his deeds on the Niger he was more handsome and irresistible than when he'd set out.

But the bus went on, past Flood Street and down towards the river and there was no sighting of Gilbert. Part of Walter felt as though he had suffered a cruel disappointment and the other part a deliverance. These feelings alternated, in waves. He held on to the seat in front of him. The sightseeing tour was nearly finished. Walter wondered whether he wouldn't stay on the bus and do the tour all over again, like he used to sit in Leiston

cinema and see the feature film twice. But he knew that Nettie and Co. would be getting off and that, without them, he would feel lonely and foolish.

It was late when he got home to Swaithey. Walter expected Grace to be asleep but she was sitting in her armchair, waiting for him.

'How were the Crown Jewels?' she asked.

'Fine,' said Walter. 'Shining.'

'Did Mr Blakey show you a bit of London?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that's nice. Now you've seen it.'

Walter sat down. He felt cold and exhausted. He wanted to say to his mother, there and then, I can't go on here. I'll kill myself if you make me. I want a life of my own. But Grace was watching him like a cat. Lately, she watched him this way from her booth in the shop, her eyes following his every movement. It was as if she knew what was in his mind.

Pete left the hospital in Ipswich. He'd grown attached to one of the nurses. He'd thought he was too old to have dreams of women, but he wasn't. He thought, perhaps one is never too old. They could cut off your nose and ears and all your limbs and your stump would still go on dreaming.

He moved into Josephine's room. He found an old Horlicks mug in the wardrobe. He looked out and saw the field with his bus in it, waiting for things to be as they were. He knew the wait was vain.

Grace fed him a lot of meat and gravy. She let him have a nip of whisky in the evening. He was in pain. He sat by the fire with his eyes closed. He thought, the only thing I'm looking forward to is hearing Walter's new song.

Walter didn't want to sing it again in front of Grace who'd called it morbid. He waited for an evening when she was out at a whist drive in the Girl Guide hut, now rebuilt in brick and used for Conservative fund-raising and meetings of the Parish Council. The story of how Mary Ward had spoiled a dancing

show by appearing in wellingtons was still sometimes remembered there. But it was laughed at now. It was no longer shocking. People said: 'What a nerve that poor child always had!'

With Grace gone, Walter got his guitar and sat down in front of Pete. Before he began the song, he said: 'I've got to tell you something: one of these days, one of these years, I'm leaving. I know I'm letting down generations of Loomises, but I can't help it. I'm going to leave and that's it. It's final. I need to have a life before it's over.'

Pete nodded. He looked round the tidy front room with its chintz curtains and its shiny wooden furniture. 'I couldn't live here,' he said. 'You've done all right to stay so long.'

'I'm thirty-one,' said Walter.

'Sure,' said Pete. 'Thirty-one. Now sing.'

Walter tuned his guitar. He told Pete the song was called 'Something Different'. He said: 'I wrote it when I saw there was a lot of things I didn't understand, even at my age.'

'Your age is nothing,' said Pete. 'Now get on with it.'

Walter cleared his throat. He was proud of his song. He imagined future fans growing old and remembering it and saying: 'Wow, that was a Walter Loomis classic!' It had a wistful tune. It was in the key of B-Minor. This was how it went:

I tried to find the answer to the earth,
I dug deep down to see what I could find.
I dreamed some foolish dreams about its birth
And I woke up with its riddle in my mind.
I tried to find the answer to the sky,
I climbed a rainbow and looked all around,
Confusion was the thing that caught my eye
And mys-ter-y was what I really found.

Chorus:

Well, there's always something different hiding
There inside the something that you see!

Sacred Country

The world is full of secrets
And I know that it won't ever
Give the secret of its secrets up to me.

I tried to find the answer to my love,
I came to her and put the question, why?
She said: 'Don't ask for what I cannot give,'
She said: 'Don't touch me now, don't even try.'

I tried to find the answer to my life,
I lay alone and lonely in my bed.
I tried to paint a picture of my life
But what I painted was my death instead.

Chorus:

Well, there's always something different hiding
There inside the something that you see!
The world is full of secrets
And I know that it won't ever
Give the secret of its secrets up to me.
No, I know that it won't ever
Give the secret of its secrets up to me.

