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# ***Between The Wars: An Activist Novel***

Submitted for the degree of PhD in  
The Contemporary Novel: Practice as Research

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**Abstract:** The first part of this thesis, *Between The Wars*, is a novel based on the life and work of pacifist and social reformer Muriel Lester. It is an interrogation of the beliefs that inspired her, the christian pacifist movement she was a part of, and the challenge of living out the values of peace through two world wars. The novel is also an exploration of the relationship between activism and fiction, and the possibility of representing Lester's ideas in fictional form. The second part of the thesis discusses the process of writing an activist novel that seeks change and yet allows, indeed encourages, the reader to question its beliefs. Idealistic, complex, unflinching, and yet ultimately likeable, Muriel Lester is a challenge to the familiar narratives of 20th century history. Yet the closer to her activism the novel gets, the less certain it becomes, the more it casts itself into question.

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## *Between the Wars*

by Alexandra Martin-Carey

"I see men as trees suffering  
or confound the detail and the horizon.  
Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing  
of what others never set eyes on."  
— Keith Douglas, *Desert Flowers*

## **A Beginning**

**October 1928**

I am walking down the aisle at my wedding but I am not looking at my future husband.

From the moment I woke today I have longed for him; for his eyes that always look as if I am enough, for his big hands, for the clean lines of his suit and the smell of tailor's chalk. I even longed for Peter, my sister's husband, to arrive. For cigarettes and hair grease. I longed for anything but the female fuss and noise, the pins and flowers and scents and mirrors that besieged me. When I was finally deemed acceptable, when every part of me felt as though it belonged to another woman, Mother said that Father would be proud. She didn't mention my brothers. I called Peter to help me into the cab, to take me to Harry.

All day I have longed for him. Now I am walking down the aisle but I am not looking at Harry. I have noticed a woman I do not know in the second row on the right. I have never seen her before. Her hair is parted in the middle, coiled over her ears like two ancient snails. One gloveless hand rests on the back of the pew. She has turned and beams at me. The flagstones echo the metal click of Peter's soles. There is something about the woman's eyes, I want to keep looking at her. We draw level then pass the front seats. I have a feeling the woman will do something extraordinary. I twist away from my arm, lifted and held by Peter, but I cannot keep her in sight. I must concentrate on being married. Here, finally, is Harry, with a yellow rose pinned to his lapel.

We travel from the church to the reception by horse-drawn cab. When we turn from Bow Road into the narrow streets lined with flat little houses we are driving through a stream of people on the pavements, all heading for Kingsley Hall. The building was opened only a month before. It is a community centre and church set up by

two of Harry's aunts, named after his Uncle Kingsley who died in 1914. I did not want the reception here, but Harry was determined and I wanted to make him happy.

We wait outside until the guests are in. Two flagpoles jut from the face of the building with a sign strung between that says *Congratulations* in painted letters.

"Come along — enough waiting."

Harry opens the cab door. I hadn't noticed him slide out from the other side. His dark hair and eyes are glossy in the sun. He takes my hand. It seems impossible that we are married. This hand with its ring could belong to anybody. His jacket is tight across the shoulders and I feel his strength when he pulls me close. "Do you miss your brothers?" he asks. I nod and he kisses my forehead. I do not want the reception. This is all that I need.

Still, we must go inside and I must make Harry proud. In the hall people orbit us, watch us, smile at us, talk to us. I grow dizzy. I haven't eaten all day. The seconds dissolve into faces. I grip Harry's hand, nod and smile. There is the woman with the snail hair and the absorbing eyes. She talks to a team of waiters, strides across the shining floor. My heart races. Harry lets go of my hand. I think I am going to fall. People swarm around us, drinks are offered, and cake.

The food brings back my strength. Harry smiles when I talk to his friends and I begin to relax. George impersonates the choirmaster from the church. He is Harry's youngest brother, fourteen but not yet grown into his tall body. The impression is accurate though not flattering. Harry pulls on my arm.

"Dorothy, darling, you must meet Aunt Muriel — you know we call her Prue — this whole place is her brainchild — her and Doris — though they never take credit —"

I turn. I am face-to-face with that woman. I cannot speak. I look straight into her eyes, swamped by a tight, constrained feeling, a falling from the inside out. She takes

my hand in both of hers and kisses my cheek. A curl of hair falls across her face as she leans forward.

"Congratulations, Dorothy — it's a great joy to meet you at last."

She talks but I do not listen. I fly back through the day, seeing it again in the knowledge that she is Aunt Muriel; Prue. She is the woman Harry and his brothers obsess over. She is the one who caused in each of them a gnawing hunger to change the world. She is the pacifist. I had imagined it would be impossible to like Prue if you have not idolised her from childhood. I imagined she must be stuffy, self-righteous, dull, ugly — I have clearly misjudged Prue.

She bounces on her feet as she speaks, her hands always moving. She says something to Harry and he blushes. George laughs. I do not want to be drawn in, and yet I want to know her.

This is how it began.

Time spools and skips, plays in all the wrong places. The future has mushroomed into life; we have won the war. Now they will wind us in and hide us in archives, but I am not afraid to remember what we have done. Before our lives become only history I will pull out all that I can find.

If any of it means something to you  
then you will know that it is true.

## **A New Thing**

**June 1937**

I am cleaning the floor of Kingsley Hall. The floor of the main hall has lacquered floorboards that must be washed, waxed, and polished regularly. I am on my knees. I have stacked the chairs against the wall. It is wood-panelled to shoulder height. A wooden dado runs along the top, circling the room, smooth and precise. I crawl from the front to the back of the hall pushing a dented metal bucket of soapy water. Scrub each part of the floor with a soapy brush. This can be done with a mop, but sometimes more force is necessary to keep the floor looking good.

When I reach the back, the point furthest from the door, I look at the small stage. Behind it is taller panelling, reaching up towards the domed roof that in turn reaches a cupped hand down towards me. From the centre of this panelling is cut a curved window and below it sits a wooden altar that could, at a glance, be a fireplace. I drop the brush into the water. The skin on my hands looks like an apple that has sat too long off the tree. I stretch out my left arm and rub the elbow. An ache snakes down to the wrist, beneath dark runnels of water that stain my skin.

Why am I doing this? It is not an elaborate room, it has no need to be kept on show, and I don't enjoy this sort of work.

I push the bucket forward; the handle falls and rings. I set to the floor again. Water pools on the wood as it dries and I remember a pitted road in India after a storm, water sitting in pools, Gandhi taking off his sandals to walk through the puddles. To remember what it feels like, he said. It is three years since I was in India and the Far East with Prue. We spent weeks with Gandhi, in the centre of the crowd that appears wherever he is, sleeping in the homes of new Indian friends, always listening, learning.



When I danced on this floor at my wedding I didn't consider who would clean it. I certainly never imagined myself crossing the world as an 'ambassador for peace' with Harry's mad aunt.

Grey water dribbles down my arm. I do strange things these days. But we must.

If I had to explain peace, I'd begin with its opposite: last year an Italian cardinal made the news when he blessed troops heading to Abyssinia. They went with machine guns and mustard gas and he called them agents of civilisation bringing Christianity to the heathens.

I move the bucket up onto the stage and swap hands. Dunk the brush, rub at the wood in widening arcs.

It is not only Abyssinia. The scale of it — panic ploughs up under my skin. What can a woman like me ever hope to do? I wrote a pamphlet the year after my travels. I have joined societies, protests, and there's my work at the bookshop, but — Prue is almost always travelling now. The young men are in Spain, or Parliament, or pulpits. So I am in Bow, cleaning the floor. It is something at least. Kingsley Hall matters because peace matters, and this place is as good a model of a peaceful community as any.

I stand, legs shaking as I straighten them. Take the bucket out through the back door then into the park beyond. The water sinks into the soil of the flowerbed and leaves a grease stain. I dump the bucket and walk around to the front, where I left the wax with another brush and chamois. The hall looms wide and long. Grows as my enthusiasm ebbs. I have never liked cleaning.

I lower myself onto knees, pop the tin, and scoop out wax with the bristles of the brush. Rub it in circles, backing across the room. I want to stop but won't. I feel hard done by but I volunteered myself for the job. After one traverse I return, rubbing the chamois over the boards I have just waxed.

It helps to imagine Prue beside me. I see her squatting, Indian-style, over her cloth. Sleeves rolled up, hair pinned back, hands red and swollen. She would talk to the rhythm of her cleaning, or rather, clean to the rhythm of her speech. She cares about the cleanliness of the hall more than I do, but Prue is not a cleaner by nature. It's not only about Kingsley Hall — she would say — the work helps us to see the world as God does. To ignore all barriers of class, race, and nation.

The sound of a car horn outside. I have covered about a quarter of the hall. My nose and eyes tingle from the smell and I feel queasy. I switch hands.

Back to Prue. I am unsure about God, but I do understand what she means. The work of a peacemaker is to create a world in which all people can flourish. At the heart of that, Prue would say, is learning to serve others, and so to value them. Relying on somebody else to clean the communal floor while you stay at home writing essays nobody will read may teach you many things, but service is not one of them.

I sit up and rub my eyes. Everything aches but I feel lighter, buoyed by the inexplicable excitement Prue inspires. Even imaginary Prue. I am halfway across the hall. I reach for the wax, spinning, muscles wobbly and sore. This bloody hall is hard work on my own. What did Gandhi say about cleaning? 'We must act even as the mango tree which droops as it bears fruit'.

I laugh. No — try as I might, it is only cleaning. Hard and tiring. I am not made for their mysticism, and even Gandhi was joking when he said that.

I apply another dollop of wax to the brush, droop my head to the floor and the chamois in my hand. The door swings open behind me and throws a rectangle of light on the far wall.

"Lovely scrubbing, little sis."

I turn, frown. It is Peter, my brother-in-law, inexplicably here where he hasn't set foot for almost nine years. From the floor he looks particularly tall and thin, like a pollard with its long bare trunk. He steps delicately over the clean floor and pulls me up. The model of a young politician; Peter's blond hair is neat and oiled, jaw smooth, shirt starched, studs shiny, and his face disciplined into a selection of useful expressions. He looks as though he was born to rule, as though his success is merely inevitable and not tactical, and he is so charming it is difficult to hate him for it.

"How are you all?" I ask, wiping my hands on my skirt.

"Well — very well. Eddie's home tonight — I'm driving up to collect him from school — the house is a-flurry with preparation."

"Do you think he's taller than you yet?"

"Probably."

"He takes after you."

He pauses, looking around. "Not too much I hope —"

Something outside blocks the light. Shadows droop into the hollows of Peter's face.

"What are you talking about?" I say.

He looks back at me and laughs. "My ugly nose."

"Let's not discuss your nose Stratton — please — at least have tea first."

"No time I'm afraid."

"Here I was thinking you'd come to help with the floor."

He looks at it and shuffles, unusually comic with his hat in hand. "It seems bigger than I remember — now it's empty. Were there really so many people at your wedding?"

"Half of Bow I should think."

"It all passes so quickly —" He wanders to the framed photographs on the wall. There is one of the bricklaying for the Hall, a similar one for the Children's House round the corner, one of Gandhi planting a tree when he stayed here in 1931. Peter sniffs, tuts. In my memories of Gandhi, of goats milk, jokes, and wisdom, as often hilariously impractical as meaningful, in which he feels to me more like a father than the father of a movement, I forget the hostility he inspires.

"I see Muriel still has her unique hairstyle." Peter considers Prue a figure of fun — a view greatly enhanced by her snail-shell hairstyle and habit of wearing a cape.

"I think it suits her."

"She was rather impressive at the wedding. Do you know Helen thought she was staff — asked her to clear our empty plates. She was horrified when Harry came running over to introduce his aunts."

Peter laughs at the memory. I haven't heard the story and I'd be embarrassed to tell him I thought the same.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"Ah —" He looks at me. He has a slow way of saying anything important. "Yes, right. It's about a job opportunity."

"I knew you'd find something." It has been six weeks since Harry moved into the house in West Hampstead, replacing the women who had shared the place with me for two years. The agreement was that we would be equal partners in this new arrangement. So far I am not only paying all of the rent but cooking and cleaning as well, which is why I asked for Peter's help.

"Well —"

"When can you come and talk to Harry?" I ask.

He spins his hat. "The talking will be down to you."

"What?" I bend to put the lid on the tin of wax.

"Because the job is for you —"

"I have a job —"

"It's a writing job. For a newspaper."

The breath catches in my chest, a shift, far away, where a desire is pushed when you long to forget it.

"I thought you could do both?"

I look at him for a long time but my mind is utterly blank. I cannot process what is going on.

"I've a friend at *The Times*," he says. "We were talking — he needs someone to write about India so I recommended you. I gave him your book."

"It's only a pamphlet —"

"He telephoned this morning to say how much he liked it — he was impressed with how you explained Gandhi — he'd like to try you out. There could be a regular spot."

The idea is absurd. I am still holding the wrinkled chamois. Absurd, terrifying, wonderful.

"It's up to you." Peter shrugs.

But he wouldn't be in Bow if he didn't care.

"I know nothing about journalism," I say.

"Bertie can give you a hand — you'll pick it up. At least give it a go, until Harry finds something?"

This enthusiasm is suspicious. Peter is a man of the state, and the state comes first. I try to think but my mind has lost traction. A newspaper?

"What about The League?" I ask.

"That's your private life. Journalists must be impartial."

"Could have fooled me."

"Don't be a pain, Dorothy. This is a good opportunity — isn't it what you want?

To tell the nation about India?"

"Real India — but I'm not impartial when it comes to independence."

"So act it. I didn't mention The League and I suggest you don't — but it's up to you."

I pull the cloth between my hands. I want him to know that I am thinking; it is always useful to make Peter believe you know more than you do.

He steps forward, snatches the chamois away. "I haven't got all day."

"I'll talk to Harry —"

"Why?"

"Because he's —" *my husband*, I think, out of habit, out of loyalty perhaps, out of fear certainly.

Peter hold out the chamois to me, eyebrows raised.

"Well?"

"Tell your Bertie I'll give it a go."

He smiles. "Excellent decision. Helen'll be relieved — she worries."

Perhaps it's as simple as family solidarity. No tactics. Though my sister has been worried since the day I agreed to go to India.

"I'm fine — better than fine. And I'll see them next week. But look — tell your friend it's only a trial."

"Tell him yourself. He wants to meet you — Monday morning at Printing House Square — you know where it is? Ask for Albert Briggs."

"Fine. And thank you — really."

"It's nothing."

"I better get this finished."

He looks round the hall, shakes his head. "You're mad."

"Not a bit."

"Absolutely barking."

He kisses me and leaves. The Hall shifts, settles and rests. It is good at receiving people, at moving imperceptibly to make space for them. My knees crack as I squat. Gandhi, Prue, and the rest of the world seem as far away as ever, but my own world has expanded. Here is another unknown, perhaps the start of something useful, perhaps the end of floor cleaning? Excitement and fear meld in a ferment of nausea indistinguishable from the effects of the wax fumes.

I hear steps on the back stairs then Ben appears; a middle aged man, closer to old than young, pale-haired and pale-eyed, who ought to be nondescript but somehow commands attention.

"I knew this floor would be a nightmare," he says. "Did I hear someone come in?"

"My brother-in-law."

"George?"

"Peter — my sister's husband."

"The politician? To what do we owe the pleasure — a donation?" He laughs quietly.

"A friend of his has offered me a job."

"Doing what?"

I hesitate for a moment. Then, "Writing about India — for *The Times*."

He strides towards me with his hands outstretched. "Fantastic —" he says, and pulls me up into a hug. Then he looks at me, coughs, and takes a step back.

"Think what you can do —" he says.

"They might not like what I write."

"Of course they will."

"We'll have to see."

"You'll have to write to Prue — and Gandhi. I can't wait for Doris to hear. Let's go over now — I was going anyway. Don't worry about that. Come on — come with me."

"No —"

Ben is one of the oldest friends of Kingsley Hall. He was, in fact, a friend of Kingsley himself, Harry's Uncle who died in 1914 leaving a legacy which paid for his older sisters to start the original hall. Ben is a weather vane for opinions here. He takes the cloth from me, smiles,

"Come and tell them the good news."

"No, really —" I suddenly can't bear the thought of people knowing. Of them going out to buy the paper, to see what I have written, of all the possible ways I might disappoint them. I take back the chamois. "This needs to be done. You go."

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"And if they try to hold you to ransom?" Shantih looks between us.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"They will pressure you to write what is acceptable to them."



"Because they'll be paying me? But if they didn't want my stance they wouldn't have asked me in the first place."

"Perhaps," Shantih says, "or they could threaten you."

"Why on earth would they do that?" Susan wafts away the cigarette smoke in front of her face.

"I don't know — to discredit her?"

I do not answer. I do not want to get into it. I build a tower of plates and walk them to the sideboard. It is only Shantih and Susan with me in my sitting room but three other women have just left. The room is jammed with chairs, littered with the remains of a cold dinner and the chill of disagreement.

"Darling — while you're over there — any chance of a real drink?"

I pour Susan a glass of port. She is always riled after India League Women's meetings.

"Don't brood," I say, handing her the drink.

"I can't help it — I'm not the cake baking type."

"Yes — we all know — but they are." I start to move extra chairs to the side of the room.

"I think I should give up on these women's meetings —" she says, "stick to the main event. Don't look at me like that — the men don't have men's meetings, do they?" She sips her port. "Anyway, what were we saying? Oh yes — *The Times* is out to ruin your reputation."

"I just don't believe it."

Shantih is still, her face rigid. "It is unlikely — but you know nothing of these people or their motives."

"I know Peter."

"Hardly reassuring." Susan drains her glass and holds it out to me.

"Does it matter?" I ask. "I know my motive."

I pour Susan another drink, and one for myself. Shantih is drawing a pattern on her hand with my fountain pen. She is compacted. Arms crossed, close and solid, head and shoulders down. Only her eyes seem to still be open. They flash in the firelight, the shining gold brown of wet rock as the tide recedes. A pattern emerges from the pen, twisting between fingers and thumb, a thought glove, a distraction. She holds the pen halfway along so as not to smudge the ink as she draws. I know the shapes, but I do not know their meaning, if they have one.

"You're being unreasonable," I say. It sounds nastier than I intended.

I give Susan her port and drink mine, then pour another. I don't know where to go or what to do. The room is too small.

"She's right," says Susan, "they'd as quickly use you as a crystal whiskey tumbler."

"What if they just mean what they say and they want good writing about India?"

"Let's be honest — good writing doesn't get one money or power," Susan says.

"Perhaps, but — people change — look at me. Five years ago I wouldn't have known how to talk to either of you. Now here you are, my closest friends, in my house —"

"Not only your house," snorts Susan.

"Leave Harry out of it — the point is: this could be different." I don't know why it matters so much but I want them to be pleased, impressed at least by the idea of me writing for a national paper.

"Why do they want you now?" Shantih spreads her arms with the question, but still, somehow, remains impenetrable. She screws the lid onto the fountain pen and blows on the ink.

I want to leave, dramatically, to slam the door and stomp upstairs. Though if I did I would want them to follow me.

"You've got to admit —" Susan lights another cigarette, "it is surprising. I thought we'd have to knock Hitler and Franco on the head before we got back to talking about India."

"Isn't one breed of violence the same as another?" I say.

"Do people want to hear that?" Shantih asks.

"Doubtful —" Susan jab the fingers that hold her cigarette as she speaks. "Look at that peace survey. The people of our rain-sodden little country don't want war — they want cooperation — how bold — but it's not longing for a peaceful world — it's fear of war. Rule Britannia's fine as long as we're holding the guns. They want jobs, housing, safety for themselves — the rest be damned. One cannot keep on with the same system and expect a different outcome."

She finishes her drink and waves the glass rhetorically. Shantih raises her eyebrows and says, "Thank you comrade." We all laugh.

Susan refills the drinks. I sit on the arm of Shantih's chair, feel the warmth of her elbow against the side of my leg. She doesn't move away. I want to touch her, put an arm round her shoulders, but I resist.

"Enough speeches," I say. "I just can't help feeling this thing with *The Times* could actually make a difference. Why can't I be the one to make a difference?"

She tilts her head back and looks up at me. "I know, I do understand, but — we have been fighting for so long. All my life I have been struggling to be a real person — to be a citizen in my own country —"

Susan watches from across the room, opening and closing her cigarette case.

" — If it is *The Times* who decides when and what to write about us — us Indians — then it is not even our fight any more — we are less than nothing."

Her eyes are dark, beyond me. I cannot read them. I nod. Do not smile. I want her to know I am listening. I glance at Susan. She pockets the cigarette case and wanders to the sideboard pulling bottles and glasses from inside. I slip from the chair and sit on the table in front of Shantih, close. *The Times* recedes, my mind is only her, the smell of lavender, dry ink curling across her hand. I want to run my finger along the line of the ink.

"It won't be *The Times* telling your story — I won't let that happen. It'll be me — only me. I'll always try to tell the truth."

"I know that wherever we have friends that is good for the struggle — but —"

"You don't need to explain."

She looks away for a second and then back, a skip in a movie, and suddenly she is here. She nods and smiles in her familiar way, eyes rushing out at me. I feel exposed. She puts her hand over mine. I may not be able to read the pattern but I feel it in my chest.

"Thank you," she says. "And I am proud of you."

"I second that." Susan raises her glass. She seems to have poured whisky into a wine glass.

"Get a bit carried away?" I ask.

"It's very good — where did Harry get it?"

"From his father."

"Daddy's boy?"

"He can't afford to drink any other way."

She takes a gulp. "The whole world is dammed depressing. Can't imagine how you cope without a drink to take the edge off now and again?" She looks down at Shantih, eyebrows raised. This is a well-worn path between them.

"You know that I do not drink for your sake."

"Nonsense."

"Who would look after you if I was not sober?"

"What about Dorothy?"

There is a click in the front door, a quiet bump as it hits the wall, the thump of feet on the doormat. Susan puts her finger in front of her lips. Shantih lifts her hand from mine. We wait. I look at the floor, but Harry's head does not appear. Instead we hear him march upstairs. They both turn to me.

"I haven't a clue. He has his bad days — but I thought he was with George. That usually cheers him up."

"We should be off." Susan drains her glass and takes her jacket from the hatstand in the corner.

"You don't have to —"

"It's getting late anyway," Susan persists.

"She's right —" Sahntih stands. "I hope the meeting goes to plan. We will pray for a good outcome."

"Yes — good luck old chap."

They both kiss me on the cheek and step into the night. I watch their backs until they turn left at the end of the street. Two cats fight silently in a ring of street-light. The

cold air seeps through my clothes, and I fight the feeling that I am losing something. Shantih and Susan are tied so strongly to memories of India, where I met them both, to the sense of myself I returned with, that they always leave a bright trail whenever they pass through. It is harder than usual tonight. The strange feeling I have had since Harry arrived rushes back in, a tide of longing I do not understand.

I shiver. It is still summer, but there is a wind snaking down from the heath. The smaller cat screeches and darts into the road. I turn and step back inside.

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I close the door, click the latch into place. Flatten my palm on the heavy wood. This is the distance between my friends and I. We share much, but my life with Harry is resolutely my own. Unless you count Eileen of course, but I try not to.

I listen.

Here is the memory I have now, when I think back: the solidity of the closed door, the heavy silence, a desire to close my eyes and dream it into something else.

Perhaps he has gone to bed? But his bedroom door is open when I get upstairs. Study then. The door is open a few inches. I look through to the island of lamplight around the desk, Harry's own nation. It is a deep, leather-topped desk his father gave him when he started the business, now all that remains of it. My old school desk has been relegated to the side wall. The armchair behind the desk also arrived with Harry, his favourite fireside chair, with us since we were first married, with Harry since he went up to Wadham. It doesn't really work as a desk chair but I gave him the study to furnish and he has done so.

One of our wedding photographs sits on the desk, thick dust on the glass of the frame glitters in the lamplight.

I knock.

"Have they gone?"

"You're safe."

He is holding a glass, probably whisky.

"How was your evening?"

"Wretched." He drinks.

"I thought you were seeing George?"

"I did."

I perch on my desk, carefully holding my weight to protect its buckled legs.

"What happened?"

"He's going to China and Japan."

"Now?"

"Soon."

"But there could be war —"

He shrugs and drinks again. "I suppose that's the point."

I think for a second about this. Even in his personal darkness Harry is still imprinted with this kind of thinking. It is instinctive to him, but it still surprises me. I miss the way his idealism once made me feel safe, justified and useful. While he was saving the world I could look after him. Except he didn't, and I couldn't.

"When's he going?" I ask.

"A few months. He'll go to The States first."

"Ah — so —?"

"He'll be meeting Prue."

We are silent. Prue hovers in the shadowy room.

"That's good — isn't it? For George."

Harry fills his glass. "Fantastic — of course — lucky old George."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I never had the chance."

"Did you ask?"

"Did you?"

I want to go to him, as I always have, and to say whatever it takes to fix it, but the reflex is tempered by the urge to hit him. Instead, I draw the curtains on the empty street.

"I made a choice to be your wife."

"I didn't force you to go abroad."

"You wanted me to go."

"And it worked out nicely for you." His voice is raised, face red and twisted out of shape.

I lift the lid on my desk. On one side is a stack of notebooks, my travel journals, on the other a pile of drafts of my pamphlet.

"I had an interesting day," I say.

"Oh yes?"

I tell him about Peter's visit. Harry is silent. His hand shakes. I gather the papers and books from the desk, hug them close, turn back to him.

"So what do you think?"

His face shows nothing. He spins the glass. It rumbles on the desk. Then he smiles. It is a surprise — Harry has never been much of a smiler.

"It's a good pamphlet."



"I was lucky — you know — to travel with Prue. To see things that way."

"Still — you've done well."

"Thank you."

For a second I fly back nine years to our little cottage, to our dreams for life. I am looking at my new husband, his look of hard thought ruptured with pleasure at some small thing I have done: money collected for the church fund, or a flower arrangement, or a letter to his mother. I cannot remember any single thing I once did but I am drenched in the brief joy of believing I can please him, and then the memory folds, and folds again, and flies at the heavy curtain, and slips out, paper-thin, into the night.

The smile has fled from Harry's face and his lips are pale. His hair is not combed, he wears no tie. I am looking at a stranger; panic thunders in my chest.

He puts down his glass and comes to me, pours the jumble of books and papers into his arms. He seems smaller. When he swallows his Adam's apple bobs and strains at the skin of his neck. I smell whisky and something else, sour, on his breath.

"Where do you want these?" he asks.

"My bedroom."

He walks out and I close the desk. The room is badly furnished, chilly, not a nation but a colony, where the shadows of my husband's dreams — desk, chair, coat stand, pictures — have come to die. A colony. A picture of Shantih invades my mind, as I looked down at her from the arm of the chair tonight, the warmth of her beside me.

Harry returns and stands in the doorway. He looks at the desk. We don't even know how to look at each other these days.

"I always knew you were wonderful." He mumbles, resentfully, as if it is me who has always known this.

"Did you?"

"I used to say you were perfect — when people asked about you — I said you were too good for me."

"You've a strange way of showing it."

He swallows and glances at the whisky. I walk to the desk, keeping my eyes on him, take hold of the glass, and drink. The liquid burns through me and I want more.

"I'm not perfect," I hold out the glass to him.

He steps forward and puts his hand round it, over my hand, then squeezes. I do not want to show how much it hurts. He grabs my other arm and squeezes it against my body. Drops his head close to mine, breath hot on my face, the skin bristles cold pins. I try to move but cannot.

"I thought —" he says, "once — that if I could make you my equal that would be enough."

"You can't make anybody anything," I say. My voice shakes against my will.

He lowers the glass, with both our hands, onto the desk. I do not resist. Then he pushes his body against me. The desk digs into the back of my thighs.

"I could make you a real wife," he says. The saliva catches in his mouth. I can smell him; familiar, rank.

He kisses my lips.

I keep perfectly still. Try not to think of him kissing Eileen.

"Let me go Harry." I think he will not. After a second he drops his hands but he does not step away, does not look away.

"Goodnight," I say, pushing my voice into his face.

He sinks into the armchair and I leave, force myself to walk slowly. He will not come after me. Thin, finger shaped bruises blossom on my arm.

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That night I dream of Bihar, in India. It is not a new dream. I walk among piles of red-orange sand after the earthquake. Wherever I look there are mounds and towers of sand in the yellow light. Poking up from valleys between them are roofs and upstairs windows. It is hot. My white blouse sticks to my back. As the dream goes on it turns orange and yellow from dust and sweat.

Prue walks in front of me; Shantih holds my hand. There is nobody else in sight.

We walk and look down into ruined buildings, as if down throats. We are looking for someone. Hello? Hello? We don't call her name. Hello? . . . No. Not here. Not in this one. I know who we are looking for, I know that I must not stop, that something terrible will happen if I do, but I can never remember when I wake up who we were searching for in the wreckage. I squint down into the dark and recoil — this building is completely filled with sand.

On and on it goes;

buried rooms like caves and the growing fear that she, whoever she is, is lost in the destruction. We move faster, frightened. I think I will die if we cannot find her but I don't want to look into those holes. I am afraid of what I will see, or what I might lose. At each building we must find the courage once more to look inside.

And then I wake up. Hot and blank.

We did go to Bihar, after the earthquake. Saw houses buried and people trying to dig out the bodies of loved ones with their hands. Not like the dream though; there was no rushing or searching, only slow, creeping horror. Men dug all day to find the soil, or

sowed seeds in the sand on the roofs of houses. The lucky families climbed into their homes through upstairs windows.

In bed after I wake is the limp weight of my body on the old mattress and the question, pointless, of what we were looking for. Night yawns into the past. Between the curtains grey moonlight bleeds into a white dawn, pockets of yellow from the street-lamps left like rotting teeth.

My wedding ring shines on the chest of drawers. I get up and open the top drawer. Inside are bundles of letters tied with stained string. I pull a letter out and uncurl the top of the envelope. Harry's handwriting looks at me, upside down.

I drop the ring into the envelope, tuck it back together, stuff it into its bunch, and drop them into the drawer. Outside, the top of the sun is beginning to creep over the East London skyline.

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The planes come low across the city, dark smudges forming into clear wings that rush towards us. The port is an easy target. My throat is tight, my skin cold in the sunshine.

"There they go — do you see the bombs?" says Ben.

We are standing in the street where it runs along the edge of the Hendon Aerodrome, twenty of us, watching the display between the bars of the fence. The soldiers won't let us stand by the main gate. A man leans in the doorway of a nearby house, smoking and looking at the sky. A woman takes in her washing. The tiny bombs flash and wink as they fall above the grass of the airfield, bright with wildflowers. It

might all be a joke at the end of a summer's day. Then the first bomb lands at the base of the lighthouse tower.

Each hit is a bright flash and a shaking. The ground spits earth and blooms smoke. We are buried in noise. I can only imagine the shouts and whoops of the crowd.

"No mistakes this year," shouts one of the women in our group.

The air splinters and cracks as the lighthouse tower falls. The crowd cheer. They applaud while the planes bank away. Even from here we can see them on their feet, hats waving. A group of boys cartwheel at the base of the stands.

Ben shakes his head.

Billy whistles. "Savage blighters, aren't they?" he says, his voice creaking. It was damaged by gas in the war and I always want to ask if it hurts, but can never find the right moment.

A smell of rubbish drifts past on the warm wind. I am afraid I might vomit.

A rumble. More aircraft join the game. These ones head for the far corner of the field, mud and wattle huts against a painted backdrop of dusty hills.

"Where do you think that is?" asks George, poking me in the ribs with his elbow.

"Does it matter?"

"Long as it's not here?"

"Looks like India."

"Gandhi's ashram?"

"Gouty old generals would love that."

We laugh as the huts are flattened. Each one receives its own bomb.

"You've got to admit — they're accurate," shouts Billy.

When the planes retreat only the European-style church remains. The crowd wave flags, hurrah and chant in unison. We cannot make out the words. A military band

begins to play. From this distance the music is out of time. I lean on George and he puts an arm round me. He smells of fresh bread and damp wool, a smell that reminds me of when I first knew Harry, somehow picked up from their childhood home, with a love of crumpets and the habit of pacifism.

The final group of bombers sprint towards the far side of the field. Their target is a grey military installation crouched round the column of an oil well. A red flag flies from the windowless building.

"Here we go —" says George, " — it wouldn't be Hendon without bashing commies."

The fanfare swells while the planes obliterate the compound. For the final tableau we see the aircraft against the evening sun, oil well prostrate beneath flames, field flat once more, as the music segues into the National Anthem. The sound of the singing brings a pale, wrinkled face to a window of the nearest house. An old woman. She watches us. There is no change in her expression except a narrowing of the eyes, a retreat into the folds of her skin. Then the curtain swings back. Of course I am convinced she disapproves. All the people singing, all together, every note and every word. How nice it must be.

"Come on —" Ben turns, "we'd better get ready."

Our gathering peels away and heads for the front gardens we have been allowed into; three out of a hundred and fifty houses. George starts to turn but I hold his arm.

"All right?" he says. He comes round to face me, to stand between me and the mass of people singing the final lines of the National Anthem.

I nod. Swallow back nausea.

He glances down the street to see if anyone is watching. Then he takes my hands and speaks quietly. "Don't worry, we're all scared — it's normal. Prue always says: if you're not afraid, you're not doing anything important."

"How comforting."

He laughs. "I'm only saying — try to ignore it. We're here now."

I nod. "You're right."

"Come on."

I let him lead me to the nearest garden. His whole family insists on behaving this way, as though it is the most natural thing in the world to stand before a crowd and shout an unpopular opinion. Ben is tying a banner that says *Peace Not Planes* to a washing line. George grabs a box of leaflets and jogs to the other gardens. I help Ben with the banner. Then we I arrange a pile of old vegetable crates into a makeshift stage. He whistles the National Anthem. I try not to get wood mould and mud on my hands.

The crowd squeezes through the gates and onto the pavement with the smell of sweat, pies, beer, and sawdust. At first they come fast, but soon there is a jam at the far end where they wait to board buses and trains. They talk and laugh, look us up and down. Men shout at each other from one side of the road to the other over the cars. The young sing *Rule Britannia* and some wave Union Jacks. They stand on walls and dustbins for one last glimpse of the planes. A woman carries a little girl who is crying, her face scrunched and red. A man tries to comfort the child but she only screams louder. The show is over and this is our chance.

Ben mounts the pile of crates as an enormous beetle retreats from beneath. His mostly greying hair flaps around his head in the wind, and I notice a crack in one of the lenses of his glasses. Balancing on the unsteady crates, arms spread wide, he looks a little crazy.

"What if they heckle?" I ask. "What if they throw things?"

He looks down, a smile softening his face almost into a laugh, and reaches for a handful of leaflets. "It doesn't matter does it?"

I stand behind the crates and a low wall that would offer little protection from a mob. The people could turn on us, it happens. Then it will matter. This is how it goes; my mind, turning away, stubborn and exhausting, insists on jumping ahead into all possible versions of disaster. I try Prue's recommendation — deep breathing, sensing God's presence around me — but I just feel foolish. Instead I think of my meeting with the newspaper editor on Monday, imagine what might be said, picture myself behind a polished writing desk sipping tea and reading Virginia Woolf.

George bounces over the fence from the next garden. "They've started down there," he calls.

He clambers up beside Ben, looking boyish beside the older man. He is the youngest of my husband's brothers, just down from Oxford. His tie is loose and his jacket unbuttoned, but the thing about George is that people like him, no matter what he says or wears. I don't believe for a second he is afraid.

"I hope you've enjoyed the day?" Ben begins. "Had a good look around? It's been quite the day for it, hasn't it?" The people are bored. They look up, glance at the banner, roll their eyes.

"Don't start," calls a voice.

"Give it a rest."

It hardly matters. I couldn't leave if I wanted to. The crowd barely moves five paces in a minute and I have made the decision to do this. I have to make it a dozen times a day but I always do in the end. I could no more abandon the protest than I could



stand atop the crates and speak. I am hemmed between the people and the house, between my past and my future. I take a bunch of leaflets and move to the garden gate.

"Some of you may remember — not long ago — when air travel was a thing of stories and dreams, when skies like these were nothing but blessings in this wet country." Some of the people laugh, a few look up at Ben. A car blows its horn.

"Excuse me?" The woman with the crying child holds out her hand across the gate.

"Yes?"

"Can I have one?" She points at the sheets in my hand.

"Of course — sorry. Here you go." I give her a leaflet. The man behind her takes one as well.

"I'm just an ordinary fellow," says Ben, "an Englishman, a Londoner — like all of you — a husband and a father — and I believe we can find better entertainment for our families and children —"

"If you don't like it go home," a boy shouts. "It's only a bit of fun." His friends hiss and laugh. An old man frowns at them and they go quiet, hands in pockets.

"Isn't it sad to think about what these planes can do? They're not built to look nice." Several people turn their faces from Ben, cross their arms. "It's all well and good — flying around in the sunshine — but they're not made for that. Today you have seen their power, the bombs they've dropped, and the damage they can do . . ."

I open the gate and step out, expecting to be jostled along the road, but the people alter their course to flow around me as they do the lampposts.

I stick my arm in front of a family, "Take a leaflet?"

The mother is about to but her husband puts a hand out to stop her. The children gawp at the men on the crates. Ben's face is red with the effort of shouting, but he is

smiling. George waves and sticks his tongue out. He is not much like Harry really. George is tall, fair, and lean, he likes games and parties and practical jokes. Harry has always been shorter, stocky and dark. His ideal day would be spent reading and gardening. Now George folds one of the pamphlets into a paper aeroplane and throws it at the children. They jump to catch it. There is something deeper though, of Harry, that I recognise in George; the enthusiasm, the passion for a better world. When I married Harry it was this that I loved most about him, and feared most. Now I wonder if it has vanished completely.

The children throw the paper aeroplane back at George. It catches a breeze and loops over and over itself. People nearby clap and whistle. Somebody bumps into me. "Watch what you're doing." I can't see who it is but I step back. "Oi." "Watch out." Somebody pushes me from behind. I bounce into the crowd, left and right, and left again and then down.

I am on the floor. There is noise; paper flapping, shouting, feet, singing. My hands sting and all I can see is legs.

"You all right, darlin'," says a man in a flat cap. He bends towards me, holds out a hand.

"Thank you," I say, as he pulls me up.

"Mind —" he pushes some boys away, "mind. Give the lady some space."

"My pamphlets." I am standing in a sea of paper. I look over at George and Ben, but they have not noticed. They are further away than I expected. I bend to pick up the papers.

"Let me help," the man says.

"What a mess." The sheets are dark with footprints, mud and grit, some folded over, others miraculously pristine.

When we stand the man smiles. "There you go — right as rain."

"Thank you."

Somehow we have moved further along the road. Ben's voice is faint, and instead I can hear Billy's, cracking and breaking in the air overhead.

"You done this before then?" the man asks.

I tell him it's my first Hendon.

"It's bold of you."

I shrug, turning the papers round so they are all the same way up. He lights a cigarette. The end flares and glows, daylight must be fading. A woman frowns at me over the man's shoulder and I look away.

"Aye — bold," he says again. He points at Billy. "Heard that fellow here last year. There's plenty in what he says — I don't dispute it — nasty business this bombing."

"Horrible really — when you think of it."

"Aye." He sucks on his cigarette. "But we can't stop war can we?"

"Perhaps we could — if we tried."

He frowns, "What if you were attacked?"

"There's certainly a risk —"

"Well that's it see — it'd never work — you'd have to change everything else along with it."

"Everything else?" I ask.

"All the reasons war starts in the first place. Or else it's a death sentence."

The crowd has moved, leaving a hole between him and those in front.

"I don't see how to do it — but good luck to you. And good evening." He lifts his cap, swivels, and pushes away into the evening.

"Thank you," I call after him.

I look at Billy. He is talking about Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze, previously chaplain to the Kaiser and a notable pacifist. Beyond him George has managed to catch the attention of three young women and Ben laughs. When I turn back the man has vanished. He is right though. None of us with the leaflets and banners think otherwise. This is not only a question of ending war. It is a question of overturning every injustice in the path that brings us to war; poverty, imperialism, violence, greed, hatred — it is a question of building a new world.

I feel the familiar tingle and surge of conviction, as though the moment has opened out and I can see the world and my life within a fourth, fifth, sixth dimension.

One day, I tell myself, I will be able to live with this sense always alight in me.

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The shadow of the building slants towards me along the pavement, dominating the street and the people walking past. Even the breeze that blows my hair out behind me seems to come from the building. A stream of dark suits and hats step neatly past. Sunlight shows pale faces and pale hands. Men in overalls lean against the wall, smoking, watching the suits. I am here to meet Albert — the editor Peter told me to find. I know from Susan that he is in fact a sub-editor, perhaps a sub-sub-editor. He will be a suit just like all of these. I wish the thought would calm me.

I cross the road. The clock under the arch above the door tells me it is quarter to ten. There is another, even larger clock at the centre of the building's parthenon-style roof. Inside a third clock faces me. I am certain it is quarter to ten. The hall is high and

cold, light but lacking colour. It is full of people busy creating the impression of an important place; quick stepping feet, telephones, doors, greetings and commands, hushed conversations and louder ones that are meant to be overheard, the rattle of typewriters, deliverymen, bells, jokes, an ownerless dog. Beneath it all a growl of machinery that shakes the floor.

Behind a counter topped with a brass rail sit several young men, and a row of uniformed boys on a bench kicking the wall and each other. One young man looks up at me. Judging by the length of watch-chain hanging from his waistcoat pocket he reads his watch with his knees.

"May I help you, Madam?" The man asks.

"I hope so — I'm here to see Mr Briggs?"

"Mr Briggs?"

"Albert Briggs."

"Lord Briggs?"

"If you say so."

He tilts his head and removes the watch from its pocket. It opens with a pop. He considers it carefully, and unnecessarily given the profusion of clocks around the building.

"What time is your appointment with his lordship, madam?"

"I don't have one."

"Then I'm afraid he cannot see you." He writes something in a book on the counter.

"I was told to come here today — to meet Albert Briggs."

The man looks up. "We operate on appointments only."

"Can you tell him Mrs Hogg is here please?"

He breathes out loudly, through his teeth, and speaks to one of the boys who scurries through a door at the side of the hall. The man returns to his post, turns the pages of his appointments book, shakes his head slowly. Above us, windows near the roof glow white in the gloom. I watch the hand of the clock opposite the door. The dog returns from somewhere, running in circles around a little man with arms full of files. A tall man in a white suit stands beneath the dome of the hall.

The boy returns, panting. "Mr Chambers, sir, Lord Briggs says he is expecting Mrs Hogg and please bring her up and please ask Mrs Pollin to send up some tea." He steps back once he has delivered the message and drops his head, looking at Chambers through his eyelashes.

"Fine — sit down Hawkins. Mrs Hogg — step this way, his Lordship will see you."

We go up in the lift and along a corridor lined alternately with doors and portraits of imposing men. The portraits have increasingly elaborate facial hair the further along the corridor we progress. Halfway down we stop and Chambers knocks.

"Come," calls a voice from within.

Chambers opens the door. "Mrs Hogg, sir."

"Do come in."

Chambers flattens himself, unhelpfully against the door so that he can close it seamlessly behind me as I cross the threshold.

"Don't worry about Chambers — he's under strict instructions I'm afraid. You wouldn't believe the dirty tricks some of these so-called newspapers will play." Lord Briggs stands to greet me. He comes around his desk as he speaks, holding out a large hand.

"Albert Briggs."