Pete was moved by Walter's song. He took a sip of whisky,
then he said: 'If my old friend, the Minister in Memphis,
could've heard that, Walter, he might've cried.'

Walter shrugged. 'Trouble is,' he said, 'my songs don't
change one single thing.'

CHAPTER TWELVE
1968

Revolution and Revelation

Cord was writing a letter to the Ministry of Transport. The letter would have a hundred and eighty-nine signatories. It informed the Minister that he had 'reckoned without the residents of Gresham Tears'.

They'd been told a new trunk road was planned that would slice through the water-meadows on which the villagers had gazed for four hundred and thirty-two years. The blacksmith's forge and the Gresham Cattery would go flying into history. The air would fill with a relentless thunder.

Fighting the coming of the road had cured Cord of his palsy. It had vanished. What came to him instead was rhetoric. He formed the Residents of Gresham Tears Against the Road Action Group. Its slogan was LEAVE GRESHAM ALONE, TAKE AWAY OUR TEARS. He told the assembling villagers: 'They think we're of no account. We have to prove them wrong. We may be called upon to lie down in the path of a tar-spreader. I do not rule out the all-night vigil or the long march. I, for one, am willing to contemplate the ultimate sacrifice!' The residents looked at him in alarm. They said they didn't think that it would come to that. 'This is England,' they said, 'not Hungary, Thomas.'

The campaign against the road was given, in Cord's mind, a marvellous momentum by the events in Paris in May. He sat on his Yoga mat and talked silently to his long-dead Livia. He

said: 'This is turning out to be a decade of protest and I wish you could see it. There's hope in us now. I wish you could see that. The dispossessed and the about-to-be-dispossessed (we, in Gresham) have found a voice. We're getting off our backsides. We're saying things we thought we'd never hear ourselves say. And even in Suffolk – don't laugh, Liv – we'll man the barricades if the need arises. In the absence of Parisian cobblestones we'll hurl sods . . .'

His mind was all on this, on the Road Campaign, on protest and bravery, so that the normal things of life didn't seem important any more. They seemed a bit futile, in fact. Cord sat in his garden thinking and dreaming and the summer weeds grew high everywhere and he didn't notice them.

Then Timmy came to see him and remarked on the weeds. Cord looked at Timmy and then at them. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'Well, everything in its season, that's the thing.'

Timmy seldom came. It was as if he knew Martin was the one Cord liked best. But now he had come and Cord could suddenly see that Timmy looked frightened. He stopped talking about the new season of bravery and said: 'What's up, old Tim?'

'Everything,' said Timmy.

'Everything how?' said Cord.

'The farm. It's finished.'

'Don't say that. It's your father's life.'

'Yes. But not mine.'

'It'll be yours one day.'

'I don't want it. I hate it. That's why I came to see you.'

'Hang on, Tim . . .'

'That's why I came. To tell you that I'm going to leave the farm.'

'Hang on . . .'

'Don't say I can't. You've just been talking about protest. I'm protesting, too. I loathe and detest the farm. The only thing or person or life I want is God.'

'Wait a minute . . .'

'Stop saying hang on, wait a minute. I've come to ask your help.'

'Help with what?'

'I want you to tell my mother and father.'

'That I'm leaving. I've applied to theological college. I'm going into the Church.'

Cord took out a handkerchief and wiped his left eye. This was a habit left over from his palsy time. He stared at Timmy. The boy sat on the very edge of his chair, holding tight to its arms, blinking.

'Relax, Tim,' Cord said kindly. 'I was given a bottle of sherry by the Residents to thank me for organising the letter to the M.O.T. Let's have a sip of that and talk about it all calmly.'

'Okay,' said Timmy. 'But don't think I'm not serious. Don't think you can talk me out of it.'

'I wouldn't dream of thinking that,' said Cord. 'My respect for the individual increases day by day.'

Cord poured the sherry into two tumblers. These days, he felt reckless about almost everything. He had a sudden ache of envy at the thought of Timmy's youth and all the years lying ahead of him. He thought, if I were young I wouldn't choose the Church. Oh, no. I'd take Livia to Paris and hurl stones into the air. I'd run with her along the Quai des Invalides and watch her hair flying . . .

'All right?' said Timmy.

'All right what?'

'Are you listening?'