"A pleasure to meet you."

"Please — do take a seat." He gestures to two easy chairs on either side of a fireplace with an unlit stove at its centre.

I am surprised that Briggs is short and rather fat, but he is handsome in a continental way. Even if I did not know his title I would still say he has a friendly, lordly look which I suspect is apt to make you agree to things you would otherwise barely think of.

He moves to the chair opposite me and I get a better view of his desk, covered in papers, crowned with an oversized typewriter, and not a clock in sight. Behind it is a wall of shelves filled with books. Above the fireplace hangs a framed newspaper. The small window on the other side looks down over the entrance hall.

"I take it this is your first time in Printing House Square Mrs Hogg?"

"I'm afraid so."

"It's a little rough — but it serves our needs. It doesn't let us get above ourselves."

I nod. This room is at least twice the size of my sitting room.

"Thank you for coming — Peter speaks highly of you."

"Does he?"

"He says you're quite the worry to your sister."

"And that's good is it?"

"As far as journalism goes — my sister despairs of me."

I smile. He seems a person who likes to be at ease, and likes others to be at ease with him, though I am far from relaxed.

"I've known Peter since Harrow," Briggs says. "I hear young Edward's doing well?"

"Yes — Helen's very pleased."

There is a knock at the door. A girl comes in with a trolley, parks it between us and begins to pour tea. She is young, narrow-waisted. The tea-set has floral patterns and a gold rim, one of the saucers not matching the rest.

"How are you Nancy?" Albert asks.

"Very well, thank you Sir."

"Good — good. Thank you. This looks lovely."

She looks sideways at me, tries not to grin. I concentrate on the tray of cake and biscuits, to make her life easier. The biscuits are arranged in concentric circles around small slices of cake, alternately placed to create a pretty effect.

"Will there be anything else, Sir?"

"No thank you Nancy."

She turns and looks me in the face. I look back. She is bony but pretty, in a pale way that makes her appear childish. When I do not look away or speak, she rushes from the room.

"Help yourself," Albert says.

There is a pause as we sip tea. I want to laugh at the pretty little fingers of cake on their doily, at all the artifice of the office and the tea trolley, and my being looked at askance by a serving girl.

"Did you go to university Mrs Hogg?"

"No — it was never an option."

"Your father didn't support it?"

"My father died long before I was old enough to worry him with such questions."

"I'm sorry to hear that."



I realise I may sound bitter, and soften my voice. "I've had a different apprenticeship."

We fall into silence again. Briggs takes two shortbread biscuits from the trolley and eats them, one after the other. There is a precision to his eating, a concerted effort, as though he is playing a sport.

When he has swallowed the second he asks, "When was it exactly that you were in India?"

"Thirty four."

"Peter said — you went with an aunt?"

"My husband's aunt. Muriel Lester?"

"Muriel — ah, yes — that is interesting." He picks up another biscuit and taps it on the edge of the plate.

"You know her?" I ask.

"Not well — but our paths have crossed."

"Oh?"

"She's a rather memorable woman."

He grins, wide, so his teeth show. There is no discernible change in tone, but I bristle.

"I helped Muriel with her work —" I say, too quickly, "she was a first rate guide. I'd never have met such interesting people without her."

"I don't doubt it. And it had quite an effect on you?"

"Is that remarkable?"

"Not at all." He leans forward, refills our tea cups, then sits back to attend to two more biscuits.

I take my chance. "Muriel isn't to everybody's taste — but she is honest. She only responds to the situation as she sees and experiences it."

"I'm sure —" he says, still chewing, "and she's a thorn in many a side. But nobody ever achieved much without being a thorn in somebody's side, did they?" He swallows. Perhaps I was imagining the hostility. "I very much enjoyed your pamphlet," he goes on. "It seems you've a refreshingly clear grasp of the key issues."

My stomach lurches; how silly to feel nervous now.

"I wouldn't claim know all the history," I say, "but I do feel I've grasped the ideas that drive the politics —"

"Well we've got a correspondent for the politics. That's not exactly what I'm after."

"Oh — of course."

He rubs his hands together. I cross and recross my legs. It is hot in the office and I can't get comfortable.

"So what is it you want?" I ask.

He brushes his legs, though I cannot see any crumbs, and leans into the corner of the chair. "I particularly liked your style — using the descriptive, the ordinary, to illuminate a point." His eyes narrow when he is thinking. "I suppose that's what you mean by the ideas — that's what we need more of. The public doesn't want a paper stuffed with dry politics. They want to feel what they're reading means something to them — an idea they can actually picture."

He looks at me expectantly.

I nod. "What do you have in mind?"

"I want a new column to go alongside the regular dispatches that shows the readers how things really are around the Empire — the people, the places, the important work being done. A sort of — journalistic Empire exhibition, if you will."

"I didn't go to the exhibition."

"But you see the idea? I want to call it 'Sketches of Empire' — have a team of writers each do a different country each day of the week."

"An ongoing series?"

"Exactly. Every week you write a little scene about India — just as you did in the pamphlet — you can write about whatever you want, but nothing too political for now. More social — anthropological. What do you think?"

He punctuates his question by biting into a piece of lemon sponge cake and leaning, wide-eyed, towards me. He is obviously very pleased with his idea. It may well be popular, and it could be useful. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to explain the Indian situation to someone who imagines the entire continent to be made up of monkeys, peasants and snake charmers. On the other hand, it's hardly truthful to ignore the subjugation of millions of Indians.

"Albert —"

"Call me Bertie." Cake crumbs fall onto his lap.

"Bertie — did Peter tell you I'm a member of the India League?"

"Of course he didn't."

"It means I'm in favour of independence for India —"

"Aren't we all supposed to be?" He chuckles between bites.

"Independence now. Does that change your offer?"

"Not a bit. You can't write that of course — but it's your business. I'm not asking you to lie — I want the truth. Just write what you saw."

The truth? That is what I promised Shantih. What would she make of Albert and his *Sketches of Empire*?

"Such as?" I ask.

He swallows. "I liked the bit about the crabs in Ceylon — something about missionaries would go down well — or arriving in Bombay —"

"The Taj Mahal by moonlight?"

"Yes, very funny. I'm sure you can come up with better."

"And if I write the wrong thing?"

"Wrong?"

"Step over the line?"

He leans back, crosses his arms, and looks out of the window.

"Mrs Hogg — do you think the respectable papers of this land are filled to the rafters with paid up members of the Conservative Party? You will find that we're as radical — and certainly as varied — as any other group of thinkers. I have no desire to censor your work. If you respect the boundaries of your assignment, I'll respect the truth of what you write."

It is only now that he looks back at me, his face as easy as earlier.

"Do we have an agreement?" he asks.

There is nothing to be gained from hesitating. It is hardly perfect, but I picture Ben, his arms wide in the gloom of Kingsley Hall. Prue would be just as excited. What would I say if I turned it down? I wanted to be a foreign correspondent?

"We have an agreement."

"Very good news." He stands and steps over to shake my hand. I stand as well. We discuss details, dates, times.

"Is there anything else, Lord Briggs?"

"You really must call me Bertie."

"Well — Bertie. Is there?"

He squeezes his lips together, tight, so they virtually disappear, then releases them. The pink rushes back, as if someone is painting in the template of his face. He grips the back of his chair, "I think you'll find us as keen to avert war as you are." His brow is furrowed and his face sags.

"Nobody wants another war," I say, hoping to close the topic.

"You'd be surprised what some people want."

I struggle to trace the line of the conversation. He has played the buffoon, but now his knuckles are white on the chair wings.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"The new fashion is to believe in things — it seems hardly to matter what, but if we go to war again — have you thought what could be at stake?"

"I lost three brothers in the war."

"I'm very sorry for that, Mrs Hogg — but it's not just our loved ones we stand to lose this time. It's our culture."

"I'm not sure I follow?"

"All the art, millions of words, all the songs that ever touched our hearts, our very civilisation — replaced by the shallow myths and vulgar triumphalism we see sweeping Europe."

A drip of sweat has rolled along the line of his jaw. It falls and seems to hover in the air, I think for a second it will go upwards, but it splashes onto the cloth back of the chair. I have the feeling I am in a silent film, the moment is missing words to make sense of it, but my head plays a relentless, incongruous piano jig.

"Is that why you're doing *Sketches of Empire*?" I say.

"What? Oh that. Yes — I suppose so." He comes around the chair, smiles as if nothing has happened, and holds out an arm. "Shall I escort you downstairs?"

In the lift Bertie tells me the history of Printing House Square. He points out artefacts in the lobby. Everything is oversized, or repeated unnecessarily. It is a space that could only have been conceived by men. We cross towards the door under the dome and the scowl of Chambers.

"It's been a pleasure Mrs Hogg — I look forward to reading the first one."

"Thank you Bertie. And you must call me Dorothy."

"I don't know about that." He sends the doorman to fetch a cab. "I met your husband you know, at a dinner in Oxford years ago. He must have still been up. Harry Hogg, isn't it?"

"That's the one."

"Give him my regards. What's he up to these days?"

"He's on a sabbatical."

"From?"

"His printing business."

He raises himself, slightly, onto his toes and drops down again.

"Here's the car."

"Thank you."

"Goodbye." He pushes the door of the cab shut and steps back.

"Argyle street, please," I say, and we are off.

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I leave Printing House Square feeling powerful. No, not even powerful, but real, existing, with a role of my own, however small. I don't need to polish the floor to feel I have done some service. I smile at the taxi driver in his rear view mirror. Close my eyes, lean back against the seat.

A second memory is inlaid within this one, a picture within a picture, a counterpoint;

I am in my cabin, on the ship home from India. There is the wooden sideboard with its tiny sink, the mirror, the strange painting of interlocking square boxes floating over a grey sea. There is the easy chair and the side-table with a rim around to stop things sliding off as we wallow through monsoon seas. There is the porthole.

I have returned from dinner. A table of bores and a bellicose major who insisted on telling us the ways in which Indians resemble children. I didn't think twice; I didn't need to. It is the first time in my life I have disagreed with someone in public. From my cabin, alone, I watch through the dark skyline where sea bleeds into brighter night sky. Open sea. I know no bounds. Anything is possible. It might even be true that anything is possible for me.

I look each day at the map of India pasted into the back of my journal, trying to work out where Prue will have reached. I know it is futile. She will change her plans, things will get in the way, people will charm her. Yet the idle pastime becomes a nag, and then a need, as we travel further from India.

The taxi edges past Holborn station. Across the road is a bus, going in the opposite direction. A capsule of faces, looking at one another, paths crossing for mere minutes, then propelled out across the city.

"Excuse me," I lean forward, "can you take me to Bow instead, please? Powis Road?"

The driver raises his eyebrows. "Will do."

I sit back. The truth about the cabin is that although I was changed, although I had a new sense of my own power, I was not free. I was tethered to Prue.

As time passed the thread that bound us together has stretched so thin it is often possible to imagine it is not there at all, until, unexpectedly, I feel the sharp pain of the pull and tug of it.

We are passing St Paul's. With grey clouds above it, the dome looks cut out, flimsy. Something a child might make at Sunday School. The excitement of *The Times* fades to a cautious optimism that tingles in my fingers and toes. This, finally this, might be my task. I try to feel the weight of Prue, but the thread is not there, not tight. I hear a woman's voice. I turn; a flap of material, the edge of a coat.

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"What is that delicious smell?" George appears in the doorway.

"Fresh cake — any minute now."

"I always miss it," he says.

There are four of us in the Kingsley Hall kitchen that evening, getting up cold snacks and cakes for the evening.

"Going somewhere?" I ask.

"Meeting in the West End. But I got the weeds out, so I leave content — if hungry."



"Take these," says Vera, a pretty girl with a burn on the side of her face. She hands him a handkerchief and puts four sandwiches in the centre.

"They look lovely, but I can't take them."

"Course you can."

He tries to give them back. She blushes and waves him away.

I don't have the patience for this. "She's right," I say. "Take them — you need to eat."

I follow him from the kitchen into the living area. There is a dining table, tattered armchairs, and George is an almost permanent feature these days. The door to the reading room stands open onto rows of book spines. Beyond, the clubroom is being readied for the evening. Long, arched windows shine bright white in the late sun.

"What's the meeting?" I ask, as we start down the back stairs.

"A Friends thing about China and Japan."

"Harry told me your plans. I didn't know you were interested in the Far East."

"As much as anywhere — but —"

We reach the ground floor and he turns. I am surprised by the slow thoughtfulness of his look. It is easy to think of George as a boy who does much and thinks little. I could never have imagined, behind those eyes, how our stories were connecting, how they would fill the gaps in one another — but that will come —

"What?" I ask.

He shrugs, "Something I can't shake."

I understand that feeling well enough. I squeeze his arm.

He smiles, that damn grin, swings into his jacket, stuffs the sandwiches into the pocket, and doffs an imaginary cap.

"Wait — where's my hat?" He pats himself down.

"Did you have it in the Sanctuary?"

"Ah — yes — cheerio then."

I follow him into the main hall, dusky and quiet, and watch as he weaves between chairs. He reaches the door and disappears. After a few seconds he comes back into view to wave his cap at me. I wave back. Then he is gone.

The windows in the hall are smaller than upstairs. They invite daydreaming, along with the sweet smell of polished wood and the cloistered cool of thick walls.

Will this place still matter in fifty years? Will it even still stand in a hundred?

The Old Hall, two streets away, is the remnants of a Strict and Particular Baptist church. When Prue, Doris, and a group of locals first took it over they found a stack of prayer books that opened with the declaration: *We deny that salvation is free. We deny that Christ died for all.* Prue told me they bought a furnace to heat the hall and threw the books in as the first offering.

Voices drift from the entrance hall, the beat of feet climbing stairs.

I slip through the back door again and up the way I came. It is gratifying to avoid the business of entering, artificial greetings and breezy chitchat. This way I come from within straight to the heart of things. Outside the evening is still light. Through the stairwell window I see children playing in the park. A very young boy stands with his face turned up to the rays of blanched sunshine. I reach the first floor. A record crackles and leaps into life. I am surrounded by warm smells; dried fruit, syrup, burnt sugar. Vera comes out of the kitchen carrying a board with a cake on.

"Our George gone then?" she asks.

"Just about — shall I take that?"

Under cover of the cake I drift into the clubroom. Couples are dancing. Older men and women sit around the edge of the room at their games. Clusters of people talk

and laugh. Beyond the open windows rows of houses lead on to warehouses, factories, banks, and eventually The City.

Conversations flit past half heard; young Jack's working now — Lucy's out at Dagenham — I heard they was marching over Whitechapel — her husband's still laid up; talk of work, family, neighbourhood business, ever-present unemployment, the latest political controversy. We live in times that feel both new and old. Sometimes it is difficult to tell hope and fear apart so we take refuge here, in dance, games, tea, friends — and who can blame us?

I know most of these people by sight, many by name, and some well. They are my friends I suppose, and I belong here more than anywhere else. Not the fierce, patriotic kind of belonging — the love that asks no questions — but the easy familiarity of years at the same school. Two men, Alf and Jim, come back from the kitchen with cups of tea for their wives. Others come and go. These nights have a life that works on its own terms.

I put the cake on a table and collect some empty plates. Two children with dirty hands take two slices each, looking at me sideways, stealthy and ready with excuses.

"Something on your mind?" asks a voice behind me.

It is Nan, one of the Bow grandmothers; she's not yet an old woman but she's seen plenty, is quick to speak her mind, and as hard as they come. She lost an eye to shrapnel during an air raid in the War and wears a glass one in the socket. Rumour has it she puts the eye in a glass of water at night and stores it in the family icebox.

"Do you know — I used to be terrified of you?"

"Rubbish!" She waves an arm but smiles, perhaps not entirely ignorant of her own power. "You know right now — pussy cat I am."

We both look over the dancing couples.

"Here —" she goes on, "where's that husband of yours?"

"I don't know."

"I thought we'd be seeing him — now he's back."

My left thumb runs down third finger, feeling the empty space, the jolt, fear, followed by the memory; my ring is at home with the old letters, old feelings, with everything old.

"He's not his old self," I say.

"It's knocked him, has it?"

She looks at me, hands in apron pockets, left eye looking me up and down. The right one — the glass one — apparently still watches the dancers.

"Men are simple," she says. Nan is the wife of a factory foreman, and the mother of a policeman, a carpenter, and several married daughters, so she should know. "They decide on something, and they'll stick at it 'til it kills 'em — but they all got the devil of a pride."

I laugh. "That can't be true. Look at Mr Gandhi—"

"That don't prove nothing. He might be different, but most men are four-fifths pride — that's why they're stubborn and they can't be swayed. But if it turns out they're wrong they reckon they can't live with it."

"That does sound like Harry."

"You can waste all day telling him he's fine — it's better to give him a new idea. A man can never resist proving himself."

She crosses her arms to punctuate the end of this advice. The trouble is that I don't know what Harry should do any more than he does, and the thought of him proving anything to me makes me queasy. I have begun to wish Harry was not always

there; in my home, my chair, my life. Something is stirring that I cannot name but I am sure he won't like. It makes me false and loud when we talk.

I have no words and no desire to explain this to Nan. Fortunately she sees one of the boys who pilfered the cake reaching a hand into the gramophone box and is off to set him straight. I look at the plates in my hand and remember that I was clearing up, gather some cups, make for the kitchen. In the reading room I pause to breathe in the smell of books and dust that somehow knits the parts of me more securely together.

When I return to the clubroom the atmosphere has shifted. The old men and women ignore their games and peer into twilight. People stop eating. Stop talking. Move to the windows. The music ends and the record spins into silence. Nobody stops it. We listen. There are ordinary noises: shouts of children, buses, cars, a dog barking. Under them a rumble grows, a tremor.

Ben steps across to the window. He goes onto the balcony, squints, and returns.

"People —" he says, "lots — maybe a hundred — coming from the Bow Road."

"Close the doors then, shouldn't we?" someone says, Alf perhaps.

"I don't think so," says someone else.

Nan, in the centre of the room, looks around at us. "We will not — that's not the Kingsley Hall way."

"We don't know who they are."

"What does that matter?" asks Nan.

Ben is, in fact, already propping open the first floor doors. He stops and looks up. "Nan's right — everyone's welcome here. It's always been our way — but if you want to go there's time. Otherwise just stay calm. There's no need to worry — it's probably nothing to do with us. A few of you come down to the Sanctuary and pray. The

rest of us get ready to welcome them — if they come. They might pass by. Jack, Vera, can you make more tea please?"

A mob approaches and we brew tea. I have no idea if this is brave or foolish, but I know that in this new life the smallest actions can contain or grow a meaning much larger than seems right.

Ben, Nan and I go down and stand by the big wooden doors. I don't know why I go with them. Ben wears no shoes. He likes to go without shoes whenever he can; he walks barefoot along paths in Epping Forest near his Essex home, dances without shoes, tends his allotment without shoes. He is in his shirtsleeves with an old pair of dress braces, mismatched to his blue trousers. It should be funny, but I am thinking that he will be little use in a fight.

We cannot see the people because of the corner.

The pound of feet builds. Snatches of song drop. Draughts counters click.

I try to to marshall the fear. Ben is smiling. I do the same. My face is slow, the smile odd. The road shadowed. There is a scratch on the door, a scar across the grain.

Draughts counters click.

The mob turn the corner. They are close, faces clear. Eyes locked on us. Mouths open. Singing. They carry banners, hammer and sickle pennants, and they come without pause.

"It's the commies," Billy says, perched on the stairs.

"What do they want?" asks a voice from above.

"We'll find out soon enough."

"Maybe they fancy a dance—"

"They heard ol' Nan's fruit cake was back."

"That'll be it."

"Shut it you cheeky beggar—"

"Here they are."

They stop in line with the pavement. Jostle to look at us. Ben and Nan step into the street. I follow. There is a hush. Seconds pass. Draughts counters click.

"Down with Hitler!" shouts a man from the back of the crowd.

They roar an echo of the shout. Ben nods slowly. Nan's left eye scans the group. A man steps forward from the front line. He wears a grey suit with matching waistcoat. His black hair is greased back. His round, black-rimmed glasses reflect the light of a streetlamp that has just come on.

He shouts, "We are the Bow Communist Party."

They cheer.

"So I can see," says Ben.

"We've heard this — establishment — is spreading the idea that Nazis are our brothers and we should resist war with Germany."

Hisses and boos. A group of children pull themselves up on the park railings at the corner to watch.

Ben is still smiling. "Everybody knows," he says, "that at Kingsley Hall we don't think violence is a good way to solve a problem — whether it's between friends or between nations."

"You think a brute like Hitler understands anything else?" shouts one of the women.

Nan crosses her arms. "I shouldn't like to comment on what Mr Hitler do or don't understand — seeing as I've never met him."

A man beside the woman grins at her. She punches his arm.

The grey-suited man coughs. "There are no grounds for cooperation with Hitler — or any other Fascists."

Another cheer.

"Our comrades are dying in Europe. They tell us — Guernica was a slaughter — that's what Hitler is, and the rest of them. We fought at Cable Street. We heard the Blackshirts."

"Blackshirt scum." "Moseley's monsters." They break into clamour.

"Exactly," calls the man in front and they calm. "Fascists are against the working-class — against the people and against progress. We have no choice but to resist Reactionary Forces."

They cheer. A toothless old man swings his pennant so hard that the fellow beside him has to stop him from falling over. I look from person to person. They are dressed the same as most of us. They are neat, standing in lines, mostly men but some women. This is not a mob at all.

Ben answers, quiet-voiced. "We've always spoken out against violence — against any kind of oppression or injustice. We don't support Hitler, and we don't believe in Fascism —"

"That's what the Government says — then they let Mosley do what he wants and they're eating dinner with Hitler."

"We stand with those who suffer — we're ordinary people."

Another man in the front row steps up. His fists are clenched. He spits on the road. "You support the Japs."

"Some of our members have been in Japan, they have Japanese friends — we have friends around the world who believe in justice — all are welcome here"

I feel my cheeks heat up but Ben doesn't even glance at me.



There are shouts from the next street, from the direction of a pub.

Ben smiles again.

The leader hasn't finished. He pulls his shoulders back, pushes his glasses up his nose. "We fight for the common good. We are here to protest against Adolf Hitler, against Nazism, and against Fascism. We don't want these policies tolerated by our government — and we will root them out of our nation." He finishes with a hand flourish and pumps his fist in the air. They roar. Sweat shines on his upper lip.

When the shouts die we can hear a brawl in the distance. They stare at us. Pinning us to the Hall. Ben frowns. Something must be done. They may not be a mob but their passion is real.

Hardly knowing what I will say I step forward. There is no use in explanations, Ben has said it all. What we need now is something different, to show them we are not a threat. I see Prue's face, Bertie in his office at Printing House Square. Harry, red-faced and angry. I've been standing too long with nothing to say. I can hear Billy's rasping voice. I think about upstairs, the draughts counters, our friends praying, waiting, brewing tea —

"We were just going to have a round of tea," I say.

The Communists look blank. Some raise their eyebrows. They think this is womanly nonsense. Even Ben is surprised but Nan nods and steps forward. She puts her hands on her hips.

"We've plenty of tea — then it's our way — at the end of the night — to have a prayer, just to speak up our fears and worries. Why don't you join us?"

"We don't need your God," says the man who spat. He steps towards Nan.

"Suit yourself," she says.

"You think God cares about us — in the factory?"

"Easy Bob," says someone in the crowd. "Leave her be."

"God cares for us all," says Nan.

The man steps towards her again. He seems about to say something but then he closes his mouth. He pulls his shoulders back and spits again, right past Nan and almost on the wall of the hall. Then he walks away without a word.

The leader watches him go. There is a long silence. He puts a hand up to his glasses, as if he is about to take them off, then drops it again. "Thank you," he says. "I will take a cup of tea."

At least half of them leave, but the rest file up into the clubroom and double our number. Billy shakes hands with as many as he can. Nan gives me a pat on the arm. "Good thinking," she says. I shrug. The young members slide into action with tea trays and food. Even with the doors and windows open the room gets hot, muggy with the smell of bodies. Our people greet the Communists by name; they work together, live in the same street, have children at the same school.

I bring a tray of tea into the room but I keep spilling it each time I move. Everything has a vibrating tightness. Billy shakes his head and takes it from me. I blush and start to collect empty plates and mugs instead. I remember people saying that all the Communists in the East End are Jews. I don't know if they are. I want to sit them down one by one and ask a legion of questions. As soon as I think it guilt bites back. I don't want to ask questions to know them, I want to ask questions so that I may know more. That is not why you invite people to tea.

The leader in the grey suit stands with Ben. He talks fast and nods or shakes his head whenever Ben speaks. He keeps taking his glasses off and putting them back on. Beyond them are three men, close to one another but standing apart from the rest in the corner. There is something odd about the way their clothes hang. Two gaze over their

teacups at the polished floor, which I can understand. The other is much taller than his friends. His eyes jump from person to person and around the room as though committing every face and floorboard to memory. Nan sweeps across to the trio. She begins to talk, ushers them towards a plate of fresh sandwiches. It turns out they are German exiles.

Before conversation can die Ben turns to nudge Billy, who calls the group into prayer.

"Come on then," he says "let's get in a circle, best as we can — bring your tea if you've still got some."

The room shuffles, flexes, reforms into a clump. The visitors remove caps and stand, solemn, looking at the floor with the long faces I know from years of church Sundays.

Billy starts: "Now — don't be shy —there's no right words, only get out what's in your heart if you feel you want to. I'll be first. Thank you — Father — for our new friends, and please let them remember we'd love to see them again one day."

Some of the men smirk. A cough breaks the silence. I scan the bowed heads.

Vera speaks, "Give the governments and statesmen what wisdom and strength they need to deal with all the trouble in the world."

Nan is next, "Look after our brothers and sisters in Spain and China — watch over them that's fighting and them that's hurt — and bring an end to the violence we pray."

Quiet voices follow one after another. The Communists begin to relax. Whatever we believe about prayer, there is a great relief in speaking our fears and deep desires, in releasing all that stored-up energy into the world where it may do some good, rather than holding it inside where it can only ram against the bars of its cage. Tonight we

draw strength from the things we have in common. The minutes pass. None of the visitors have spoken and we begin to feel the energy wane.

Then an unknown voice takes up the prayer; quiet and slow at first, unmistakably foreign. It comes from the outer row of the circle.

"May the German people — all people — rise up free from hate and fear — " It is one of the Germans. I have to hold my breath to hear him. "My we be free from leaders who will rob us of — of progress — of life and of dignity."

The circle accepts his words with murmurs of assent and releases them into the night. We breathe out. Ben says goodbye and people begin to leave. Several visitors stay to clear up.

I look for the tall German who spoke in the circle. His face is thin. Ridged cheekbones are visible under paper-pale skin.

"I'm Dorothy."

"Eric." He shakes my hand and bows his head. "Thank you, madam."

"Thank you. You understand what we long for better than most of us."

He looks up, "This is not as we thought."

"What?"

"Here. The club."

"I know — not what I thought either. And neither are you."

"Germans?"

"Communists."

He laughs. "Many people ask why I believe in communism — they know nothing about it. My father did — he made me study when I was young. I did not want to read his books. After he died they became my books and I read them to feel near to

him. When I read Marx then it was — a light coming on. I thought: this is true, this is how it will be."

"How did he die?"

"The war." He says it as though it could never be anything else.

"Im sorry. My brothers —"

"They fought?"

"All three of them."

"And they died?"

"Yes."

He does not look away as most people do. "You are right to despise violence," he says. "Communism only means violence when there is no choice — not this daily brutality we have now."

In the surprising quiet of his certainty I find something familiar, mesmerising. His friends are ready to go, standing in the doorway. I walk down to the street with them.

"I'm glad to have met you. Will you come again?" I ask.

"Perhaps. If I am able." He bows his head once more.

"Ask for Mrs Hogg — that's me."

Towering over the others, he stoops out into the greasy London streetlight. How could I contradict him? I have never even seen a Nazi, and never faced any consequence more severe than disagreement for my beliefs. I am uncomfortable about communism, about any method of coercion or denial of the individual, but there must be a truth in it somewhere to inspire a man like that.

Another figure appears at the corner, coming our way, passes the Germans and begins to run.

"What's wrong?" George shouts. His speed, his concern. I start to shiver.

"Nothing —" I say, "some visitors"

"Are you all right?" He stops in front of me and peers at my face. "Who was it?"

"I'm fine. Ben will tell you — go up."

"Come inside."

"I will. Go on."

I stand looking at the empty street. My mind replays the picture of the Germans, heroic and rather sad, walking away. Communists, Pacifists, Nationalists, Jews, Germans, Christians, Londoners; a world of names, labels, and tribes. We were at risk tonight. Nothing like this has happened since the war. I turn and step towards the door, run my hand along the scar in its wood. A good result today does not mean a good result tomorrow. Yet for now I hope we have created a little more friendship, a little less fear. I'm pleased, and I think Prue would be proud.

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The week draws on. I try each evening to work on the column. Bertie's words circle my mind, whether I am holding the pen or not: Write what you saw. . . A journalistic Empire exhibition. . . Respect the boundaries of your assignment. . . The new fashion is to believe in things. It's all very well, but I sit on and on before the clean paper and whichever way I turn my way is blocked. I dream I must find and fight a Minotaur. I can kill it, but I might release it by accident, or it might follow me back and I'll wake up, in my bed, next to the monster. When I dream this waking it is no bull-man I wake up next to but a very ordinary man, a man who looks like anyone you could pass

in the street and never know, and then I wake for real, sweating, and more afraid than when I woke in the dream.

On Friday evening I sit at my desk, rehoused in the corner of the dining room, my feet on the cool clay tiles, and take out pen and paper yet again.

There is a quiet knock on the door.

"Want some coffee?" Harry asks.

"I'd love some."

He comes back with a mug and a pot of coffee on a tray, along with a jug of milk and biscuits.

"Thought you might need supplies."

"Thank you."

"How's it going?"

I hold up the blank paper.

"Oh." He puts the tray on the table and pours the milk. "What's the problem?"

"I believe they call it writer's block."

"Can you have writer's block before you've started?"

"I've started in my head a hundred times."

"So what's stopping you?" He passes me a cup across the corner of the table.

Since the night after Peter came to Bow Harry has not come close or tried to touch me.

He has not apologised either, but my mind is too full to live in anger. I take the cup.

"It's not supposed to be political," I say.

"Everything's political."

"Not too political."

"Don't be like that — it's an important point." He pulls out one of the chairs from under the table. "You know, you could have had the matching chairs from Birmingham."

I shake my head.

"See — that's political furnishing choices."

"Are you going to be helpful?"

"Sorry. Look — I don't know the first thing about writing. But I know that for me — with the business — things went wrong because I wanted to do everything all at once. You know: change the whole world every time I went to work and be the most successful printers in history —"

"Were you really so idealistic?"

He rubs his eyes and nods. "But now you're worse."

"Go away."

He holds out the biscuits. "Write first," he says, "worry later."

I take a shortbread. I don't remember buying them; perhaps Harry is on the mend. I put my hand on his arm.

"Thank you," I say.

He looks at my hand. "You're not wearing your ring?"

"What?"

"Your wedding ring."

I take my hand away. "No."

He opens his mouth and closes it. Pushes a biscuit around the plate. I remember picking out the china, in a pawn shop near Kings Cross the winter after I returned from my travels. I was drawn to the outlandish glaze; greens and blues swirling and bubbling up from chocolate brown that somehow reminded me of India. I look at the saucer beneath my cup, more green than blue. Pick up my pen.

"I do have one idea —"

"Where's your ring?" he asks.



"Upstairs."

He nods. "I'll leave you to it."

He closes the door behind him. I eat a biscuit and drink most of the coffee. Then I turn back to the blank paper and allow myself to write what I have resisted all week. One memory of India I always return to: the story of how I first met Shantih.

*My first days in India were spent in the house of seven brothers in Bombay. The morning we arrived, I drew back the curtain in my room to reveal open doors. Beyond them, a light-filled courtyard opened to the sky. Water ran from a fountain to fill man-made streams, as it does in houses and temples all over India. The sound of running water, birds, singing from an unseen room. In the centre of the courtyard was an Indian girl in a green sari. It was exactly the green colour of moss at the bottom of a small river in an English village. The girl was preparing food, pounding with a heavy pestle, in perfect rhythm she never missed a beat. She was strong and delicate at once. My mind rushed through ancient myths and Arabian Nights, silly stories a child would believe. She could have been a princess, except for the chores. When she saw me standing in the window she smiled and waved. I let the curtain drop and was returned to gloom.*

*The following morning I had the chance to talk with the girl in the green sari. We met in a small sitting room in what had once been the Zenana, or women's quarters. In India noble women have traditionally kept in purdah in this part of the house, only meeting face to face with men of their family. In the house of the seven brothers, as in many other progressive houses across India, the women are no longer in purdah. Only the girl's grandmother continues the practice and she, at seventy-three, has surely earned her respite from male company.*

*The room we met in was furnished with large embroidered cushions, heavy drapes, and two chairs in deference to me. We talked about her studies, her plans to attend university in London, and the trades of her six uncles, her brothers, and her many cousins. The girl was clever and charming with the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen.*

*When we finished our tea she asked if she could show me a treasure belonging to her family.*

*We went into another room. Dark wooden lattice-work screened the balcony. The draw rumbled as it opened, releasing a heavy scent of lavender. The girl reached in and picked out a length of salmon-coloured material encrusted with gold thread scales. She held it up and released the back. The material dropped onto the hard floor, rustling across it as if it were a wedding train.*

*I did not understand at first that this was a sari.*

*When I touched the material it slid between my fingers. I could feel the thinness of it, though the fabric was not soft. The gold thread rasped and there were coarse pockets in the fabric, and uneven patches, though this suited it and did not detract from its beauty.*

*The girl laid the sari on the floor and removed another from the drawer. It was dark night-blue, almost black, with stars sewn across it in silver.*

*There were thirty such saris inside the drawer. She took them out, one by one, until I was stranded in a sea of silk. It must have looked as though I was wearing a multi-coloured dress with each sari a bolt of the enormous skirt.*

*I knew of khaddar, the hand-woven cloth advocated by some in India to improve the local economy and provide employment, while removing the burden of expensive*

*foreign-made fabric. The girl told me her mother had spun and woven the cloth, then made the saris while she was in prison some years before.*

I stop writing. The memory is problematic from here. How could I explain that Shantih's mother was imprisoned for taking part in the first non-cooperation campaign against the British after the war? To justify the movement will certainly appear political, but I will not condemn it. I cannot.

My hand shakes drops of ink onto the page.

How would I go on — if I were to simply write it as it was?

I would think: What did your mother do? But I would say: "Why was she in prison?"

Shantih would say: "Sedition — officially. She led a group of women who picketed liquor shops."

"Why?" I would ask.

She would explain that, while alcohol was causing all the familiar social problems in India at that time, the campaign was not about such things; it was about choice. The government had tied local spending on schools, healthcare, and services to receipts from the sale of liquor vending licenses.

"So drinking was encouraged?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. "It was a form of bribery that profited the British who make and sell the drinks. The campaign was peaceful — the women spoke to the people who came, asked them not to buy alcohol, and gave them tea instead."

I would want to write how uncomfortable it was to find my Government apparently culpable in such a dirty little injustice. I would remember that the non-cooperation was described in Britain as malicious rebellion. I know that my readers

would want to justify the Government. They would write to remind me that the liquor shops were legal, that people used them, that campaigners were not arrested unless they broke laws, that money was tight after the horrors of war. I understand, because these are the same things I wanted to say to Shantih in that moment.

Back in the house of the seven brothers. Shantih leans against the drawers. She pulls the dark blue fabric between her fingers, as though it is the most natural thing in the world. Watching me, very directly, without looking away, so I feel conscious of my big, clumsy body in the silence.

I ask a question I wouldn't need to now. Why was she arrested? Talking to people isn't illegal.

"Perhaps — but they were very effective."

"How?"

"It was the women. In India high-born women had not gone out in public for hundreds of years — it was seen as disrespect for men to look on women of other families, let alone to speak with them. This is changing — but older women feel that without Purdah they have no status. When my mother and her friends went out in the street the ones who came to the shop felt shame that these women should risk their honour because of them."

It was as hard for me to comprehend this idea as it would be for most readers of *The Times*; that a woman could be most honoured when least seen. So unlike Queen Victoria, the most honoured of British women, whose head was on every coin.

Shantih looks down at the saris, bends to lay the blue one back with the others, and buries her hands beneath a river of nut-brown fabric. I think for a moment she will keep going, headfirst, beneath the strewn saris, and disappear completely.

"Your mother is brave," I say.

"That is true — though my father is a man of open mind. We are fortunate."

"So what happened?"

"Few vendors wished to renew the liquor license after the campaign — there were low sales. The Government and the firms lost money. It was decided to arrest the women at the shops for sedition — allegedly they were speaking against the Government and plotting revolution."

"So that was the end?"

She laughs. "Not at all. More took their places, women and men, and they were arrested also. So more came — there are always people in India, it is one of our great strengths."

She slides a look at me, her big eyes narrowing, half turned away.

I smile, and try not to smile, both. I crouch down to put my hands on the material, to be closer to her.

"In the end Gandhiji called off the campaign," she says.

I remembered. The readers would. In the British press it was billed a triumph.

"Why?" I'd never thought to find out before.

"There was violence — a mob — policemen were killed by protesters. He thought we were not ready."

This, of course, was not reported at home.

I put the lid on my pen. Close my eyes and think of India; the quiet of Shantih, the noise of Prue. Everywhere we went faces turned to us, the whites of eyes, the smell of bodies, onions, milk souring in the heat, dust, songs rolling through a dusk so thick you could taste it.

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The bookshop where I work is the long, narrow downstairs of a house in St Pancras. It is owned and run by Mr Oswald Frankland, a Quaker in his sixties who lives upstairs. The shop floor is really two rooms but the door between has been removed so now only a square arch separates fiction, poetry and drama at the front of the shop, from politics, religion, and academic in the smaller back room. The walls are lined with tall bookcases. Second-hand books on one side, new books on the other. In the centre of each room is a stripped wooden table around which piles of books nest.

I first encountered the old man at a meeting of the India League, shortly after my return from travelling in 1934. He needed an assistant in the shop. I had moved out of my marital home and needed an income.

"Well — I'm sure a woman's better off without a man to worry her energy away," he observed, ignoring my lowered eyes and the questions I had no desire to answer. "And my shop would be greatly improved by some female attention."

I now know that this is characteristic of Frankland. Despite his balding head, long grey eyebrows that twitch like insect legs, and his habit of wearing slippers to work, there is little of the old man in him. He is a true nonconformist and an expert in the ways of quiet radicalism. Unknown to me, I had taken employment at the heart of the Quaker peace witness.

The garden behind the shop is the real jewel. It is a paved courtyard hemmed in at the end by an office building and on either side by high walls. Years ago Frankland built the frame of a timber shed to fit perfectly into this courtyard. At the base of each upright he planted flowering creepers. Each week he trimmed the plants, coaxed them on, introduced them to one another, twined them round his frame. His friends and

patrons shook their heads. They laughed and winked, but Frankland tended the plants and waited for the revelation of his vision. Over time the courtyard was transformed into a room made entirely of flowers and leaves. It is cool in the summer and warm in the winter. He cut away a hole for a chimney and installed a wood-burner. In this strange oasis, this grotto, this green chapel which might have been hollowed out of a forest by a green man, or at least by William Morris — I fell deeper into my new world. Peace campaigners, reformers, ministers, writers and thinkers of all stripes gather in the garden every day and in all weather, whenever they happen to pass, for tea, coffee, or a cigarette. They gather and they talk.

My working days at the bookshop are surrounded by this talk, but the shop itself is quiet and I prefer it there. Frankland holds court and I read between the shelves. Inhale the smells that come out of books; chemicals, cloth, and other people's lives. Sometimes I stop for tea and lean against the door of the back room. The light falls through the leaves and flowers of the courtyard as through stained glass, so colours dance across the speakers' faces and the talk is never quite as serious as it might be.

On Saturday, a week after Hendon, I unlock the shop door to find books everywhere — but not in the normal way. The books are open, pulled back, standing on end. There are gaps in the shelves and the table is bare. The stacks of books are collapsed to rubble. Labels and torn pages skitter across the surface of the wreckage in the breeze coming through the door.

"Oswald?" I call out. "Oswald — are you here?"

"I'm in the back," Frankland's cracked voice calls from the courtyard.

I realise I was holding my breath. I turn to shut the door and see that the window is empty. The books from the display lie on the floor. Covers trodden and bent. I rescue

two copies of a history of the destruction of the monasteries. Then pick a way through the debris.

Dust thrown off the books hangs in the air, visible in the light that slants between blind slats. I move some of the books as I go, close them if I can, restore their dignity. The mess is even worse in the back room. Mountains of pages and twisted covers thrust up from the floor in a great massif spanning the room and rising up to the table at the centre.

In his grotto Frankland sits alone. He sucks on his pipe, a half-eaten slice of toast on the table.

"Are you hurt?" I ask when I finally reach the door.

"Not at all. But I'm afraid today — well — it may be a day of stock taking."

I sit in a folding wooden chair.

"What happened?"

"The other Oswald." He tilts his head.

I frown at him.

"Mosley's mob."

"In uniform?"

"They might have been. They called us — um — 'Jew-lovers'. Followed us back from the meeting. We were protesting outside — nasty business — but I don't know for sure they were his men actually. Coffee?"

I nod; he pours.

"They ran when they heard the sirens."

The front of the shop is a glass door, a large window. It is not a busy street, especially at night. There is a pub on the corner, a dentist and a florist but it is mostly residential.



"You should stay with me," I say.

"Nonsense — there's hardly room for you and Harry."

"There's plenty of room —"

"Don't fuss." He leans back and sucks on his pipe, squinting up between the plants as if through a keyhole. The leaves and flowers distill the light. Today the feel is of milky tea, nothing rich or sweet. I think of the Communists, the heavy wooden doors of Kingsley Hall. We escaped once this week. Not a second time. A fascist mob violating the shop, idols on church pillars with their faces scraped off. Destruction and desecration; *this daily brutality*, as Eric the German said. I cannot shake the sense of narrative, step by step, and unfathomably progressing.

I telephone Susan, Kingsley Hall where I get George, and send a telegram to the LSE for Shantih. I think about trying to reach Harry but give up when it makes my head hurt. By one o'clock Susan and George have been helping for some time. Susan has ascended a step-ladder to lovingly rearrange a shelf of Marx. I pass her the books without speaking until she stops taking them. I look up.

"Where's your wedding ring?" she asks, bending to peer at my hand.

"Harry asked me that yesterday."

George coughs, gets up from where he is sorting books from the pile in the middle of the room. He walks into the front room and asks Frankland something, a little louder than is strictly necessary.

When he's gone, Susan comes down a few steps and takes my left hand in hers.

"Well?"

"Apparently I'm not a *real* wife."

She frowns. "It's a tad late for that excuse."

"It's not an excuse. I assume I was before India — before —"

"You taking up his causes and him taking up Eileen?"

"He's right though, isn't he? It's a fantasy."

"So you'll become loyal opponents — like me and Dickie?" Susan married her brash civil servant husband primarily, as far as I can tell, to spite her father. She hardly speaks to Dickie these days, but neither of them seem much perturbed by the unconventional nature of their marriage or in a hurry to dissolve it.

"You have a son to think of," I say.

She gestures at her bag on the floor by her feet. I take out cigarette case and matches and pass them to her.

"Are you separated?" she asks.

"He's staying in the house."

"Do you want him there?" She asks the question lightly, leaning on the ladder, cigarette at lips, but I am in no doubt that ideas teem behind her blank expression. That is her way; a knife to the heart, a blow to the head, all ambivalence. She knows this is a question I do not want to answer. 'Separated', like 'divorce', is an ugly word.

"I thought I did — before —" I wave the ring hand. "Now — I honestly don't know what I want."

"Can't imagine Harry likes that?"

"He doesn't like anything."

There is a knock on the glass at the front. Frankland pads to the door in his slippers. Susan raises her eyebrows at me with a faint smile.

"Hello." The voice is familiar.

"Hello dear — Shantih is it? Well — thank you for coming."

"I brought sandwiches."

We sit in the cool of the courtyard. Frankland and Susan are on the folding chairs, Shantih and I on an iron bench. George sits on a stool made from a tree stump, resting his elbows on his knees. We eat the sandwiches — cheese for Shantih, salt beef for the rest of us. Insects buzz in the canopy, butterflies flit between flowers. We do not talk. I lean against the back of the bench and let my neck fall backwards so I am looking straight up, back arching. The day has become hot and dry. Traffic horns blast. I squint into the shop to remind myself of the mess.

George licks his fingers. "I'll have to vandalise your shop more often — it's lovely looking at all these books."

"There's a whole stock room upstairs —" says Frankland, "come back next week and you can start on that."

"How long have you been here?" asks Shantih.

He looks across at her. She is wearing European clothes; she wears trousers without a second thought. Her blouse is off white, the colour of white roses, precise against the dark skin of her neck. She looks back at the old man with her big eyes, not alarmed by his scrutiny. They are eyes that ask questions, that always know more than you think they can, are afraid of nothing. She was barely twenty-one when I met her in Bombay, but she already had that look.

Frankland begins to fill and tamp his pipe, without looking away from her.

"Well — if I am not mistaken," he says, "your father is a lawyer, trained here in London. Let's say then — the shop has been running long enough to have served him."

"You know my father?"

"I remember him well. You have the look of him — even if I didn't know I'd have guessed. He is Sajan Pawar — am I correct?"

Her pleasure is written, like everything, in her eyes.

George pulls at a thread on his cuff, rocks the tree-stump. Susan lights a cigarette and smiles into the air. The fear, the sense of violation, has fallen away but the freshness of it leaves us open. Looking at the others, the moment presses into me.

"I knew him years ago —" Frankland says, "when the shop was still run by the Friends. A group of us lived upstairs."

"A Quaker mission?" George asks.

"No — more of a family — we stayed together for years. I bought the place twelve years ago because I came into an inheritance and the society needed funds. But it's only been five years since I've lived alone."

He lights the pipe. Smoke tumbles up to meet the clouds already hanging over Susan. Shards of light slipping between the leaves become vivid and solid where they strike out across the smoke.

Frankland leans back. "It was during the war really — I knew Sajan vaguely from his student days but of course, that was some time before."

He crosses his legs, and begins to tell the story, slipping into it, as though it is inevitable he should.

Sajan came back to London after Shantih was born to carry out research. It went well for a few months until the war broke out. He could have travelled home at that stage, but he felt it would be wrong to abandon his work and his friends during the crisis. This resolve did not make it easier. War fever was endemic and his friends were at the front or doing war work. Others opposed the war, later they were COs. Sajan would have received hundreds of white feathers if he were not Indian; he thought that women were afraid to touch him. They used to eye him as he passed, holding their feathers tight, whispering. None of this shook him. He would come to the shop and sit

over tea, a huge presence filling the little courtyard. He gave long speeches to anyone who asked on the crime of 'The Great Imperial War', as he called it.

Frankland pauses. He does not look at us. He has this one old man's tendency to continue talking in his head when he has stopped speaking aloud. We wait. Perhaps the tale will end here — but there is something compulsive in the moment. The others look at me. Susan lifts her head, silently taps a cigarette. Shantih keeps her eyes on Frankland. We know that there is more to be said, something beneath the memory, and we cannot settle until it is out.

Sajan came to the shop one morning in 1916. Not long since the bill passed and conscription began. Things had got much harder for pacifists because now the young men had to choose not to go to war. They had to stand up and say it. Then either you did something else, which felt like the soft option, or they put you in jail. Such huge numbers were dying in France that it took a strong man to stay away and not hate himself. Frankland told us Sajan was grey when he arrived that morning. He hadn't shaved, the skin drooped around his eyes, not like him at all. He sat out in the courtyard and wouldn't speak. Frankland came and sat with him, brought tea, waited. He drank three cups, then looked up and said: They've sent him to France.

"Who?" Susan's eyes open wide.

"Robert Sinclair," says Frankland. "He was a friend of Sajan's — a Quaker, a socialist."

"He was conscripted?"

Sinclair was a CO. He was an absolutist so he was imprisoned. Sajan tried to help but Robert wouldn't do war work and he wouldn't renounce his socialism. Sajan wrote letter after letter to everyone he knew in authority. There was nothing to be done; the nation had declared it a holy war. That morning in 1916 a street trader found a note

dropped from a train about COs being taken to France. 16 men who were held at Richmond Castle were on their way to the front. Sinclair was one of them. If you disobey orders at the front line — and refusing to fight is obviously disobeying orders — then you can be court marshalled and executed. Sajan thought Robert would be shot. His friend was as good as dead. He explained it all to Frankland, quietly, shivering. Frankland put a hand on his wide shoulders. Sajan stared at the ground. What was the point of it? he said.

A shudder rips through Shantih's body. Her father is oversized, determined, always starting something new. To imagine him sitting here, when there was no flower pagoda, in the shadow of cold London buildings and bomb-laden skies, sunk in despair, to even imagine it is horrifying. This is what war means. I always think I have grasped it. I live as though I know what war is, what loss is, but there is always another story, another detail waiting to stun me. This is what war means; it destroys the things that make us who we are.

"What happened?" Shantih asks.

"A group of us got together — put in the money and got him a place on a ship back to India. We told him we wanted him to go, to be with you. So he went."

"And Sinclair?"

"The NCF got their sentences reduced to ten years penal servitude — which meant breaking up rocks until the war was over." He looks down at his pipe, and turns it around in his hand. "He wasn't shot but his health was never the same. He died — years ago now."

Shantih opens her mouth to say something but Frankland puts a hand up. He stands and walks back into the shop. A bee drops down from the canopy and swerves through the space between us. She looks at me and I shrug. Susan lights a match and

watches it burn right down to the edge of her perfect nails. George screws up the wax paper his sandwich came in. He presses the ball of it together between his hands. We can hear Frankland walking around, stumbling over books still on the floor.

"Did your father ever tell you?" I ask Shantih. "About Sinclair?"

"No. About the white feathers though — he said that English women were mad — they wanted their men to die so they could sing songs about them." She bumps me with the side of her shoulder.

The old man comes back out with a big, cloth-bound book. He places it on the table. When he opens it we can see it is a sketchbook filled with charcoal drawings and clean, pale watercolours. On one page a hill rolls into the distance with a chalk path threading over it and storm clouds above. On another is a tree done in charcoal, a chestnut in leaf standing alone, and though there is no colour you can feel the sun falling hot beneath the leaves. Workers stand at long benches in a factory. Between these pictures are individual portraits; men in suits and soldiers uniforms, women with their sleeves rolled up, a child chewing a pencil.

"Where is it?" mumbles Frankland. "Ah —"

He lets the book fall flat onto the table, open on a portrait. It is a watercolour of Sajan Pawar, Shantih's father. He is younger than when I met him, but there is no doubt who it is. He sits beside a window on a chair that is dwarfed by his size, looking out at the view beyond. Squinting slightly to suggest bright sun or reflection. Daffodils and hyacinths wave into view at the bottom of the window and a single, cream coloured butterfly flits above his shoulder in the otherwise bare room. The painting is simple and so light you can just about see the paper beneath the paint. The butterfly in fact seems to have no colour at all but to stand out of the paper against the grey of the walls, as if the

paper is the butterfly and the paper lives. There is a crack running across the top left hand corner of the glass in the painted window.

"Who did this?" Shantih asks.

"Robert Sinclair — he was an artist." Frankland brings the book over and rests it on Shantih's knee. I lean nearer to the page and Sajan's features, so clear, seem to dissolve into nothing but splashes of colour. How is it possible? What magic?

"He did that one after he was released," Frankland explains, "from a series of sketches he had done before. The sketches were lost — this is the only book I have."

Shantih runs her finger over the figure of her father, barely touching the page, and over the butterfly. As her finger hides and reveals them they come suddenly to life, as if the light were switched on in a room at dusk. I look around for the butterflies in the courtyard but they are gone. It doesn't occur to me to ask where the picture is supposed to be, or when, or why, or any of the questions I would ask of a photograph. A torn page skits from the door, tossed by a breeze, down the stairs, it catches on the table leg. When I look back, Shantih has rested her finger on the place where her father's painted hand is. He is looking away from her, out at the English countryside. Perhaps she is looking at him. Or perhaps she is also looking through the painted window at the view. Green hills, distant woodland splashed on the horizon, the suggestion of meaning, of stories and magic, of forces we cannot see.

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On Monday I am back in the shop. It is quiet and Frankland strolls back and forth in front of the shelves, sucking on the end of his unlit pipe. The books are still out of order from the blackshirts. He pulls out a volume and reads a section, leaning against the



shelf, moves it to another shelf, shifting what is there to make space. I am at the counter.

I look at where I stopped writing on Friday:

*The girl told me her mother had spun and woven the cloth, then made the saris while she was in prison some years before.*

"What's wrong?"

I snap my head up. Frankland looks down on me. I hadn't heard him approach.

"You're biting that poor pen to death." He raises a single, arachnoid eyebrow.

"It's this —" I say, "for *The Times*. I've written some others, they're good enough — but I want this to be the first."

"There is often a natural order."

I do not answer.

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's not important."

"Of course it is." He tamps the tobacco in the pipe and holds out his hand.

I relinquish the sheet of paper. He takes it between thumb and middle finger and, without speaking, leaves the room. I hear him sit, the rasp of a match.

I put my palms on the desk and close my eyes. Everything feels ready to lift off in the wrong direction, in any direction but the one I want to go in. How could something so small be so difficult? Something I'd always thought was natural become so painful? I stand and relax my muscles, to feel the weight of myself. After several minutes I go to the door of the courtyard and lean against the frame.

"Well?"

Frankland turns his head towards me. "I like it."

"There should be more."

"Yes, I see your problem."

"I'm being a fool, aren't I?"

"How?"

"I should give it up. Use something else —"

"Not necessarily."

He turns his head away and looks into the distance, into the plants that scatter light around the courtyard. His pipe comes automatically to his lips.

"Can you tell me what it is about this memory that has power for you?"

I sit on the step, looking into the haze of smoke. On the ground lie leaves, prematurely fallen. Can I say what it is? There is Shantih, certainly, and the shadow of her mother. There is the feeling, newly minted back then, of the power people have when they harness themselves to an idea of the world that is larger than themselves. There is the contradiction of beauty emerging from tainted circumstances. Yet I did not understand these things at the time, even if I had begun to feel them. I have plastered them over the memory with hindsight because they matter to me now.

I look at the back of Frankland's head. His hair is grey but still thick. No, he would not accept any one of these alone as a reason, he would see through it.

"Honestly —" I say, groping for words to fit the feeling as I go, "I think what was so powerful was how utterly new it all was; the house, Shantih, saris, khaddar, even the reality of non-cooperation. I'd never realised before that other people's lives could be so different and still be — beautiful."

"Valuable?"

"Exactly—"

"Civilised?"

"Yes." I am glad he is not looking at me. My face is hot but I am not sure why.

"That's certainly a political point — but perhaps it doesn't require the less palatable parts of the story for you to make it?"

"But —"

"Wait." He rises. He rests his pipe on the table and steps past me into the shop. I hear rummaging, books being slid from shelves, and smell the sweet, tart tobacco that reminds me of Father. A butterfly glides past, in no hurry.

"Hold out your hands." He returns with a pile of books. Before I can look at the titles he goes on. "Journalism should be concerned with facts, but that's not quite what you're doing. So think instead that while it has to be true — you're right, of course — it doesn't necessarily have to be real."

"Are you suggesting I make it up?"

"Not necessarily — but use your tools wisely so you can tell the story you want to tell but can't, in your case the one that really happened, under the mask of the story you can tell."

He points at the books and reaches across for his pipe.

"You spend some time with them — I'll take care of things inside."

I scan the spines: Schreiner, Forster, Sassoon, Woolf.

Later Frankland heads out to a meeting, leaving me to close up. After I've locked the door I sit at the counter in the greying light, alone with the books as so often before, and attempt to channel something of them into my writing.

I cross out the last words I had written, *while she was in prison some years before*, insert a full stop, and underneath begin to write again.

*I picked up a red sari, the colour of a tropical sunset over shallow seas, and draped it over my shoulder so that it ran in a bar down the front of me. It was cool on the thin material of my dress.*

*The girl was delighted. She said that the colour was fond of me; that I must dress in it.*

*Donning the sari was a dance of great intricacy. There was twirling, folding, wrapping, and tucking. I thought the complexity would bind me, but when I stood fully clothed it was with surprising freedom and weightlessness.*

*The girl stood and admired her work. I thought it must look strange with my blonde hair. She wrapped the veil around my head, over, then under my chin, and tossed it back across my shoulder. She dropped her hand and stepped out of the circle of material. She walked around me, at the edge of the room, looking at me from every angle while I did not move an inch. I remarked how comfortable it was, how cool.*

*The girl in the green sari smiled. "Now you know how it feels to be Indian," she said.*

*In truth I knew nothing, but it was my first glimpse into the vast and varied life of India.*

On Tuesday I show Frankland the finished article. He reads it then looks at me over the top of his glasses, smiling.

"Did you keep the sari?" he asks.

"For a while."

"What happened to it?"

"I gave it to Gandhi — for one of the Harijan auctions."

"Did it raise much money?"

"Quite a lot."

He nods, and picks up the page to read it again.

"Who bought it?" He asks a moment later.

I look up from the accounts table I am filling. "Sajan."

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On Wednesday a small, brown envelope comes with the early post. There is a cheque inside, folded along scored edges, and a note which reads:

Love the sari - published Friday morning edition.

Next due week Wednesday.

Find payment.

Yours,

Bertie

I smooth the cheque on the table, pressing down a corner that has folded over. Earning my own income has yet to become dull. It is not the money, I don't need much, but the fact that I can, that I rely on nobody else. By the effort and skill of my own hands I can afford to live. Even though we have had the full rent to pay since Harry moved in, I will not take money from his parents. I put the cheque into my bag. Think how easy it would be to lose it.

There is another note in the post as well. It smells of Susan's perfume and says:

Darling, when's it printed? Let's have a party — Love, S.

I tear up both the letters and drop them into the rubbish. I have two days to wait for reactions to the article. So far only Frankland has read it. I woke up before dawn this morning to the whisper of voices; the things that people will say. Suddenly there, as if I'd expected the thing to go unnoticed. I cannot shake them. Mother and Helen will say it is too foreign. At Kingsley Hall they will be polite, but disappointed I did not mention Gandhi. The India League will complain of sentimentalism. My friends will pity my idealism reduced. Harry will snort and say he could have done better given the chance. All of this I have heard a hundred times already, squeezing through the gaps between thoughts.

Then there is Shantih. I have told her nothing about the article. She is not named but she will know. Not only have I written her story, but I have not written part of it as well. I could have chosen anything. I could have submitted one of the four other ideas sitting on my desk but I chose that memory. It is a tribute, I thought. Only now it is accepted and beyond my control I can see the risk I have taken with the thing most dear to me.

Most dear? I would once have said Harry.

I stare into a mug of coffee. My fingers drum on the table and ripples flower from the tight surface of the coffee. They rush against the sides of the cup and bounce back, crash into one another, eddy and die. I would give anything to feel the tight line linking me to Prue, but I am floating, free. I stare at the gritty brown coffee. Remember drifting with the fast current of an Indian river. I cannot see beneath the clay-brown surface. The green head of a snake rears, wet and shining. I drum my fingers, imagine the ripples are waves, feel the rhythm, the distant beating of a giant heart. The snake

blocks my way to the landing stage. If I miss it I'll sail away. Down the river to the end of a continent and into the sea. I kick. Swim. The snake ducks beneath the surface. I put out my hand, grasp something smooth and firm — it is the bank. The snake is gone. The green ones are poisonous, says Gandhi later, smiling.

Harry moves about upstairs. I feel queasy. The coffee is cold and powdery.

I leave the house and walk up the hill to Hampstead Cemetery. Step into the green quiet of ash trees. The air is sticky with drizzle. Grass between the gravestones glistens. A path runs straight, flanked by the names of the dead, under a brick arch that curves between two chapels of rest. A squirrel flashes across the stonework, back, and back again, from Anglican to Nonconformist chapel. Here are the high monuments to the important dead; columns and cornices and eagles. Then the path balloons, meanders into overgrowth. I linger and read the gravestones. The illusion of simplicity: beloved mother and wife; loving father; patron of the arts; clergyman. Daughter, who died in 1856, has fallen flat into the elder.

An army of clouds begin a barrage. The rain brings smells of grass and ivy, memories of September at Brentwood, the school where my father was head; footprints in the bright dew, the hoot of wide games over twilight playing fields. The same playing fields where in 1917 a German airman was found one morning, dead, propped up against the red-brick wall. His clothes were torn, ribs broken, face soot and blood grimed. They carried him out on a stretcher but nobody thought to cover him. He looked too small, too dead. I did not believe he was a German.

Another twist and the path reveals the war dead, identical graves on eternal parade. A soldier, an airman, a naval officer. I stop in front of one: David Grayson, Officer, Kings Royal Rifle Regiment, 1894 - 1915. If I let my eyes blur I can imagine it reads David Wyatt, Private, Essex Regiment, 1898 - 1918. It hardly matters that the

words are different, they give you only a sliver of the man who was. David Wyatt, brother, tennis player, imaginary tea party attendee, scar on left arm from sliding between barbed wire to find blackberries, expert whistler, ghost story teller, poet, patriot, secret keeper, romantic, never kissed a girl, died on the day before his twentieth birthday. Nineteen years ago. Almost as long as his life has passed since his death and I still forget he won't come back. I never expect to see William round the corner of a path on hot afternoons. I do not accidentally talk to Matthew when I am half awake or half asleep. I have long given up wondering what Father would make of my life. Of all the lost ones it is only David I cannot let go of. He was different, is different. David was not only a brother, he was my first and best friend. Closest to me in age, he never went away to school. He was always there, and then he was gone. My little big brother.

A bird lands on a branch and looses a shower of drops. I do not bother to wipe them. I look down at David's gravestone that is not really his.

"I'm going to have an article in the paper." The words stand out in the quiet. I lower my voice.

"In *The Times*. It's about India — it's more about Shantih. I think it's good, but — I don't know. Everything seems inadequate."

A drop of rain snakes down the front of the gravestone, catching in the grooves of the lettering, a tear pooling on the chin.

"That feeling — so many awful things happen in the world and we're powerless to stop them. But we have to do something — in the hope. The Communists protested at Kingsley Hall last week, blackshirts roughed up the shop — can you imagine?"

The rain drums on the skin of the earth where the dead lie just beneath.

"Of course you can't."



A thistle has seeded itself in the groove between gravestone and grass. I bend to pull it out, and stay down, squatting, eye to eye with the name. David.

"I wanted to tell you — it sounds silly now, after all this time — but I wanted to tell you that I understand why you made the choice you did. I pretended before — after you died — but really I thought you were a fool. I'm sorry. It was because I wished you hadn't — I wanted you here. You've missed so much. But now I understand. You would have had to live with that and no matter what the cause was — how little it deserved your life — I do understand that you had to do it, and I'm proud of you. I always was proud of you Did."

I want to sit down with my back against the stone, my legs stretched out along the grass, and see how long it is before I begin to flake and fall apart and become the earth myself. It would be blissful to disappear. Just like that. I could take the ferry to France and lie down with brother David in the soil of Flanders. I could never hear any more talk of war, or India, or *The Times*. Even as I think it I know I could never do it. Running wouldn't put out this fire. I throw away the thistle, and pull up the other weeds around me.

"I hope I can be ready —" I say, "when it comes to it. Because I think it does always come down to it eventually. The question is only — how can you be sure you're fighting for the right thing?"

The trees whisper and moan. It has stopped raining. My clothes are wet through and I am cold. I reach out, bend down, and lay my hand on the gravestone that is not David's. I remember his last day at home, when he and Matthew fought with Father. I listened from behind the long curtains, my breath steaming up the window. Father shouted; the boys wore their army boots that banged on the floorboards. You sound like a child, Father said, you wouldn't care if the war was only in China or Africa. David's

voice was very quiet. But it isn't, he said. That's the point. I can only fight the war that's happening. And because it is happening, I must choose to fight — or not to fight. I don't care about being an officer, and I don't want to be safe. I can fight now — so either I go now or not at all.

That evening I sort through the boxes in my bedroom, for something to do. The voices have gone, but a cramping fear keeps me moving. I empty the boxes of letters onto the bed and make a pile for each person. I am surprised to find I have the most letters from Susan, then Shantih. The pile from Prue is small, but the letters' edges are tattered from re-reading. There is a large envelope with three postcards inside, from David when he was in France. All three say I must not worry, and peace will come soon. I throw away all the letters from Harry, except the one with the ring tucked into the envelope — the one about Eileen — and another old one sent from Oxford the week after he proposed. I should be sad that these are all I need to remember my marriage, but what is the point of holding onto it?

When I have finished I tie up each pile of letters and return them to the boxes. I lie back to read the letters from Prue again. They move from nineteen thirty-three up to several weeks ago. They are markers of my story, torches, or perhaps cairns are more apt.

Some time later, around nineteen thirty six, the top step creaks under Harry's weight. I stiffen and hold myself still. He treads slowly along the corridor and knocks on my door. It is a single, hard knock. He must be drunk.

I do not move or speak. He knocks again, twice.

I am silent. I do not breathe. A pain begins to expand in my head, starting from the centre and pushing on my skull as if trying to splinter. Harry moves away. I hear him close his bedroom door.

I let my breath out. Slide under the bed-clothes, ghostly quiet, everything distant, as if I am underwater. I pull the blanket up to my chin. Then I reach out an arm and flick off the light. Pain still beats behind my eyes.

-----

In my sister's house on Friday evening my nieces shiver in their nightgowns, even though outside the evening is warm.

"Give your Aunt a kiss goodnight," prompts Helen.

They do, each aspiring to minimum lip to cheek contact.

"Sleep well girls."

Helen herds them out and upstairs. As their voices fade I am surprised by the quiet. The large townhouse is set back from the road behind a hem of shrubs and trees which muffle the sounds of life. Helen has taken to heart Peter's aristocratic roots. The furniture resembles what a theatre producer might use to furnish the stage for the "Country House" scenes in a Noel Coward play. A velvet-upholstered, dark, lacquered and highly-polished look. There is rather more furniture than I would say is strictly necessary.

Edward sits opposite me on a chaise-long. He gives me a little smile, then looks at his knees. I cannot quite believe he is my nephew. Since I last saw him at Christmas he has crossed a boundary. He is still a boy, but now closer to a man than a child. When

he was younger he was blond like his father, but in the last year his hair has darkened to a milky chocolate colour and he has lost the little childhood fat he had. Now I can see that while Peter's face is long and sculpted, Edward is softer, rounder, with cheeks that redden easily, as they do now.

"What?" he asks, picking a scab on his wrist.

"Has anybody ever told you — you look like your uncle David?"

He shakes his head. "Which one is David?"

We both look at the frame on the sideboard. It contains three small portraits, each of one of my brothers in uniform.

"The one in the middle. He was the youngest. He's eighteen there."

Edward goes to the picture. His eyes are blue and David's were green, but now that his hair has changed the similarity is clear. He turns the photograph in his hands to let the light play on it. I know that the images reveal little but unsmiling, uniform soldiers.

"He looks young," Edward says.

"Your grandfather got him a commission here, training support, but he refused it. Went into the ranks."

"Do you think he should have stayed?"

"It was his choice to make."

He glances at himself in a mirror that hangs on the opposite wall. "I think I see it."

"That's not the best picture. I'll bring some more next time, if you want?"

"Please." He holds the frame tightly, pushing his thumbs into the glass.

"Of course, you have your own brother now — how are you finding it?"

"He's a baby. I never see him."

"Give it time."

Peter marches through the open door, his steps suddenly muting as he moves from the wooden floor of the hallway to the rugs of the sitting room. He walks to the centre of the room and stops, looks between us.

"Oh what plot?" He asks, with his hands on his hips, acting as always.

"I was telling Ed how much he looks like David now."

"Nonsense."

"Actually — I think she's right." The boy holds the picture out to his father. Peter takes it without looking.

"How can you tell? Soldiers all look the same in these pictures." He drops the frame onto the chaise-long and sits beside it, crossing his legs and smiling.

Edward is rigid, staring into the empty fireplace.

"For goodness' sake boy — go and find something to do with yourself if you're going to stand about like a statue."

He leaves without a word, through the doors that open onto the terrace. His footsteps crunch along the gravel path towards the canal at the end of the garden.

"Stupid child doesn't even bother to close the door."

Peter labours over rising and crosses the room. Outside water slaps the wall of the canal, ducks flap, the boatmen call and sing to each other. When he reaches the door he shuts out the fresh evening air and the sounds of the world. I flinch, in part because of the insult to Edward. Of all my sister's children he is the one I know best and love most. All the more now he looks like David. I also flinch from my own anger. Still, after nine years of marriage and all Harry and I have been through, I cannot bear the complacency with which those who conceive easily, without a thought, regard their children.

"He's not a child anymore," I say.

"He behaves like one." Peter takes a cigarette from a gold case on the bookshelf and lights it. "Never mind. I read your article yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"Bertie sent it over. He's pleased as punch."

This is ostensibly why I am here, for a celebratory dinner. In truth my sister enjoys every chance to congratulate herself. My needing Peter's help serves this end perfectly. I think of a line of Prue's writing; *We must love that neighbour or family member who so frustrates us, who repeatedly falls short of our standards, or downright flaunts them. No matter what they deserve, we must remember we do not deserve the sacrifices made for us either. We must love them still. This is how we train the heart for its disarmed life.*

I smile at Peter. "I'm glad you liked it. It's a good idea — the series. I think people will like it."

"Yes, do you? Good. Ordinary people, that's who we're after."

"We're?"

"What?"

"What's it got to do with you?"

Peter still stands beside the bookshelf. He doesn't answer but keeps looking straight at me, dragging on his cigarette.

I shake my head.

"What?" he says, all perfected innocence.

"I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"That there was something else — something behind it."

He waves his hand, the one holding the cigarette. "Oh there's something behind everything."

"There is with you — I suppose Bertie doesn't give a damn what I write?"

Peter returns to his seat, next to the photograph of my brothers. I force myself to stay still, lean back in my chair. Resist the urge to snatch up the picture.

"Of course he does —" says Peter, "it's a good idea, just as you said. But you know we can't separate out the world into sections like a newspaper."

"What does that mean?"

"If people are reading one thing they're not reading another — they're thinking about one thing and not another."

"You're saying these articles are a distraction?"

"In a way —"

"From?"

He raises his pale eyebrows. The movement is fast, his pause long, still.

"From Germany, mostly." He speaks quietly; a quiet slap across my face. Peter throws his cigarette end into the empty grate in the fireplace. I watch it burn and crinkle, turning in on itself, fading to nothing.

I swallow. "And. Why?" I separate the words, carefully, to mask the emotion.

"There's a lot of negativity around Hitler — around what's happening in Europe that, frankly, most of us in Government don't consider helpful —"

"Helpful to who?"

"— *The Times* has for some months been in agreement with a majority of ministers and businessmen that it's in nobody's interest to publish material that will inflame German sentiment, or play into the hands of those who want war."

I don't want to look at him. My eyes slide over waistcoat, watch chain, down to the tapestry-covered seat of the couch. The silver frame of the photograph is dull, the glass looks black. I don't need to see the picture. I can feel David lurking between my thoughts, with Prue, and Shantih, and the others, throwing down challenges to me out of my own imagination. In the new life I am making I can never rest completely. This is one of those moments when even a conversation with a brother feels as if it means something, as if it is a kind of test. I don't need to hear Prue's voice. I already know. Love — yes of course — but to be a real peacemaker I have to say something, don't I? Gandhi's vow of truth demands it and I know Prue would agree. But what? How?

I look up. "Does anybody really want another war?"

"I think so —"

"Or is it just a convenient excuse?"

"There are plenty who want war — for whatever reason. Communists, socialists, Jews, even some MPs —"

"And suppose it's true — the things you want people not to hear?"

"Don't be childish."

He is so still I want to shake him. I want to put a bomb under his seat and wake him up to his own nonsense.

He goes on, "It's not about truth or lies — I'm not suggesting we withhold the truth — but how you present something, how much time you give it — that determines what people think."

An ugly laugh is stuck in my throat. "So there's a good way to write about attacks on Jewish shopkeepers — or the flattening of Guernica?"

"What do we really know about such things? Who are these people allegedly being attacked? Communists, war-mongers —"



"People — Peter. They're just people."

I think of the tall, thin German striding away from Kingsley Hall last week. Leaving behind a prayer, a hope, a longing for better. I can't stay sitting. I feel sick. I stand and turn away from Peter. Walk to the sideboard. When I get there I don't know what to do. I take the lid from a glass decanter of sherry and pour out two measures. My hand is shaking, it makes chips of rainbow light dance off the glass onto the wall behind.

"I'm surprised, little sister. I thought you'd be pleased. You could say — I'm won over. All I want is to prevent another war — and I believe we're succeeding."

I stopper the decanter and bow my head over the two glasses of sherry. Everything has got away from me. What was I supposed to be saying? I take one glass to Peter and go to the window. The sherry is sweet and hot. Outside the sun has set but left the last light to run itself out in grey and silver shadows. Edward is fuzzy in the distance, throwing a cricket ball high into the air and catching it. I imagine my brothers with him, young, as they were before they went to war.

"You mean it, don't you?" I say.

"That I'll do all in my power to prevent war?"

"Yes."

"I've never felt more sure of anything."

"I suppose you might succeed that way. But don't you worry you'll end up giving away too much — everything you'd be prepared to fight for?"

"We'll concede some things — but that's diplomacy, compromise. Muriel would tell you — give and take are essential."

I turn on him. He is spinning the glass with his left hand, its bottom on the palm of the right, his left elbow resting on the high back of the chaise-long. Perhaps he is

ruffled, perhaps not. He doesn't look at me, but stares into the space before him, towards the door. When Peter came back from the war he had developed this dark kind of pragmatism, previously unseen in him, and the ability to hide all trace of thoughts and feelings from the outside world. In almost twenty years he has taken that world for all he could get. I can no longer tell what he believes and what is convenient.

"You can speak the same words," I say, "but mean something different."

He looks at me over his shoulder. Sips his sherry. "If I'm so wrong — please — tell me what you suggest."

"There's no point."

"We want the same thing."

"We might do, but I'm tired of it —"

"Giving up on peace?" He shifts his body to get a clearer view of me. Grins. I want to slap him.

"I couldn't if I wanted to — I have wanted to. But I'm tired of trying to prove myself. You have no idea what that article means — that little story I wrote. Just none. Somewhere in there — with the saris — is all of me and what did I risk it for?"

He sets his glass down, softly, on an end table. Takes out his watch and checks the time. Then looks at me. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Talking about something isn't the same as living it."

"Could you pass me another cigarette?"

I pop the gold case; the sound satisfying, the action like opening an oyster. I give him a cigarette and take one for myself. He flares the lighter for me, and chuckles.

"A smoker?"

"Too much time with Susan."

He lights his own. "Surely you can't believe something unless you do it, or do something unless you believe it?" He is happy to be on philosophy, away from anything real.

"I'm not sure that's true — but either way — believing something isn't at all the same as saying it."

He considers this, but I feel it glide away from him. I suck on the cigarette, too hard, flirting with the point where it will make me cough. Words rush into my mind, framing thoughts for the first time: I am tired. Tired of expecting to wake up to the new world each day. Tired of endless debates and the sneaking fear we might only work for change to justify our own lives. And I am tired of trying to cram actions into my days in the hope that they will reward me with a moment of clarity and belief. I have missed something. I need Prue; I need to know what I am missing, where I have gone wrong. I need to know what to do.

"Do you remember," I ask, "how everyone said we had to beat the Germans completely before? That would be the way to stop another war?"

He finishes his drink, throwing his head back to receive the last drops.

"We know that was folly."

I suck on the cigarette again. My chest clenches, muscles pulled tight, as if by a thread.

"Do you think there will be war?" I say.

"I hope not."

"But it's possible?"

"Yes."

"Probable?"

"No."

Footsteps in the hall. I finish my drink and put the empty glass on the bookcase.

Helen comes in.

"The girls won't stop asking questions — when will Daddy read to us again? When will we be allowed to stay up to late supper with Edward? Why do we have to go to Sunday school? They never stop —"

She looks at each of us without seeing us, but when she gets to the chaise-long she stops.

"Are you smoking?"

I blow out smoke. She looks down at the seat, at the picture of our brothers. For a second her face droops and her eyes widen. Then she smiles. Only a little smile, but it reorders her features. She picks up the picture and rubs at the glass with her sleeve.

"What's this doing here? I might have sat on it."

Peter looks at me. "Dorothy was telling Ed he looks like David."

She stops halfway across to the sideboard and turns.

"What did you do that for?"

"I was just looking at him and I thought — he's like David. Now his hair's dark. You must see it?"

"I don't." She replaces the picture.

"Really?"

"Not at all — he looks like Peter. Except for the hair he's like his father."

"Well, I thought —"

"You're wrong. You probably don't remember David."

"I was fourteen when he went to war."

"Very young."

"I remember him."

"Did Eddy tell you —" she sits next to Peter on the couch and he puts his arm around her. "He's decided on being a doctor."

"He didn't say," Peter says.

"It's wonderful — of course he might change his mind — he's very determined. Just the right career for him."

"It won't keep him out of a war," I say.

Her mouth drops open.

"There's no need for that." Peter stands, speaking loudly.

"What does she mean? There's not going to be a war is there Peter?"

"I hope not."

"You hope not?"

"Come along — I can smell dinner."

"Who would we fight? Not Hitler. If anyone it should be Stalin —"

He pushes her out of the room and looks back at me with an incline of his head, a half shake.

"Are you coming?"

"Just a second — go ahead."

Once they are gone I put my cigarette out and turn to look again through the patio doors. It is almost dark now and I cannot see Edward. I want to leave, but I will not. I will go into supper, apologise to my sister, say I don't know what came over me, and we will go on with the fiction that the world is an orderly place, that four courses and wine are entirely appropriate to it, and that nothing will ever be any different to how it is now. Meanwhile I will hope that Peter's stunt and my stubbornness haven't cost me everything, and that there is still a place for me in the real Peace Movement once people have read my article.

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Coming out of the underground into the roar of Bow Road, I have to stop to blink and put a hand over my eyes. The sun has begun to drop in the west and it shines into my face over the rooftops. Even though it is Sunday the road is busy with traffic and people.

There are enough large building on this road to do a good impression of a more westerly thoroughfare. The Bow Road railway station, with a concert hall on top, dominates the smaller fronts of closed shops. There is a school, columns and wide steps, and the boarded off building site of the new Poplar Town Hall. The tower of Bow Church stands on an island amid the traffic with Gladstone's statue in front, its yew trees reminding one to mourn for the dead village of Bow. All of this could be any part of London, slowly eating its way out from the centre. The other way, however, loom the red-brick chimneys of the match factory. Despite the wind I can smell faint, tangy fumes and taste fat in the air; the brewery, the soap factory. Further east is the canal, warehouses, oast houses, crates waiting like orphans to be loaded onto barges. Beyond it the high bank of the sewer. That is what makes Bow different; there is no screen between what you are supposed to see and what you are not, between the city and the mechanisms that keep it running. You could say Bow itself is a thing most Londoners would prefer not to see.

I snake between children in caps, couples strolling in Sunday hats, and two young men selling shoe polish, who look at me sideways to see what I think of their goods laid on the pavement on a handkerchief. Soon I am off the main road. I wind down an alley with wet walls, cross the railway line, and turn left between crumbling

houses. Something is rotting, the smell of it in the air. The shortcut brings me onto Bromley High Street. Awnings droop from shop fronts like eyelashes. Men lean against the walls, smoking and talking. I like this about Bow; the ability to travel through it crab-wise, between the lines. When I was travelling with Prue everything had that quality. We never arrived anywhere until we returned home. Each day was only another step. Prue would say it helps you to remember that answers are less important than questions.

I almost walk past Kingsley Hall. I take hold of the wall to make myself stop in front of the open door. George is already in the hall, moving up and down the rows of chairs, talking to people. He gestures to somebody I cannot see. For a moment he looks just like Prue. Ben comes in and puts an arm round him, they confer about something. Ben looks older in the gloom of the hall, and I wonder how many times he talked with Kingsley like this, close and hushed, and what the dead man would make of his friend's commitment to the place that bears his name.

I turn into the sanctuary. Behind the door all is still. The room is empty except for four wooden chairs along one wall. Galaxies of dust hang in the evening light from a high window. A figure squats on the floor in the centre of the room, on haunches, a head of dark hair dropping forward over her face.

Shantih.

I do not move.

I have become used to seeing Shantih in English clothes, but today she wears a sari. A khaddar sari, of course. The shawl is pulled tight across her back. I can see the ridge of her spine beneath. I want to touch the material I know will be like a body, knotted with individual blemishes; missed stitches, bunched fibres, a thousand moments imprinted onto fabric.

I breathe slowly and feel the door at my back. I wish the pressure could pop us out of now and back three years.

She looks up, apparently not at all surprised to find me there.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

"Almost. Come." She gestures to the space in front of her, closes her eyes again.

I lower myself until I am also squatting, Indian style. The unpractised position strains at my knees and back. It springs a memory on me.

I remember —

knees aching, back aching, squatting in the pre-dawn dark between sleep and waking, listening to unknown words in unfamiliar rhythms spin in the air above. I smell clay-dust and bodies, sweat. The heavy musk of flowers. Shantih in front, hunched over her knees, rocking almost invisibly. Dreams recede and the hush stirs with the possibilities of day, until the dark night sky dye begins to run, leaving pale daylight to smear across my eyelids. Pain and tiredness lift. Worship is an inadequate word for this.

In the sanctuary we are silent, listening to conversations from outside.

"What's wrong?" Shantih asks.

"Nothing."

Her head drops to one side. "Tell me."

"I'm fine."

"You are unhappy with the article?"

"It's good enough."

"It is wonderful."

I part the curtain of her hair, to look at her face. Perhaps I look surprised.



"No —" she goes on, "it is not only me who thinks so. At the University many people have asked me — is this true? They say — tell me about khaddar. And — how does it feel to wear a sari?"

"They don't know it's you?"

"One or two have asked —"

"And you said?"

"Truly it is nothing but Mrs Hogg's fantasy." She says this with a smile pulling the edge of her mouth, only half looking at me, swinging her hands between her legs. The way she looked up at me from among the saris that first day we met.

"Thank you." I say. It is not enough, not when we say the words a hundred times each day. I nod and drop my hand.

"I was worried —" I say, "you said before —"

"I said I trust you. And you have done well."

I try to arrange my face into gratitude, but now there are tears in my eyes, threatening, and Shantih only looks at my eyes.

"What is it?" she says, lifting her head.

I thought I would wait until after her speech but now I don't want to say anything. How can I disappoint her, when she has believed in me? I stand and pull down my skirt.

"Nothing — I'm fine — we should go through."

"Tell me." She doesn't move, just looks past my knees at the door. I notice that fresh henna curls around her wrist.

I lower myself again. "I saw Peter on Friday."

"Yes?"

"He didn't mean to tell me — but he let it out. The whole thing — the Sketches of Empire — is meant to draw fire. Nothing more."

"I don't understand."

"It's supposed to distract — take column inches from stories about Germany, Nazi policies, Spain, vigilante attacks — anything of that sort. They want to keep people snug thinking about Empire rather than worrying about Europe."

The fingers of her gaze unwind me. Now I have begun the tears I've been ignoring are close to the surface. I concentrate on containing them. Spoken into the space between us, it all sounds so small.

"I suppose it makes sense," she says.

"What?"

"It is logical — if you think in a certain way."

There is a dry metallic taste in my mouth. "Why did you ask if you don't care?"

"I do care. I only said I can see the logic —"

"It might be logical but it means my article is a useless howl — everything else I write will be the same. A waste of time."

"How?"

"Nobody's interested — its padding — nothing serious."

"The students have taken it seriously."

I shake my head and let it drop forward, feeling the strain in my neck and the echo of the pull beating down my spine.

"But I feel — sick — if everything — whatever I do — can still be twisted and used to cover up something ugly. Peter says he's only trying to stop war — that we want the same thing, and perhaps we do, but that only makes it worse — I have no idea what I'm doing."

Tears have got the better of me. Shantih sinks forward, onto her knees and closer to me, pulls my head onto her shoulder. She smells of soap, and the musty-lavender scent of drawers. She rubs my back, down and then up. Her hand comes to rest on the joining point between neck and back, on the skin above the collar of my blouse.

"Do you remember the henna?" she asks.

"Of course."

I remember the writing, the letter on my skin. Firm brush, powdery, cracking residue, Shantih's hand holding the weight of my arm, her fingers tracing the stain day after day as it grew paler. At some point she said to me: you would not see it on my skin now. I remember the way she looked at my arm as if it was familiar, not something repulsive, pale, foreign.

Now she speaks quietly into my ear. "Prue once said to me: there is nothing so completely satisfying as to deliver a message. Its reception is not your responsibility."

I lift my head and take hold of Shantih's shoulders. She is terrifyingly small and fragile.

"I'm not Prue."

"Thank goodness —"

"No — listen. I'm not the same as Prue or Gandhi or any of you — not even a bit, and I'm tired of trying to be. I'm just not made to go on fighting a battle we may never see won."

"But we do not 'fight' — remember — and so it is not important to win. We only live."

She leaves me on the floor and steps over to the fireplace. Above it hangs a small, carved, wooden cross. There is no figure of Jesus carved onto it, hanging in

perfected agony. It is not necessary. The imagination suffices better than any knife to complete the picture. Shantih stands, looks up at the cross, arms folded.

"This looks like a failure," she says. "I used to think that. It is — brutality beyond belief. Now I think it is more truly a refusal to fight on the terms of another — turning the eyes always away, back to the on-looker. That is beyond victory or failure. You cannot keep on pointing to something larger than yourself without causing an effect."

"I'm not sure I believe any of — that." I gesture at the cross.

She flashes a smile over her shoulder. "I'm a Hindu. Facts are forever in dispute — but you ought to ask: what changes if we choose to look at this as a victory?"

There is a knock and Ben comes in.

"Oh — hello Dorry."

I pull myself up. "Good evening."

"How does to feel to be published in — *The Times*?" He says the last part of this in a deep, put on voice of grandeur. Shantih laughs.

"Disconcerting, if I'm honest."

"Well I loved it. So much — in fact — that I've cut it out for posterity. And George is going to take them all out to Prue when he goes."

"Must you?"

"I absolutely must. Shantih — we're ready when you are."

He strides away.

"What does he mean George will take them to Prue?"