'Yes,' said Cord, 'I'm listening. Go ahead.'

Timmy leaned back into his chair. He didn't look at Cord, who was taking large sips of sherry, but tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling.

He began to describe his 90° angle. He said: 'The shape of it is like the sties we make for the pigs out of corrugated iron. It's completely black and cold in there. It's mud. It's shit. And I can't stand up, even.'

'How long have you seen it all like this?' asked Cord.

Timmy explained about the two sides or arms of the angle and what they had once been. He said: 'No one can live their lives without light. Without the miraculous.'

'You'd be surprised,' said Cord.
'I can't, anyway,' said Timmy. 'I can't. I'd rather be dead. But my father won't understand. He'll think I'm letting him down. He won't understand any of it.'

'And your mother?'
'She would. She will. I don't know. But it's my father who'll stop me, not her.'

'How can he stop you, if you've made up your mind?'
'He will, somehow. Kill me, maybe.'

'Don't talk bunk, Tim.'

'He'll kill someone. One day. I've thought it for years. I never used to think it could be me.'

There was a long silence. Outside, in the weed-choked garden, all the summer birds were singing.

'Listen to that,' said Cord after a while. 'You won't hear the racket the thrushes make if we get the road.'

'No,' said Timmy.

'I hate blight,' said Cord. 'Wherever it turns up. And if you feel your life's blighted, old Tim, I'll do what I can to help you. All right?'

Caesar, Waiting

The subscriptions to *Liberty* were increasing. It had thirteen readers in Gibraltar. It ran political essays now and jokes and pen and ink drawings done by Mary to illustrate the poems. A lot of the poetry was about the Vietnam War. Mary didn't trust herself to draw faces. She drew the backs of people, running. She drew machinery and flames.

Her salary had increased. She was given a desk to replace the drinks trolley. Her drawings were signed 'Martin Ward'.

On Friday evenings, she, Tony and Rob would drink in the Drayton Arms. They would order a bottle of Bulgarian red wine and talk about foreign films and the beauty of Jeanne Moreau. Sometimes the wine made Rob think about his lost South Africa, about bioscopes and milk bars and Jacaranda trees. His sadness disgusted him. 'Sorry, Tony,' he'd say, 'sorry, Mart. Just ignore me. Talk about something else. Discuss Harold Pinter.'

Mary broke off her relationship with Georgia. She despised Georgia for desiring her. She tried to explain to her that she could only love women who loved men, not women who loved women.

Georgia threw a lamp at her. It exploded against the wall. Georgia began to scream and cry and her make-up dribbled in inky lines over her chalk-white face.

They were in Georgia's flat. It was still nicely situated but its owner was elsewhere in her mind. She swooped on things like a bat. She took her lime-green suit out of the wardrobe and tore at the seams with her teeth. She ripped it to pieces. She came from a family with strong teeth and strong hands. She even got one sleeve out of its socket. She flung the mutilated costume at Mary's chest. Then she started on her pillows. She stabbed them with scissors. She ripped open the holes and took out fistfuls of feathers and sent them flying around the room like thistledown on the wind.

Mary backed out of the room, but Georgia dived onto her. 'No one leaves!' she screamed. 'No one fucking leaves me. I'm D'Esté Defoe. I fucking leave *them*! I'm the one who does the leaving!'

Mary tried to take hold of her flying hands. She was much shorter than Georgia. One of the hands hit her face and she fell backwards into the sitting room with its pleasant south-facing view.

Being hit was the thing she feared most. It reminded her of Sonny. She had dreams about it.

She got to her feet and ran. She kicked the flat door shut in Georgia's face. She took the stairs two at a time. In a race, she

knew she could outrun Georgia. She was wearing running shoes.

Letters from Georgia arrived. They were sorrowful and calm. They attempted little grieving jokes: 'I was Snow White, but I drifted.' 'You're a person of rare gifts; you never gave me any.' Mary put them in a drawer. It seemed cruel to throw them away. Then she threw them away. They embarrassed her. She felt glad she'd never written any self-pitying letters to Mrs Ranulf Morrit.

Georgia started sending money. Mary returned it. It kept coming. It went to and fro like an unwanted thing. In the end, Mary sent ten pounds to Cord for his 'Residents Against the Road' Fund and sent a postcard of Jeanne Moreau to Georgia. On the back, she wrote: 'Your money has gone to charity. Anything more you try to give will take the same route.'

After that, there was nothing from Georgia. She was there in the magazine, of course. The advice of D'Esté Defoe poured out to her million women readers, week by week, but Mary wasn't one of them.

Her visits to Dr Beales continued. One day, he uncovered her first lie.

She had told him she never menstruated. He had looked at her suspiciously. He had written on his pad: never menstruated(?). But her first period had come soon after she'd thrown her skirts into the airwell, soon after she'd announced to herself that she was happy. She'd stared dumbly at the blood. She had never believed she possessed the womb from which it could come. Now it was here, a punishment. The misery of her years in Swaithey had kept it at bay. Happiness had allowed it to arrive. That was how fickle her body was.

She endured the monthly bleeding by disowning it. She never looked at it. She inserted and extracted tampons with her eyes shut. She told herself that this small flow was nothing compared to the tides that used to stream from Lindsey's body. She took aspirin round the clock for four days and nights so

that no flicker of pain reached her. She pretended nothing was occurring.

Dr Beales saw it in her altered pupils.

She said: 'No, you're quite wrong. It couldn't be. There's no womb inside.'

He stood up. She had only been there for ten minutes but he told her the session was at an end.

She said: 'Dr Beales, it takes me an hour and a half to get here.'

'Good,' he said. 'Well at least you'll be spared the journey in future.'

She gaped at him. She felt sick from aspirin and now from dread.

'Since you are not telling me the truth, Marty, I am bringing this session and this whole line of enquiry to an end.'

She had to plead with him. She admitted the lie about her periods. She explained to him that it was a lie she herself still wanted to believe, that she had dreams of cutting out her womb and burying it in Antarctica. She swore it was her only lie and that all the rest was truth.

'What about your adopted parents?' said Beales. 'Have you told me the truth about them?'

'Yes,' said Mary. 'And I wrote to my father, telling him you might want to see him.'

'And your mother? The person you described as a "good woman".'

Mary took a handkerchief from her jeans and held it to her mouth. She felt icy. She could taste grey aspirin vomit in her throat. She excused herself from the room and was sick in Dr Beales's toilet. The thought of all the lies that were going to come and going to need guarding and watching made her feel so tired she wanted to lie down on the lavatory floor and sleep. But she returned to Dr Beales.

He offered her a Glacier Mint. He said: 'We'll leave it there for today. Next time, bring your father.'

Edward Harker wasn't fond of London. He believed the French understood how to set out a city and the English did not. But he came there for Mary. It was a hot June day and he arrived at Liverpool Street Station wearing his panama hat. His face was tanned from games of cricket in the back garden with Billy. He looked sprightly among the arriving passengers.

He and Mary rode the tube to Richmond. Harker gave Mary a letter from Pearl, which she put in a back pocket, to read later, when this day was safely over. She said to Harker: 'If you had been my father, this might not have happened.'

Harker smiled. He said: 'I'm pretty sure I know what Billy was in his previous life, did I tell you?'

'A wrestler.'

'No. An Indian princeling.'

'Why?'

'It's in his cricket. He bats with marvellous disdain. Like old Ranjitsinhji.'

They laughed. They got on a bus to Twickenham. In the sun, Twickenham seemed a nice place. The river had a shadow of blue on its surface. They were early for Beales so they sat on a bench admiring the water, pretending it was clean. After a while, Mary said: 'I hope you're not going to mind telling lies, Edward?'

Harker took off his panama and gave it a shake. He sometimes had the feeling, when he wore this hat, that there was a rodent trapped inside it that would start biting his head any minute. He examined the interior of the panama. There was nothing in it. He put it back on and said: 'I don't mind lying to your psychiatrist fellow. The thing that's going to get difficult is lying to Irene.'

'Well,' said Mary. 'Dr Beales keeps mentioning Irene. He keeps saying he will have to talk to her as well as you.'

Harker shook his head. 'I could try to explain it to her,' he said, 'but you know what she'll want to know, don't you? She'll want to know the *why* of it. And none of us really knows the *why* of it. Not you, not me, not the doctors. So that would be the hard bit.'

'I will know why. At some moment in the future. That's what I think. It'll just come into my mind in the middle of a silence. That's what I believe.'