"He's going to meet her in The States — leaves in a few months. Then they're going to Japan and China."

"China?"

"I know — it was bad enough when I was there, but with the news this week — I can't bear to think of it."

She crosses the room, turns me back to face the little cross, and stands behind. I can feel the movement of her breathing, closing the space between us.

"When George goes to China will it matter?"

"Every action for peace is an action against war." The words are out before I have thought of them. Apparently I am also growing roots into this world.

"So will you give up?"

"I need the money."

We laugh. She rests her chin on my shoulder.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Good luck."

"Thank you."

"I'll be listening."

She touches my arm and leaves the room. In the hall the piano begins the worship service then voices take up the tune. They slip and slide over one another until they blend together into a single voice. Without noticing, I also start to hum the hymn. My mind floats up on the melody to a place outside of myself, removed from the fog of emotion, a place where every singing of this hymn fuses, linking the pages of my life into one briefly distinguishable story. Perhaps there is something to it.

There is a pause before the final verse, a silent breath before the music rises clearly. Picks out the chords, piano a fraction out of tune. I push open the door and step out, to stand behind the rows of backs. There is an almost impossible harmony of moment and meaning and I find that I am singing.

". . . Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire

Oh still, small voice of calm.

Oh still, small voice of calm."

Shantih's talk is a success. People nod, laugh, listen without moving, and some even take notes. The hall is full, and not only with familiar faces. I lean on the wall and marvel at how it feels to slide into the collective mind and see her from there. To know that she is a part of my life now, a part of who I have become. What surprises me, though, is how easily she assumes a new authority on that stage. I have always thought she needed others to spring from, prodding and probing into the unspoken corners of your mind through conversation, pulling your emotions out of your expression and analysing them. Tonight she needs none of that. She is perfectly calm, contained within herself and the words only she has to say.

I think that this is what she's made to do, but I don't believe in vocation. What then? I watch her, in her summer-night-blue sari, and I remember her father at the charity auction bidding to buy back one of the saris his wife made in prison, and the bland-looking column of the story as I wrote it, now nestling halfway through a British newspaper. Not vocation. It is closer to the way missed stitches and irregular rhythms give the khaddar sari its character; the world spins on and draws everything, even our failures, into its movement, and sometimes even into its progress. I am tired, but perhaps I am not lost.

That is how I would like to see it tonight. Shantih stands on the palm of the stage. She looks around at the raised hands of questioners. Then she looks at me. She raises her eyebrows, barely noticeable but I see it. I nod to her. It is as though I am looking at her for the first time, across the courtyard of the house of the seven brothers.

She could be a princess. She could be a story. Ben steps onto the stage to field questions. For a second more she looks only at me and I cannot stop smiling. I know, suddenly, that she is right. In a single breath an important part of the fear falls away. A refusal to fight on someone else's terms. We have delivered our messages and it is just possible that we have confounded our critics, that we have confounded even ourselves, and we have both done something important.

## **Wandering Fires**

### **October 1937, George's journal**

The Travelling Journal of George Aylwin Hogg

or Where It All Starts

or Chronicles of the Making of a Man

or In the Pursuit of Peace

or Under the Same Sky Filled with Stars

13th October 1937 — RMS Queen Mary

When Jesus told his disciples to take nothing with them on their journey, I doubt he envisaged them travelling on the fastest ocean liner the world has ever seen. I already wish I'd brought an evening suit. Granted I won't have much use for it on the road, but I met a girl tonight and I don't think changing my tie really cut it

No. Wait —

I shouldn't begin with the girl. I don't want to ruin it by jumping ahead. I should begin with the reason I'm here.

I am setting out across the Atlantic from Southampton to New York. I'll meet up with my aunt, Prue, and travel on to Japan and China, then home through India. I'll make a full circle but travel is not my aim. Prue and I go as Peacemakers. We will go to war in China as ambassadors for peace, representatives of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. The FOR. We will talk and listen, bring messages of support, and carry the truth of the war back home with us.



That's better. I love the way it sounds. Deliciously clean, laid out clear and straight, open and blank as this book ready for my story. I'd like to be starting on the bow of the ship with the Atlantic unfurling beneath me. That would be a fitting prologue to the adventure. With the wind in my hair, watching the toe of England vanish into darkness. If I was starting that way I could be a hero or a knight. Perhaps I could carry it off, but knights and heroes don't talk about peace they fight valiantly. Everyone knows that. So I may as well be honest. I'm not in the bow of the ship bravely facing a vast ocean. I'm in a windowless cabin that smells of polish, sitting at a desk too low for my knees. The sea is stretching and it's dark and raining. Still, the adventure has begun and Prue and I don't travel for our own glory. We do what we do for the Brotherhood of Man, the common hope of humanity, and for the Glory of the Lord.

Fortunately I got out on deck before dinner, which is where I met the girl. Miss Amelia Palmer. She appeared beside me, fizzing from nowhere, as we pulled out into the Channel. She began to talk as if we knew each other. Saying that she'd crossed the Atlantic twenty times and, Oh how she loved it, the thrill, the feeling like flying, and the sinister edge that's a little bit wild. I felt as if I'd been hit by a wave.

You're going to love it, she said. I call her *Madame Atlantic*. She's a great romantic.

This extraordinary woman, small and young, was wearing plus-fours and a tweed coat, with binoculars hanging from a strap around her neck. She had a strange centre of gravity that pulled me straight in, as if she was a much larger person. Which of course she was in every sense but the physical. I gaped while she went on talking about seagulls, geese, arctic terns, swallows, and how absolutely wretched it was to embark just before dusk because we lost all those hours to darkness, but the birds would follow until we were well away from the shore, and then we'd be in the hands of luck and

fortuitous timing to get a sighting of some migrators or wait until we came near the islands, and her cousins wanted to see whales, which were only mammals after all, and turtles were even worse, fish.

All this I heard, I think, or I remember it now as if I did. Perhaps I was daydreaming. At the time I was solely occupied with the sight of her. Cut out against the pale blue evening, perched on the deck. She was a new unimagined species. She kept lifting the binoculars, swivelling, squinting this way or that. I wanted to stop her, to stop time for a moment, and look at her from every angle. To enjoy the surprise of it. The pure unexpected freshness of her that was even more clean and exhilarating than the salty wind or the expanse of ocean.

Instead, I smiled and gasped like a dying fish. Then suddenly she thrust out her hand. Said, Gosh, sorry, I'm such a slob, introduced herself, and asked about my trip.

The sudden formality caught me off guard. I said that I'm going to China. Then out tumbled the whole business, family and all. Her eyebrows popped up and she was still for a moment. She didn't look at the floor, or blast off stale arguments, or quip, or laugh too loud. She did none of the things I've learnt to expect when people discover I'm a real life pacifist. After a pause she said, I think that's rather brave.

Above us, where the first class deck and cabins were, a man coughed, the sound of a saw through wood. Miss Palmer lifted her binoculars. There was hardly anyone on our deck, even though the view of England receding into the past was rather lovely in the last of the sunlight. Green and grey and shimmering, as if covered by a thin curtain of smoke.

I asked why she was travelling. She said she was going to a funeral so of course I said I was sorry. She looked up. I can remember exactly because it was so strange.

Sorry for what? she said.

Your loss? I answered.

Gosh. Please don't be, I couldn't bear it. It's my Grandmother, and she isn't dead yet, though she looks likely for this winter.

Miss Palmer turned the binoculars on the deck behind us and twisted the dials. There was a man in second-class drinking and looking over his shoulder, a woman waiting for somebody by the stairs, a couple walking. I said she'd make a good sleuth and she gave a mock curtsy.

It's been very nice to meet you, she said. Mr Hogg: peacemaker and adventurer. Be sure to find me if you see any birds.

Then she bobbed a little bow and rolled sternward.

I watched until she turned into a stairwell and was out of sight. England began to blink in the fresh dark, life and home going on fine without us. Above me, a steward in white carrying a tray knocked on the door of a first class cabin. Everything else was still. The railings shone like bones.

Later, in the dining room, the candles weren't lit because of the weather and it was only half full. It has gold wallpaper with embossed fleur-de-lis under cornices holding up a mirrored ceiling. A bit elaborate for my taste. I sat in front of a fluted pillar that was made from plaster of paris. Listened to the harmony between ringing cutlery and engine drone. At the table were three dull men who passed comment on the soup and stared at their wine.

Just as I finished my lamb Miss Palmer came in and took a pile of bread rolls from an empty table. She wrapped them in a napkin and slung them over her shoulder. Looked around and saw me. The boat summited a wave, the biggest yet. We seemed to hang mid-air. She closed her eyes and I wanted to freeze the moment; her sharp, precise little nose, high angled cheekbones, and her squared, almost boyish chin, all wrinkled a

fraction ready for impact. We crashed into the valley of the wave. When she opened her eyes I waved. She waved back and left with her rolls.

So there it is. Perhaps the tie made a difference, but we have three more evenings and I've shown all my cards.

14th October, after breakfast

Last night I dreamt I was trapped in an underground tunnel with a train coming. I tried to run along it to the next station, but there was never a station and it was always dark. I woke sweating. The cabin was hot and vibrating. I fell between waking and sleeping, as though falling down stairs, or tripping on the rugby field and falling into the mouth of the earth. When I slept I thought I was inside something alive, purring in its depths. I was Jonah in the heart of darkness. I was trapped in a whale and I could feel its heart beating and the rushing water outside. This inside dry space under tonnes of water was wrong, utterly wrong. Behind it all hovered the sandy towers of Nineveh, a destiny too difficult to face.

When I woke again it was almost seven. I was not Jonah and the sea was calm. I went to breakfast desperate for boiled eggs and met a missionary with food in his beard and flakes of skin on his shoulders. He said that I'm doing 'a great work for the Lord'. If Prue said that I'd be proud, but coming from a man like him it embarrassed me. When he spoke he spread his hands, palms up, as though expecting a gift or a vision. When I told him who my aunt is he said,

Ah yes, Mrs Lester.

Miss Lester, I corrected.

He's never met her. He probably doesn't know the first thing about her. He blabbered about preparations for my mission. His head bobbed when he talked and dislodged crumbs from the upper levels of beard. One after another they fell into the depths of the facial hair, loyal little soldiers in search of comrades.

Eventually he got to the crux. His daily prayer meetings for the voyage.

Times for reflection and supplication, he said. We begin this morning. Perhaps you'd care to join us?

I froze. He had me on the spot. I knew I should be kind and graceful, but I've spent years avoiding the religion of grotesque little men. It's hard enough to be a pacifist without being lumped in with all and sundry. Then I wondered about Jonah and Nineveh — how do you know what can be avoided and what cannot?

He mumbled platitudes about the fruits of the journey.

I turned over my empty egg-shell and put it in its cup upside down. It was pale and translucent, and almost seemed to glow. The missionary leant towards me. His neck skin hung over his collar and over the top of a napkin wedged into it. There was a greasy smudge where his hands rested on the table-cloth. The poor man needs a wife, it's almost sad. A waiter removed my plate and I watched the egg weave between tables. Across the room it passed Miss Palmer, binoculars beside her. It was as good a sign as any; the missionary was not my Nineveh.

Can I count on you to form part of our group? he asked, but I was already on my way. I said that I'd try.

Miss Palmer seemed pleased enough to find me rushing towards her. Even more so when I told her I was running from a missionary.

Gosh, she said, your adventures.

We set to work on an excuse to avoid the prayer meetings. She offered to teach me about birds, but it wouldn't provide good enough cover. We ran through cards, deck games, billiards. Then she asked if I play racquets. There's a court a few decks down and a ship-wide tournament that her brother is entering. It's the perfect alibi. I could have kissed her.

The brother, Freddie, was further round the table so she introduced us. He's a slim, untidy chap about my age, who grinned at me when Amelia explained the plan. He was so busy talking that he followed me all the way back here after breakfast. I had to tell him I was going to change to get him to leave.

Later

I won both my matches which even surprised me. This meant I spent the whole day around the court or on deck with the others. It was like being back at Oxford, the lightness of a hard-worked body, easy conversation, jokes and digs, and loud talk of winning. To top it off Freddie invited me to dinner with him and Amelia. We met for cocktails first. She was wearing a short dress that gathered at the bottom and swung whenever she moved.

We arrived late and the dining room was full, loud, bright with candles and evening dresses. I felt hot and happy as we wove to our seats. The missionary looked over from the far side of the room and Amelia waved.

Our group was Freddie, Amelia, me, their cousins (2 female, 1 male), their uncle, and several others they'd picked up on board so we made a whole table. Amelia blew my cover right away by telling them I'm a peace campaigner. Freddie laughed until he realised she was serious. He asked what it meant. I explained and everyone nodded,

then shook it off like rain. I wonder if Prue gets such responses? I didn't mind though, I was enjoying myself, and it's always better to keep morals away from dinner. (Too much grace-saying as a child?) Freddie hit me on the arm and shook his head. Amelia beamed. I let her look at me and pointed out that Peace is not a popular topic.

I don't care, she said. It's only because they don't understand. They think you're a do-gooder. That you're different to them.

And you don't? I asked.

You're not a do-gooder, are you?

I shook my head. She saw a Puffin today, while we were on the court. Apparently they winter at sea and can go half the year without touching land. So we made a toast to the mighty little puffin.

Conversation wandered. Who was on board, what was happening in New York, the status of the family matriarch scheduled to die, and a plan to sleep out on deck. Freddie decided he was host and filled our glasses. He asked the waiters to bring more champagne, and burgundy with the meat. The meal passed like a Saturday tramp on the downs; nothing too strenuous, everything pleasing to the eye, uplifting to the soul.

It wasn't until much later that things got interesting. When the old man, the uncle, finished his meal he asked about the racquets. Freddie went out in his second match, and everyone had a laugh at his expense. Then another man piped up, a journalist who wasn't wearing a tie, younger than the uncle but older than us. He went out in his first game to a government bod up in first class. They all laughed again and one of the female cousins put a hand on the journalist's arm.

Freddie looked around with a wide grin that wrinkled his eyes. He's very deliberate, the same as his sister.

Well then, he said, George is the only one of us into the quarter-finals.

The table focused and saw me for the first time. I told them the name of my opponent.

Why that's my government bod, the journalist said. You're in for a hell of a match — excuse my language. (Amelia's right. They do think I'm a bloody missionary.)

The uncle raised his glass.

Drinks were poured and they toasted my victories. In the silence that followed, the uncle looked at me. Sipped his wine and licked his lips. He asked when I became a pacifist. Everyone took a breath. This was the moment. I knew it, and they knew it. The point at which I could hold them or lose them, could move them somewhere or leave them exactly where they started. They might have ignored it, that was their chance, but the uncle was the elder of the table. He was interested in me and he probably served in the war. They didn't dare. There was a polite silence, faces filmy with indifference.

I started as I always do. I said that my family are mostly pacifists, but until now I've preferred rugby. They laughed, murmured surprise and approval. It might be easier to impress them than I'd imagined. Freddie nodded, patted his sister's leg under the table as if she'd had a hand in making me.

The journalist asked, No demonstrations then?

Some, of course, with the family, I said.

What's it like? asked a female cousin. (The one who'd touched the journalist's arm.)

I didn't know how to answer. Nobody's asked that before.

Freddie asked if it's exciting. I told him it is sometimes — when you feel you're doing something important. You might change something and then it would matter that you'd been born. That's a buzz, absolutely. But sometimes it's just boring, or hard, or the thing doesn't take off.



Like a rugby match? said the uncle.

I knew I could explain it then. It's like when you let go and run as hard as you can because you know that if you make it you'll get a try and it will be worth it. If you don't get a try you still know it was worth running that hard. Even though it hurts like mad. It's just something you do. Though with rugby you win at least half the time.

Unless you're awful, said Freddy.

It doesn't sound awfully much fun, said the girl, the cousin. She grinned. Her mouth was open and there was a gap in the teeth along the bottom. She was trying to make a joke but nobody laughed.

I had them. I could feel it pulse round the table, eyes on me, the agreement that I was worth their attention. Though I knew they would still laugh at me if I gave them the chance.

I remembered Prue and my brother Daniel disembarking a ship from India at Tilbury years ago, Daniel looking somehow taller and wearing a dirty hat. The cousin was right.

This is my life, I said. I'm not one for pretending life is all roses and cakes and parties.

For me it's as if she'd asked: what's it like to eat a meal? Or what's it like to go to school? Protests and meetings have always been there, so they're part of the good and part of the bad. They don't have those qualities in themselves because nothing does. They're a natural consequence of believing that something is important.

Amelia leaned towards me and said, It's just like bird watching, isn't it? That can be terribly disappointing, it almost dashes the spirits completely. Yet still I go back.

She looked sideways at me and I wanted to hug her. My heart was beating in my throat and I was too aware of my body and my big hands on the table. I asked her if she'd always gone in for birds.

Of course, she said. I was born at Christmas and the mobile in the nursery had robins on it.

After that I told them about my first memory: a demonstration on a beach during the war. My brother and sister and I had signs to hold up while the adults gave out anti-war leaflets. I think we were in Kent. I remember tall chalky cliffs and ridges in the sand I burrowed my toes in to pretend they were crabs.

How sweet, said the cousin. (Or something else, equally patronising).

How brave, said Amelia.

Didn't you hate it? asked the male cousin.

I didn't mind. I was only four so I didn't know it was strange. The sign was as big as me and because it was card it began to disintegrate when I dropped it on the wet sand.

They laughed. I was on a roll. I looked at each of them. We all had red cheeks and red lips from the wine. It's like a dance, I thought.

It was worth the effort. If we held the signs for half an hour we could play for an hour.

They smiled, spoke about mothers, childhood memories. Our glasses were refilled. The topic would change then someone would ask me another question, but I knew the hardest part was done. Prue would have been proud. I let the red wine curtain fall on my sharpness and a day's work well done.

Everything flickered in the candlelit; room, table, faces. It was an enchanted land, or a vision that might vanish in an instant. What do they all want beneath this

surface? What are they prepared to die for? Or suffer for? (Or kill for?) Those are the real truths that cling as shadows to the base of the pretty worlds we construct. Outside, the black surface of the ocean could be a flat expanse of tar, but underneath are currents and life and our propellers churning it all up.

What am I prepared to die for?

At some point the journalist said, I'm sure it was all good training but China will be something else.

I know he's right. The British are mostly tolerant when it comes to it, and I've always kept daily life and pacifism separate. The only really important thing I've learnt so far is to expect resistance.

That day on the beach in Kent is as clear to me as the songs we sung in Sunday school. I've got in a habit of using it the way I did tonight because I know that people like the story. Somehow they can find common cause in children doing adult things. They love to hear about us standing in a row with our signs, sweating and rigid while Mother and Prue hand out leaflets and try to talk to people. How Stake and Roke elbowed me, and I kicked Stake and nearly fell over. That we were desperate to finish our half hour and get our feet in the water. That we could hear the guns from France. Even the nasty things that were said to Prue and Mother, quiet, British, and cutting, later became our nursery insults; *you should be ashamed, you disgrace your country*.

Yet there is a part of that memory that I never discuss. It is the moment at the end when a huge man with a moustache began to shout. He was so loud that everyone on the beach turned to look. A tight feeling gripped me. Spit and foam flew from his mouth. His face purpled like a giant bruise. He was too loud for Prue or Mother to respond, all the beach watching us, some probably feeling glad. I thought the man would never stop shouting. I dropped my sign. Roke picked it up and held both.

I couldn't understand his anger. Didn't we all want the war to stop?

I was a pacifist from then because I couldn't be like him. I never wanted to be the one standing on a beach shouting into the wind.

15th October

After breakfast I played my quarter-final against Marcus Cuthbert. The 'government bod' is actually a civil servant in the MOD who knows Dorry's brother-in-law. You could tell he was a good player from the way he moved across the court, with an economy that made you believe he could feel where the ball would go. And he's been playing for years (Charterhouse and Cambridge). He was taller than me and would have been fast if he hadn't had a hell of a hang-over. That was my only advantage, but I took it. The court smelled like turps after he'd sweated for an hour. In the end it wasn't hard to wear him down and take the win. The semi-final after lunch was another story. I played a Bermudan, a long whippet of a man. I tried to exhaust him as well, but the result was sweat pouring off me while he hardly seemed to move. He darted so quickly for each shot that he was back again before I'd seen him go. I barely won a point. My dignity was only preserved by his silence and the offer to buy me a drink.

I was disappointed to be out of the tournament, but happy to be busy all day. The sweat and stretch of the court is a good substitute for real movement. To top it off I got the missionary to play shuffleboard between matches. He was walking the deck when I saw him, with his hands behind his back and his chin in the wind. His beard was combed and empty of food, so I took pity. He only mentioned the prayer meeting once. I even let him win a game.

All the while I've been watching the sea whenever I can. Admiring its different moods. Most people think the sea is flat and dull, going on the same right up to the horizon. Yet the land is like that to some. Just a green thing in the way, as Blake said. It's a law of the world that the more you look the more you see (whether you're looking at trees, water, or people). Millions of creatures live beneath the sea, a whole world that we know almost nothing of. Even the water is alive in its way. Light and swell wink their semaphore, the sky and the sea reflect each other, endlessly. Still we go on with our self-important sports, and our self-important politics, and our self-important wars.

When I think like this I wish that Prue was with me. I realise how little I really know of her, or what it takes to be her kind of peacemaker. It's a far cry from the fireside polemic, marches, and protest signs of my little world.

Before I met Amelia and Freddie for dinner I went out to watch the sunset. I stood in the bow, straight-backed as the colours dripped into the water. A piano began to play, glassy notes falling into blurred grey air. Fingers of light held the horizon. There was nobody on our deck. Coughs and doors shutting and voices punctured the air. Above me, on the first-class level, was a single dark figure shrouded in smoke.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And ordained the place between to be the most precious?

At a certain point I knew that the sun was probably gone (according to the laws of physics) but I hadn't seen it set yet. Just as I thought this the colours peeled back. Bright green flared along the line of the horizon, up into the air and out towards me. The disk of sun dropped. It left a black smudge where it had been. The smudge was the shape of a man at the heart of the green-blue-gold flash.

I knew that it was the science of light and air and water, but I was looking at a Green Knight of the sea.

He stood on the rim of the ocean and stared back at me, holding out a challenge from legend.

Then it was over. Light and knight dropped out of sight.

And darkness was upon the face of the deep.

There were voices and steps, a group walked towards me. They had drinks in hand and cigarettes between lips, a man at the front with his arm around the waist of a woman. I leant back against the rail to watch them. One of the women waved, with just her fingers, sipping wine. It was the girl from last night, the female cousin.

When they had passed I walked the other way along the deck, pulling at my tie and smoothing my jacket. Under the bright lights a deck chair stood, not yet cleared away by the stewards. The material fluttered. I walked towards it but I didn't want to sit. I was about to turn away when I saw a shape on the seat. Something left there weighing it down against the breeze.

I stepped over and looked down; it was a book. I looked around. There was nobody in sight.

I picked up the book and took it over to the light. It was thin, with plain red-orange covers and gold lettering on front and spine. The title was embossed but faded, so you could only feel, and not see, half of the letters. I ran my finger along them. *Idylls of the King* by Tennyson. It smelt dusty with a salty edge of mould. I turned over the title page. There was the dedication to Prince Albert, a memento of another world. I thought of Daddy reading *The Eagle*; 'Ringed with the azure world, he stands'. That bird had made me dream to be an eagle when I grew up, but, predictably, I became a pacifist instead.

I put the book in my pocket and went to dinner. The blue night had faded and everything was movie monochrome. I felt the weight of the book in my jacket. Now it's

sitting on the shelf in my cabin beside *Gone with the Wind* (2nd reading), and *The Hobbit* (something new Roke bought me — apparently the next *Peter Pan*). Lamplight flashes on the spine lettering. They don't make an esteemed collection to begin a pilgrimage. Bowra would be horrified.

16th October

I gave in and went to the blasted prayer meeting. Actually, I was strong armed into it. The missionary came over after lunch while Amelia was showing me her journal of bird sightings. He was very polite and said he didn't mean to interrupt (of course he meant to interrupt), but he only wanted to remind me about today's meeting. His mouth clicked as he spoke. It was to be the last one. Docking is scheduled for late tonight or early morning and he didn't want me to miss out.

When she heard we were near to land Amelia grinned and clapped, much to his confusion. She explained about the birds but he didn't listen. He proclaimed the importance of travelling time for spiritual growth. Amelia set her face into what I think was an earnest look and asked if she could join the meeting. She was up to something. He was like a child at Christmas.

They introduced themselves (have I said his name is Bevan?) and while she wooed him I studied the dry skin visible at the edges of his beard. Not the sort of thing you want to be around, but I'll admit I felt bad for leading him on. I don't think he enjoyed the shuffleboard.

You will come won't you George? Amelia said. She was selling me out. I had no choice but to say yes, and then I had to agree to 'say a few words'.

After he'd left she was grinning but wouldn't confess her motives.

I'm intrigued, she said.

By what? I asked.

Everything. Especially you, she answered. And anyway — my soul could do with a cleansing before New York. There's all manner of temptation on that Island.

She's probably right. I said that next time I see a bird I'm not going to tell her.

We met Bevan an hour later and followed him down three decks into the chapel. It was as deep as the racquets court, a clammy, dark, mouth of a room. There were bibles and hymnals piled under a table. Along one wall was a stack of chairs with a piano opposite.

Golly, said Amelia, I feel the stern gaze of the founding fathers.

The missionary frowned and turned away.

For me Chapel has mostly been rows of boys yawning, flicking each other with specially grown fingernails. Conkers and coins slid from your neighbour's pockets, and prayer cushions passed along the pews between legs. Or it's light pouring through high old windows, lungs-full, light-headed singing, and pretty girls in Sunday dresses. I used to try to listen, but our pastor's voice was flat, as if on the other side of a wall. I've always thought Chapel is all well and good, but it's not faith. Faith is doing what scares you and looking for miracles. This place didn't even promise good chapel.

Amelia sat at the piano and began to play. I didn't know she could play, but I have a feeling she can do anything. I took out my prayer beads, began to roll them in my left hand between thumb and first finger.

I know it's unusual for a Baptist to have prayer beads, but I've had them since Roke and I were at school in Switzerland. Our parents came over to take us to France one holiday and I saw the beads outside a church on a hill above Lake Annecy. They lay on a table among a cluster of icons, between napkin rings and forged coins, offered for



sale by a man with one leg. I remember the sight of them, red as imagined Japanese autumns in the cold light. The weight of the money in my pocket saved up for a souvenir. When I bought them Daddy frowned and asked what I wanted them for. I couldn't tell him it was because the boys at school said in Rome worshippers went up the stairs to a shrine on their knees.

The missionary made a circle of chairs then sat and opened a Bible. Amelia stopped playing and sat opposite him. It was peaceful, except for the engines. I sat beside her and ran the beads between my fingers. Tried to be hopeful or devout. The room began to fill. Amelia had her eyes closed, perhaps she was praying.

The rest of the worshippers were all women. (Had I known I'd have gone before). First were three pretty young girls and their elderly chaperone. The girls rustled through the meeting, as if in perpetual motion somewhere unseen. It was a severe distraction. Then came three older women, about Prue's age, and two others of an appealing unknown age — not young but certainly not old. One was dark and one was fair. Both were handsome and looked at me in a way that made me feel I should look away. I couldn't believe this bevy of interest had been worshipping daily before the strange beard. I glanced at Amelia. She was looking sideways at me with one eye and I couldn't decide if she was laughing at me or not. I was still angry with her for getting me into it.

There were prayers to start then we went quickly into hymns. The old woman pounded the piano fast, from memory, and not entirely accurately. It made for snatched breaths between lines and a good deal of fun.

Then it was over to me.

I began by denouncing the word 'sermon'. The girls gasped and the missionary flushed over the top of his beard. I swallowed and paused. It occurred to me that this might actually be fun.

I went into a story about Prue, visiting us one Sunday years before, when she had run off into the woods with Roke and me to avoid having to sit through a sermon. She said nobody ever did something good because they were told to in a sermon. It is heart, passion, and spirit that drive us. I detailed her career and all the notable people she's met, from Downing Street to Delhi to Tokyo. I explained how she came to work for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. It flowed out nicely with them all there watching, listening to me. Amelia leaned forward and I felt for a moment as if she was mine.

Then I described the journey Prue and I will make.

Even into the heart of the war, if we must, I said. (I was pleased with that). To bring the message of brotherhood and reconciliation. We will listen and tell the stories we've heard of when love and understanding have overcome nationalism, and where non-violence has triumphed over militarism. As it always must in the end. As our Saviour showed us through His love even unto death on the cross, to be resurrected to new life.

The girls' eyes popped and I felt my shoulders pull back. I couldn't help it. I looked at them each in turn, not smiling. Amelia nodded. The rest of the room smiled.

All of them except one. One of the handsome women, the dark one, sat with her head down, long neck bent, and fanned the pages of her Bible. First one way, then back again. She might have been bored, except she was frowning and there was a tense stillness about her.

I realised I'd paused too long. My mind panned through memories of Prue, speeches, phrases, snatches of conversation. Just in time I hit on one:

We refuse to pronounce a moratorium on the Sermon on the Mount. Not for this war. Not for any war. Not even for a second.

Applause splattered against the bland walls. The missionary looked around at my happy crowd and grinned. I sat and he took over. Amelia leaned close.

I had no idea, she said.

I looked at her and she snorted. I nudged her away with my shoulder but she bounced back and said,

I still think you're brave — for the record. But possibly a little mad.

We went to the lounge afterwards. They had tea and I had beer. The young girls stood around me and asked questions about Peace, the FOR, Kingsley Hall, Conscientious Objectors, anything they could think of. When I didn't know the answer I improvised, and when I said something unconventional they blushed. So I kept doing it.

Amelia elbowed her way between one of the girls and me. She said things like, Oh yes, I've known George for years, he's very modest. Did you know he turned down a position as the King's personal bodyguard to make this trip? The things of the world hold no interest for him. His life is given over to the pursuit of love and enlightenment . . . The girls stared at her. It was all I could do not to laugh.

Eventually the elderly chaperone swooped in and shoed them away. She offered me cake and asked when I knew I believed. I wasn't sure what she meant. The missionary circled his flock, nodding so much I thought his head would fly off. Everyone laughed and talked loudly and wanted me near them. I began to feel grateful to Amelia for setting it up. I watched her flitting between the people until I was giddy. I could have watched her all day.

Only one person ignored me: the woman I'd seen flicking her bible. She sat alone, sipping tea, looking at the blue horizon. Her dark hair shone red. I should have been content with my success, but I asked to join her.

If you wish, she said. She had a European accent. When she looked up I saw grey eyes, clouds in front of the sun. My face grew hot. It took me by surprise. She smiled, but there was nothing happy in the look, a mere acknowledgement.

I'm afraid my talk didn't please you, I said.

Does that matter? she asked.

It does to me.

You are a charming boy.

I was surprised by this. She raised her eyebrows and I blushed again. Amelia watched us over the shoulder of the missionary. I tried to look calm. The woman asked if I'd left a sweetheart in England. I didn't know what to say, yes, but no. She raised her eyebrows again, so I said no. She said she was surprised. Glanced at Amelia.

Why surprised? I said. I obviously didn't charm you.

Charm is not sufficient when we speak of such things.

Such things as war?

What else?

When she looked at me I had a sense of the edge of a cliff, the danger of falling, but also that I was getting closer to what I wanted. She shrugged, but I wasn't going to let it go. I'd had a good trip so far, when it came to talking about peace. I hadn't let people imagine me to be weak. I wanted to make her talk. I told her I've lived with these ideas all my life, seen them from every angle. Still she said that I didn't really know, it was only words to me.

I swallowed, And you?

What about me?

What do you know?

She put out her hand. My name is Juliana Maria Cercas, she said. I am Spanish — from Madrid.

I stared over the cliff. Looked into her eyes. The grey of a restless sea.

I shook her hand.

You do not need to go to China, she said. If you want to see blood, you should have gone to Spain.

I opened and closed my mouth.

The missionary came over. He asked Juliana about her plans in America, but he didn't ask what she thought of my talk. He went on smiling and nodding. I stared at the horizon. The boat barely pitched but I was unsteady. I ordered a whisky and soda for myself and one for Amelia. The missionary frowned but we ignored him. We sat at another table and watched the group disperse. The girls giggled as they left, and twisted their hair around their fingers.

Who's the old bird then? Amelia asked, when Juliana left.

She's immune to my charms, I said.

Someone has to be, other than me of course.

And she's Spanish.

Amelia looked at me over her drink and breathed out through her teeth. She told me to remember what I said the other night, to expect opposition.

I said that before I left home Roke said I'd fall in love with the first beautiful girl I saw. Amelia is beautiful, it would be easy to fall in love with her. Think of how much fun life would be.

Don't, she said.

We laughed. And that was it.

But she is right about resistance. I can't allow myself to expect anything less. Prue and I are a challenge, what we believe is not easy. I can't blame Juliana for what she's experienced. I think Prue says that if something isn't difficult, it's not really important. Though now I think of it, I'm not sure. Perhaps it's me that said it and not Prue. Either way I can't just expect opposition. I must face it with love.

I stayed talking with Amelia, talking about nothing. She said she's read Idylls of the King. I asked her if Arthur dies. I've always thought it's unfair that he dies in Malory. I hate it when the hero dies. She finished her drink and squinted at me through the glass.

He has vision, she said, Tennyson's Arthur, he wants to rule his kingdom well. It's built out of magic but it becomes his earthly responsibility. In the end that's his downfall. Admirable, if rather boring.

I grinned. I couldn't believe I'd heard those words from her. She raised her eyebrows and looked as though she might walk away. I quickly asked what the other knights want.

To see the Grail, of course.

Which would you rather? I asked.

What a stupid question, she said. I'd take the Grail every time — it's no different to bird watching.

I'm not so sure; I don't know what the Grail is. It would be too obvious to say the Grail is peace. Peace is meant for everyone but the Grail is something rare. Perhaps that's the point. I don't know, but I can't worry about it now. It's my last night before America.

Later

I think I could have kissed Amelia. I'm a coward. I should have done it. I wanted to, of course I did. It was after dinner and we were standing in the bow, curls of foam peeling along the blade of the ship. We'd been dancing and I could feel sweat drying cold on my back under my shirt.

Word spread through dinner that speed had been reduced because of bad weather. We won't be docking tonight. Probably not until mid morning or even lunchtime tomorrow. By the end of the meal the moon was lost behind a mist that crept under the door and made every view damp-grey. I remembered a voice that conjured such a mist, translating Virgil in a cold stone classroom, hands smelling of desk-wood and eyes scanning the rugby pitch; *This place belongs to the shades, to Sleep and to Night, the bringer of sleep. Living bodies may not be carried on the boat that plies the Styx.* Then I remembered a story told by Teddy Marshall, an American at Wadham, about a prohibition party where a half-naked policeman was found floating in a bath of moonshine.

In the lounge, Freddie and Amelia were dancing. Freddie spun his sister from side to side. The female cousin was with the journalist again. He still wore no tie. Her hand was on the point at the top of his chest where the skin is sucked in by the base of the throat. She whispered into his ear. I envied him, even though she's a snob. I ordered a whisky and leant on the bar. The swell rose, a solid wind blew, the ship rolled slowly and unpredictably, as if it was drunk, and the drunkards in the lounge rolled with it.

I watched Freddie and Amelia. I didn't know the faces around them. The male cousin waved his hands in the air. The band played faster but the melody seemed to slow. My focus slipped. I might have been drunk (I think I was drunk.) The whole room

danced, and groups slide over one another and round and under then they split apart — and there was Juliana sitting with a man. He leaned close to her across the curve of the table.

I turned back to the bar and drank my whisky. Amelia appeared at my shoulder, told me I looked glum. She led me by the hand and I forgot about the Spanish woman. Freddie appeared, put his arm around me. The band played faster. Faces and bodies reeled past, jackets and ties, and the smell of wine and whisky and low-burning candles and under everything the wet edge of salt and wilderness. I held Amelia close and we danced. She felt small, barely wide enough to hold all the life of a person, let alone a person like her. I tightened my grip on her waist. I could break her if I wanted to.

Let's go outside, I said.

She didn't want to, the weather was bad. She was right but I couldn't stay. We walked into the night and neither of us spoke. There was music everywhere, different tunes mixing and splitting, beneath it all the drone of the engine.

What's this about? she asked when we reached the bow.

I was watching myself talk to her. I mumbled that the party was out of control, but she shook her head. I said I'd seen the Spanish woman. Apparently I ran away, but I think that's unfair. We crested a wave. For a second we were free, hanging, fired up into the sky. Amelia braced ready for the fall. I remembered seeing her in the dining room on the first night, how lovely she looked, how much I'd wanted her to come over.

That's not what I meant, she said.

I looked away, tried to seem at a loss, but I knew what she meant. She wanted to know why I was doing it, the trip, all of it.

I want to do something that matters, I said.

Do you? she asked, quietly.



You know nothing about me.

She swayed, and pulled her head back.

I felt bad straight away. She's the best thing on this boat. Then I wanted to be somewhere else. I leaned over the rail, the excitement, I only had to lean a little further to be in the water. The same as walking alone in the city at night. If nobody knows where I am I could disappear, and perhaps life would be easier if you could start it from scratch.

Amelia watched me watching the water. Shouts, thumps, barks of laughter in the night behind us. I looked at the invisible sky. We were standing exactly where she was when she saw the puffin. She said it just dropped down as it curved in front of her, looking beautiful, black and white like a dancing shoe.

She pointed where it had flown and I nodded.

I think it did it just for me, she said. She looked down, and put her hand over mine on the railing.

I almost pulled my hand away but I stopped myself. I don't know why I wanted to do that. The space between our hands grew warm quickly in the cold mist. I told her about the green flash at sunset. I didn't tell her it looked like a green man, or about finding the book. I leaned closer, but not so close that we were touching. I told her that my Uncle Kingsley died four months before I was born. He was the youngest as well and they say I look like him, taller and fairer but like him. Mother used to say I have his eyes and forehead. A wave of confession was pushing up, and something else with it. I wanted her to know me in a way nobody else does.

It sounds mad, I said, but I've always felt I had part of Uncle Kingsley in me.

She didn't think it sounded mad of course. That's just her, it was almost annoying. Amelia thinks we all carry our ancestors, carry those we've lost even if we

never knew them. Just as birds know how to migrate. So I went on, before I could stop myself, and said that when I got the letter from Prue about this trip I knew I'd come. Straight away. Amelia nodded, as if it was obvious, but it wasn't.

Roke, my sister, asked why I was coming. All I could think was: I'm looking for Uncle Kingsley. She thought it was a gruesome joke. Kingsley was twenty-six when he died and he left everything to Prue's work in Bow. Then I was born and the world had me instead of him. It's unfair, but that's how it is.

I told Amelia all of it. I hoped she would think I was strange and important, fated. Then I took my hand away, put it in my pocket, and turned to face her. My jacket and hair were wet from the mist. Her neck was wet where her dress didn't cover it, smooth as a pane of glass with droplets rivered across. A drip fell and rolled down my neck under the collar. It made me suddenly aware of my body, suddenly rush back into my body. I could feel everything powerfully. My hand was still warm where she'd touched it and I wanted to hold her again. To be dancing again.

I asked if she thought I was serious, she said that she did.

So you see how it is?

I think so, she said.

I was making myself un-human, the do-gooder I don't want to be.

Her puffin will go home in the spring to breed. I said I'd be home in the spring too, and she said, Perhaps. I frowned. She put her hands on my arms. I didn't want to move. The boat rolled and we stumbled and laughed. Then she asked me to hold her and I did, not knowing how I'd managed it. Her hair smelt of nuts and cinnamon. My throat ached at the thought that I wouldn't be home for Christmas, and somehow that was mixed with the pain of leaving Amelia. My lips were on her forehead, salty from the mist and the wind.

You'd never have thought, she said, would you, that you'd come on the Queen Mary and meet a mad bird-watching girl. You didn't expect it did you?

She spoke into my chest so I felt her words inside me.

No. I didn't expect that.

So why not keep your plans open? she said.

I couldn't answer.

We stood alone in the mist until she began to shiver. I tried to persuade her to go inside, or to let me walk her back to her cabin, but she wouldn't move. Then she said she would go to bed and I wasn't to walk with her.

Are you crying? I asked when she pulled away.

Don't be stupid, she said, it's the bloody mist.

We agreed to meet tomorrow and she went. I wanted to run after her, to stop her and kiss her. Even then I wanted to and I think that I could have, but I only stood dripping. When she was gone I turned my back to the boat. I stayed in the bow for a long time waiting to see the continent appear out of the night but there was only mist and water, mist and water, and the tobacco-stain yellow of the ship light.

Later, a couple stumbled towards me. I stepped back against the wall beneath the overhang. Stood and watched them kiss, and he slid his hands down her back and pulled her tight and close so there was no gap at all between their bodies. I don't know if they saw me when I walked away, I hope not.

I've left Winnie and I've almost left Amelia. It hasn't been like that with either of them: no gap at all. I haven't let it be that way but I can't say why, except that my life must be leading somewhere or I would have, wouldn't I? Or I'm nothing but a coward.

17th October

Sitting on deck looking at the sun over an ocean just crossed. I can't believe I'm here. The air is fresh and the floors are clean. Jacket buttoned against the wind. The arms of America reach out to welcome us.

I've just had a drink with the Bermudan who beat me at racquets. I'd forgotten about him until I saw him, smoking and circuiting the deck above. I asked if he'd won and he said, Sure did. Apparently he looked for me in the lounge last night but a woman told him I was off with my girl. I suppose that was Amelia's cousin. The Bermudan had the decency not to ask about it.

I went up to the first class bar and we both had sherry. It was ten o'clock and we watched as the land began to slip past the windows. We talked about England and where we're headed. He doesn't have plans for New York but apparently there'll be plenty of parties. I told him I'm going to a conference. He ordered another sherry and lit a smoke, said he's never been to a conference.

Me neither, I said.

He asked if I was in business. I said it was a peace organisation. He sipped his sherry and asked what I meant by peace. I explained, and he nodded, slowly.

War's lazy, I said. It always ends around a table eventually.

He nodded again, said he could see that.

I was wary of the shadow of the Spanish woman, but the sweet sherry sat warm over my breakfast and I could see buildings through the window. My new life was almost here. I must embrace it as it embraced me: with no gap at all.

That's why we scald children for fighting, I explained, trying to sound calm, because fighting never settles anything. It can be the same for us. Let's try to understand each other, to see what we have in common and work from there.

He crossed his legs and finished his cigarette. Said,

You're a sportsman, aren't you?

More rugby than racquets.

All right. But isn't sport really war with different rules?

He's not wrong, but I was prepared for that line of argument. It's not always the strongest player who wins, is it? In sport you can be creative, skilful, confront your opponent on your terms. There's no room for that in war. It's kill or be killed in the end. A game of brinkmanship. Whether it's the best weapons, the most men, wealthiest competitor— it's pure strength that wins through. Organisations like the Fellowship Of Reconciliation offer that creativity, the change of tactics. Rather than fighting a war on war's inevitable terms we change the whole game, so that war itself, violence and destruction, becomes unnecessary. We refuse to conform to the very pattern, the very concept of war.

The Bermudan took it well. At least he listened. I have no idea if he understood but he nodded and smiled. I was surprised to find that, in the end, I didn't care. We shook hands and he went to find his wife.