'Maybe,' said Harker. 'Or maybe not. The world is packed with mystery, you know. We tend to forget this, but it's still packed tight with it, like water in stone.'

Dr Beales greeted Harker warmly. His secretary brought in cups of coffee. Mary didn't look at the two men, but out of the window, at the vacant blue sky.

The discussion seemed to go well for a while. Harker told Beales that, being a believer in the transmigration of souls, he had no difficulty understanding Mary's conundrum. But he was a little nervous. He embarked on an unasked-for description of one of his former lives. He told Dr Beales that as a lutenist at the court of the Danish King Christian IV he and his fellow musicians had to play by candlelight in a damp cellar underneath the state rooms. An open trap door above them allowed the King to hear the music, but when he tired of their playing he would kick the trap door shut and then the musicians' candles would blow out and they would be left in pure darkness.

Beales didn't seem interested in this story. He ignored it, in fact. He said to Harker: 'You say you understand – and I take this to mean an intellectual understanding – Marty's predicament. What I need to know is whether you are going to give your support to the journey of physical change and reconstruction she may eventually undertake.'

'Yes,' said Harker. 'I am. Mary, or Marty as you call her, had a difficult early life and I have always hoped –'

'You say she had a difficult early life. Why was it difficult?'

'For reasons she's probably outlined to you. Her belief that she wasn't, in her true essence, a girl, made everything difficult for her.'

'In what ways?'

'Well. In what ways? Well. The behaviour we expect of girls is different from the behaviour we expect of boys, and so the –'

'Describe it.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Describe the difference between the two sets of behaviours or the two sets of expectations.'

'Well, I don't know that I can be precise, but -'

'Try to be precise.'

'Well. Take clothes, for instance.'

'Clothes?'

'Yes. Mary, always, from a young age, hated to have to wear a dress. My wife told me of one occasion, when Mary would have been six or seven, when the wearing of a smocked dress caused her great distress.'

'You weren't present on this occasion?'

'No. But -'

'Can you think of an occasion when you were present when your daughter showed similar distress?'

'Well. Many occasions. She used to say she looked ugly, felt stupid . . .'

'You used the word "behaviour". Clothes condition behaviour to some extent, but you couldn't define them as *being* behaviour. What expectations of certain behaviour in Marty's childhood caused her unease?'

'Unease? Well. Toys and games, I suppose. We expected her to play with dolls, play at being a mother . . .'

'And she refused to do this?'

'Yes. She wasn't interested in this.'

'But you insisted that she continue with this kind of play?'

'No. Not really . . .'

'Where was the unease, then?'

Mary glanced at Harker. He took one of his familiar oil-scented handkerchiefs out of his trouser pocket and wiped his face with it. It was hot in Twickenham. Mary felt guilty that he was here in this hot room.

Beales asked his question again: 'If you didn't insist that play be centred on mothering and domestic tasks, where did Marty's anxiety have its root?'

'We didn't insist. But I think we went on assuming that she

would play with dolls and so forth and be interested in giving pretend tea parties and all the things which Pearl -'

'Yes. Pearl loved her dolls. She had a pram for them. She tried to wash their hair . . .'

'So you never played cricket with Pearl?'

'Cricket?'

'Yes.'

'No.'

'But you did with Marty?'

Harker turned to Mary. His face looked petunia-red. 'Cricket? Did we, Mary?' he said.

'Yes,' said Mary. 'Don't you remember? In the garden. I used to mainly bowl - with that old tennis ball I had.'

'Ah, yes,' said Harker. 'So we did. So you did. So we did!'

Dr Beales was writing on his pad: Cricket(?). Harker blew his nose. Mary tried to remember what kind of bowler she'd told Dr Beales she'd been. She thought this would be his next question, but it wasn't. He put the top on his expensive pen and turned to Harker. He spoke gravely. He said: 'On Marty's first visit to me, she told me that in childhood you tried to annihilate her. What do you think she meant by that?'

Harker said: 'Do you mind if I take my jacket off?'

'Go ahead,' said Beales.

As Harker struggled out of his linen jacket, Mary struggled to remember how old she said she'd been when her real parents had died. She thought she'd probably remembered the two-minute silence and said six, but she wasn't certain. She'd forgotten she'd ever talked about Sonny, ever used the word 'annihilate'. Always, when she was with Beales, she found herself believing that Edward and Irene were her mother and father.

She stood up. 'It wasn't him, Dr Beales,' she said.

'What?' said Beales.

'It wasn't Edward. It was my real father I was talking about. He tried to annihilate me. Before he died in the Silver City crash.'

'He tried to annihilate you when you were four or five years old?'

'Yes.'

Beales turned to Harker. 'You knew about this?'

'Well . . . ' said Harker.

'You didn't know about it?'

'Oh yes. I knew there'd been some trouble. Sonny was always -'

'What was meant by the word "annihilation"?''

'Well . . . '

'It's a very strong word to use, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is.'

'But not, of course, a word that a six-year-old child would be familiar with. So what incidents or feelings was Marty referring to that occurred before you became her adoptive father?'

'I don't know exactly . . . ' said Harker.

'You've been her surrogate parent for fifteen years and you've never made it your business to find out what damage was done to her in early childhood?'

Harker turned to Mary. He wiped his face with his handkerchief. 'I expect you talked about this to Irene, didn't you? Not to me.'

'Yes,' said Mary. 'I don't think I ever talked about it to you.'

Dr Beales threw down his pen. He got up and crossed to the window. He stood there with his back to Mary and Harker, looking out. Harker mouthed the words: 'I'm sorry,' to Mary.

There was a fly in the room. Its mad buzzing against the window was the only sound. Mary thought, silence is all right when you know what a person is thinking in it, but not when you don't.

She stared at objects. She saw that the label on Harker's jacket read 'Milsom and Sands (Norwich) LTD. Men's Outfitters. Estb. 1895.' She wished Edward was there in a Norwich clothes shop, free to saunter out into the sunshine whenever he wanted to.

She looked at the pen and ink stand on Beales's desk. It was

leather and had a matching blotter. She wondered whether the ink well was made of porcelain. It was the kind of possession Georgia might have boasted about, but it appeared rather tarnished by lack of use.

Several minutes passed before Dr Beales came back to the desk. He was smiling a secret smile, as if he had seen something that amused him while looking out at the waters of Twickenham. He looked affectionately at Harker. He rested his elbows on the matching blotter, obscuring his notes. To Mary's surprise, he returned to the subject of reincarnation.

The word 'annihilate' seemed to have floated out of his mind. He let Edward Harker describe his life as a nun. He appeared to listen attentively while Edward recounted what he could remember of his nun's routine, his use of Coal Tar soap, his fondness of the Psalms, the bitter cold of his hands. Mary heard Harker's voice relax. He sat back in his chair. He seemed to think that all the lying was over. But Mary had seen Beales's smile. He would let Harker ramble and then he would return to the subject of her childhood.

He didn't return to it. He continued to listen courteously until Harker could recall nothing more of his life as a Sister and then he got up again and thanked Harker for coming and asked him to go back to the waiting room.

Harker looked confused. He stroked his creased linen jacket. He started to apologise for his faulty memory, but Beales cut him off. He wasn't smiling any more. He said: 'Wait outside, please. Thank you.'

When he'd gone, Beales sat down. He closed his eyes. With his eyes closed, he didn't look like a kitten or a fox any more, but like a thin Caesar, waiting to have his head modelled in bronze.

With his eyes still closed he said: 'By doing this, you've set your cause back six months, maybe more, maybe for all time.'

'By doing what?' said Mary.

Beales ignored this. He said: 'It means that all my notes are worthless.'

He opened his eyes wearily, took some pages from Mary's file and scattered them over the desk.

'Why?' said Mary.

'Why?' said Beales. 'You know why.'

'No ...'

'Because you've been lying, inventing, telling stories. Your parents are not dead. Your parents are John "Sonny" Ward and Estelle Maria Ward, née Cord. They live at Elm Farm, Swaithey in Suffolk. You invented their death; you invented this very likeable father. I conclude that you have therefore invented all or part of every single thing you've told me. This invalidates every session we've had. I warned you once before about lying. So there it is. You must find someone else to take your case - if you can. I have no more time for you.'