Amelia wasn't at breakfast. Freddie said she had a headache. I asked if I should go to her cabin to say goodbye but he waved his arm and said I'll see her before we go.

That's why I'm waiting out here, but no sign of them yet.

We're already sliding up the Hudson and the deck is filling. Buildings blink and my legs ache to walk without railings. The great road stretches out before me. I've been whistling a tune, the hymn that ends: There's no discouragement, shall make him once relent, his first avowed intent, To be a pilgrim.

Later

I can't describe Manhattan. Not now. I'm already sitting on my bed and sleep is pulling me down. But I'm here, on American soil, and everything I've heard and more is true. I was expecting Nevin Sayre to meet me from the ship but he sent a telegram. They were behind on preparations. I stood and watched people coming off the boat, and the workers and drivers gathered on the quay. Everybody ignored me. I thought I saw Amelia duck into a taxi, her short hair sticking out on one side.

I could have taken a cab but I walked through the city to get some exercise and be alone for a time. Or anonymous anyway, because I wasn't alone. I felt drunk on all the life pressing close. Our ship wouldn't people a single block. I didn't bother to buy a map but kept stopping to ask directions, glad now not to have an extra suit to carry. I bought a hot potato from a dirty man with a cart. There was a fire under the cart and drawers he pulled out filled with potatoes that he turned with tongs. Once he'd turned them all he had to start again from the bottom. The potato was tapered at the ends and orange, its flesh soft and sweet. I sat on my bag to eat it, holding the ends with the tips of my fingers so I didn't burn my hand. There was a woman further down the street playing an accordion. She was wearing gloves and a coat that was longer than her skirt. When I'd finished eating and I got up she began to sing a looping, eastern song. I had a fantasy, just for a second, that she knew who I was and where I was going. As I passed she opened her mouth wide and sang louder.

Nevin was waiting in the dark station when I arrived at Orangeburg. There was only one street lamp, fields like bashed tin in the moonlight and dark smudges in the distance that I think are hills. It was cold in the car and I didn't know what to say. After so many people on the ship I didn't want to talk. I don't think he did either, but he said there was a crowd at the house already and he was sorry he couldn't meet me earlier. I

was surprised how tired I was. He said I should come straight up when we got here. It was barely five minutes before he brought bread and cheese and little pots of jam and chutney. He has a quiet voice, with a hiss at the top when he told me to sleep well. I think I will. It's quiet without the engines.

18th October, Morning

I couldn't remember where I was when I woke up. A strange room, an attic thick with shadows and a bar of light between the curtains. Then I saw a note on the chest from Prue, left last month to say she's busy with work and she'll meet me at the boat in December. On the back is a list of names and addresses mapping the continent. One of the names has a star beside it. Sam Fuller. The address is a farm in Texas. I ran my finger over Prue's close knotted writing and felt a crystallisation. Excitement, unknown possibilities packed up against me as books in a library.

It doesn't do to dwell on that though, and I needed a good shave.

When I opened the window noise rushed in, voices and laughter, mallets striking wood. There were cars and taxis on the driveway, two tents on the lawn, and beyond them the smoking chimney of a barn. A crowd of people pulled out the ropes of a third green bell-tent. Above this activity hung huge views of sky and wooded hills, orange and green and blue receding into bright smudged light. I wanted to be outside.

The tent rose, slowly and unsteadily. One man directed its resurrection, taller and younger and darker than the rest. He wore a red waistcoat unbuttoned over a blue work shirt, so he looked like a clown. He danced around the tent and shouted. The others laughed at him. The tent billowed and they jumped out of the way. It swayed left, and right, then up, and reached the peak of its curve, wobbled, and came to rest.

Everybody cheered. The soft light made them handsome, and somehow old. As though performing an ancient ritual, not just putting up a tent.

When I came back from washing the tent was pegged and rigid.

There was a knock on the door. A small face appeared around the edge. A pretty little blonde girl, eight or nine, blue eyes and a blue apron. One of the Sayre girls. She said,

Breakfast's ready Sir.

I told her to call me George. She said, yes sir, and her cheeks embered. Her name is Faith. I said I'd be at the children's table as well, so we could become friends. She laughed, but so often I feel still only a child in this movement.

Perhaps this time, this week, will change that? Without Prue or any of my family it's the best chance I've had. But first it's time for breakfast. My first day in a new country, the first day of my first FOR conference.

First stop: tea and toast.

Later, 10.00 pm

Where to begin? The beginning, I suppose. I want to skip ahead to the thing still ringing in my ears but I should tell the day as it happened, if I am going to tell it at all. So much to remember, so much already gone, shunted away into the mysterious sidings of memory. If I'm to tell it, I must tell it as though I'm sure; what I write here is not what happened but it's the best I can do to remember.

The morning then.

There was no toast. Instead, towers of pancakes, a Manhattan of pancakes, rose from the long table. This breakfast city was as crammed as yesterday's brick one. People



sat, elbows in, around the whole table, and those who'd already eaten leant against the wall or the door or the kitchen cabinets. A dog sat on my feet, a terrier. It was warm and I could feel the rhythm of its breathing.

Mrs Sayre introduced me while she went on producing pancakes. She is Kathleen, like my mother, and I saw immediately that Faith resembles her mother; fair, pretty, suntanned, quick, but Kathleen has mellowed and looks less predictable.

The people in the kitchen greeted me. Almost everyone had a question about Prue. Some even asked about Bow. When we'd talked a little, they went back to reading and eating, or other conversations. I'd expected to be a point of interest, but I wasn't sure how to react to their un-fussed acceptance. I ate quickly and gave my seat to a small, white-haired man who hovered behind me.

I wandered into the lounge. It is unlike any other room I've ever been in. There was so much in it I wanted to sit down and take notes. Daddy will probably never see it, but he would laugh if he did, fan as he is of junk and jinni's caves. I'll try my best to render it here, in the hope that the description might one day please him. First, it's a very large room with a fireplace at one end. Flaring out from the fireplace are seven or eight unmatched chairs and a couch piled with blankets and cushions. Among them are dotted little tables with candles and pens and lamps on. The wall on one side is lined with bookshelves, chests-of-drawers, piles of newspapers and magazines. Opposite this are large windows and doors opening onto a back garden that leads down to the wood. Against the far wall stands a desk with a dozen ink-pots on it and a picnic basket beneath, two bicycles, a large cabinet with a glass lid full of strange artefacts, and a poster of butterfly species. The fireplace is topped by a mantelpiece holding a gaggle of pots, some with glazes like dirty gold, others navy-grey brown-flecked Hudson river colour.

All the chairs were full. I stood near the fire, beside a pile of logs, riding crops, and a hat stand swathed in coats and jackets. There was a pair of binoculars hanging from it. In the fullness of that room the binoculars pierced me with a sudden emptiness, the lack of Amelia, a kernel of Nietzschean blankness that surprised me.

Near the desk sat two young men with a coffee pot between them. They argued in low, fast voices. One was the man I'd seen earlier with the red waistcoat. He's probably not yet thirty, no more than five or six years older than me. A tall, sporty looking chap, even taller than me. His chin was shadowed with stubble, his face and arms suntanned very dark, and now I was closer I could see that his short black hair suggested curls. He sat back in his chair, body and arms wide as an open book. His companion was smaller and stocky, with expressive dark eyebrows and a mediterranean look. Both men pointed when they spoke, slapped the arms of the chairs, and drank long gulps of coffee.

Nevin Sayre sat beside the fire while his children recited a poem. He was watching me. The chair curled round him, or he curled into it. He asked if I was settling in. Nevin makes me think of Daddy; thin, easy, quiet, but not quite safe. Daddy is everyone's friend. He looks light but the truth is that he wouldn't budge in a gale.

Nevin sent the children off and I sat opposite him.

I knew you were you the moment I saw you, he said. Though you don't exactly look like your aunts.

It's Kingsley, of course, but I didn't say that. Nevin said the house is the oldest in town, originally a farm, and they're always in a muddle. Especially with so many people. He was trying to make me feel at ease. When he talked he only sometimes looked at me. When he peered into the fire a grey shadow licked the side of his face.

The corner men erupted in barking laughter. Nevin looked up. He said,

Those two. You'll like them. The small one's Tony; tall one's Ray.

They had turned to face each other. Leant over the coffee pot, hands on thighs, faces close and creased.

Nevin asked if I was nervous. I shrugged, and he said nerves are normal.

But don't feel you've got anything to live up to, he went on.

Such as? I asked.

Before he could answer a heavy bell rang. Why do they always ring a bell to start the thing? Why must we humans announce ourselves? Better to slip in and appear ready-made. Better to avoid starting altogether if we could.

The important business would happen in the barn, so Nevin and I walked over together. I did feel nervous, which I knew was foolish and wouldn't help. It may as well have been Camelot I was walking into. The Fellowship of Reconciliation is the heart of the kingdom my family are pledged to, the heart of the world I've always known. I knew this was the start of something big.

I glanced sideways at the delegates gathering to their Round Table. Bearded, dog-collared, straw-hatted men, scarfed and bloused women. Some old, some young, most middle aged. Some frayed and grinning, other serious and ironed and lean. We slipped out of jackets and onto benches, each one carved from a single warped plank.

The men from the lounge, Ray and Tony, slid onto the end of our bench and nodded to each of us. Ray squinted at me. Then he leaned over and held out his hand. We stretched across four people, long arms pulling out of cuffs, and shook hands. His hand was cold. We introduced ourselves. He didn't give a clue if he knew who I was, just asked when I got to the States. Then he said,

No kidding? First time? How long you staying?

Leave from San Francisco in December.

It was the first time I'd said it, I only found out from Prue's letter. It sounded concrete, more purposeful than it felt.

He introduced Tony and we shook hands. I leaned back into place, a little more relaxed, and pleased to be inconspicuous again in the crowd.

So now we come to it, the business of the day. I am not sure how to relate it. All that was said lingers in my mind more as a feeling than a memory. I do know the conference began with a welcome. Then stories from some of the gathered, and letters from others who were absent. They reeled through recent months of protest from one headline to another; Spain, North Africa, Germany, India, Austria, Italy. Much of it bad news. I floated beneath the waves. The language was familiar, I knew it's meaning, and yet I knew nothing. I wanted to be moved but I couldn't get beyond the words; war, peace, armies and militarism. Had I travelled so far for this? Around me faces were set, film-screen eyes playing images they never witnessed. I stared at the bright sunlight skipping and flashing through half-shuttered windows. My legs ached with the idea of the hills, but I squeezed my mind back into the room and demanded focus.

Then a Chinese man stood.

He was small, neat, with dark moons under his eyes. He stepped to the front and stood in the light with the dust motes and butterflies.

He looked at a paper in his hand. Cleared his throat.

I do not need to tell you that China has been invaded, he said. Her Independence has been violated.

The statement detonated among us as others had not. A murmur of assent rippled from the end of his sentence to the edge of the barn, though some stayed silent. I swallowed. A drum in my head as if my ears had popped. The Chinese man looked

around. Something in his eyes made me remember losing my parents during a village fair and hiding in a fortress of hay bales.

We waited for him to speak again, and were frozen by the waiting. When the words came his voice was hard.

The Japanese government allege they are bringing freedom and civilisation to China, but this is not true. They are bringing death and horror. War has changed and it is now possible to bring devastation as never before. He told us that the war in China has only one objective: the destruction and conquest of China. The Japanese strive to conquer the Chinese through violence, yes, but also by crushing their will to resist, breaking their pride, and eliminating national identity.

Shanghai will be the next Guernica, he said, there will be nothing left when the fighting is over. The battle is being fought in streets and houses, on the bodies and in the hearts of ordinary Chinese people.

His words flew as bullets, tearing through the body-hot barn. Shanghai was distant, but he was small and close and angry. An alien in the William Morris feel of the morning. Outside a cuckoo moaned. Around the barn eyes dropped. I looked at Ray. His chin was on his fists, his eyes on the Chinese man.

I am going to the place he is talking about, I thought. Shanghai, the next Guernica, Total War. That is why I am here. I had to keep looking, keep listening. I must not turn away.

He twitched, and swallowed. Clenched his hands and neck. His lips were wet and shining.

The foreign powers and the League of Nations stand by and do nothing. It is American-built bombers powered by American oil, financed by British and European

trade, that fight this war, he said. Ships full of western scrap metal are made into bombs that kill Chinese soldiers and Chinese families.

I knew he was right. I have heard it before. How could we?

His voice dropped and he cleared his throat again. He said that our words of support have been welcome, they have strengthened the Chinese, but our leaders do not listen. The Nationalist Chinese Government has now united with the Communists to fight for the survival of China. Shanghai will fall, but the battle will move on. This will not be a short war but if they do not fight China will be conquered. That much is clear.

I no longer believe war is always the opposite of love, the man said. It is the only way I can love my people. What choice do I have?

He stood straight, to attention, but his eyes met ours. They met mine. He wanted to be challenged, I think, but he knew that it wouldn't matter.

I must support China's war of defence. I can no longer be a member of this fellowship.

These were his final words to us. He folded his paper, went back to the bench, picked up his coat and briefcase, and left the barn.

Silence.

Wind pattered branches against wooden cladding.

Several delegates held their heads in their hands. Others sat with closed eyes. I could hear fast tapping and looked towards the noise. My knee was bouncing. The sound was the metal heel of my shoe.

Nevin stood and walked to the front. He opened the shutter on the windows. Still the dust motes and butterflies floated. Late butterflies, they must be the last. Nevin spoke, slowly, failing to find the words as often as finding them. He prayed for our

Chinese and Japanese brothers and sisters, for all caught up in that war. For wisdom to seek the truth.

He did not invite comment.

I saw the Chinese man when we broke for lunch. He got into a taxi and snaked away along the tree-lined driveway. It is eleven hours now since he spoke. The rest of the day has passed. Discussions about mobilisation and non-violence floated past, flotsam on the surface of my thoughts. All the while his speech repeated. I had no words to say to him, and yet what he said has changed me. I have heard it said that war is Hell. I've heard it said and I believe it is true, but today, for the first time, I could picture it. That's where I'm going. I'm going to Hell. Somehow I must go with faith and love, joy even.

What kind of a world is this?

I began to read Tennyson before dinner, for something to do. Outside the older men played bowls and Ray lit a fire. Tennyson writes of the powers who walk the world, his Arthurian magic. I know that Prue would say God and his power are behind everything, all life, and that if we can believe in it and step into it we have access to that power. I was taught that the power of non-violence is in the choice not to become part of a cycle of hatred. Gandhi says there is power and freedom in the place where revenge is resisted. It's true that small things often have unimaginable power, and we can do much more than appears possible. It took only a letter to move me across an ocean to a new continent. Yet tonight when I think of power all I can picture is the Chinese man, his sad eyes, and the late butterflies circling his head.

19th October

At lunch today Ray came over. I was sitting on a stump of log, eyeing the pale blue spreading away between the trees.

Hear you're a walker? he said. Can't miss a day like this.

He was right; the day was almost too beautiful. We agreed to pass on 'Ways of Praying' this afternoon and take to the hills instead. I asked if Tony would be coming but apparently he doesn't like exercise, and he's a good Catholic so he does like to pray.

An hour later we were tramping uphill. We left by a barely-visible path across a field behind the house, took a bridge over a stream, then went along the line of the water and turned right onto a track up through the trees. It forked twice. We didn't have a map but I followed Ray and he seemed to know where he was going. We didn't talk.

It was bliss to feel the rhythm of the ground beneath my feet. To leave tension in the packed earth of a new continent. Breathe the familiar sweet smell of damp leaves and see them falling. When I bent my neck back I couldn't believe how tall the pines were, branchless and stout, but I had a sense of England, the soil somehow familiar to my soles. As we got higher, fresh air on flushed skin reminded me of cold rugby days when steam rose off hot bodies.

The second time the track forked Ray turned and asked me which way to go. I shrugged, said I was following him and he laughed.

We came out on a ridge after an hour of climbing. The river lay far off like a seam of grey-blue rock. Beyond it, a smudge of cities and the glinting smear of the ocean. We sat on boulders in the sun and ate apples and raisins. The forest ran as liquid down the hill, juice trickled down the back of my throat. I remember long conversations about empiricism by the fire in Wadham, the way we acted as though we knew it all, but we could never account for things that shouldn't be true but are; the river solid as rock, the forest a liquid. I think it, so it must be true, in the sense that words make anything



true. As Hopkins said, All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God, and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow.

Ray looked up at me with his ear flat on the rock. I asked if he thought we could believe what we didn't experience, or things that don't seem to be real except in your heart. He said there's plenty we can't see, but we notice where it's been, or where it's absent. He sat up and threw his apple core into the trees. Then he asked if I'd ever seen a dead person. I saw my grandparents before they were buried. Ray said,

So you know?

The soul? I asked, not looking at him, feeling stupid.

I don't know, he said, maybe. Just something was there — then it isn't. That's it. Gone. But where?

I was going to ask what dead people he's seen, but there was a shuddering of leaves behind me. We looked at each other. My heart hammered and Ray laughed. He twitched the bush with a stick. There was nothing there but the moment was lost.

We walked on along the ridge, skirting the edge of the trees. I wanted to kick rocks down the hill. We didn't talk, but Ray barged me with his shoulder. At a lightning-charred tree we turned and began to go down again. We came to a stream flowing off a higher peak beyond and followed for about a mile until it became a river, then a pool. Its surface shone in the sun over dark weed raddled depths.

Ray slung down the bag, took off his clothes and stood on the bank. I'd thought before that his arms and face were dark from the sun but now I could see he was dark all over like an Italian or an Arab. He asked if I was scared.

I undressed quickly and ran towards the water. Ray watched me pass and I flew off the bank into the air, weightless, the sun on my skin, went into a ball then quickly stretched my arms and legs and plunged in feet-first. My legs bent for the ground but I

kept on down, deeper than I expected. Water closed over my head. There was sudden cold slippery silence and plants tangled round my feet. I imagined I was dead.

Then I came up into brightness and Ray in the water. He shook his head and sprayed me with droplets. I floated on my back and thought the clouds were shed skin and I could hear the prophet Isaiah saying, Behold, I will do a new thing. When I imagine the prophets they have big, deep voices with the texture of a choir singing in harmony.

Ray tumbled forwards. His legs flicked the air and slid beneath the surface. The pool became calm and I waited but he didn't come up. Seconds passed into a minute. A bird flapped against a branch. Leaves soothed my worry. He'd been under for ages. Something touched my leg. Then he leapt in an explosion of foam, spray and wet curls, grabbed an overhanging branch and held himself there, grinning. Legs trailing in the water, everything hanging loose, bobbing on the surface.

After a while Ray climbed out and lay in the sun to dry. He said how much he liked that place and ignored me when I asked how he knew it was there. He turned on his front to watch me swimming up and down the pool.

I honestly think it's holy or something, he said. More holy than any church.

He pulled at the grass, letting clumps spin in the breeze and fall on his arm. He is a sort of Pan and his church is the pool, the hill, the open spaces. Forests, hills, mountains, prairies, desert, beaches. He's been in it all and it's all holy to him.

I told him Prue was the same, and how we escaped chapel into the woods. Waded up-stream to an island where birds nested and hid there until the service was over. Listening to birds dropping through the leaves with our feet in the water.

Ray frowned and shook his head. A fine halo of water flashed around him. I'm glad he was surprised. He said,

I'm more of a heretic than you think.

I wanted to know, but I also thought he wanted me to ask, so I said nothing. I swam to the bank and hauled myself out. Ray sat up cross-legged and naked to roll a cigarette, not looking at me.

When I was dry and dressed I crouched and wrote HARPENDEN in the dry mud. Ray would like to see England and walk the old pilgrimage roads. I can't imagine him there. He wouldn't fit among the small houses and the tweed on grey days, or even with the ramblers breaking onto Kinder Scout. I explained that most villages have an old church with a spire, usually on high ground, so when you walk the land you go from spire to spire, and the path from village to village is from church to church.

And if there's no church? he asked.

He tossed me the bag and began to walk. I picked up a stick. It was too short for me but I liked the feel of knots and grooves.

Well, I called to his back, you could always walk towards a pub?

20th October

Since the woods Ray and I are friends. We slipped into it easily, two edges in a flat seam, and I got Tony in the bargain. We make a good threesome, larking about, asking the old men and women for stories. We always seem to be the ones making noise and laughing, and Nevin watches us, rubbing his chin and raising his eyebrows. The conference has settled into a pattern as well; we listen, talk, eat, pray, and sing. There are games in the evening and a fire.

Today, though, two strange things happened. The first was after lunch. I'd taken myself into a corner of the lounge to read the paper. Tony came in and sat beside me,

sucking on a segment of orange. He has small eyes close together that screw up when he's thinking.

Be careful with Ray, he said.

That wasn't what I was expecting.

He's not like you, Tony added with a shrug, popping the last of the orange into his mouth.

Not like me how?

He's got nothing to lose.

It sounded like something from a cheap paperback, the friend warning me off, the big tip. Tony had few facts to offer though, he doesn't know much himself. Apparently Ray's father died in the war, in France, and that's why he hates war so much. Perhaps even why he's involved with pacifism. He ran away from home when he was fifteen and he's been on the move ever since. Tony doesn't even know where his home was. Ray turns up at protests and camps and works when he has to. Then he vanishes, often for months at a time.

The way Tony spoke to me was ridiculous. What's he worried about? Maybe I do know nothing about Ray, but it happens that way with some people. You only have to see them to know you're destined for friendship. Sometimes you don't even become friends in any lasting way but they mark your life. However little you know about them, you know the secret language of that mark forever.

When the bell rang I looked out of the door towards the hills. There was a brown smudge in the sky. I watched, and the smudge became the shape of a bird. I stood on the lawn and put my head back and waited for it to pass over me. An eagle, stretching silently on the wind.

The second strange thing was this evening. We were outside, the fire smelt of nuts and earth with the edge of wet clothes drying. It rained earlier and afterwards the air was heavy with metallic tasting mist. You couldn't see it as you do a fog, but it blurred the edges of everything to give a shimmering, dream quality. We sat on damp logs, deep in coats, hats and scarves. I found a thick hunting jacket in the cupboard in my room and put it on over my own. Kathleen Sayre frowned at me when she saw it then laughed. She has a particular way of laughing, with her head back and her mouth open and her eyes closed, as if abandoning herself to it. The coat belongs to Allan Hunter who's always freezing when he comes up from California. In the pocket was a scrap of paper with some names on it, numbers crossed out, an address in St Louis, and in quotation marks: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace." I slipped the paper into my copy of *Idylls of the King*.

Beside the fire we spoke quietly, as you do in a church. The change in weather had changed the temperature of us as well. We listened more, closed our eyes, balled fists. The world, the wars, the city, even the tents seemed to recede.

Ray appeared with an armful of holly branches and a violin. He threw the holly onto the fire. The flames recoiled for a moment, the tips of the leaves browned and curled to black then caught. Fire popped, flashed, the sound of gunfire, fireworks, loud and fast, sparks spinning into the air.

Ray sat on a log beside me. He held the violin by its neck between his knees and plucked a string, a single note, loud for a moment then falling into silence. I couldn't tell the point when the note was no longer heard because it went on in my head, chased by the cracking fire and a greater silence beneath. That silence became the idea of the note, expectation, where all possibilities still existed.

Conversation faltered. A Canadian lit a cigar. Tony and an old vicar whispered with heads together. The rest of us were silent, waiting. Ray looked up and saw me watching. I had a strong sense of him then, that his destiny lies far outside the confines of our group. He flipped the fiddle up and rested it on his knee. Then he slid his hand so the strings let out a squeal, and plucked at notes to make a chord. One chord after another, an old song, like a psalm, weighed with sorrow and tethered to the earth.

There was a thickening of the moment. I felt it as symbolism, an alignment of idea, image, and sound. I thought I might understand, finally, answers to my questions, the questions of the Chinese man, all of the questions.

Ray flicked the fiddle and flourished his bow. He pulled long hard chords and began to sing. The song was about death and freedom, crossing the river and living with God. I closed my eyes and the music expanded and took up all the space. I felt the others around me, close, and most of all I felt Ray.

Tony whistled, and shouted, Play one for dancing.

Ray grinned and began to stamp his foot. Tony whooped, the vicar laughed. I clapped in time, and Ray raced into a new tune, barn-storming, rabble-rousing, and we laughed together hard and dry. We urged him on with shouts. He started to sing and Tony knew the song and joined in.

The door to the house opened and light rushed onto the lawn, the shapes of people cut out against the hot bright inside. They walked along the road of light; the Sayres and others. Ray whooped and started again into the chorus. Nevin clapped, smiling and creased. Ray stood up to stamp on the log. Kathleen laughed again and put a hand out to Tony. He pursed his lips and widened his eyes. She pulled him up and they linked arms. We twirled and jumped and put arms round each other. Kathleen spun Tony away and Nevin slapped him on the back. Tony danced at the edge of the circle, kicked

his legs in the air, heads poked from tent flaps and lights went on in the house. Shadows crossed the lawn and appeared as friends. Ray slid between songs but we kept on dancing and steaming into the night as if there had never been anything else to do.

And really, what is more important than to sing and dance together?

I don't know how long it went on for. We finished with a rendition of Amazing Grace. Standing in a circle around the fire, grinning at each other's glistening faces.

What can I say about this? If we had set out to make it happen it wouldn't have worked at all. It would have been toe-curling in the cold, all the while thinking of warm beds and silence. As it was we didn't plan a thing. There was just a spirit, a moment that came over us. It began with Ray plucking a single note on the fiddle and grew without effort. Because it happened like that it meant something to us, as things that happen are apt to do. There was a clotting, a gathering of time around the night, that has given it meaning and pressed it into memory without the need to speak of it. A strange end to a strange day, but sometimes the best fictions are written in life.

21st October 1937

As the days go by I find ideas falling into line inside of me. This or that comment reaches into the dust and cobwebs of my mind. It pulls out an old volume to replace it with something new, or move it to another shelf, where it rightfully belongs. Peace seems to be coming slowly, more clearly into view. Still, a lurch can catch the top of my chest. It surprises me that there is much I'd never considered. Sometimes it feels as if these new ideas, making new compounds, can't be stabilised and must bring the whole damn thing down.

Like this afternoon — Ray was arguing with an American called Wendy. She's tall and straight, with almost no hips, long legs, long arms, long fingers. Oddly attractive. She was wearing trousers, a blouse, a geometric print scarf over her hair in red white and blue. They were talking about defensive violence and I thought of Dostoyevsky's question: would you kill an innocent child to win salvation for the world? I agonised over that for years before I went up, but it disappeared from view among all the new ideas of Oxford. The next time I'd thought about it I realised that the problem was useless, it could never happen and so there was no merit in resolving it.

Wendy was right: we must work for peace and peaceful solutions. Yet Ray's argument was not entirely hypothetical. There may come a point when lives are on the line, real lives, real deaths. What would I do then? As I stared into the shouting mouth of the question I saw that I might do it. I might kill to save a life. The proposition left me cold and a hot power came off Ray. I remembered a woodcut I once saw of Gawain's Green Knight holding his head in his hand surrounded by stunned Knights of the Round Table. I punched Ray, knuckle into thigh much harder than I intended.

Much later I was sitting on a log stump beside the fire. There was quiet snoring from the tents and nobody else outside except Ray, sitting opposite me. He took out tobacco and papers. Pulled out a single paper and smoothed it on his knee. Popped the tobacco tin. I could smell it, even over the ashy smell of the dying fire; sweet, earthy, and oakish. He pinched up shredded tobacco between thumb and middle finger, dropped it into the paper. Picked more, dropped it again. The ritual soothed me. Each movement was simple and perfectly necessary.

He struck a match. The head spluttered then flared and after it went out I could still see the flame in the back of my eyes.

He inhaled, two long breaths, then asked if I was still angry at him. I said no.



He could never understand that knowing a person like him believes the same as me would matter and make it easier, the way Prue does.

His eyes flicked from me to the end of his cigarette. I poked the fire with a log.

I'm sorry, he said, after a long silence.

I told him about the recruiting officers from the Army and the Navy who used to visit Wadham in Michaelmas and Summer every year. How they would set out a table with pictures and pamphlets, and stand in the quad in their uniforms. They made me think of clowns, the bad kind who give children nightmares.

Ray stared at the sky, cigarette between lips and no hands. He looked like a statue, marbled from the firelight, hair blending into night.

I did speak to the recruiting officers once, the last time, but I don't think they tried to persuade me. I was only sport.

Good, he said, you'd make too good a soldier.

Aren't you deserting? I asked.

Never, his head dropped as a pendulum. I can't. Even if I wanted to.

I've heard that before, every pacifist says it.

I made a promise, he said.

I looked into the fire and thought of burning houses and was angry again.

He said, This afternoon — that was just training, to keep the team on their toes.

He got up not long after. Asked when I was leaving and if I was headed straight for California. I remembered the list of addresses and the name with a star by it. An instinct made me say that I'm going to Texas. He nodded, looking at the embers. I wondered if I should ask him to come.

He stamped on the fire and we said goodnight.

Later, 2 am

In bed under scratchy blankets. I can't sleep for memories. Pictures parading past, at speed; racquets, sweat, candles and fleur-de-lis, Amelia's skin pink where her binoculars rub, hot potatoes and tall buildings, and four days of Ray pulling tent ropes, talking, eating, laughing, hanging naked from a branch. Memories on show. Ray staring at Wendy, Juliana in the ship's lounge with a man who leans over the curve of the table.

Behind it all are the recruiting officers, slowly changing because I can't remember the conversation well, my mind worrying at the question of what I should have said. Five months ago. Wadham College. Oxford. . .

I stopped beside them in the quad and said my family were pacifist.

They grinned, as if at a child.

And what about you?

I don't think I could kill a man, I said. (Or: I couldn't kill a man. Or: I won't kill a man. The last is better. I want it to be the last.)

You would if he was going to kill you —

— Or if he was going to kill your girl. Navy man finished the Army man's sentence.

Is that CO rubbish the best you can do? I said. (Or: That's rubbish. Or: Is that the best you can do? Or: That's not war. Hear my scorn echo down through the months.)

It's not rubbish, Navy said.

But it's not war.

War is a fight for survival. (Army.)

Only because two generals in different coats decide it is. (I know I said that.)

If you don't kill or capture the enemy they will kill or capture you, Navy said.

But if you always kill the people who threaten you — don't you become a threat yourself? (Classical. Elegant. Do unto your neighbour as he will do unto you, given half the chance.)

Better to be the threat — (Army.)

— Than be dead. (Navy.)

My Aunt would disagree.

(But what if the dead person isn't me? What if it's someone I could protect? What if it's a child? What if there's hundreds? What if killing one would save a thousand? What if? What if? They missed an opportunity.)

And what about you? said Army.

What do you think? (Navy.)

I looked at the pamphlets on the tabletop. One had a picture of soldiers in uniform taking shelter behind a building. I wondered what they were hiding from. I wanted to humiliate the officers.

I looked up. Said, I'd rather be neither. (I expected them to say no, that's not allowed, I was cheating.)

Instead, Mr Navy leaned in close enough for me to see that his eyes were red-rimmed.

Are you afraid? he asked.

Perhaps I wasn't sport after all.

No, I said. (I think I said that or I might have said nothing. Or I might have looked surprised.)

Do you love your country? Navy again, still too close.

Of course.

Do you love Oxford? (Army.)

I like it.

Wouldn't you fight to defend your country?

To defend Oxford?

I felt like a child. I couldn't beat them because they weren't arguing, they were just speaking. There was no listening, no desire to understand, only to follow orders.

I don't believe in war, I said.

Do you believe in freedom? Army asked.

Yes.

Then you believe in war. (Navy.)

What about the freedom not to fight?

War protects all freedom. (Navy.)

Unless it kills you. (I want to have said this. I don't remember it.)

You don't know what you're talking about. (Army.)

I know I don't believe in war. (Me.)

Maurice Bowra, wrapped in his gown, was watching it all. He leant on a pillar by the porters' lodge and grinned at me as I walked away. I nodded and he said, Hogg you're too cruel. Then he spun and stalked away.

I turned back. Navy was arranging leaflets while Army spoke to a little chap with glasses who didn't seem military material. He simpered at the Army man, flattered, and anger punched up in me. Smug bastards, self-righteousness brimming from shiny buttons, the spilt-over glamour owed to boys twenty years dead. The horror and unspoken reverence for a man in uniform. They didn't deserve it.

22nd October

Today's main event was a trip into town to buy supplies for Kathleen. I offered to go, and as soon as Ray saw me heading to the car he skipped over.

Going for a ride? he asked, with the look of a puppy. There was a great little bookshop he wanted to check out. He bounced into the back and leant between the seats for the whole journey, one hand on my shoulder.

It's a small, wood-clad town. Shops looked out from under bent awnings on a street lined with boards and food crates. Flags hung stiff and cold. Crowds of damp leaves clung to our feet. We followed our instructions and made short work of the groceries.

Ray rootled around in the bookshop while I stood with our boxes and shuffled to one side whenever someone came through the door. On the table were books of poetry by Walt Whitman, Robert Frost and more surprisingly Ezra Pound. I felt as though they were artefacts, static and distant. I stepped aside to let in a serious looking man with an equally serious moustache. On the shelf were smart new copies of Hemingway and Proust turned face out for display among the spines, leather covers shining, preening themselves, self-satisfied and superior. A year ago I'd have wanted those copies, I'd have coveted their looks as well as their contents. Now I have no use for book buying. I'd only have to leave the books somewhere and if I'd wanted to spend my time wading through collected works or keeping up with new releases I'd have stayed at Wadham.

I had to move the other way then for a woman and her son (whose lip curled at the sight of my potato-filled boxes), so I decided to wait for Ray outside. That was when I saw him coming towards me. He slapped me on the arm with a torn and faded copy of Thoreau's *Walden*. As we walked back to the car he showed me his other purchase, something by a man with a German-sounding name, I forget it now. The name was familiar but I couldn't place him. Perhaps he's one of Bowra's fads, I don't remember.

Europe feels faint as a star, burning on, producing heat and books, but hardly touching my life now. Ray looked at the book as he walked. He smoothed the edges, then wrapped it back up in its tissue paper. I was embarrassed by him, acting that way over a book in the street.

We put the boxes in the car and he realised we'd have missed lunch by the time we got back. So we went into a cafe along the road. Inside, there was a counter on one side with stools standing in front, metal with leather seats and when the sun caught them I thought of a row of swords hanging from the leather belts of knights. That was better than when the sky clouded and dulled them into prison bars. The place was busy, condensation freckled the inside of the windows and the booths opposite the counter were full. We took the only two free seats at the counter. Ray smiled at one of the pretty waitresses when she passed and she smiled back, then looked down at the plate of roast chicken in her hand. A different waitress came to take our order. She was older and fat but Ray still set about charming her as he ordered a breakfast with an army of sides.

The man sitting next to Ray looked sideways at us. He was hunched over his food and frowning. When I met his eyes he turned away to speak to a woman on his other side who shook her head and leant forward to look at us. The waitress flicked a glance at the man. I was about to ask her if she'd heard our order when Ray stopped talking and she left. The other woman looked at her food again, but did not eat. She pressed her fingers into the chromium counter so it reflected white tips. The man took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. There was something about them. I couldn't stop looking.

Ray asked what was wrong. I said it was nothing, but the other man was watching. He had short uncombed hair, a beard, and the dusty edges of a man who

works outside. Ray turned in his seat to follow my gaze. The man stared at him. It was very strange. Ray's leg began to bounce on the footrest of the stool.

Everything all right? he said.

The other brought up his cigarette, holding it between his thumb and first finger so he touched his lips when he sucked on it, as though hushing Ray. The woman pulled her jacket round her and looked about. A few of the other customers were watching us over mugs or forkfuls.

Not really, said the man.

Sorry to hear that, said Ray.

He spoke quietly but in a way that made me feel something more was being said than what I was hearing. Perhaps the man knew we were staying at the Sayres' and he took against pacifists? We'd bought the groceries on their account, he might have been in the shop. It was all made even stranger by the way he sat. He kept very straight and away from Ray, and didn't leer forward the way most aggressive people do when confronted by a pacifist. It was as if there was an invisible wall between them. The man's wife, or whatever she was, stood and pressed against his back, looked at us like ghosts. If it was because we were pacifist why didn't they just come out with it?

I know what you are, the man said. Don't think I don't know.

Ray didn't take his eyes from him.

If the man hadn't stuck so rigidly to that odd position I'd have started to worry we were in for a fight.

He went on, saying, You think you're safe here with things as they are, think you can do what you want? But it's not right.

The woman squeezed the man's shoulder and said they should go.

It's not right — hear me? he said. I know it, and you know it. You'll see.

He stood. The whole cafe was silent. I'd never seen Ray so still.

Don't look at me like that, said the man. His voice was loud in the watching silence of the cafe. He was talking to me.

Like what? I said. Blood rushed behind my ears.

The woman told him to come on and pulled on his arm. His face was red and I thought of the man on the beach in Kent when I was a child, the shouting man. Now he opened his mouth and I saw a gold tooth. I thought he would say something else, but he took a dollar from his pocket and laid it on the counter. Then he looked at us for a long, heavy moment.

There was something obscene about the performance of this look in front of the serious faces of the watching customers, the red cheeks of those who looked away, the waitresses flicking wide eyes between us, and most of all coming as it did after a glimpse of that gold tooth. It was all so full of meaning, yet because I didn't understand a thing about it I suddenly found it wonderfully funny. Like a twisted Noel Coward play with a gold-toothed farmer and a peacemaker for dramatis personae.

You think this is funny? asked the man. I should knock some sense into you right here.

I frowned at him and struggled to control my laughter, not knowing what to say. I was vaguely afraid behind it even though I was taller than him. Ray stepped across between us. I thought the man was going to spit at him, but he only sucked on his lips. Then stubbed his cigarette on the counter and turned to leave. The bell chimed behind the wife, toneless and dull in the unexpected depth of the room.

Ray sat and the diners began to talk. Noise rushed in quickly, as if to pretend it had always been there. The peculiar atmosphere drained, but it made me realise that there had been something strange right from the time we walked in. Perhaps I'd had the



feeling that we were being watched, or at least that sense you get sometimes that you're an outsider, that you've been noted. There had definitely been something.

I sat back in my seat beside Ray. He didn't look at me but he did say that it wasn't funny. The waitress came over and put a mug of tea in front of each of us, and she offered Ray the sugar and looked at the floor. I said sorry, but could he at least tell me what just happened.

Do you know him? I asked.

Ray looked up, at first searching to see if I was joking, then slowly his face crumpled and puckered. He asked if I was kidding and did I really not have a clue? I didn't and my face must have convinced him. He began to laugh but I still had no idea what was going on.

Those kinds of fellas, he said, they don't want anything to do with blacks, especially not where they eat.

I stared, and he laughed even harder and pointed at himself. Of course I'd noticed his dark skin, though he was barely darker than Tony who was Italian, and his hair, but — He shook his head, said Brits don't understand the colour bar. I said that we have Empire which is worse, but I went on looking at him, seeing it completely and wondering how I'd been so blind. Had everyone else here known? Did everyone at the conference know? As I pushed at this point a great web of cracks began to spin out from the nexus of everything I knew about Ray, zagging and cutting across the space between us. He stopped laughing and frowned at me, cup halfway to his mouth. I was breathless under the weight of my own stupidity. Embarrassed but more fiercely falling through those cracks into unknowing Ray. Tony was right, I know nothing about him. My mouth was dry.

Come on, Ray put a hand on my shoulder, don't give him the joy of getting to you. My Ma — she was white — she always got into fights with men like that and it never helped.

I heard myself agree. The waitress brought our food and I was grateful for something to do. The mechanics of eating reminded me I had not disappeared. That Ray and I still existed, side by side, as we had all week. He began to talk, chewing and talking at once as he does, but my mind was full of the man with his gold tooth.

I was worried Ray would say something when we got back and I'd have to deal with humiliation for the rest of the week. The worst imaginable situation was that it got back to Prue, which it would if people at the Sayres' found out. Almost as soon as I thought this I realised how petty I was. My humiliation was unimportant compared to Ray's experience, but even knowing this I couldn't settle.

Ray was quiet on the drive back. He sat beside me and unwrapped his new book, the one by the German fellow. He turned the pages very gently, as though picking ripe blackberries from the bush. When we turned into the driveway he said he'd prefer it if we didn't talk about what had happened. He especially didn't want Tony to find out. I was relieved but I just said OK. He wasn't paying attention. He was staring away across the valley to the peak of a mountain that reared out of the horizon.

I didn't see him during the afternoon. He sat across from me at dinner and he was laughing and shooting his arms out when someone said something that excited him. So he was back to normal. I kept seeing the man looking at Ray, deep disgust clutching his big farmer's body, lip curled, gold tooth dull in the shadow of his mouth. Ray ginned at me across the table, a moment of stillness, his face creased. No cracks. I know him better now than before, and yet I know that he is further from me than ever. I nodded to him. There was something alive, a power between us.

How does he keep on laughing, smiling, caring? When each day he wakes and goes into the world knowing faces will look back at him and hate him. A whole world looking back at him with its hands over its ears and a fire in its belly fierce enough to convince itself that even hatred is worthy of the name love. Merlin says that Excalibur will be cast away when all our wars are done. But as I walk towards Peace I discover more conflict, hidden deeper and deeper beneath the shining surface of the world, behind our eyes, and beneath all our good intentions.

23rd October

I am looking at familiar stars. If I squint the points of light blur and fuzz. When I relax I see them clearly again. Everything here has become familiar; the worn rug between my back and the flagstones, itchy between shirt collar and hair, the red-grained wood holding the glass above my head, the foot in its suede slipper to the left of my face. How can somewhere become familiar in less than a week? Yet it does, always, and every time it's a wrench to leave. As if a part of us still believes nothing exists but wherever we are, even as we long for the new. We are both terrified and created by change. Humans are self-indulgent creatures.

The stars are beautiful tonight. They seem closer than at home, though they can't be, can they? I stood in the Balliol quad after the first rugby match last year, drunk on champagne and whisky, and I envied the stars their clear purpose.

The foot has begun to tap on the flagstone. Gentle and regular, it's a blur in the edge of my vision. If I arch my neck I would see crossed legs above the foot, leading up to a thin body and balding head.

It's only been a week but I've already grouped Nevin with Daddy and Bowra. Nobody else comes close.

When I wrote that he looked down and I had to stop. He smiles in a way that reminds me of an anchor being released. We talked about the week, about how I've found it. I've been wary since I arrived, afraid to let Prue down, but from the way he looked at me I thought I could tell him anything. That smile, and the moon reflected in his glasses.

I wanted to be in the dark wood at the edge of the view. The sky was clear, hard and flat as if frozen. As if you could play racquets against it.

Nevin asked where I was going next.

To a farm in Texas, I said.

Sam Fuller?

Trust him to know. I said I was going to ask Ray to come with me. He didn't say anything to that. The chair creaked and I imagined him sitting back, settling his gaze over my head and returning to more important thoughts. I looked over my shoulder. He was looking back at me. His expression was calm, patient, but I felt a kind of pressure and had to turn away. That look, straight on, so that I had to turn away, was a type of strength that I want. It's not much different to Ray getting up and going about even though he knows that round any corner might be a man who would lynch him given the chance. We must go on with peace, even when we doubt the actions it leads us to.

I want to throw this damned book against the wall, to scream from my attic across the fields. Yet as soon as I leave here I know I will long to sit with Nevin, to hear him speak, to hear him say that non-violence is a place of strength.

I will be with Prue soon, beginning the real work. Even tomorrow, only tomorrow, everything will change. Fear and bravery, perhaps they go hand in hand? I must go on. I must get up tomorrow and step out towards that unknown end that is also, somehow, the beginning of me.

24th October

The journey has begun and movement is bliss. Though we only got as far as Tony's parents' house in Brooklyn.

Tony, Ray and I left together after Sunday worship. We rolled into Manhattan by train with the taste of communion wine in our mouths. It's different to arriving by boat. On a boat you have empty space between you and the new life of the unknown city, but on the train you rush right through the place. We burrowed between houses, factories, car parks, warehouses, shops, barbers', docks, diners, brothels (according to Ray), and courthouses. Between suits and overalls and children with dirty faces and a hundred uniforms I've never seen before. This was Manhattan. Last Sunday may as well have been a dream.

On the train Ray tapped his feet, pointed out things as we sped past. Tony lounged behind a smudged newspaper. I listened and looked where Ray pointed, thinking I should really ask him to come south with me. I'd almost accepted the idea in my mind. I asked questions about the city but I think he made up most of the answers. Tony kept laughing and shaking his head.

At one point Ray said, Is it like London? It must be like London. Or Paris. I bet it's like Paris?

I said it was both and neither, and he said he'd love to see Paris.

There were moments when he was right and I could have been in Europe, back in those long, ancient summer days. The back of a man, hatless, lifting crates from a freight carriage with cigarette smoke around his head, reminded me of Bow. A woman carrying a huge basket had dark hair, dark eyes, and thick eyebrows that made you wary and horny at the same time, like Paris. The police on a street corner, upright and shining, were Berlin. Young men outside a brick library were in Oxford.

The train shot out over the water, as if released by a sling, all the crowded life gone, and we hung stretched over greasy grey water. I looked along the river and heard the edge of a whisper, my Madame Atlantic. That sudden space, and the pressing current of the ocean, made me long for London, for Westminster Bridge.

Manhattan was a cocktail and I was drunk on it.

Off the train we ate hot dogs, which are sausages in bread rolls with toasted onions. While we ate we stood on the street corner and watched the city fly past. What peace we've lived in for the last week, wrapped in trees and cold pine-smelling air. The smoke from the barn chimney, the long carved benches and earnest talk. While here, barely beyond the bend in the river, humanity charged at itself.

We grinned. We couldn't help it. A young man in a smart three-button jacket stopped and looked at us. We looked back and didn't move, went on chewing our sausages. We must have been in his way because he sighed, puffed his cheeks, and stepped out to go round us. He had to shoulder against the current of people coming the other way. Then he was around our corner, slipped into the steam, and was off.

I leant my head back and looked up at a building that leant over me and I remembered squirming away from Daddy in a crowd in Victoria Park to get to the front and see Prue speaking.

Ray stood with the hot dog vendor's son, a boy of about ten. They talked fast through full mouthfuls. Tony held his paper in one hand, folded up small, and squinted at it while he ate. When we left we walked three abreast, disrupting the flow of pedestrians, but always somehow following Ray. I felt I was in a film. Sometimes it was a comedy, or a sunny love story. Then we turned and the buildings shadowed the road so it felt like a mystery and made me shiver.

We went into a bar near the East River. It was a smoky cave down steps from the street. Three old men sat on stools at the bar and a few suits with dirty collars were in the corner. The yellowed wallpaper was printed with willow-bough stencils that mismatched at the seams, as if William Morris had come here to die. It wasn't a place I'd choose to stay, but Tony said his parents don't drink and don't like it in the house so we should take our chance. He's waiting until he's married before he moves out. He asked if I've got a girl at home.

The barman was reading a brown, curled book with no cover. He squinted at Ray for a few seconds then put the book down and walked along the bar trailing a dirty rag over the stain-ringed wood. We ordered beers and dropped into a booth as far as possible from the suits. The barman still watched us, rubbing the bar with his rag.

What's his problem? I asked.

Ray shrugged, Just drink.

I thought it best not to get into this again. Tony unfolded his paper, turned the pages, refolded it. Ray and I leaned across the table to talk. I put my body between him and the room and showed him the money I have to get to San Francisco. A cheque from my parents will be waiting there. He thinks it's enough, if I hitch and I'm careful with what I buy.

Come with me, I said, suddenly. Tony's paper rustled but I kept looking at Ray.

What else have you got to do? I asked. I could use the help and it'll be fun.

You want me to go with you to Texas? Ray said.

Why not?

I can think of a hundred reasons.

It won't be like that, Prue said I should go and Nevin thought it was a good idea.

This farmer — Fuller — he must be one of us.

Tony snorted and Ray asked if I was crazy. He raised his eyebrows and rubbed his forehead. I trust Prue, she would never send me somewhere that isn't revolutionary. It hadn't occurred to me that they wouldn't feel the same. I looked into my beer, feeling hot and stupid.

You're dying to come, I said, trying to sound as though I didn't care.

You need me more than I need you, he said.

I finished my drink and went to get another. When I got back he apologised. He said even if Fuller is all right we still have to get there and it's a state he'd rather stay away from, but he does want to come. I told him to think about it and left it there.

On the way out I looked over the posters for bands and acts that were plastered on the wall of the staircase. Pictures of men with fiddles and guitars, dates in the twenties and earlier. I couldn't imagine them playing there, to the three old men and the greasy barman. As I got higher the posters changed to signs: No dogs. No cycles. No women. No coloreds.

The last one stopped me. I looked up but Ray was already out the door. Tony was a few steps above me and he must have sensed that I'd stopped. He turned, asked what was wrong. He was frowning. I pointed at the sign. He put his hand on the wall and shook his head.



Yeah, he said, no bikes and no blacks. 'Cos, you know, they're both inconvenient in a basement, and don't even start on women. Welcome to the land of the free.

Outside, Ray was standing a few feet away with his hands on his hips. Tony pointed to him and said,

Never doubt that small acts of resistance matter. He looked at my face and slapped me on the back.

Now we're in Brooklyn where everything is shorter and dirtier. Though the Brooklyn Bridge is bigger than any I've seen. Ray called it the best bridge in the world. They put their arms round my neck and we marched forward together. It felt invincible, as though it was land and not a bridge at all. (And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.) There was something simple and marvellous about the way it held us with its spreading fingers of metal. Like it hardly needed to make an effort. I leaned over the side and saw the olive and ash coloured swirl of the water lapping at the stone plinths.

When we walked off the bridge I could hear an accordion playing. We had dinner with Tony's parents and his three younger sisters. His father's a tailor so he talked about work and asked questions about Daddy. The oldest sister kept looking at Ray. I think she has a fancy for him, and he could do a lot worse. She has big hazel eyes and soft looking skin. Everything is warm here, smells of tomatoes, vinegar, and chalk. It's the kind of place that makes you want to let go of all responsibility and be a child again. Let someone tell you what to do until you can say your prayers under a warm blanket and fall asleep with the knowledge there's a family taking up every room. I listened to them talk, overlapping each other, half coded, as families do, and I longed for crumpets and honey, the old armchair by the fire.

Ray and I are in the lounge. He's sitting on the floor, cross legged and limp-lidded as a dark little Buddha. Smoking and blowing out rings in the light of the street lamps from outside. He asked what I'm writing and said we couldn't have any secrets. As if he's told me everything, even anything, about himself. I said it's a story.

About what?

About you, I said.

He laughed and asked me to read it, which he knew I wouldn't.

It's a diary then, he said.

No, it's a record.

A journal?

An account of a journey.

We went on like that, him calling me Mr Pepys, me trying for Marco Polo.

I like that you write, he said, it's sweet.

Sweet? Honestly? I told him it's good for the mind, that it helps me to work things out.

He's smoking another cigarette now, humming half under his breath.

I'm scribbling as though the journey depends on it.

It's not to work things out though, not really. There is a creature in my mind which makes me write. A gremlin writing the story of my life. It cannot help but see my journey as a tale unfolding. It hovers behind each moment and picks the wrong things to feel important about, and ignores the important parts. It sees one thing echo in another and writes them into layers that shine like oil on canvass. So I walk through life as through a lens and I cannot help but feel significance all around. This creature, this gremlin, this friend, won't let it go because it'll be important one day. In time you'll see the layers come together, all at once, into a picture that you can look at and say: Yes — I

know what it is. That's why I have to write. Why I have to write about Ray and Amelia and the way the river looked from the hills behind the Sayres', rather than about the talks and the papers. In a way I told Ray the truth. It may not be fiction I am writing but it is certainly a story.

25th October

Today has not gone to plan.

We lingered all morning, ate a long breakfast and drank coffee. Tony's father bought the morning papers from a boy on the corner and we read them cover to cover. Before he left for a half day at his shop he called me into the lounge. There was a shirt hanging over the back of the couch, brown with faint stripes hand stitched in blue. He said he'd made it for a client but there was an error with the cuff and he'd had to remake it. It was too large for him or Tony and would I take it for my journey? When I held it up I couldn't see any error. The line was narrow and the fabric slid between my fingers, catching on the lines of the stitched stripes. It was heavier than a normal shirt and unlike any of the other plain shirts I own. I wanted to smell it but he was watching. So I thanked him, folded it the way I'd learnt helping Daddy at work, and put it into the top of my bag.

I came back to find Ray saying his goodbyes. He turned to me and said we had better make a move. Nothing more, but it meant he was coming with me. Tony had his arms crossed and I thought of what he said about Ray disappearing. He saw me looking and nodded, but there was something shallow about it. Time seemed to accelerate then, and before I knew it we were out of the house and at the bus station. Cracking jokes and moving as if it cost us nothing. There was only space in my mind for our journey. With

Ray coming as well we'd agreed to pool our money and take a bus to start us off then hitch the rest.

But when we got to the station there were no more busses for hours.

Energy drained from us. We dumped our bags, turned out our pockets, leafed through the timetables. Sighing and spitting. I was annoyed at Ray for saying there would be hourly busses and fed up with his act, with his claims to know it all. He was wearing his ridiculous blue shirt and red waistcoat again. Today he'd added a bow tie that did nothing to improve them. I thought the people passing us sneered. I didn't see them looking but they would be. With his coat over his shoulders he looked like a jester. He said it wasn't his fault I wanted to go the most direct route to the middle of nowhere. They'd changed the times. If we had more money we could take shorter trips. Why was I in such a hurry anyway? I wanted to get on the next bus, for something to do. It was going to Boston.

Fine, Ray said when I told him. You'll be more use there than shit-town Texas.

I've told you — I trust Prue.

Why? You're just playing a game. If you want to do something real don't disappear to China.

I'm doing what I believe in.

Are you blind? There's a war right here and I'm already fighting. Every day I live these things. All you have to do is see it.

He rubbed his face and sat on his bag. I looked down on his head and he pulled his coat closed across his body. He didn't look like a jester any more. Now he was a homeless boy, all his height and presence lost in bent knees and cupped back and loose neck.

I took Idylls of the King from my pocket. It dropped open at the point where I'd put the scrap of paper from Allan Hunter's coat.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace.

I kicked my bag over in front of him and sat. He raised his head, looked me in the eyes. His gaze was so hard I thought he would hit me, but in a second it hollowed out and I saw that although there was anger it reached out from sadness.

You're right, I said, about your war.

I lifted one of his hands and opened the fist, laid the scrap of paper on his blistered palm.

He read it and looked back up at me.

It could be your war, he said.

Perhaps —

Stay here?

I can't.

He closed his hand around the paper and swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbed into view over his tie then disappeared.

I stood. He looked up at me. I was conscious suddenly that we were in the middle of the station forecourt and people were moving all around us to buy tickets and queue for busses. Men with briefcases and women with carpet bags and children and porters and cases. I'd forgotten all about them, forgotten my embarrassment and anger. That's the way Ray is. When you listen to him, when you're with him, when it's working, there's no room for anything else. It's exactly why he couldn't come south with me. Prue wanted me to go for a reason. If I am to learn, it has to be me and my gremlin. No other distractions. Otherwise what had I given up Amelia for?

I held out my hand. Ray took it and let me pull him up. Then he slid his arms into his coat sleeves and slung his bag over one shoulder, sniffing.

Good luck, he said, and we shook hands. Before he let go he leaned towards me and whispered, Not that you'll need it.

He smiled, turned and walked away into the crowd. Once he left the station, striding between busses, I couldn't see him for long.

I stood alone among all those busy people. A beautiful loneliness flowing out into the world. Everything up to here has been preparation. This is where it begins. I see it, shimmering up through layers of paint where it catches the light; the silence before the song in which the song is born. The whisper of the story. The gremlin has a hold of me. Everything is as it should be, will be, must be.

The bus leaves in an hour for Pittsburg.

26th October

Slept on the bus and changed into my new shirt this morning in the station bathroom. I bought some food and looked around the city, then walked south out of Pittsburg on highway 79. It's been cold and dry. My bags were heavy and I had over a thousand miles to travel.

Every time I heard a car or a truck coming I stopped, turned and stuck my arm out. It was my first ever hitch. I didn't want to look over-eager and scare people off, but I also thought I was more likely to get a lift if I looked purposeful. After about ten miles my back was wet and sticky and I was losing hope. There was plenty of traffic but nothing even thought about stopping all afternoon.

When I couldn't walk any further I dumped my bags under a leafless tree, sat on the large one, and unwrapped some bread and cheese. I closed my eyes while I chewed. It was quiet, heavy, would be dark soon, but then — I could hear something. I opened my eyes and sure enough a car was forming out of the haze in the direction from which I'd come. It solidified into a silver Ford with a lone man inside. This was my chance. I took one more bite, stuffed the bread in my coat pocket, and jogged to the edge of the road.

The car stopped and a man looked up at me through the open passenger-side window. He looked normal enough, slim and middle aged, nothing flashy but nothing unusual. Then he leaned back to look at my bags.

Better put your kit on the backseat, he said, trunk's full.

I did and we were off. Finally starting my real trip. I felt marked, edgy, excited, feet and legs bouncing.

I remembered the food I'd shoved into my pocket.

Do you want some bread or cheese? I asked the driver.

No thank you, but you go ahead.

As I ate, I tried to work him out. I was strangely aware of myself, how he must be sizing me up the way I was scrutinising him. Even my shirt front was creased and dirty. Those perfectly stitched stripes doing little to mitigate the appearance of having walked all day.

The man had obviously once had dark hair but now it was almost all silver. It was this that had made me think he was middle aged, but in truth he didn't look old at all. He wasn't wrinkled and he was neat and clean-shaven, dressed in a modern suit without a tie. After a long silence I began to think he'd forgotten I was there completely and I started to doze, until from nothing he asked if I'm British.

I jerked upright and opened my eyes. I answered him and he asked polite questions about home, and then,

Where you headed?

I thought for a second and decided on the truth. Japan, I said. Then China.

From San Francisco?

Yes.

Going alone?

With an aunt.

He nodded and fell silent. The exchange felt like a dream. I squeezed my eyelids together into a bright darkness. When I opened them he was still there, looking placidly at the road stretched out ahead. Minutes later we slowed for an interchange, even though there were no other cars in sight. As the car sped up again he glanced at me.

I'm headed for Kansas City — I can take you that far if you'd like?

I turned towards him. It couldn't be a joke, could it? I don't have much money, I said.

He laughed and introduced himself as Dr Lacey. Then he told me about his cargo of Bibles for schools in Kansas. He's got churches or contacts wherever we need to stop, so the journey will cost nothing up to there. My mind was full of the irresistible sense, almost magical, that history was folding me into itself, and drawing me on. Even two thousand miles of flashing fields, prairie, desert, and mountain could not stand in its way.

I wonder what Ray would think of it all? Would Dr Lacey have even stopped if Ray was here? I'd write to him but I don't have an address. I should write to Tony. Perhaps tomorrow.



## A Smoking Gun

September 1938

The door clicks open. I barely register the time before it shuts again.

"Is Dorothy here today?"

I freeze. I am in the back room of the shop. The doors are open onto the courtyard. A heavy, hot smell of roses and fleshy sunflowers hangs between the shelves. In the frozen moment I can feel my body abnormally; my knees pushing into the hard floor, rolling on the joints; the sleeves of my blouse tight where they are rolled up over the elbow; sore ends of my fingers under low-bitten nails.

"Who shall I say is asking?" says Frankland. He is protecting me. It is a year since I began my column for *The Times* and although the regulars of the bookshop have encouraged me, not everyone has welcomed my perspective on India and the Far East. But I am not afraid. I know who this is.

"Muriel Lester."

Blood plays on my eardrums.

"Ah — right, yes — just a minute."

I hear Frankland step towards the back room. I drop my head; there is a book in my hand. I have forgotten what I am doing, what the book is, its grey cloth cover swims.

"Dorothy?" says Frankland.

I look over my shoulder.

"There's —"

"Muriel."

"Yes."

He raises an eyebrow. I drop the book and stand.

In the front room Prue turns the pages of a book on the display table. It is a history of Quakers in North America. I watch from the doorway. She is smaller than I remember. There are lines of grey in the plaits around her ears.

She lifts her eyes and sees that I am smiling.

"Hello," she says.

I can't believe it is her. Eighteen months have passed since we were last together. In the dusty light of this shop I have imagined conversations with Prue, arguments with Prue, meetings with Prue, travels with Prue. I have felt sorry for myself and abandoned. I have felt so excited and hopeful that I half expected to burst and become joined to the world in eternity.

She hasn't moved; her right hand is still on the book.

"Well?" she asks.

There is a held-in feeling to her. Not held-back, something different, familiar. I do not have that. I know that if I open myself to the moment there is nothing that might not fall out. It is Prue after all, and it has always been so. I want to say a million things, to tell a thousand stories, but all I can manage is to step into the room. She takes her hand off the book and the pages spring up; fast at first and then slow, until the weight of the pages pulls the front cover up and down onto the face of the book. My steps across the room are quick, but the last one is slow and it slips me into Prue's space. She is grinning. As I reach her she puts her arms out and I do not stop until I am held tight.

She smells of disinfectant, ink, and the mustiness of the shop. The line that holds us in each other's minds, that binds our worlds together, has sprung back tight and

sturdy. She pushes me away from her, holds me by the shoulders, and looks me over. She turns me to each side and I do not resist.

"When did you get back?" I ask.

"Tuesday — I thought I'd see you yesterday at the hall."

"I had to finish my column — and Helen's not been well —"

"Oh?"

"I don't know what it is — she barely gets out of bed some days."

"Isn't there a baby?"

"William. He's walking now."

She lets go of me. Looks at my face for a moment more, then smiles.

"Satisfied?" I ask.

"You look well."

"Fatter."

"Healthier. How about tea?"

There is a cough behind me. Frankland's head and shoulders hover in the doorway.

"I made a pot."

"Wonderful — thank you." Prue spreads her arms wide, "Lead the way."

She follows me to the courtyard. I sit on a rusted iron bench but Prue stops on the steps. She admires the canopy of leaves and flowers between her and the sun. A goldfinch darts down through the hole around the chimney. Prue watches it, and I watch her. I remember that she is a collator and carrier of moments.

The finch lands on the table. Its head flicks left and right. It dips its beak to peck at breadcrumbs on the table, is still for a second, energy contained. We are also still. Then it hops once and takes off, circles the courtyard and leaves the way it entered.

Prue chuckles, steps down, and sits on an oak-trunk stool. There is a tray with tea things on the table.

"I've heard about this place —" she says. "I don't know why I've never been."

I pour. "You've not had time."

I push the milk across the tray and wonder where Frankland has gone, but there are only two cups. Prue pours her milk and holds out the jug to me then twists it away at the last moment, so that I have to look up at her face. She has an about-to-laugh look.

"Are you all right?" she asks, turning the jug back to me.

"Yes, of course." I pour the milk and stir. "I'm surprised."

"Sorry."

"I thought you were coming next week."

"I couldn't stay away."

I put down the spoon and lean back into the corner, between bench arm and back. I lift my tea. Her skin is sun tanned. Now that I am closer I can see lines at the corners of her eyes that are deeper than they were. I'm surprised how quiet she is. Usually Prue unleashes a torrent as soon as one meets her. Yet she has on her habitual expression, the edge of a smile, with that held-in feeling.

"I'm sorry —" I slide along the bench, closer to her. "I just — I don't know where to start."

She sips her tea. "I wanted to get back because I miss it — It gets too much — especially in summer."

"How flattering for us."

"Stop it — I miss you all more than — well you know, don't you? I passed through on the way to Holland — it got its claws in, I had to get back for the forest — the paths — you know — before Autumn sets in for good."

"I've not been in the forest for months."

"But it's only a bus ride. We'll go tramping — let the skylarks refresh our souls."

She grins. Allan Hunter, an American friend, became the butt of this joke several months earlier during a visit to England. His desperation to hear the song of an English skylark drove him to stride out of a railway station in Derbyshire during a stop-over and enquire of every person he passed which field was best for a lark. News of the locals' surprise has obviously reached as far as Prue.

"We'll have a lark," I say, and we laugh, spilling the tea, and everything is realigned.

Traffic purrs beyond the courtyard, and workmen somewhere talk about a wall. A wireless starts up: an echoing voice over tight orchestral music, rather dull and too loud.

"I wanted to be back before Sunday," says Prue. She is looking at me as if I may have an undeclared wound.

"I can't believe it." Sunday is the first gas mask day. The Government has announced that it will issue every citizen, man, woman and child, with a free gas mask as a precaution against air raids. Prue sniffs a rose and I pick a splinter from the table.

"I don't think it will come — not yet," she says.

"No?" I long for her to present me with a new and perfect piece of logic.

"It's a precaution — there isn't the will."

"Is there ever the will for war?"

"No — I mean — there isn't the will to stand by the Czechs."

We look at each other; Prue frowns. She gulps the rest of her tea and leans to pour more.

"What did they say in Holland?"

She takes my cup to fill it. "There aren't easy answers — as you would expect. The vow of truth demands Hitler's actions and rhetoric be called what they are —"

"Vile?"

"Aggressive — But we can't fail to recognise the ironies in our own behaviour or the claims of the Sudeten Germans."

"Sounds as though you had a cheery week."

She shrugs. "We must face the world as it is." The smile still plays on her lips. "Remember how we felt —" she asks, "those first days travelling with Gandhi?"

"Tired?" I say.

She laughs. "Yes — quite — and I lost my hat, and we couldn't sleep on the trains, and everywhere we went we were besieged by people?"

"I remember."

"Then the car broke down and they wanted Bapu to turn back because of the protesters — but he refused and he said he'd go on foot — because — look at him — you remember he said? — A child could knock him down he was so small but he wasn't afraid."

"And they didn't touch him."

"Exactly." She sips her tea. "I told that story in Holland — I think it's how we should think here. The question is who wields power — if we accept our weakness then we might have some power. Certainly more than if we're forced into a war we don't want."

The wireless snaps off. I drop a sugar lump into my tea, on an impulse, and grind it with the spoon as it dissolves.

"And what news from India?" I ask.

Prue beams. "Tremendous optimism, thank goodness."

"Can it last?"

The telephone rings in the shop. Frankland answers it and I can hear him talking about an H.G. Wells pamphlet. There is a dissonance in the moment; the words about the pamphlet crowd out other thoughts even though I try to hold onto them. I don't think Prue has answered me. In any case she is watching the leaves bob in the breeze.

"What time do you finish?" she asks.

"I can leave after four."

"I'll come back — I want to run some errands in the West End and go to the office."

"Do you have to?"

"I do — but you can have me for the evening if you'd like?"

I begin to gather the tea things. "Only if it's convenient," I say.

She puts a hand on my arm. I look at it. I cannot fathom that Prue is here, that this is her hand touching me, and these are our plans.

"Look at me," she says.

Her eyes dart, bright, left and right between mine.

"I'm sorry I have to go now — but let's have dinner. I want to hear about you. Not all this Hitler —" She puffs out her cheeks. "It's all anyone talks about."

"I'd like that."

"And my nephew? Will I see him?"

"Harry?"

She is surprised that I ask. I try to remember the letters — when did I last write?

"I thought I told you?"

"What?"

"Harry moved out — about a month ago."

She closes her eyes, squeezes my arm. "My nephew is a fool."

"It isn't all him —"

She looks at me again, carefully. "I don't know what you mean. He doesn't deserve you."

I shake my head. "He doesn't have me."

Later, we take the bus to Hampstead and walk up onto the Heath, past Keats' house, and down a path between brambles onto the face of the hill. Prue is quiet. When we come out into the open there are couples and families walking in the sunshine, groups of young people lounging on benches or standing in clusters smoking cigarettes. It feels hearty, like a holiday at the beach.

"How was your afternoon?" I ask.

She stands looking up. "The sky's so — startling —"

"What?"

"When you come up through the trees like that — then — smack — here it is."

"The sky?"

"Right on top of you and up close. One forgets — how wonderful." She drops her head back down, grinning.

"How was your afternoon?"

"Oh — yes. Sorry." She puts her hands deep into her pockets and hunches against the wind that sweeps over the crest of the hill. "Not easy."

"Why?"

"Everybody's tense — beholden to what happens next. We do what we can — but we must also entrust it to God."



We come to a ridge and the path forks. One side runs along the ridge top and into a copse, the other snakes away down the face of the mound onto Parliament Hill.

"Which way?" I ask.

"Keep going — I love it."

We head towards the trees. "Isn't now the time for you to be busy — to keep the pressure on for the sake of the Czechs?"

"I think so. But it's become so political — this fear of war. It's the roots that need to change — I almost feel — *almost* — that it's too late for that."

I stop and turn to her. "Who are you?"

"Don't look at me like that." She dislodges a rock with her toe and sets it rolling down the hill.

"Well? Where's my Prue?"

"No — I'm not giving up hope — of course we need to carry on writing and speaking and praying until the crisis is past but —"

There is bench nearby. I go to it, sit, cross my arms.

"We're starting to think of the next phase," she says.

The ridge hides the city from us and it feels as if we are alone, though I know the families and groups are just out of sight. Prue looks small next to her long shadow stretched out on the path. She sits beside me, leans back, runs her fingers through the long grass and wild flowers behind.

"What's the next phase?"

"I'm going to Germany — and hopefully Austria and Prague."

I know better than to ask why. I know what she will say; to listen and to talk — as usual. To build each other up with stories of non-violence and resistance, to discover the facts and tell others about them.

She plucks a dandelion and holds it in front of her, turning it around like a planet in orbit.

"Is it safe?" I ask.

"For me — probably — but I'll have to be discreet for the sake of people there."

"When do you go?"

"Early October."

"Next week?"

"The end of the week."

Flecks of woolly dandelion seed fly off in the wind and disappear. She will be gone again so soon, this may be all the time I get. The dandelion fluff catches on my skirt.

"Wouldn't you be better off here —" I say, "working on the government? I can set up something with Peter —"

"There are other people for that. My job is to travel — I'm the Travelling Secretary."

"I know — but why there?"

"How can we dispute what we don't know?"

"We know about Hitler."

"We know a good deal — why he's there, even why he's successful. But we don't know what it's like to resist him. For ordinary people."

"Successful?"

"I suppose I mean popular."

I lean forward and put my elbows on my knees, arms hanging between them. The grass around my feet has been worn down to a patch of brown.

"I thought we were going to talk about something else?" I say.

A man walks past with a dog trotting behind him. Prue slides along the bench and leans on me. I fight the urge to look at her.

"Come on Dorry — my dear Sal —" she says.

Sal is the nickname she gave me on our way to India. I turn, slowly. I am surprised to see her grinning; always surprised by Prue. She drops the dandelion and puts both her hands on my leg. "You don't think I forgot about my English Sal?"

I lean my head on her shoulder, "Stop it."

"Surely you don't need me to tell you how grateful I am for Sal? For the best ally I've ever known?"

"It doesn't hurt to be told."

She sighs ostentatiously. "Well there you are — I need you — very much — which is why I want you to come to Europe with me."

The dandelion lies on the trodden-down grass in front of the bench. I hope the wind will catch it and spread the rest of the seed over the heath before somebody steps on it.

Prue gently turns my face towards her. "Please come with me."

"To Germany?"

"Yes."

"Me?"

"Yes. It's a crucial time — crucial work."

I am drawn again to those webs spreading from the corners of her eyes. She may look older but those eyes still throw out a flash of something, fire, energy, right along those lines, to match the edge of a smile, the suggestion, the challenge, the look that is more Prue than any other. I remember how I learnt to judge what mattered based on that look. It would catch me, catapult me in a new direction. Rip a tear through the creeping

inevitability of life. And now? What is it I feel today? Prue still changes the fabric of the day; she is here and the world is no longer so old and crumbling. Even a dandelion matters more in her presence.

Yet we are changed. I am no longer her nephew's wife, except in law. I have created another sort of life for myself. I have learnt to imagine and with that to push open a sliver of possibility without Prue lending her shoulder. I have learnt to live without relying on her.

"Don't be ridiculous," I say. "What use would I be?"

Prue begins to laugh. She shakes her head.

"Shall we walk?"

I am dizzy when I stand, the world turning around me. We continue across the Heath with our shadows ahead. There was another moment like this one, walking with Prue more than five years ago, across frost-hardened fields when she asked me to go to India and I said she was crazy. We raced twigs down a stream beneath a bridge. Mine snagged somewhere and was lost but Prue's sailed out from beneath our feet bouncing along on the middle of the current. I was afraid of India then, just as I am afraid of Germany now; of discovering what I do not know that might make it impossible to continue on the path I am following.

"I do have a lot of work —" I say, "with the shop and the paper."

"I don't doubt it."

"Shantih's moved in to help with the rent — but still —"

Prue is quiet. I have the feeling she might laugh again, and this time it would be at me. She has a habit of slipping away from you without moving from her place at your side. Sometimes even mid-conversation, even as she goes on speaking, I know that

some crucial part of her has withdrawn or been withheld from me. Now she strides forward and I pull at the grass by the side of the path.

Soon we are in another copse. It is warmer. The wind barrels through the leaves like a river, but otherwise it is quieter, softer beneath the trees. The path narrows and I fall in behind Prue. I watch her back, relax into the muted air, following. Prue's shoulders are hunched. I can't hear anything except the wind and our steps. The wind and our steps; the wind and our steps — then a frantic beating and Prue stops, starts back and puts her arms up.

"What?" I shout and shield my face.

A little brown and white bird rises up in front of her, circles to the top of the trees, and disappears.

Prue looks over her shoulder. "A skylark — just for us. He was on the ground."

"We're tense."

"We shouldn't be —" she sighs, "it doesn't help."

We emerge from the copse and walk until we reach the eastern perimeter of the Heath where we follow the path down past Highgate ponds. There are children throwing stones and feeding the ducks. Two small boys crouch on the edge of the pond with their hands in the dark, still water. The reflection of clouds floats on the surface.

"If there's another war," I say, "it'll be the way we talk at Hendon — they'll suffer as much as any soldier."

"It almost makes one relieved to have no children."

"Almost."

Prue takes my hand, squeezes it. "Come along Sal."

We turn west, as if turning into another world; the big summer sun paints the view an old gold sheen. The grass could be finely blown glass from the way it shines.

Blue sky bleeds into the air lending it a shimmer like bubbles and scattering tiny rainbows that linger at the edge of my sight.

Prue puts out an arm to stop me. "Just look at it — the world wants peace."

I am not sure about this. I wonder what lurks in the scrub ready to eat the skylark, but I wait and let Prue look. She is soft on her long-missed English light and taken in by the rooftops and steeples of the city below us. To one side of the path lies a crumpled sheet of newspaper, like a wounded animal, dirty and wet. Yet the bright light bounces off it just the same as the grass and the daisies.

Prue looks at me, running a finger along her top lip.

"The sun at least doesn't discriminate," she says.

We link arms and she pulls me on.

"Will you think about next week?"

"I've got things to do."

"I need an extra head and an extra pair of eyes. I need another perspective — your perspective."

I doubt this but I pull her a little closer. "Prue and Sal together again?"

"Suggest to the chap at *The Times* you could do a special — 'Inside Hitler's Germany'."

There is a little rush and a skip in my stomach. That would be a chance, wouldn't it? She looks at me through narrowed eyes, still smiling. Was this her plan from the start?

"All right I'll see — we'll see."

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Shantih and I walk down the hill on Sunday morning. The church bells are ringing and the city looks clean and wholesome. I love days at the end of summer when the cold makes the sunlight precious. Even our shabby edge of Hampstead has a rather grand air this morning. Everything about the day is at odds with our task.

"Are you certain?" asks Shantih. She is tying a scarf around her hair as we walk to keep it from her face.

"About?"

"This morning."

"Yes — you've convinced me — the mask isn't an instrument of war."

I had argued that to accept a gas mask is to accept the protection of the government from an aggressor, essentially to accept war in my name. While Shantih agreed, she also pointed out that if there is a gas attack then our standing firm in the cloud without a mask will be of little use. We would already be at war, or would be soon after, and staying alive to work for peace would be the priority. Either way, if we accept the masks we keep our options open.

"We are the only instruments of war in the end," she says.

In front of the church at the bottom of Fortune Green Road a crush of passengers disembark three busses. We cross the street away from them and walk into the red-bricked playground of a school. There are two soldiers inside the gate. The couple before us stops, the soldiers question them. We wait, looking over their shoulders. I am surprised how many people are already here. In the far corner is a large green tent with one side rolled up open onto a dark interior. A queue snakes towards us, filling half the playground. Soldiers stand between the people and a barricade of metal trunks and boxes stacked against the wall.

The people in front move on and we step between the soldiers.

"Good morning ladies," says the one on my right, who holds a clipboard. The other, tall and slim, gazes at us without expression.

"Good morning," says Shantih.

"Could I take your name please, Miss?" asks the soldier with the clipboard. He is looking at me in a way that suggests I should be grateful for the attention.

"Mrs Dorothy Hogg," I say, slowly.

His cheeks redden. He looks down at the clipboard. "Address?"

I give it.

"Thank you Mrs Hogg." He writes something on the page. "Has your husband been delayed?"

"Sorry?"

"Is your husband coming along?"

"My husband isn't at home."

"Ah — I see — do you mind if I ask when he'll be back?"

"I do mind."

He frowns. Shantih smiles at the soldier and leans closer to me, barely a movement and the men notice nothing, but I feel the air pushed out from between our hands and I understand.

"It's just that —" the soldier flicks through the pages on his clipboard, "Mr Hogg will need to be fitted — everyone is advised to — it's for your safety —"

"Yes, I understand."

"There is one more fitting scheduled here."

"I'm sure we can arrange something."

"Shall I put him down for next week?"



I sigh and look at Shantih. "Yes — fine — put him down."

He makes a note. "And your name please?"

"Miss Shantih Pawar."

He scans his list. "Address?"

"12 Burrard Road."

"Ah —" He taps his pencil on the clipboard. "I don't have you on the list — only Mr and Mrs Hogg. Not a problem. Can you spell your name for me please?"

The people in the queue shuffle forwards. Families stand in line together; parents, grandparents, teenagers and small children. They chatter, laugh, shout at the children, and the men smoke, or stand with their hands in their pockets. They look as if they are waiting for a fete rather than a government fitting for gas masks. One man near the end of the queue has his hat in his hand and his face turned up to the sun. I want to join him, to stand beside him and enjoy the sunshine, the people, the children. There is an enchantment on the moment that stops us from thinking of the bombers and bloodshed these masks augur.

"Occupation?" the soldier asks Shantih.

"Student."

"Nationality?"

I look back at him. "You didn't ask me that?"

"You are registered." He points at his papers.

"Where's that information from?"

"The census and the register of voters."

"What about children?"

"We have a rough number from the census but parents are expected —"

"Why do you need to know these things?"

This little man with his uniform and his clipboard and his pink little face, who thinks he can ask questions about our lives, is not to blame for the bureaucracy he represents. Yet I want to make him ashamed.

"I have orders," he says, "to record who receives a mask."

The silent soldier on our other side shuffles; his belt buckle clacks against buttons, his boots squeak. Through my anger the sounds reach and catch me. I swallow. Stare at the silent soldier. He is young, I notice, even younger than George.

The first soldier is still speaking: " — have to attempt to account for all individual adults and children by family so the Government can —"

Shantih puts her arm out. "It's fine," she says. "I understand. I am Indian. A citizen of the British Empire."

She looks at me. I grope for the enchantment; it has vanished.

"Thanks you Miss. If you'd like to step over to the queue please."

We walk to the end of the line. A group of children play tag around us, weaving in and out of the adults.

"Do not think about them," says Shantih.

"This whole thing — it's an exercise in spreading fear."

She laughs as children rush between us. "It does not seem to be working."

A mother in front of us picks up a discarded child's jumper and we all creep forward towards the wall, where we will turn back on ourselves and begin again. Soon we are close enough to the tent that I can see inside, a long wooden trestle table with two soldiers behind and piles of small boxes. More soldiers measure people, give instructions, check the fit, and mark off another list. Soldiers in a school; it is just as it was before. The queue moves forward again. Each of us will try on a mask in turn.

A family inside the tent put on their masks as if adopting a strange mutation; one is an ugly long-nosed mouse, another an emaciated elephant, a space man from a comic book future. Two boys face one another, wave their arms and pretend to fight. Their masks are red and blue, unlike their parents' khaki green. They could be playing, dressed up in a toy of the moment, until they earn a clip round the head for their efforts and stand to attention. It might almost be funny if I didn't remember boys going off to war with gas masks slung over their shoulders, the boxes banging against packs and tin hats. Here is the kernel of sadness within the strange festivity of the morning.

They move off. They will step onto the street, back into the everyday world, with their boxes and their names ticked off. One more family safe and protected.

"Our Government's done their duty —" I say, "how grateful we are."

Shantih is reading a pamphlet she has taken from her pocket. She looks up at me over it, follows my gaze towards the family.

The queue moves forward and we shuffle into the next line. Another family is in the tent. Three children and a baby, mother, father, grandfather and two grandmothers. The soldiers size them up and hand over masks. Soon they stand close together, transformed. Some might call it a new stage of human development.

Only the baby is left without a mask. One of the soldiers walks to the front of the tent and calls to another outside. This one opens a trunk that stands against the wall and takes out the baby's mask. The breath rushes out of me, involuntary. The contraption is part diving suit, part rigid little medieval smock. There is a bubble that goes over the head and shoulders of the baby, and a skirt to be fastened around its waist and between the legs. A soldier in the tent helps mother to put baby inside. The child screams. The front of the bubble begins to steam up.

I feel something hit my hand. It is the pamphlet Shantih was reading. She is watching the family in the tent, biting her lip, forehead furrowed. She feels my gaze and turns, for a second we look at each other, and I want us to run. She lets the pamphlet rest against my hand.

On the side of the baby's mask is a tube like an accordion that must be pumped to circulate fresh air. Mother begins to pump, trying to soothe the baby with rocking and listen to the soldier at the same time. Two of the children — a boy and a girl of about four and five — stand staring and still. I cannot see their faces because of their blue and red gas masks, but I can see their eyes are wide. The little girl, the smaller one, reaches up a hand and takes hold of the edge of her grandfather's jacket pocket. Their older brother, no more than eight, stands with both hands in the pockets of his shorts. He looks at the floor and kicks a non-existent stone.

When the soldier is finally satisfied he nods. The family tear off their masks. The older boy drops his into its box from a height and one of the soldiers glares at him. They pick up their boxes and bags and head towards the exit.

"What a lot to carry on a normal day," says Shantih, "and if the little one is coming — someone else must have their mask so they can pump hers."

"What's wrong with us?" I ask.

"Us?"

"People."

She pushes me along with a hand on my back as the next family enters the tent.

The morning warms up and the queue grows.

There is much talk of Hitler and the Germans. I am surprised nobody says a word about China. Behind us in line are three families who arrived together. The older

people stand in a group catching up on the gossip until talk turns magnetically to the subject of war.

"When you look at what they did before — why did we expect any different?" says a man with a grey moustache that droops at the corners of his mouth.

"It's the Germans that started these air strikes, weren't it?" says another.

"When you think of all the boys who died —" adds a small woman, shaking her head.

They are quiet for a few seconds.

"It's bred into the German mind —" says the man with the moustache, "brutality — going after power — it's how they've always been."

"They want to colonise Europe."

"We'll see about that," he says.

"I say: let them have Czechoslovakia," says the woman, "but if they turn this way —"

"We'll see about that," the man repeats.

Shantih spins around before I can stop her.

"Excuse me," she says.

"Yes?" The man with the moustache is tall and fat, more than twice as wide as her. His voice is loud, its tone an accusation. The rest of the group falls silent. Even the children look up and stop running.

Shantih doesn't show anything in her face; it is only her eyes that let her emotion escape. She is angry, perhaps, but when she looks at me it is sadness that I feel rushing from her eyes into my chest.

"I overheard your conversation —" she says, level, calm. "I just wanted to remind you of the thousands of German children who were starved by the allied blockade during and after the war."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

Shantih does not immediately answer. She thinks, checks her anger. I dare to hope she will turn around and leave it at that. Why does she have to do this? Even as I wonder, I suspect that Prue would do the same, though perhaps she would find a joke to make. Perhaps that is not always possible.

"Well?" demands the man. The others laugh. The children turn back to their game.

Her answer is quiet. "War does not bring out the best in a nation. You cannot judge a man a brute based on his race."

"Are you German missy?"

She frowns, "I'm Indian."

"Ah — well — quick to bite the hand that feeds you, aren't you?"

"Not at all."

"You wouldn't fare well under Hitler — you should appreciate that — he don't have much time for inferior races."

"What — he considers — inferior races."

"That's what I said."

I take a sudden deep breath and force myself forward. "Rather like you then?" My voice sounds too loud. The children look over their shoulders.

"Excuse me?" The man frowns. He says it as if he doesn't understand at all.

"From what you said — it sounds like you consider Indians an inferior race — and Germans as well for that matter. Didn't you say that? They're militarist by breeding?"

I couldn't quite fathom it," I try to sound unbothered, "but the gist seems to be that — you — don't have much time for your so-called inferior races."

"Are you German?"

One of the soldiers standing among the boxes by the wall is watching us. He tilts his head. My imagination turns over — I see us marched off, I see us in the papers, Shantih deported.

I look at the man. His face is red.

"Of course I'm not German," I say.

"Then I suppose you're married to some conchie — if they're even capable of marriage." His group laughs. He thinks he's on a roll. "Don't talk to me about Germans. What do you know? Ask any man who was in the war—"

"I'd ask my brothers but none of them came home."

His jaw quivers. He opens his mouth and closes it like a great red carp.

"Loos. Arras. Flanders." I hold up three fingers.

Nobody makes a sound. In my peripheral vision I see the soldier, the one who looked over, step towards us. The man jerks closer; I think he will hit me. I fight the urge to step back, suddenly aware of Shantih very near, the smell of lavender and soap.

"I'm sure they're very proud of you." The man spits as he speaks.

I do not move. He steps back and looks at his friends. They do not meet his gaze. His shoulders sag and he seems smaller. I wonder what I look like, if my brothers would recognise me.

"We cannot fight injustice with injustice," says Shantih, speaking to me, her eyes bright, brilliant, alive with that truth.

The man grunts. She turns to him. "We people of goodwill — we must stand together: British, Indian — German."

She steps forwards and puts out her hand.

He looks down at it as if he has never seen a hand before. He does not move. The soldier is only five feet from us. Suddenly a young woman from the group behind the man leans over, grasps Shantih's hand and shakes it. The soldier sees the handshake and turns around. We are safe. I feel a smile stretch across my face. Everything recedes under a rush, a feeling like knowing a great secret.