Mary felt a weight come into her chest. She thought this might be how you would feel - just for the tenth of a second - if someone had fired a bullet at you. You would stare in disbelief at your assassin, just as she was staring now at Dr Beales, and then you would fall and cease to be.

At the station, Edward said: 'I failed you. It was my fault.'

'No,' said Mary. 'He knew the truth all along. Nothing you could have said would have made any difference.'

'What are you going to do now, then?'

'Find someone else.'

'Will that be difficult?'

'It's all difficult, Edward. I wish none of it was like it is.'

Harker kissed the top of Mary's head. Then he got onto the train.

It sat waiting in dusty light and he sat inside it feeling old and a fool.

He waved at Mary, who stood on the platform, and she waved back. They waved because they thought the train was moving, but it wasn't. It was only being shunted a few yards. They felt stupid having this waving rehearsal, so when the train did begin to move they both raised their hands very tentatively, in case this, too, was a false departure and not the real thing.

Mary went back to her room. She stood in the middle of it and stared at her possessions. For such a long time now she'd been preparing the room for Martin Ward. Her pen and ink sketches of war were taped to the walls. She'd painted the ceiling black. Above the cooker hung a photograph of Jeanne Moreau riding a bicycle.

She sat down on the bed and lit a French cigarette. She thought of the brightness on the river and the heat in Dr Beales's room. Her hope and her future had been in those places and she hadn't truly realised it until now, when they were no longer there and had no existence anywhere. There seemed nothing to do but smoke and stare. It was Friday. She would spend the weekend staring at all her black and white things.

She had no plan. Only the eternal plan of becoming Martin. She was in the middle of her third *Gitane* when she remembered the letter from Pearl. She pulled it out of her pocket and looked at Pearl's round, childlike writing on the envelope. She felt glad to be staring at something that was going to speak to her and not remain mute like the room. From some previous, dimly lit life she heard Miss McRae ask: 'What is this baby doing in my lesson, Mary?' And this made her smile. She opened the letter. She wiped her glasses on her sleeve and read:

Dear Mary,

I am going to send this letter with Edward. I know something is wrong, but he won't tell me what. Please write and tell me. I've never forgotten Montgolfier and the universe. I don't want you to be unhappy.

I'm doing my exams. Biology is my best subject. English is my worst. I have no imagination. For literature we're reading a book by Joseph Conrad called *The Rover* which I don't understand. There are quite a few sentences I don't understand, even. One of them is 'Réal's misanthropy was getting beyond all bounds.'

Our main things in Biology are called Kingdoms. There is a Fungus Kingdom, for instance. The Animal Kingdom has a sub-kingdom called Protozoa. A fluke is one of these. A fluke leads a life inside other things, e.g. a snail, then a fish, then a human liver. I think this is more interesting than something like 'Réal's misanthropy was getting beyond all bounds.' Don't you? Think of flukes inside people!

Edward said perhaps I could come to London for the day and you could take me to the Natural History Museum. Could I? Mum has just said Pearl if you don't come down now I shall give your supper to Billy.
(Will go on later.)

Later

Here is some news for you.

I went into Swaithey church one evening to water the flowers and Timmy was there by himself. He was praying. I don't think he noticed me. (Sorry about new pen.) While I was doing the flowers he started to cry. I went and sat with him and the watering can. He just cried more and more. Then he told me the news, he's doing Theology in a Correspondence Course. He wants to become a vicar and not die working on the farm. I can't imagine him as vicar, can you. He's too small. Your father can't imagine it either. He thinks Timmy's just trying to annoy him. He's told Timmy he will never sell the farm as long as he lives. Timmy said: 'Pearl, he refuses to imagine what it's like to be me.' I said: 'I expect he wasn't good at English, like me, and has no imagination, which is why he is a farmer.' Timmy had no hankie. And I didn't. He had snot all over his hands.

I hope I could come to London and go to the N.H. Museum. And see Earl's Court, where you live.

I hope you are O.K. Do you like Brian Poole and the Tremeloes?
Please write.

love from Pearl

Mary read the letter again and then another time and then another. She didn't know why it was comforting. She read it over and over, on and on until she felt sleepy. She read it her cigarette and drew the curtains over what remained of evening in the lightless airwell.
She didn't undress. She got into bed still wearing her jeans. She put Pearl's letter on her pillow and placed her head on the round writing and soon slept.