"Tell me," the young woman asks, "how did you come to be in London?"

I cannot listen; I hear only the beating of my heart. Somewhere else I might shout and jump and run, but in the playground I look at my feet. Shantih frowns and talks to the young woman. I bite my cheeks to restrict the smile. Knowledge breaks over me. This rushing gulf around our little island — this — is one of the feelings they give the name 'love' to. I didn't know a thing about it half an hour ago, and now we are perched here, together, and it is ours, and whatever surge threatens to wash us away must first cross the gulf.

We are almost at the front of the queue. There is a strong smell of rubber. I look into the tents and I do not feel fear or horror or any of the dramatic emotions I have imagined. It is not because the weight of watching a mother learn how to dress her baby in a gas mask is gone. I doubt that will ever leave. Yet isn't it something, at least, that Shantih can turn an argument into something new and flood me with relief? That an ugly moment can become a cause for wonder? If I can feel this now, when yesterday I could not have imagined or described it, then can we not hope something better for the future even if we cannot picture it?

I step into the tent.

My throat is dry. The playground is full of people and I cannot shake the feeling that every one is watching me. Last night I lay in bed and thought about putting on the



gas mask. The thought was a hand around my throat, an uncontrollable urge to cough. Now the soldier holds it out to me. My hands are shaking. I slide it over my head and pull down, so the respirator sits above my mouth and nose. I do not flinch. Everything goes quiet. I am not breathing. I make myself start. The sound wavers. I push my shoulders back and look the soldier in the eyes. He ducks away, pulls on the straps at the back of my head. Tugs the edges of the mask to check the fit. Then he nods, looks over my shoulder, and signals for Shantih.

I stand for a few seconds with the mask on. It is over. Another soldier picks up the cardboard box and holds it out. I remove the mask and it slinks back into the box.

We leave carrying identical packages. The air is warm and the street is empty. Shantih whistles. She begins to skip up the hill then stops and turns. Waves to me.

"What? What are you thinking?" she asks, when I catch up with her.

"About going to Germany."

"With Prue?"

"Yes — I want to go."

She falls into step with me. "I thought you said it was a waste of time?"

"Because Bertie doesn't want an article? It was never really that."

She unties her scarf and shakes out her hair.

"What changed your mind?" she asks.

"I don't know — I could have refused the mask." I hold it up.

"But we decided not to — it is not an instrument of war."

"Or we're afraid?"

She gives me a long look. The sun is behind me so she has to squint and it closes my way into her.

"It's too early for that," she says.

"To be afraid? Why?"

She shrugs. "There is no war."

"The things we call wars are only the final crisis," I say. "We've been there before."

"Are you afraid to go to Germany?"

"Shouldn't I be?"

"I don't know — I cannot imagine."

"I'm afraid of being afraid — of running away. I don't want to be someone who only talks or writes — who only does what makes a good article. It's backwards — I need to go first, then write — or not."

Shantih nods.

"I almost didn't come to India out of fear."

"And other reasons — no? But I am glad you did."

I hand her my gas mask so I can fumble in my bag for the keys.

"This is different —" I look at her.

"Yes?"

"Everything is."

I am standing in the doorway, looking down on her from the top of the stairs that lead into the house.

"So you go to understand —" she says, "not to write?"

"I'm going because — not to go is to accept that the future is already decided."

"Or is out of our control." She looks away. "I wish I could come with you."

"I know — but it's not safe." We step into the house. Shantih closes the door and I turn to face her. "And I need you here. For whatever comes next."

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I slide the newspaper across the table; Prue looks down at it without moving. She has a shawl wrapped around her shoulders and holds it together with both hands under her chin.

"I don't want it," she says.

"Peace for our time — apparently."

She raises her eyebrows and looks out of the window at the fields of Belgium flashing past. The day began with bruised clouds over the grey water of the channel, but it has brightened. Clusters of white sail across the cold, colourless sky, making shadows dance on the land beneath.

There is a French couple in the carriage with us, and a young Englishman with a full beard that looks as if it is stolen from an older man.

"Peace for our time?" the Englishman repeats.

He looks too young to have fought in the war, but you can never quite tell. Prue slides the paper along to him. The French couple recoil. The man snatches it up and turns in his seat, looking sideways at them. He opens the paper, crosses his legs, and raises it, blocking himself from view. Prue takes a handful of grapes from her bag and offers them to me. I shake my head.

"You look well," she says.

"You mentioned that last week."

"I'm pleased the absence of my nephew isn't affecting your health."

We laugh.

"Poor Harry."

"Did you see him?" I ask.

"No — Kathleen said he's left Richard's office again —"

"Roke told me."

"He's very defeated isn't he?"

"You could say that."

She extracts more grapes and a few nuts. "But you wouldn't?"

"I don't think Harry's failed — he just thinks he has."

She chews. "I see."

"What?"

The newspaper flutters and the Englishman's face appears, frowning.

Prue raises her eyebrows again and grins. "So you're saying Harry's failure is a state of mind?"

"Am I?"

"I think you're probably right —" she says. "Isn't all failure a state of mind?"

"What if you fail an examination?"

"God doesn't ask for success — he asks for faith."

"So believing you've passed the test is as good as passing it?"

The Englishman fidgets. Prue laughs. "You're a pain," she says, inspecting something from her bag, which may or may not be a raisin.

I have an unexpected urge to take her hands, to feel skin, blood beneath. My own hands are pale and thin on the table. The skin has gathered and loosened around the knuckles recently so they look older than my thirty-four years.

"I don't know how to help Harry," I say.

"No." Prue chews. "Me neither. Sometimes what people really need we don't have the power to give."

Fields flash past. "So we shouldn't bother?" I ask.

"Don't be so literal," she grins. "He'll find his way. Trust God with him."

The man folds over the pages of the paper. I find myself looking at a photograph, bobbing up and down with the motion of the train, Chamberlain beaming out. His hand is in the air, showing off his treaty. There is a crowd around him. I imagine the heat of them, the smell, the shouts, the relief rushing from the outside to the centre, the Prime Minister, and then back out again. He could have been a little more circumspect, couldn't he?

"Is it safe to take that paper into Germany?" I ask.

"It's hardly a secret," says Prue.

The French couple and the Englishman disembark at Brussels, nobody else gets into our carriage. Prue sleeps. She can sleep anywhere now, after all her travelling. I fold up the newspaper and put it in my bag. I tap the table; the rhythm of the train weighs on me, too regular, too perfect. As we roll out of the city Prue opens her eyes.

"They walked all across here — on the peace tramp, you know?"

"Here?"

"Wherever there was fighting or occupation."

As the last houses give way to farmland again, I imagine soldiers crawling through the crops on their bellies. I close my eyes but the soldiers remain. They lie in the dirt and their limbs begin to vanish. They look up at me. Fading into dust and crops. I squeeze my eyes tight and a soldier with no legs turns his face towards me. He looks like David, except it isn't him because this soldier has blue eyes —

"Want some tea?" I ask, standing quickly.

"Always."

When I return Prue is reading her Bible.

"What's today's text?"

I put the tea on the table.

"Thank you. There was never a better time for The Beatitudes."

"Is that so?"

"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called children of God."

"There you go — you're safe."

We pass a village. Labourers are ploughing the fields, their sleeves rolled up, horses dark against the rusty sun so they seem to be made of soil.

"Did you know Gandhi gave an entire lecture series on The Beatitudes?"

"What?"

"One whole lecture on that verse alone," she says.

"I was looking at the fields."

She turns to the window, as though seeing them for the first time in the light of the sunset.

A forgotten memory pokes at me: a tune, a bonfire and a song, the sun setting over harvest fields. I begin to hum. Prue looks up and narrows her eyes, smiling. I keep going. I don't even know that I know the tune I am humming, but Prue does. As I reach the end of the melody she sings, high and fragile like a child, "John Barleycorn must die."

"Yes — I think that's it."

"Didn't you know?" She looks as though she is about to say something else but changes her mind. I put my head back and look away to where the fields blend into one another as they pass. What if the men in the field are only an illusion, like the soldiers, and nothing is real but this carriage, slowly pushing its way across Europe?

I cross my arms and close my eyes. I don't want to open them until we reach Germany.

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Our arrival in Cologne reminds me of the day after a birthday; you expect the new epoch to be marked but it is not, and life continues as it always has. Most railway termini resemble one another so I should not be surprised. There is smoke, dirt, luggage, and a sense of anonymity that I enjoy. Only in the colonies is anonymity replaced by alarming conspicuousness. At one station in India two Indian men were ordered to follow Prue and I around with a pair of armchairs, in case we should feel the need to rest (an embarrassment made all the worse by the fact that we were travelling with a number of Indians).

When the train stops we gather our things. Neither of us has the energy to hurry, but I am relieved that my nerves are exhausted. The dream of the journey is over. I step from the carriage into the familiar routine of disembarkation.

We wait in the centre of the station forecourt and try to look ordinary. On each platform are armed guards with the Nazi symbol on their shirts. Prue looks at them. I do not. We are expecting to be met, but we have no names, addresses, or contact details. This is a form of protection both for us and our hosts. I feel as though I am being watched. I struggle to remember how I usually stand, what I do with my hands. Nothing feels right. Prue eats yet more fruit from her bag. She holds out a handful of hazelnuts and I shake my head.

She frowns at me. "For goodness sake — stand still. You look like a sick dog."

"Miss Lester?" The voice comes from an older man in long coat. He is standing beside me. How did he got so close?

"I'm Muriel Lester." Prue looks at him for a second without moving. "Can I help you?"

He hands her a postcard. There is nothing written on it, but the picture is of a camping spot in a pine forest.

She smiles. "Shall we get moving?"

Our first meeting is the following evening in a zoo, in the house of the man who cares for the large mammals. Every time the door is opened it lets in the air of repressed wildness; the smell of soil and animals and raw meat, and a heavy quiet uncommon in a city.

When the group is complete there is us, our host, and five others, including all that remains of Cologne's once active FOR. There are both men and women, some smart, others shabby. Each gives a different picture of life beyond this hot little room in the pool of darkness that is the zoo. They share a gritted look, twitches, a fascination with the curtains and the door. They know of Prue, two have met her before, but they look at me and shut their mouths. Even being here with her is not enough to break the ice of their suspicion. I'm surprised, and a little hurt, until a detailed biography serves as endorsement enough to begin the thaw.

"Forgive us — Mrs Hogg — but we have learnt to be careful." This is the first thing spoken in English. Prue has been carrying the conversation in French, which I struggle to follow.

"I understand."



"It is disgusting." The speaker is a middle-aged man. His cheeks are grey with stubble and the collar of his shirt is also grey. He wears no tie, and his boots are covered in mud. His name is Felix. He tells us he was a teacher, but he lost his job when he refused to give the Hitler salute in school. Later, he was detained after two SS men saw him ripping anti-Jewish notices from shop windows. He rubs his eyebrows as he tells us, twists in his seat.

"I am no saint but I can see that Hitler promotes violence between people — here, between neighbours — surely this will lead to war in the end."

Prue nods slowly. "Is that what people want?"

"No — I think not. They believe he will bring prosperity and peace. Why should they not believe it? It is what he says — and now they have prosperity —"

"Everyone prospers?"

"Not everyone. For me this is not possible. I cannot work — nobody will employ me — so I must grow food for my son and myself — and we have friends who are kind to us. We do not stay in the city, we have a cottage in the woods. It is beautiful but we are poor."

"You're very brave," I say. I mean it but it comes out in a rush and I feel my cheeks redden.

He shakes his head and shrugs. "I have no choice. But vegetables are better than hate — no?"

Everybody laughs. Prue watches Felix long after he has stopped talking.

The evening is a catalogue of such stories, about those present and others whom they know. Prue takes part in this, sharing the tales of people she has met whenever one springs to mind, often Indians, or Chinese, Japanese, Americans. The curtains are drawn and the fire is strong. The eight of us fill the room and the heat makes my head light. I

cannot remember which parts of which stories go together, or with which face. The talk moves between English and French, with moments of German, and after a time I let go of the thread.

Instead, I watch the quiet woman in the corner. She has hair the colour of sand, long and loose, so it covers the edges of her face and falls over her shoulders. She does not speak, and the longer she stays silent the stronger the desire to hear her voice becomes. She wears a heavy dress that buttons up high to the neck with closely stitched embroidery over the fabric. It looks expensive. She sits upright and does not look at the speakers. She raises a cup to her lips; there is not an inch of extra movement. Precise and minimal, it suggests careful thought and practice. Definite, purposeful, and yet somehow the spareness suggests a gulf of despair no adornment can fill. I have to stop myself from mirroring the action.

Prue finishes a story about Kagawa, the Japanese doctor and pacifist. The fire drops in on itself at the centre. Our host stands beside it with a cigar. He looks at the woman in the corner. She has still not spoken.

"Anja," he says. And then something in German.

She doesn't move her gaze from the fire. Prue crosses her legs and waits. The room becomes quieter, as if we are drifting away from the city, the zoo lifting like an ark, everything drawn to the silence of the woman. Then Anja raises her eyes to our host. Only her eyes, there is no other movement.

She answers him in German, her voice like rain, suddenly, hard and fast.

He sucks on his cigar.

Anja turns to Prue and begins to speak in English. "I am no pacifist — I would not trust myself. I never resisted before. I did not think of it."

Prue sits forward. "None of us know what we might do. I believe God takes us on a journey — where, when, why — is always different."

"And the narrow way?"

"Is a path through each of our lives."

Anja does not move. They face each other: hands on laps, straight backs leaning forwards, necks arched down, eyes up, similar in age and build, but Prue's hair is darker and where Anja embodies stillness, Prue is always motion. I hold my breath.

"Have you ever been married?" Anja asks.

"No. Have you?"

"My husband is a Jew." She leans back in her chair. "Before the war he was a historian, a husband, a father, a brother, a humanist, a violinist, and a German. Now he is a Jew — nothing else."

"What happened?" asks Prue.

"He lost his job of course — they have broken up my family — he is forbidden to see us. I do not know where he lives, if he survives day to day. Every second or third week we meet — we have lunch, perhaps dinner, but usually lunch. It is a risk. There are some friends who help — they bring messages but he does not dare return. I do not want the children at risk."

She moves suddenly. I think she is starting to crumble, but in her even this is a tiny movement, a slip forward.

"Are your children very young?" asks Prue.

"Not young enough."

"What do they say?"

"They are angry. They never felt they were Jewish before — they barely knew it. Now they must forget this identity they have discovered or they will not survive. They are reckless — they want to fight, but they are only boys and girls."

"Sometimes —" says Prue, "the age of the spirit gets ahead of the body."

"What can I do? I told them — let me resist. Not you. Wait a little — grow a little more."

"And what do they do?"

"I don't know — I cannot watch them all hours. And I know it will not last — either they fight or they hate themselves. What can I expect? They are his children also."

Prue frowns, but does not look away.

The air in the room is tight. The fire embers now. Ghosts hang between us, smoke from cigars and cigarettes. I feel as if I should say something but my body aches and words have fled into the night. Prue is here. What could I say to this woman that she could not? I have nothing of use here. Outside a lion roars. Caged birds scream the alarm.

"Do you enjoy music?" Anja asks Prue.

"Very much."

"My husband is a musician — amateur but he has many friends. Please come to my home tomorrow. I will ask a well known pianist to play. My husband would want it, his friends will do it for him even in his absence. We will have kaffee und kuchen — if you will come?"

Prue looks at our host and he nods.

"We'd love to."

"This way you will remember us."

"Where would I be if I forgot people?" says Prue.

"You would be normal."

"But music and cake will bring us closer — we English are easily won over with cake."

Anja smiles for the first time and we all laugh. I may have nothing to offer, but we are here.

"I will pray for your family," says Prue.

"I am not a praying woman, Miss Lester."

"But you believe there's something stronger than violence?"

"I hope — I am a mother, I must hope."

Prue nods and pulls her shawl tight about her shoulders

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The next morning our host's sister arrives to pick us up. She will entertain us until teatime. We have been warned: this sister knows nothing of her brother's allegiances or of the reason for our visit. We are to be the English cousins of another zookeeper.

She steps quickly into the kitchen. Her hair is pulled back tight in a bun at the back that sits like a giant blister. She has red cheeks, dark hair, and a matching tweed skirt and jacket. Her face sags. She is at least as old as Prue. Her name is Frieda. She nods to us, once each, and turns before we can offer hands to shake. She waves a hand towards the zoo gates.

"Come — come!"

As we walk she speaks in schoolroom English. Prue answers her and asks questions about the city. On our way out we pass a line of silent children in uniform waiting for the zoo to open. They shift from foot to foot and squint between the bars of the gate like little captives.

We take a cab to the city centre. The silver-grey of the sky seems to merge and spill onto everything. Grey people rush along grey pavements with their heads down and grey coats tight against the wind. We pass parks and streets of houses. Sometimes warehouses pop out at the end of narrow streets. The cathedral spire flashes between buildings.

Suddenly the air opens out.

We are alongside a vast open field, flat and empty, sand blowing across its surface. All the streets around lead to this circle of nothing.

"What's is it?" I ask.

"The Maifield," answers Frieda.

Prue looks sideways at me. "For the rallies." Frieda nods, her shoulders back and head up, hands crossed over the bag on her lap. It seems her brother keeps his activities secret for good reason.

Our first stop is the city hall with its grand facade and row of flags. We make the appropriate noises, but it is unexceptional. Frieda tells us how nice it is not to see French flags flying over the hall as they had during the occupation. I look along the street. There is a street cleaner wheeling his bin, but almost nothing for him to pick up. As we move off I notice a market down a side street. I pull on Prue's arm. She points it out to Frieda who looks at her watch, but we turn down the street before she can protest, plunging into voices and laughter. The people argue over prices and call out to us as we pass. The meat on a butcher's grill gives off a salty, malt smell. Prue wrinkles her nose

so I order a sandwich and show it to her, squeezing the warm meat until the juices run out over my hands and stain the bread.

"I'm probably just out of the habit," she says, buying some oranges. The man behind the fruit stall winks at me.

Frieda is waiting at the end of the road with her arms crossed.

"Looks like we're for it," says Prue. "Come on."

We rejoin our guide and follow obediently where she herds us: museum, school, medieval squares, Roman ruins, even the bus station must be viewed and appreciated. Everywhere hang the same interminable flags.

Several hours later my feet hurt. The day has turned mild so I sweat beneath my clothes but the sunlight gives the city back its charm. I stop to look up at a tall, wonky house with a mural painted on the side. It shows a path coming out of a forest with a pied piper leading a train of elves and fairies, little horned men, and magical halflings. Someone has painted a Nazi armband and a moustache on the pied piper. Ahead of me Frieda stops and looks over her shoulder. I imagine Prue waving it off or making some excuse. I deliberately turn away from them; I will stay here and look for as long as I want. I will make her wait. I want to unsettle this paradigm of Germanic pride. She talks with Prue, who pulls on her cape and drops her head as if struggling to hear. There is a weight to her movement that focuses the moment. Pulls me out of myself. I walk slowly to join them, but they move off before I draw level.

We stop for lunch at a cafe on a square. The sun beats through the window. Outside school children sit on the edge of a fountain and drag their hands through the water. A man on a bench eats sandwiches from a box. It feels like the tail of summer. All of the children's ties are done up and most of their shorts bear the remains of a well-ironed crease. I am pleased to see children so well turned out, but I wonder where the

others are, the untidy, unhealthy, uncooperative children. Perhaps they do not have them.

When Frieda leaves to make a telephone call Prue tells me they spoke about her family while I was looking at the mural. Her husband is a magistrate and her sons are a lawyer and an accountant. She told Prue that during the war, because of the Allied blockade, she had to sneak out at night and catch the train to the countryside to barter for food on the black market.

"Why at night?" I ask.

"So her husband wouldn't know — or the neighbours?"

"Shame then — not fear?"

"I expect fear as well." Prue frowns at me, betraying something for a moment. Frustration, confusion, surprise? We are out of step. I take a sip of water and try to understand. An image of the Kingsley Hall floor reels across my mind.

"It's all one —" Prue goes on, "a respectable family shouldn't be breaking the law, should they?"

She raises her eyebrows and goes quiet. I think that she is watching the children in the square.

"They look healthy enough," I say.

"Who?"

"The children."

"Oh — yes. Quite."

"Here she comes."

"Try to be nice." This is as close to a rebuke as one is likely to get from Prue.



Frieda sits, folds her hands one over the other on the tablecloth. There is a stain on the white and she moves her hands to cover it. Prue smiles. Frieda nods. I look at my cutlery.

"I feel —" Prue stops, coughs. "I want to apologise."

"Pardon?" Frieda's voice is high, wavering. I look back up. I am as surprised as she is. I have no idea what Prue is about to say. Frieda returns my look and I make an effort to see her. She is small, with wide round eyes, body held tight, braced, no longer young, but lashed down onto the world, staring into the storm.

Prue says, "I am sorry for the blockade. For what you endured."

Frieda's face pinches shut.

Prue puts her hand out. It hovers, and then settles on Frieda's folded hands.

"Why do you say this?" Frieda asks.

"Because I can," says Prue.

"It is a joke?" she says this in French, her English failing.

"Not at all. I'm sorry my government acted in such a way — even in war — I was ashamed."

The two women take each other in. There is the possibility still of either rejection or reconciliation. I am far outside of their words, beyond the gravity that holds them together — I am writing myself out of this — yet still, I see that the moment is an art, that in it exists the possibility of infinite new worlds, an eternity of rebellions, loud and quiet, of destruction, rebuilding, and changing purpose. I am ambushed by reverberations of this image: Prue and Frieda, Prue and Anja the night before, Shantih and the old man on gas mask Sunday, Ben and the communist leader at Kingsley Hall. It all furls back to a single moment when I pulled open a curtain and saw an Indian girl pounding spices in a hot courtyard.

I swallow hard. Here is cutlery, water, a waitress sliding past between chairs.

Prue waits.

Eventually, Frieda nods. "Thank you," she says and looks at her hands.

-----

After lunch Frieda takes us round the cathedral then drops us at the address specified for our tea party. She has the sense to leave when we have barely stepped through the gate and hurry back to the main road. She looks back once over her shoulder, but reveals nothing. She does not know who we are to meet. Perhaps something has alerted her to our subversion, or perhaps in this Germany it is always better not to know. It is a clean street, but all the streets in Cologne are clean. The houses are large with iron railings around front gardens, cold to touch and running to a point sharp enough to draw blood. Mature trees arch over the road and shade the pavements. They are dropping their leaves and the street rustles behind us as we climb the stairs to the door.

Inside it smells of wood polish and cake. A maid leads us to a large drawing room at the back of the house. The first thing I see of this room is light slicing across the floor from full height doors open onto a garden. A golden burst of warmth and colour. It reminds me of standing by Highgate Ponds only last week, the grass sparkling like glass. A dark shape sits at the heart of the room. My eyes adjust. It is a dark, highly polished grand piano. Beside it a familiar figure; tall, hunched, slim, pale faced and serious. He bobs his head at me. Anja introduces us to her friends, including the eminent pianist who is a springy little man in his seventies. Finally we come to the tall man, the one I know.

"This is Eric Katzberg —" Anja says, "he begged to be invited when I said you were my guests."

"Very nice to meet you." Prue shakes his hand.

"And you, Miss Lester. Mrs Hogg — I have already met — at your own Kingsley Hall."

He smiles, just a little but it is affectionate. The memory floods back.

"Yes of course — Eric — good to see you."

He shakes my hand and bobs his head again.

Prue grins with her arms wide.

"Eric lives in Bow," I say. "But what're you doing here? Isn't it dangerous?"

"I received my British passport — I am fortunate — but I thought: I cannot sit and wait for what will happen. Let me use this to help my friends — if I can — to help my people."

I remember the night I met Eric; the beat of the protesters feet, the click of draughts counters, the room full of people and steaming tea, the shuffling quiet of the prayer circle.

"What about The Communists?"

He looks away towards his hand on the polished surface of the piano. In the light from the doors the dark wood resembles the marbled top of a puddle. He seems to hold his hand there, precisely, barely any weight to it. I imagine his fingers dimpling the surface of the water. Anja watches him without moving — they share that economy of movement.

"I put my people first." He looks back up. "The Party cannot help them here."

Food is brought in, the source of the wonderful smells. There is coffee, and tea for us, delicious sweets. A warm wind teases the curtains. These seem small things but

the pleasure of them binds us, as our mood loosens. Prue catches it, perfectly, as she is so apt to do, and begins to tell funny stories from Bow during the war. First she tells of the mobs who came out thinking to terrorise German shop owners, and how Prue and Nellie stood between the people and a particular German woman, so that the Londoners didn't know what to do but swipe Prue's hat, and the policeman, who was watching the scene unfold while eating an orange, arrested Prue for disturbing the peace and left the mob to go about their business. Prue looks around, mock-serious, and tells how the hat re-appeared on her doorstep the next morning, neatly wrapped in tissue paper. Then there was the night when a group of regulars from a local pub staged a late-night protest march to Kingsley Hall after too many drinks and Prue ended up walking their drunk leader the few streets to her house. We all laugh and I am surprised that the creases of Eric's face fill out and he becomes handsome.

After tea the eminent pianist is invited to play. He removes his frayed jacket and sits at the piano. The curtains buck. He asks us to name our favourite composers; Bach and Beethoven. He is pleased. We sit back. We wait.

The music begins, almost secretly, from the silence, and builds, until it is impossible to deny its presence. It slinks out into the garden, steps and hops, then leaps and spirals up the trunk of a tree, jumps between branches, up and on up again, up to the tip of the highest leaf and from there up, to bust into a thousand flaming pieces so now the tiny notes of fire float and fly and tumble out over the city of Cologne.

The pianist's face is smooth, but he is not there. With his eyes tight shut he is in the music that charges, faster and faster, out through the open door and away from the house. We want to catch it; us with our closed eyes, or peering dreamily through doors or at the books that line the wall. Anja stands behind the piano and leans on the wall. She looks over the pianist's head to a place far off. Her hands are together, the fingers of

one hand turning a ring on the other. Prue sits with eyes closed and arms open, one on either side of her armchair.

I think of the places we visited this morning. I think of them with this music, the bright little flames of it, settling down upon them. The city hall; the cathedral; the museum; the bus station; the square with the fountain and the schoolchildren, and the bright light of the sun, and the dancing curtains, and Frieda, smiling.

The music slows, begins to withdraw. It leaves itself in the quiet spaces between its parting phrases, so that in the end we cannot remember what was played and what was imagined but the distinction is unimportant. We begin to look at one another, to shift our weight. I shuffle my feet on the floorboards. The room has become intimate.

Later, when the party is breaking up and I am saying goodbye to a young woman, a singer, I feel fingers on my arm. I turn expecting Prue, but it is Eric.

He withdraws his hand. "Forgive me."

"No, not at all — I was going to —"

He hesitates against the flow of people leaving the house. I take a few steps back into the room.

"We shouldn't all go out at once," he says.

"I suppose not."

"But I wanted to speak with you."

"Yes?"

"With you in particular."

"Here I am."

We are near the piano again. I want to touch it, but now that feels impossible. We have put on our jackets and overcoats, our outside selves. The piano, the music, the

togetherness — these things are dangerous now. I feel it, and I've only been here two days. It shocks me. I cross my arms and hold onto my elbows.

Eric is looking at his hands. "I want to ask something of you."

"Of course."

He lifts his head. The sun has moved on and the light is cold. It falls in grey circles beneath Eric's glass-grey eyes.

"Really — please — ask."

"I want you to help us."

"Us?"

"My people."

"I —" I stop myself. Start again. "How?"

"Write."

"Yes — but what?"

"I've seen what you write in the newspaper —"

"That's nothing."

"No — you know what it is or you would not do it."

His stillness makes me uneasy. He is right about my motives, but writing is not, in itself, good or bad, useful or futile, is it? It is a matter of reception, and that you cannot control. I am tangled in the web of my feelings.

"It's different —" I say. "India's different."

"But many things are the same: the facts are known but they are unreal — because they have no people in them. "Jews" they say. "Who are these Jews? They're not like me." It's better to say: the Jews are your friends, your neighbours, your teacher, we are just like you. You see?"

"Yes."

"It makes a possibility — does it not?"

"Yes."

"So you will do it?"

"My editor doesn't want that sort of thing — not about Germany."

"What?"

"I suggested it before."

"I don't understand."

"I can't say I do — but the line is that we don't "inflamm German sentiments". So  
—"

Eric breathes out and the action pulls his shoulders forward.

"It's going to get worse," he says, very quietly.

I put my hand on his arm.

After a while he reaches into his jacket and pulls out a package about three  
inches thick and wrapped in brown paper. He holds it out to me.

"Please take this."

"What is it?"

"Documents — records and letters — from people here."

"From Jewish people?"

"Mostly. But there are others who suffer."

"Letters to you?"

"Some of them — others were given to me. We have been keeping records as we  
can. It is not safe to have them here but if we burn them they are gone."

"They're proof of crimes?"

"Perhaps — they are at least proof that we existed."

I look at the package. I want to ask for more detail but I know it is unwise.

"What do you want me to do with them?"

"Take them to England. And then — do whatever you think is best."

I put out my hand and he places the package on the palm. It is heavier than I expect, and warm from the closeness of his body.

"I'm going to write something anyway." The words are out before I can stop them, before I can consider what they mean, and straight away a new world hovers over the old.

Eric nods. "Why?"

"The story should be heard."

"But —"

"There are still some editors who would relish it."

He closes his eyes briefly and pulls himself up.

"And if these letters should fall into the hands of a publisher?" I ask.

He shrugs. "It may help. They are yours now — to protect."

"I'll do what I can."

"Thank you."

"Don't — it's the least I can do. If there's anything else —"

"I cannot be in contact."

"Oh —"

"It's dangerous."

"Yes — but there might be —"

"It's not for me. It's for the others." He steps over to the garden doors that are still open, adjusts his jacket. "Anja and the others — they run great risks. We cannot be connected."



He looks out on the garden. His back twitches once, then he is still. He says no more. I feel that I have said something wrong along the way, or he does not believe I will write the article. Everything seems caught in thick and sticky traps. I want to tell him he can trust me.

"Goodbye Mr Katzberg."

He turns back, standing in the doorway. A gust of wind blows his hair out around his head for a second and then dies. He looks thinner than ever, and flat, as if he is cut out from the pale blue and charcoal evening sky.

"I hope we meet again," I say.

He says nothing.

I slide the package into my bag and feel the weight of it hanging there. I turn the long way so as to see the piano once more. The clouds are reflected in its polished surface and in the centre is the dark shadow of Eric.

Then I walk into the corridor to rejoin Prue.

-----

Back at the zoo, as soon as I can be alone, I take the parcel from my bag and examine it. The whole thing is wrapped in wax paper, perhaps to disguise it, and tied with string. I unwrap it. There are ten large envelopes each bulging with documents and smaller envelopes. I lay them, one after another, on my bed, listening all the time for steps or voices outside. I share this small bedroom with Prue but she should be downstairs. I told her I needed to rest. I don't know why I did that. I had not planned to keep the package

secret from her. When I left Eric my intention was to tell her as soon as it was safe — but I didn't.

Now I study the envelopes in more detail. There looks to be at least two hundred pages. How many are letters and how many other documents I cannot tell. I think of my articles, every week for over a year, still fewer words than lie before me.

Since the first article and the evening of Shantih's talk at Kingsley Hall I have felt, for the most part, happy with the work. Often I feel conscious of a greater story, of more meaning, hovering beyond or between the lines of my work. At first I thrashed against this, but I have come to accept it. Perhaps I am another Lily Briscoe, grappling to put vision on canvass only to fail and have the work rolled up or hung in the attic. Or maybe all artists feel this way. All in fact who feel, who see, anything beyond themselves and their understanding in the world; who are moved by life and wish to tell another that they are moved. It sounds bleak, this reconciliation, but it is not. A purpose has started to shape out of the shadows of all the nonsense I was once told about how my life would, or should be. This may be why I hesitated to come here with Prue. I have my own life now. Though in the end I could not resist the chance to witness Prue's art. With all the hysteria, wide eyes and gas masks, headlines and treaties, I need her still.

Now I have taken one risk, why not another? To write about this, to put my head out of the trench. It will be to risk the position I have carved out for myself. To risk everything, perhaps, but then we are never really as safe as we think we are.

I pick up one of the envelopes. The paper is soft and creased, not new. It smells of vinegar and wet dog. I pull out a sheet. The writing is hard to decipher. It is in German and a heavy, close script, but I see it is a list of some sort. There are columns, names, and notes. I will need to find a translator I can trust. Frankland will know someone. Next I take up another envelope. It is addressed in capitals all the same size,

the spaces between letters and words perfectly regular. I slide out a letter, this one written in Hebrew. Characters spin across the page like a sandstorm. I cannot read it of course, but I feel it. Unlike the capitals that addressed the envelope the writing on the letter rises and falls, pushes hard from one word to another, bending into the wind. I want them to be words of resistance, but they could just as plausibly be the script of despair, or a rushed note of fear. Whatever it means, the letter grabs me; a voice crying out in the desert.

Footsteps on the landing. I freeze. If Prue were to come in now I would have no choice but to tell her everything. A knock.

"Will you want dinner?" Prue's voice from outside.

"I'll be down in a minute," I answer, trying to sound sleepy rather than jumpy. I do not want to tell her. Not yet. I hear her walk away and down the stairs.

It is not that I am afraid Prue will take over responsibility for the papers. She has her own job as Travelling Secretary and she is not one to feel jealous of the limelight. Unlike me, she believes unshakeably that we all, each, have our roles to fulfil, large and small, through life. I am more inclined to think luck has a hand in it and you make the best of where you find yourself, but Prue would see that this task is properly mine. Yet for all that, it would excite her. She would have thoughts and ideas about the documents, and somehow I know this would be enough to drive me off course. It may be Prue's power or my own weakness that would allow it, but the truth is that I am afraid to tell her. I need to make this decision on my own.

I fold the letter back into its envelope, thinking of my own letters at home, of Shantih in the house alone. Whatever I do now the world may spin for good or evil. We can only make our best decisions, but to each of us comes a moment when it is

necessary to take responsibility, if only for one decision. They also serve who only stand and wait.

Chairs and cutlery scrape downstairs. I gather up the large envelopes, wrap the whole package back in the wax paper and tie the string around it. I slide it inside a folded skirt in my suitcase and go down to dinner.

-----

The wind comes suddenly, bloating the red flags into bilious guts stretched over the street. Then just as quickly it drops, and they sag, gaudy and wrinkled. We have been riding our German underground railroad for ten days and the number of flags rustling and preening at the edge of the view has become a barometer for new places.

I transfer my bag from one shoulder to the other, for something to do, to break the spell.

The flags burst out again, cracking, a sound like ripping. They are huge, bigger here in Berlin than anywhere we have been. A moment of calm is not possible. The flags remind us that everything is covert. The skin on my neck is prickly. I wish I had bought a scarf. It has become cold.

We turn a corner.

"There it is." The woman who leads us, Stephanie, points to one among the municipal buildings that line the street. Opposite is an incongruous concrete and glass block. Somehow one does not imagine Nazis in modernist towers. We have come here so Prue can meet the 'Women's Fuhrer' — one of the few women to have a role in the Nazi administration. Though whether she holds any real power is the subject of debate.

The Nazi powers have made much of their peaceful credentials post-Munich, but when a friend in the Ambassador's staff requested an official meeting as a favour to Prue he could get nothing more than a talk with the Women's Fuhrer.

Stephanie puts her hands in her coat pockets, bends her head forward, and we follow.

Inside, the hall smells of bleach, leather, and the chemical soot of inky typewriter ribbon. More flags drape the full height of the wall. There are guards and clerks. The guards have guns. They salute as we pass. We do not salute and neither does Stephanie. Her head is up, gaze fixed. My breath catches and bubbles. Like Felix Stephanie lost her job for refusing to give the Nazi salute. She is one of only ten members left in the Berlin FOR, an old acquaintance of Prue's from the early days after the war. We are searched then allowed to cross the entrance hall. At the end are two more guards. They salute. We do not. Their red armbands match the flags, the red bleeding the colour from everything else. I feel grey, paling fast. Even the guards look like old dishcloths. All their colour is in their armbands.

One steps forward. His arm is still high. Prue, in the middle of us, raises her eyebrows, questioning. He looks her up and down. I half expect a sneer but his face is marshalled. He looks at Stephanie. She does not move. He looks at me. I am wrong about the colour, his blue eyes freeze me. I move my fingers against my leg to make sure that I can. My feet ache mysteriously. Prue presents her letter of introduction. The guard drops his arm to take it.

The letter is a single page with three lines of type in the centre. He reads it and passes it to the other guard. I let my eyes slide from him onto the wall behind, where they are safer. I can feel Prue and Stephanie beside me, three tiny boats on a rising sea

of red and flags. The last ten days cower in my memory. Every name and every face is valuable to these people.

These people? No, not that. I turn my head back to the guard and lift my chin. I urge the blue eyes back to me, so that I can meet them. Prue glances my way. There is a tightening of her jaw. It means: stand firm, I am here. It means Prue and Sal together.

Finally, the second guard nods and folds the paper.

The first one orders us to follow.

He leads us to a waiting room, an anteroom with several doors. There is a fire and armchairs. A picture of Adolf Hitler hangs over the mantelpiece. Prue is taken into her meeting, leaving Stephanie and I the only occupants. We watch people passing along the corridor and listen to muted sounds of office life.

After a few minutes I lean closer to Stephanie. She sits upright in her chair staring into the low fire.

"I think he's watching us," I say.

"Who?"

"Herr Hitler."

"He is always watching."

"No — I mean the picture."

She looks at it. "That one?"

"Look at the eyes. Strange —"

"How?"

"It watches you."

She moves her head from one side to the other. "It resembles — die Marionette."

"Like a puppet — yes — it must be the angle."

"Perhaps." She is still moving her head.

"Unpleasant isn't it?" I say.

"Perhaps not if you like Hitler."

We laugh and I stand, go to the fire. I try to ignore the painted eyes above. The more I do so, the more my face heats up and I want to look. I take the poker and turn over the embers. Scrape them nearer to a half-burned log. Stephanie crosses her legs and watches. The flame stammers then jumps up.

"There may be another explanation," says Stephanie.

"What for?"

"The picture."

"Oh?" I return to my seat.

She drops her head close to me. "Witchcraft."

The feet of a guard approach the door. We lean back into our chairs. He pauses and looks in. He is very young. I smile at him. His cheeks flush and he nods his head and scurries away.

I turn back to Stephanie. "Witchcraft?"

"That's what they say." Her face is perfectly still. Can she be serious? I've only known her for twenty-four hours and I can see nothing to reveal her thoughts.

"Really?" I ask.

She waits, even longer, then allows a quick smile. "I know how it sounds."

"It does sound—"

"But you must remember — it is a strange thing — this power he has."

"Crowds are powerful."

"Of course — but we know how to resist such a force."

She looks away, to the picture over the fire. The skin on her face sags along the jaw line. She has a mahogany coloured birthmark just at the point where the back of her jaw turns up, a perfect oval thumbprint.

"Who speaks of witchcraft?" I ask, sliding my hands beneath my legs to control the urge to put my thumb on her birthmark.

She looks at me. There is something hard, animal, in her face. Something like disgust, or fear. My hands begin to go numb but I do not move.

"There was a story in the newspapers," she says, "after the war, in the Weimar days when this country was dirty and poor — of a boy found in a village in Bavaria. He was alone, with nothing and nobody, he could not speak, could not write, he knew nothing of his past — or if he did he could not tell them. He walked out of the forest — they said he had been in the wild for years. The country did not stop talking about the wild boy of the forest — every person had an idea, where he was from, what had happened to him. They wrote songs and made plays, even Wild Boy marionettes. My brother has three children and when they were small — whatever game they played they would fight over who was to be the Wild Boy."

She sniffs, turns back to the painting. Nearby someone begins to type, the sound muffled as rain on a window.

"What happened to him?" I ask.

"Reports came less often then stopped completely. So we forgot about the boy among us — a man by then — who once used to be a Wild Boy — but we did not forget the story of the Wild Boy who walked out of the forest."

In the distance a door opens. Voices speak over one another. Stephanie tilts her head. I sit back against the cold leather.



The voices get closer, with stepping feet, the sounds of papers being passed around. I do not wrestle with the German words but there is something about the voices that will not let me switch off. Stephanie is listening, her hands pulling at the sleeves of her cardigan, eyebrows slightly raised. I look at the picture of Hitler and he looks back at me. He is serious, of course, but not severe in the picture. There seems to be a look of triumph behind his calculated non-malice, behind his all-seeing eyes. Though really it could be anything. Perhaps the painter had just made a joke, or maybe Hitler was thinking of something tasty to have for lunch. I move my head a little, and the eyes follow. If he were here with us the red of his armband would pulse against the bland, municipal walls.

The voices are loud, almost at the door. I turn my head, more to stop looking at the picture than out of a desire to see the speakers. A guard passes first, not the young man who blushed. After him come men in suits. They follow the guard's gaze and look towards us. I scan their faces, because they are there, but —

"Peter?"

"Dorothy —"

It is him, and he has said my name, but I cannot make the necessary connection to fit him into the picture.

"What are —? Well — how are you?" he says. He steps into the room. I stand. Peter turns and hands a file to a short man. He says something, in German I think but I cannot hear. The other men watch from the corridor. The short man says something to them. They nod, one crosses his arms.

Peter stiffens, and steps over to me. "Are you well?"

"Yes — fine. I'm fine thank you."

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Well —"

He puts his arms out in a 'here I am' gesture. "What are you doing here?" he says.

"I'm with Prue —"

"I thought you weren't coming?"

"I changed my mind."

"You didn't say."

"There wasn't time — and why should I?"

"I just — it doesn't matter." He looks over my shoulder. "That's not Prue."

"No she's in there. That's — a friend." She is leaning into her chair watching us. Her face is blank, carefully mastered to give nothing away. "This is Peter, my sister's husband."

They nod to each other.

"What are you doing here anyway?" I ask

"Work," he waves his arm.

"Here?"

"Why not?"

"You don't work for the German government."

He is looking at me, friendly enough, but the look is slightly off, always towards the edge of my view.

"Very funny —" he says, "it's normal diplomatic work."

"Why you?"

He laughs suddenly, almost a snort. "Why not? I do as I'm told."

"Do you?" I put my hand up and wave to the men in the corridor. The short man bobs and shuffles his papers. He has dark eyes and neat dark hair, glasses hanging on a

string round his neck, and he holds the papers close to his chest so that he resembles a mole.

I look back at Peter. "You do as who tells you?"

He rolls his eyes. "Do you think the Munich agreement just happened? We negotiate, we talk — try to build our mutual interests."

"Sorry — of course. And Britain is overjoyed with your success."

"Yes, well — peace for our time was a bit much."

His eyelids blink fast for a few seconds, flutter, then settle.

"How's Helen?" I ask.

"She's well." He tries to smile but it falls away. "She's no worse anyway."

"Does she know you're here?"

"Yes — it helps."

"For you to be away?"

"To know I'm here."

"Gone pacifist has she?"

"Talk of war does her no good."

This I know is true. I can easily retrieve from memory the image of my sister, twenty years ago, with her basket of white feathers. Her hair is pinned back so tight not a wisp flies in the wind. Her hat tied under her chin. On the street corner she looks at the passing men with her pale, watery eyes, and she does not look away. If they refuse the feather she watches them out of sight. Still, sorrowful, something plucked straight off the stage. The uniformed men and old women outside the butcher's shake their heads, possibly for different reasons.

"Talk of war doesn't do anyone any good," I say.

A door clicks open and I hear Prue. Even when she's speaking in French I can tell. Peter looks toward the sound. His blond hair has dulled recently. It has not gone grey but has become almost colourless. There is a rash along his jaw line.

"Between Muriel and I we may have an effect," he says.

"You're taking Prue seriously now?"

He frowns. "I always have."

"Hello Mr Stratton." She calls, crossing the room.

"Miss Lester —"

"Muriel. Please."

"Lovely to see you." He shakes her hand.

Stephanie stands. Her hands are behind her back, her eyes on Hitler's frozen face. A guard comes out of the door after Prue. He skirts the edge of the room until he is dismissed by the short man in the doorway.

"Positive meeting?" Peter asks.

"We could almost agree on much — but as it happens we agree on virtually nothing."

"Virtually?"

"We do both believe that rearmament — secret or otherwise — makes war more likely."

"Rearmament is an unavoidable response to circumstances."

"A response — perhaps not unavoidable."

"Please — tell me — do you see another route?"

"Yes: non-violence and disarmament."

"A practical route?"

She smiles at him. "Non-violence and disarmament."

"Peter was just saying," I tell her, "that between you — you might have an effect."

"On what?" Prue says.

I look at Peter.

"Well —" he says, "on German policy."

"Doubtless we will."

"I'm pleased you agree." He smirks a little.

Prue goes on: "Whether the effect will satisfy is another question."

Peter's grin twists away and I want to laugh.

"There's no need to jump at war," he says. "We have Munich — and a chance at peace. Personally, I think we might learn from methods here."

The small man coughs. Peter looks over his shoulder and nods.

"Sorry — I'm going to have to —"

"Of course —"

"It's been a pleasure to see you Muriel — good luck."

"And you. I'll keep my eyes open for your affect."

He frowns briefly, but then his face clears. Perhaps he finds a mask or he pushes the remark away for consideration later. He shakes her hand again.

"Bye Dorry." He kisses my cheek.

As we watch the men go Stephanie joins us. A guard steps into the doorway and salutes. It is the very young one from earlier. None of us return the salute. We walk towards him in a line until he is forced to drop his arm and lead us from the building with his head drooping.

-----

Later, Prue and I walk round a park near Stephanie's home, wrapped up against the cold. Winter presses closer, threatening even less colour, even more space for the flags. I remind myself that spring will come, whatever else may happen.

A group of boys in shorts and vests run along the opposite side of the park, steam rising from their hot bodies into the cold evening. Sitting around is a dangerous activity in Hitler's Germany. Though I expect Prue would agree with that much.

She tells me about her meeting with the Women's Fuhrer. She advocates passionately for woman's place in the home. Women, she says, must build the nation through good housekeeping and the raising of properly Nazi children. It makes me queasy. According to Prue she sees no irony in her own position as a political figurehead.

The sun salutes the end of the day, throwing our shadows before us on the grass. It is wet and scruffy, recently cut, and smells sweetly rotten. We have slipped into silence. Ten days of Germany are stacked on one side, the silent envelopes waiting in my luggage on the other. Everything that might be said about it all, everything that might be written. And yet there is this: cut grass, the sunset, birds singing, boys running.

"Have you heard anything about witchcraft?" I ask.

"I don't think so."

"Or a wild boy?"

"No — why?"

"Just something Stephanie said — about Hitler's power. I think she was trying to say that — at a certain point — power needs nothing but the stories of itself in order to survive."

She sprinkles the shreds of a leaf on the path around us. "Perhaps not only power — it's easy for us to believe in a story — if enough people keep telling it."

"This story is — that he is God."

"Hitler? Because he's given people something to die for?" she asks.

"He's removed choice."

"That may be religion but it's got nothing to do with God."

"How?"

"Think about it — if God wanted to remove choice He would have done it at the start."

She puts a hand on my back. The running boys pound along the path towards us. We stand aside and they run on the grass to overtake us. Their feet leave tracks of squashed grass lying flat. They are younger than I'd thought, still children, cheeks red, arms and legs pale.

"What are you thinking?" Prue asks, plucking another leaf and performing her ritual again. Peering after the boys.

"About David — my brother — before he went to France. He had an argument with Father."

"About the war?"

"His commission — he said he had no choice but Father said he did, which of course was true. He could have taken it and stayed in Britain. Still, David felt he didn't — and that was the important thing — he felt he had no choice because other boys his age were already dying."

We reach an empty bandstand, shadows congealed beneath its roof. It floats over the silvery dusk as a ship adrift on the city sea. I put my hand between the rails onto the floorboards. Smooth, dented, cracked paint peeling up. Close my eyes. Somewhere the

memory lingers of weekend afternoons, of parades, picnics, festivals, a host of allegros and marches played out in this place. It cannot be possible to lose such things forever. For what they were and how they felt to be expelled completely from the collective mind.

Prue steps up onto the bandstand and circuits it, slowly, once, then steps into the centre. She scatters the remains of another leaf in a circle around her and starts to hum. The tune is a hymn. She doesn't sing the words but the music echoes within the cone of the bandstand and rolls out onto the damp grass.

I turn my back to her and lean against the railings. When she stops humming, I ask, "If they will die for him — how can we counter it?"

"I had almost started to lose hope —"

"Had?"

"Today I saw something." She comes to stand above me.

I look up at her chin, a point of darkness against the milky sky. "You saw a new way?"

"Not new — remembered. It's obvious really."

She looks down. Her face is shadowed, but her eyes are screwed up. I know she is smiling, fiercely, on the brink of laughter. Then it is as if the thought skips from her to me.

"Stephanie?" I say.

"I couldn't understand why she took the risk."

"Coming there with us?"

"If she wasn't going to salute."



I walk round and step up next to her. Around the perimeter of the park the streetlights are on and people walk beneath them. It feels safer beneath the unlit bandstand.

Prue puts her hand on my arm. "What did you think of Stephanie?"

"She's braver than any rifle-carrying man."

"She said: I can't let them have power over me. Staying away would be allowing them a form of control."

"What if they'd arrested her?"

"Perhaps the risk matters, certainly you must accept the consequences once you begin — but to put it your way: it's offering another story, a new hero, or a question mark — power is afraid of questions."

"It returns choice."

"Every second of resistance, every act, is a success on its own terms."

I breathe in the cold, damp air. It presses on my throat and makes it ache. I remind myself again to buy a scarf. The new world is not born in the results of the action but in the action itself.

"Tell me — honestly —" I say, "what do you think Peter's doing here?"

"I have no idea."

"He told me earlier in the year — there was a plot before Austria to replace Hitler if Britain supported it."

"And they didn't?"

"I don't know — it didn't happen, did it?"

"Interesting."

"He doesn't want a war either."

"He may yet stop one. Though we must be careful how we exercise our choice."

"How so?"

She considers for a second. "Think of this: do we eat with the Pharisee or the tax collector?"

I squint and dredge up Sunday school Bible lessons. "Jesus ate with — the tax collector."

"Actually — he ate with both."

"So what does that mean?"

She smiles with one side of her mouth. "It's getting cold."

"Wait — in the case of Peter — who's who?"

"There's a question." She turns and walks quickly down, along the path and into a pool of streetlight. I sigh, put my hands in my pockets and follow. The Pharisee or the tax collector — who knows?

As I draw level with her we settle into step.

"I pity the disciples," I say.

"Why's that?" She swings her arms as she walks.

"Because of the parables — all the bloody parables."

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The photographs and pictures are at least twice life-sized and standing on specially commissioned frames so that they loom over us. There are men in suits — judges, military officers, workers. Women in fashionable clothes both modern and dated, and children, with parasols and chubby cheeks, in short suits who look at me at eye level.

The people are hushed, milling beneath high ceilings. A man stops and leans on his umbrella to look up at a painting of a banker. He puts his free hand on his hip, tilts his head. From behind, from where I stand, the scene could be a fairground mirror trick. His suit and his stance so closely resemble the man in the picture.

On my left a family shuffle between exhibits. They stop in front of an image of a family, a formal posed photograph. Mother, Father, three sons and a daughter. The father in the museum reads the accompanying sign. His wife nods. Their two sons elbow one another and pull at the collars of their shirts. When the father is finished reading he asks his sons a question. They look at the polished floor and answer: yes. Then they all move on, the mother pushing the children, to the next image. It is a woman in a long, sparkling gown singing in front of an orchestra.

I step up to take the place the family have vacated and read the information on the board. It lists the achievements of the family pictured, and follows this with a list of their allegedly un-German activities. The Father is a noted professor of science, the mother a writer, and the four children are following their parents into the worlds of academia and the arts. This is, apparently, a key part of their plot to indoctrinate young minds against Germany. They aim to infect them with Jewish thinking and to use them to further improve their own status and wealth. Evidence for these accusations is not given, but final proof is offered in the fact that this family left Germany for America after the Nazis came to power.

Somewhere in the distance music begins, crackling but marching towards us through the joined rooms and empty corridors of the museum. All trumpets and drums and bass cello chords. I shiver, and pull my sleeves down over my hands. I do not want to touch anything.

More people stream into the room. I step aside. A horde swarms around the picture of the family. The air is stale and thin. I look for Prue but I cannot see her. I walk quickly across the room then turn and walk to the end. She is not there. The giant pictures jut out blocking the view. I turn on the spot, looking around, and just then the man with the umbrella and another step apart, at the far end of the room that leads towards the music, and I see the coils of her hair in the doorway. I walk towards her. She stands looking at a picture of a man in the uniform of a German army officer. Before I reach her she turns, as if expecting me.

"All right?"

I drop my head and step close. "I think I've seen enough."

"Come on then."

She takes me by the arm and we step into the next room.

"Excuse me?"

The voice is English and comes from behind us. At first I think it will be Peter, yet again turning up where I would prefer not to see him, but when we turn we find an unfamiliar man before us. He looks younger than me but already his hair is almost completely grey. He has very blue eyes magnified by thick glasses that are incongruous with his smart pinstripe suit and wide shoulders.

"Can I help you?" asks Prue.

"I'm sorry — are you Miss Lester?"

"Muriel Lester — yes — I am."

"I remember you from the Gandhi broadcast."

"Really? It seems an age ago —"

"Your picture was in the paper," he says.

Something about this clarification surprises me.

"And you are?" Prue asks.

"Robert Oldershaw — a great admirer of yours."

He holds out his hand and she shakes it, a little stiff.

"Thank you," Prue says. She stares at him, holding my elbow tight with her left hand. I smile inanely, looking between them, hoping to ease the awkward moment.

"I must say —" Oldershaw goes on, "I wouldn't have expected to find you here."

"No?"

"Well — forgive me — I only came myself to see what all the fuss is about. But I'd have thought you'd take against all this."

"What makes you think I don't?"

I tense, pull my arm from Prue, glance at the guard in the nearest doorway.

She looks at me. "Actually, we were just on our way out. Perhaps we can talk somewhere else?" she says.

"Of course — my apologies — I won't keep you. I was only hoping to hear the thoughts of someone of your calibre —"

We are already half turned towards the door. Prue pauses and turns back to the man. She cannot leave without saying something. As she said about Stephanie, it allows a form of control. I check the exit and our route to it. Something stops me. A new stress stiffens the atmosphere. Between us and the door that leads to the street is a short, official-looking man. He has dark eyes and neat dark hair. He holds a folder and stands beneath a painting of a judge, but he pays no attention to the picture. He sees me look at him because he is already looking at me. The light reflects off his glasses. Without any change in expression he turns away and begins to speak with a guard. There is little enough to mark him out but a cold wave runs up my arms and around my neck. I have seen him before.

I turn back. Prue is speaking.

"— reflects more discredit on us average Gentiles than on anyone pictured here."

I grab her arm. She glances at me and her guarded expression collapses into alarm.

"We really must go," she says to Oldershaw. She shakes his hand as if it could burn.

"Of course — it's been a pleasure to meet you Miss Lester."

We leave past the small official who stays where he is, with his back to us, motionless. Out into cold sunshine and the noise of Munich traffic. We cross the square and sit on a bench from where we can see the door to the museum. A large poster beside the entrance announces the *Exhibition of Jewish History and Culture* we have just left. I look away from the building. Cars, bicycles, men with carts selling vegetables, boys waving newspapers, women beneath the sloping brims of winter hats; the world goes on.

Prue sits beside me and puts a hand on my back. We are quiet for several minutes.

"Better?" she asks, eventually.

"Thank you."

"It's stuffy in there."

"It wasn't that."

"It doesn't help."

"There's something else."

"Yes?"

I look around. The prickling on my arms and neck persists. I have still not bought a scarf. Prue watches me without blinking.

"Look more relaxed," I say.

She turns to face forward on the bench, crosses her legs, and pulls her bag onto her lap to search through it.

"Better?"

"Much."

"So, go on."

"I saw a man in there — the same one who was with Peter in Berlin, in the ministry. Small with glasses."

She passes me her water bottle. "Are you sure?"

"I know it sounds mad —"

"We're miles from Berlin."

"It was definitely him — short and funny looking, like a mole. He was watching us."

She takes out an orange and begins to peel it, piling the peel neatly on one knee.

"I wonder if he's German or British?"

"I never thought he could be British. Oh — I don't know."

"And perhaps that — Oldershaw — had something to do with it?"

I do not answer. I scan the square for any sign of either man.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if we were targets — for surveillance at least," says Prue.

"Yes but — there's something else."

I drink from the bottle. She stops peeling, turns. "Something else?"

It is hard to swallow, now the moment has come. "I should have told you before. I have a packet of documents — Eric gave them to me in Cologne."

"Eric? The man from Bow? What sort of documents?"

"I don't know — I haven't looked through them all and I need a translator. Letters from Jewish families, dissenters, records, stories — could be anything."

Prue nods, finishes peeling and begins to eat the orange.

"They can't know about that —" she says, "it's me they're watching."

"You really think so?"

"What did he say? 'I was only hoping to hear the thoughts of someone of your calibre' — I thought there was something odd about him."

"Perhaps —"

"Flattery —"

"But think about Peter — he's here for a reason and he won't want me to ruin it."

"You're his sister-in-law. He won't want me to ruin it."

"But he seems — the idea of war — they're terrified."

She looks at me, chewing slowly.

I look away. "We're all afraid."

"What are you going to do with the package?"

"I have to get them back — or it's a waste."

"Are you taking them to someone?"

"He gave them to me. I haven't worked it out yet — I need to write something."

She drums an orange segment on her leg. "Then there's no other way — you have to go back as soon as you can."

"Home?"



"I'm sure it's fine — but why risk it? Get the documents home and get on with your task."

"What about you?"

"I'll go on to Vienna alone. Hopefully if they follow one of us it'll be me."

"Either way we'll find out what they're after."

"If anyone asks — say you're unwell. I need to get a report off to Nevin, you can take it with you."

"Right. I can do that." I hand her back the water. She passes me a handkerchief. I glance at the museum entrance. Nothing. Neither of the men have emerged, but I know I didn't imagine it. We were being watched.

I look back at Prue in the bright sunshine, in the centre of Munich, the 'spiritual home of the party' as they call it. What are we doing here? Do I even recognise myself? Prue's eyes are on me, she has forgotten to act natural. There is something fierce and important in her look.

I remember a moment like this before; watching her recede from the deck of a ship, heading out from Colombo and bound for home. She was destined for a train north to meet the Viceroy, the power of the Raj, with our own government behind it, to try to bridge the gulf between them and Gandhi. When we said goodbye she had the same look as now. Peace on a relaxed face, but set firm, and a sort of light coming out towards me. It made me believe in the impossible. I remember thinking then that for the first time I was looking at a real human being, and I wanted to be part of it.

A cloud passes over the sun and Prue gets up. She puts the orange peel back in her bag and closes it. We are to be divided again, but this time we will both go into battle.

"I wish I knew who was behind this," I say, as Prue swings her bag onto one shoulder.

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it does."

"Not yet — for now we just deliver our message."

"And then?"

"If they want to find us, they will."

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They hunch over the table, their heads close together. Shantih reads with her chin in her hands. Susan's leg bounces.

"I like the flags — cropping up like that — very clever," says Susan.

"Thanks." I watch drizzle streak the window. "Though I couldn't change it now — even if you hate it."

"I'm glad my opinion's so important to you."

"My guiding light."

"And this woman sounds awful."

"Prue?"

She snorts. "The one in Cologne — Mrs march-and-point."

"Keep reading."

I want them to read unencumbered by me, my opinions, what I thought I was writing.

"Oh —" says Susan, to herself.

"The Exhibition of Jewish History and Culture?" says Shantih, quietly, her face sinking further into the hand that holds it.

I sip from a cup of tea. Hold it with both hands, letting steam rise onto the cold window and blur the view completely. Droplets congeal and stand up on the glass, cells multiplying. I turn my back on them, return to my friends.

"It's beastly." Susan sits up and lights a cigarette. Shivers once. Holds out her arms to show me the hairs standing up. "See — horrible."

Shantih finishes and sits back. "Why did you not tell me?"

"About the exhibition? It was the last thing we saw."

"Brazen." Susan shakes her head.

"I don't understand why you said nothing," says Shantih.

The water on the window is snaking down my back. "I didn't know what to say until I'd written it."

She seems to accept this. I am not sure why I do not tell the truth about what happened in Munich, why I will not tell Shantih at least. I had thought I wanted to keep them safe but I am not sure that logic holds true outside of mystery novels.

"You know — I can't believe people take it," Susan says.

"What?"

"Such blatant propaganda."

"I know —"

"It's not so strange," says Shantih.

We both stare at her.

She shrugs. "If you long for a justification — you will take it when it is offered. In India we learnt this long ago."

Susan squints. Seconds pass, and then she sighs. "You're right — but I don't want to believe it."

We go back to our tea.

"Anyway — it's very good," says Susan.

"It is," Shantih agrees.

"Thank you — I've thrown everything to the wind."

"Only *The Times* —"

"And they were never worthy of you anyway." Susan waves her cigarette and turns to pour more tea. She begins to skim the words of the article again. When she looks up she smiles and I smile back.

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

"What?"

"Letting *The Times* go?"

"Stop being so hard on yourself."

"She's right," says Shantih. "If you had not written it you would blame yourself. It had to be said."

The truth is that I feel an unexpected exhilaration I am suspicious of. Ever since Bertie called me to ask if I intended to write about Germany, presumably after talking with Peter though he wouldn't admit it, I have felt a childish weightlessness. At first I thought it was only freedom from editorial restraints, but it persisted, and it grew, and it is carrying me somewhere. I am an outlaw in my own small way, and the question I really want to ask is: am I safe? Because I know I am not.

They look at me. Shantih tilts her head. I nod.

"Are you worried about money?" asks Susan.

"I suppose."

"Well — don't —" says Shantih. "If I am to live here I must pay." The air between us tightens. How strange it sounds; if I am to live here. How strange that I had almost forgotten, had barely considered it, amongst all the trains and flags, the red armbands draining the continent of its colour. Yet here at home there are still cloudless skies, apples and blackberries, brown eyes and runner beans.

"Remember," Shantih goes on, "you must deliver your message." Her words and Prue's, indistinguishable now.

"Yes — you're right."

"Okay then," says Susan and we laugh.

She stubs out her cigarette. "But why anonymous?"

"I want to publish the letters, possibly in the *Daily Herald* as well — if they'll take them — I don't want people to know I have them."

"Doesn't it make it easier to ignore — if people don't know who wrote it?"

"This is a good set up — Ben liaises with his editors, only he knows who the source is. Besides — it isn't about me."

"Well that's very noble —"

"It's nothing to do with that."

"Then what is it?"

I glance at Shantih.

She frowns, "What?"

I put down my mug and there seems no good reason to not answer them. The rain spits on the window.

"I didn't tell you about the exhibition because — I don't know, I wanted to protect you. We were followed there — by a man from the ministry I think — one of the men we saw with Peter."

Susan lights another cigarette and I wait. Shantih nods then stretches her arms out in front of her, looks at her hands.

"Peter won't like this —" Susan waves the paper, "and he'll know."

"He will — but I trust him to put it down as a battle lost."

"And Bertie?"

"Can't afford to admit he would have suppressed it. They'll counter with something awful."

"This is one thing Dickie and I might agree on — he's salivating for war — but don't worry, I'll keep mum. Consider yourself held in higher regard than my husband. Not that he ever listens anyway."

There is a knock on the front door.

Shantih raises a hand, "Shall I?"

"I'll go."

I leave the dining room and push the door closed behind me. Stand a moment, hand on handle, feeling the cool air in my throat. I can hear them whispering. I had not intended to tell them but perhaps it is better that I have. We are not in a novel after all.

I step across and open the door. It is Harry. He wears no hat so his hair is wet and plastered flat against his head. He is starting to bald.

"Hello Dorry." There are stains on his pale, knee-length coat, which I hope are from the rain.

"Harry —"

"How are you?"

"I'm fine — you're wet —"

"I walked — stupid idea."

"Walked from where?"

"From Putney —"

"That's miles —"

"— don't mind that."

"What are you doing here"?

"I need to talk to you."

"I'm not alone."

"Oh."

He looks at his feet. One of his shoelaces is undone and he bends to tie it.

"But — I don't mind if you don't —"

"Don't worry —"

"Its only Shantih and Susan — it's still raining. Why don't you come in?"

He rests an elbow on his knee then stands slowly. Not, as I expect, like a man old beyond his years, but as a strong one. Easy and loose, just how he moved in the beginning.

"I'd love to," he says, smiling.

I am surprised. We go into the room, Harry dripping onto the clay tiles. Susan has lit another cigarette and I expect her to laugh at him, but she merely watches with her chin up, eyebrows raised.

"Susan." He nods. She makes no response.

"Hello Shantih," he says.

"Sit here," she says, and gets up from her chair. Susan rolls her eyes.

"No really — I can't."

"There's another one," I say. He nods and takes Shantih's chair. She moves around the table.

"Tea?"

"Please."

Susan watches him through fingers of smoke. Shantih sits forward with one hand on top of the other, her stare fixed on the table. She does not even look up to drink the last of her tea.

I pour a cup and pass it to Harry. He moves as if to put it on the table but stops; that would mean looking at Susan. He balances the cup on his knee, then sees me watching and his cheeks redden. I stay where I can watch them all, and lean against the cupboard.

"So? How are you?" I ask.

Harry's eyes flick to Susan and back to me. "Much better actually." He sips his tea.

"I hear you left Richard?"

"Yes, it was — it was too hard."

"I see."

"I'm sorry to interrupt you."

"Don't be —" says Susan, "it's very entertaining."

I notice the pages of my Germany article are still on the table. I do not want Harry to see it; I am serious about anonymity. The desire to hide it paralyses me. Harry looks up at the pause, and so does Shantih. They both see my gaze on the table. Harry frowns. Shantih follows my look and slides the paper onto her lap. Harry turns. There is nothing there.

I swallow the fear and my voice rushes back. "What do you want Harry?"

He turns in his seat, clears his throat.

"As you know I left Richard in September —"

"We've covered that — keep up." Susan is enjoying herself.



"Right — sorry, yes — so obviously I needed another job. I thought about it a lot — I kept thinking: why was it so hard to work for Richard? What would be better?"

I say, "It was the going back —"

"No. I know why you think that. You know better than anyone I'm a proud man — but it was more than that."

He glances at Susan, perhaps expecting comment. She is haughty but silent. Shantih spins her teacup noiselessly on its saucer.

"More?"

"You know — I always thought I should change the world."

"Yes."

"I thought I could do that in whatever I did — wherever I worked."

"Thought?"

He looks up. "I can't. It's too hard — the sum of the evil in the world is much greater than the evil of individual men."

"You can't expect to change everything," I say.

Harry looks down at his hands holding the cup on his knee. I know they will be dry and sore — he always has dry skin in autumn and winter.

"The way life is —" he says, "business — I can't change enough of it to change anything. Perhaps someone else could — but I'm not that man."

There is a new closeness in the room, an unforeseen air of intimacy.

Harry plunges on. "I read the letters from George and I just — I have the feeling that everything he does is significant — that's exactly why he does it — and nothing else will do. That's what I want."

"You're going to China?"

"No — not China — I want a life like that. Surrounded by people focused on the same purpose, without all the baseness taking over —"

"I don't think we've been reading the same letters."

"Dorry, please." His tone is not angry but desperate, longing.

He drains his tea and puts the cup on the table then he spreads his hands flat on his legs.

"I've joined the army," he says.

The silence that greets this pronouncement is ruined by a sudden escalation of rain. Drops drum on windows and stones of the courtyard. Harry waits. Eventually, when I give no response, he looks at Susan.

"You've already enlisted?" she asks.

"I've got my movement orders. I go tomorrow to start training."

"Why didn't you come in the little green cap?"

He smiles. "I didn't want to spoil the surprise."

"Why did nobody tell me?" I ask.

"I've only told Daniel — I swore him to secrecy until tomorrow."

"Very sensible," says Susan.

I walk over to the table, gather the cups onto a tray. I can feel their eyes on me but I don't know what to say. Even this familiar movement feels awkward, swamped. I should be surprised, or hurt, or disappointed, but I am not. All I can grasp is the strange comedy of Harry's life stretching on yet further, and the heavy apprehension of its ultimate punch line lumbering towards us from the horizon.

"I wanted to tell you myself."

"Your mother'll be heart broken —"

"I know she won't approve —"

"— that you didn't tell her. She's softer than you think."

He doesn't answer. I lean on the table and let my head drop.

"You're closer to forty than thirty Harry — if there's a war —"

"I'm prepared for that risk."

Susan gazes at him with her mouth open. I've heard her say that Harry is a coward, and there is enough reason to think so. Yet now he sits with his back straight, hands still on his thighs, eyes on me, and suddenly I can see the soldier in him. She must see it too. A sick feeling claws from my stomach to my chest. This soldier has shared a bed with me. I never even knew he was there. He is everywhere in Harry. In his need for order and boundaries, his love of comrades, his sense of mission. His inability to accept defeat, in his pride, his coarseness, his belief in self-sacrifice, and in his longing for affirmation. How could I not have seen it?

"You always wanted to be a hero," I say.

He looks at me, barely moving. The rain subsides. His eyes are shining.

"I just wanted to care for you."

"Nonsense." Susan's voice is too loud. Shantih drops her head into the crook of her arm.

"We won't allow such nonsense," Susan goes on, quieter. "There's already an army full of men who say they want to protect women — when all they really want is to be assured they're still better and stronger than us."

Harry curls his hands into fists on his knees. "I've never thought I was better than Dorry — I wanted her to be happy, to work if she wanted."

"Did you really?"

He looks from her to me. "I did."

"Or did you just want her to help you achieve what you wanted? To be a strong enough man to let your wife work?"

"Everyone wants to succeed."

"Not everyone thinks he has a right to his wife's success —"

"That's enough." I cannot bear it.

Susan looks at him for a second, the pair of them frozen. She lights a cigarette, nodding, stands and walks out of the room. We do not speak. When she returns she carries a glass of brandy. Harry looks at the glass and Susan raises it politely.

He leans back in the chair and lets his back slump. The soldier is gone and in his place is a grey man in a dirty coat, alone.

"Do you think there will be another war?" he asks.

I think of Germany; the faces and the flags, the cold wind that followed us into the country, the boys running in the park, and the black words of my article rolling off the evening presses.

"We don't need more speculation — too many people are already fighting."

He looks surprised. I wonder if it is at what I have said, or what I did not say.

"Including George," I add.

"George will hate what Chamberlain has done —"

"He's not the only one."

"So you do think I'm wrong?"

I do not answer. We have been having different conversations. I feel as if I am falling, too fast. It is out of my control. He stands and pushes his chair under the table. Wood scrapes on tile.

"I hoped you might support me," he says, stepping away.

I want to hit him. Instead I take hold of the cupboard handles behind me. "You haven't asked if I do."

He stops and spins round. "What?"

"If you came here for my blessing — you have it. If this is your choice."

He stares at me.

"What else do I have the right to say?"

"I came here so that you — out of everyone — so you might understand."

"I think I do."

He steps quickly up to me and puts his hands on my arms, pushing my shoulders together. It is hard to breathe. The soldier might yet re-emerge.

"Is that all you're going to say?" His mouth is dry. It clicks as he speaks. "Aren't you going to tell me I'm — violating everything I ever said I believed in?"

"Harry —"

"That I've disappointed you or betrayed myself or betrayed God? Isn't that what you're going to say? Why don't you tell me what I should be doing — why you're better than me? Why aren't you saying anything?"

His head falls forward onto my shoulder. He drops his hands from my arms. I put a hand up to the back of his neck. Feel the short downy hair. Once, I would have stroked his head, lifted his face to mine for a kiss, but that is all gone now. I cannot even imagine being able to do such things. The heat of him makes me stiff and awkward.

He looks up, "I still love you Dorry."

"You love the idea of me." I lift my hand away. "But we're not the people we were."

"So you don't love me?"

"Of course I do — but there's no moving backwards."

He spreads his arms. "Could you have imagined?"

"Not until —"

I stop myself. I take his hand in both of mine.

"None of that matters. You'll make a good soldier because you're a good man — a brave and passionate man. Stop looking for reasons to hate yourself. If this is really what you want — the people who love you will love the soldier just as much as they loved the pacifist. If they don't then — they only love what you are, not who you are."

He frowns. "When did you —?"

I bring his hand up to my face and kiss it.

The hand hovers for a second. He runs a finger down the side of my cheek to the cleft of my chin. Then he takes his hand away, takes a breath and puts both hands in his pockets.

"Thank you," he says.

Suddenly, desperately, I want to ask him to stay. In my mind I see the telegrams, all the same, one after the other, and I think I will break completely if it comes to that again.

I cannot look at him. I move my head a fraction, to the right, so that I look over Harry's shoulder. Shantih is there, still there, watching us. She leans her head forward, barely a nod. I see a tear break from her lashes and fall, catch on her cheek, and stain the skin down to her chin.

I look back at Harry.

"Good luck." I say.

"Goodbye Dorry."

## **The Gate of Europe's War**

### **January 1938, George's journal continues**

4th January

Shanghai. China. We're finally here and the day has been a barrage. This place I've leant towards for months is nothing like I expected. The war has been here. Is here and alive in what remains of the city. Yet it wears another city over the top, an expensive party gown that draws the eye and refuses to find itself overdressed.

We were met at the boat by Dr Milican, our host and a missionary doctor, a small American woman with rough hands and a smile missing two teeth on the left side. She reminded me of Kagawa and Ray, somehow knitting the weeks between home and China together with an inevitability that didn't surprise me. Dr Milican moved through the crowd of hawkers and beggars much as Kagawa did in Tokyo. She didn't barge or ignore. Though Kagawa would wave at children and bow to the poor. Dr Milican's manner is to laugh, to pull faces at the children, to keep up a constant stream of talk jumping between languages. She shares with Ray that irresistible pull on the space and the moment around her, so whatever is happening appears to happen in relation to her.

Her grace and ease was offset by me, big and pale, tripping over my feet on the quayside. The children looked up and held out their hands. One pulled on my trouser leg. They said, Please, and, Yes sir, and, Welcome welcome, as though we'd disembarked at St Tropez. Prue pulled two apples and three shrivelled oranges from her pockets. She gave them to Dr Milican, who gave each piece to one of the scrawniest

looking children. There's not enough food in the city for anyone who cannot afford imports.

The road along the dock was choked with traffic, rickshaws more than cars. Colonnaded buildings stood in the distance. Sculpted facades suggested banks or hotels. Nearer to us were warehouses and brick factories with tall chimneys. It was almost grand, but disappointing, an obvious power-play. Further down the shadow of our ship First Class passengers descended the gangplank under a motionless, gouty Union flag. There were few of them, but they called for porters and cars and rickshaws as they do everywhere. British soldiers in kilts watched. Behind them a British gunship slid through the water, leaving a trail of white behind it that looked like a chalk path in the green of the river. I had a sudden feeling of confluences, the point where paths cross. Too much was both familiar and alien at once.

Japanese soldiers stood at sentry points, as smart and expressionless as they were in Tokyo. Bloodless as dolls. I tried to feel something about them, but despite this being an occupied city they still seemed facsimile soldiers, cut out of the living quaysides. Their guns were not a threat to me. There were British and French soldiers all around. They took a keen interest in the crates and boxes coming off the ship. A cockney accent drifted over to us and Prue smiled.

She talked, through Dr Milican's translation, to a rickshaw driver with a bandage on his head about a mutual aid society set up for the drivers. My legs ached, hot from too long coiled up with nowhere to run. We had to wait for a customs inspection. I turned and walked away from the ship, away from the first class gangplank towards the unloading freight and the warehouses. A group of children followed in a straggling comet-tail. The Japanese soldiers turned to watch and the children faltered. They looked at their feet and whispered. I thought of the recruiting officers and hated all men in



ridiculous uniforms, surprised by the sudden upsurge of feeling. I put my hands in my pockets and walked with long strides, head up. I looked into the faces of the sentries as I passed and they looked back without curiosity.

After our ship I passed a Japanese supply ship and followed the bend of the river, looking for something that would stop me. Looking, I think, for the war. After a mile or so I rounded a corner and found a pile of rubble where a building should be. It wasn't unlike scenes I could remember around London when I was young. Stone, dust and wood neatly cleared. This was not yet war, but when I raised my eyes the gap in the street revealed something else.

The road curved away past a large checkpoint and into a — what? What is the correct word? Desert? Waste? No. It was neither, because houses stood and roads could be seen and people. Yet it was a grey moon landscape of half houses, collapsed as beaten faces, ash thick as paint, as ink, no, as kohl, outlining twisted features, empty windows, eyes plucked out, because — who would want to see? But I came here for this. I could not look away. Must not. Between where I stood and the destruction was a crowd of people talking low with an insect hum. They stared, looked away, but always looked back out at that view. They became still as they looked and blocked the rickshaws that tried to pass. The soldiers on their checkpoints were only commas and hyphens in this book of destruction.

Behind me were the ships, the hotels and banks clustered on the edge of the river, and everywhere traffic. From the top of those buildings you would be able to see this. Even their grand roads must dwindle into pale scars webbed and winding through the charred city.

When I turned to go there was a pressure on my arm. Another child, a thin girl with oil-spill eyes and three smaller urchins leering behind her. I could see the flutter of

her pulse in her neck. One of the smaller children pulled on her sleeve and frowned. She looked away from him. Then he stepped forward and cupped his hands. He said,

Please sir, no papa, no mamma, no whisky soda.

I thought I'd heard wrong. He blinked at me and waited. What sort of place is this? The girl began to cry. I took out my handkerchief and offered it to her. She waved me away and looked at the floor but I put it in her hand. She wiped her face, left smudges under her eyes. I didn't know what else to do so I took a few cents from my jacket pocket and gave them each one. For a second they gaped. Shock froze them. They looked at the coins, turned them over, then burst into chattering and comparing, so even the girl got caught up in the excitement. Others in the crowd turned, murmured and pointed. It was time for me to leave.

When I got back to the quay I told them what had happened and what I'd seen.

Prue put a hand on Dr Milican's arm. How bad is it? she asked.

It's an unholy mess, Dr Milican sighed.

Where? asked Prue.

Everywhere beyond the concessions — if the bombing didn't get it, now it's looting and salvage.

The survivors are living among rubble or in houses that might fall at any moment. Thousands more were forced out completely, onto the streets of the concessions or into the villages. She told stories she's heard in quick short sentences. I drifted away, and it felt as if I was in a lecture, that the place she spoke of wasn't a hundred yards away but hundreds of miles. Both women were still as boulders in the babble of the dock.

With our customs inspection came a letter to me addressed c/o The Port of Shanghai. I didn't recognise the writing, I thought it could be Ray but there was a

roundness to the letters that seemed unlikely. It wasn't family, or any of my friends. They'd know to send letters to the Milicans. Either way, I didn't want to open it in front of Prue.

We walked through the city to the Milicans' house, crouched in the shadow of destroyed factories on the far side of the British concession. Moving was hard work. I'd thought the crowds were for the ship but there were people everywhere. Beyond the smartest buildings on the riverfront, refugee families lined the pavements. Even the graveyard was home to a hundred families. Traders and coolies filled every gap. We walked in the road, weaving between traffic and shouted curses from rickshaw drivers. Behind the drivers sat well-dressed men and women. When I shifted the weight of the bags I saw gloved hands, silk, hats, gold, shaded eyes watching my progress, flashes of a *deus ex machina*.

Everywhere the smell of bodies, shit, and burning hung in the air.

I couldn't believe the people were not in shelters or camps. Dr Milican said they're all full. It's unimaginable. I didn't know life could persist like this. Living on concrete in cold and dirt. Waking up beside others who didn't survive the night. A handmade canvas or wood shelter is a luxury here. I had no idea. My mind is riddled with holes, every sight a bullet, and I'm the lucky one.

Checkpoints further hampered our movement. We passed the first as we left the port; a tiny hideout in a ring of sandbags. It looked childish, the two soldiers who manned it only boys themselves. Then one opened his mouth to shout and an old couple pressed themselves against a wall. The soldier saw me watching and smirked. I stopped and wanted to do something, but when I looked back the couple had vanished.

Other checkpoints were requisitioned buildings with bullet pocks splayed across the walls. On one a Chinese slogan that had apparently said *Protect Homes! Protect*

*Liberty!* was crossed out and below it another read: *The Japanese people are at your service.* Above the writing hung the three flags we saw everywhere in Tokyo. The pendant Kagawa gave me bashed against my chest.

The Milicans live on a quieter street lined with yellow-leafed parasol trees. The house front suggests Islington, but the back looks onto the remains of the Chinese city. Rev and Dr Milican are about the same age as Prue and Baptists in much the same way as Prue, which is to say — not very enthusiastically. They broke from the Baptist Mission Society more than ten years ago over their stance on the civil war in China, when they set up a medical centre offering help to anyone, regardless of allegiance, as long as they agreed to leave conflict at the door. After the war they bought this house in Shanghai with a legacy and set it up as home, church, surgery, radio-station, ad-hoc post house and way station. Prue met them during her first visit and became a firm friend.

Now the house has a new use as a shelter for all and sundry. There are foreign missionaries, doctors, press, travellers and camp followers. Some are passing through, others are displaced by the war. When we arrived a group of Chinese friends were sitting around the table. I'm told their homes have been destroyed. Prue spread her arms and greeted them, though I wasn't sure if she knew them or not. Revered Milican (a thin, suntanned man with bushy eyebrows and Chinese clothes) showed me where I'm sleeping. It's little more than a cupboard, but at least it's not the street. As soon as I was alone I lay on the bed and fell asleep.

Had the Jonah dream again. This time I didn't resist. I pitched myself over the side of the boat into the sticky dark sea where I floated until my head was spinning for need of air. When I tried to breathe I ripped open gills across my chest and began to breathe water. The whale swallowed me. His stomach was full of water and I floated in it, breathing through my gills, a fishy baby in a fishy womb. Then the whale opened his

mouth to spit me out onto the Shanghai dockside into a waiting rickshaw pulled by a middle aged white man in a linen suit.

When I woke up I remembered the letter. It was from Amelia. I couldn't fathom it — lying in a cupboard in China reading a letter from dear Amelia. It was an apology for not saying goodbye, and all best wishes for my time in China. She hasn't forgotten and will think of me often, it says. Her grandmother is still alive so she'll be staying in New York and if I fancy a return trip I must look them up. The last paragraph was a list of the birds she's seen in Central Park.

One sheet of paper. Two sides. The paper was soft and smelled of vinegar and some kind of sweet citrus oil I couldn't identify. The smell made me want to cry, the way letters from home used to when I was at school in France. I pulled clothes from my bag but none of them were what I wanted. I wanted an old school tie to wear but I've brought nothing of that sort. At the bottom of the bag was *Idylls of the King*. It was the closest I could get. I read the ridiculous inscription yet again, trying to picture Prince Albert and Queen Victoria. Then I folded Amelia's letter between the pages and went downstairs with the book in my jacket pocket.

We spent the rest of the day listening to stories from our fellow guests. One is a teacher who hasn't been paid in months. Another was a nurse at a clinic on the edge of the city that was destroyed in an air raid with bed-bound patients inside.

Dr Milican told us how she'd been trying to get back to Shanghai from the north when she heard the city was under attack. Half the transport was in Japanese hands and the rest were engaged in a political battle. Eventually she got on an American steamer. Nobody knew they were sailing into the climax of the battle. The captain paced the deck chain-smoking and ordered the women below. She stayed on deck. As they approached, round bends heavy with smoke and dust, a wall of flames reared between them and the

city. The Japanese bombers dived low to get a better aim, skimming the ship. Some of them missed their mark and dropped bombs into the river. There was a sudden thunder, behind above rising up through shattered water. The passengers threw themselves to the deck. Behind them a Japanese gunship had opened fire on the city. Nobody seemed to be firing back.

I have made it to China. I have walked through Shanghai. I cannot believe it. I feel breathless even writing it.

5th January

Day one in Shanghai turns to deadly night, bright winter light becoming pallid and sickly with shadow. Those who can have gone home. Lights are lit in houses and rancid fires on the pavements. Faces in passing cars and rickshaws look out over white bow ties, starched collars, stretched pale necks and pearls. On the street beneath me a woman has put her children to bed on a broken pallet with a post-sack for cover.

Should I be honest? The truth is I've been looking at destitute people all day and I'm grateful for the dark. The fires are low and I can barely see them now. I can see stars, and the bright lettering of a sign, descending like a neon arrow, and the windows of the hotel at the end of the road. And I can relax.

This morning we went to the model refugee camp run by the Salvation Army. My first taste of Prue's kind of Peacemaking in real action. We were to observe conditions and meet the residents. Equip ourselves to counter propaganda, Japanese or otherwise. And Prue, of course, went armed with stories to encourage all and sundry. She would recommend non violence to a dying dog. Anyway — the camp. There are adjectives for it: orderly, repetitive, cramped, dirty, military, utilitarian. Adjectives and

observations. There isn't enough food and the huts made for one family are housing at least two or three, tiered up as if they're excess stock. Many of the children have beri beri because there are no vegetables. Such words mean too much and too little.

Prue got talking to nurses, wardens, to the people in the camp. Again and again we heard how one way of life was cut off suddenly — another life begun in the camp. Barely a picture or a book to link the two. We were impressed by the residents who help to run the place. They cook and clean, settle in new arrivals, help distribute provisions, and run committees to report problems and abuses to the camp authorities. One doctor, himself a refugee, sleeps by the door of his hut despite the cold, so that others can find him in the night when the camp doctor is away.

I admired these people more than I can say. There's something obscene about a camp with a fence around it, where the huts are permanent and nobody leaves. They could easily languish, and some do. Glassy eyed from opium advanced by drug-pushers under the protection of Japanese soldiers.

The young children squealed when they saw us, hid beneath ropes and drying laundry. The adults sitting in the morning sun laughed and called out to them. In the open centre of the camp older children played a game like British Bulldogs. They had to run from one side to the other without being caught. A group of men carved tent pegs from long sticks of bamboo and cheered the children who made it across. Some of the boys saw me watching and beckoned me over. I shook my head but the men jeered and laughed until I lined up on the far side of the square with the children. They were so thin I didn't want them to chase me. I was afraid to use up what little energy they get from their food, but the men clapped and the boys chattered. So when the game began I jogged out. All the children who were catching raced over. They threw themselves at me until I could hardly stand and the noise of cheering and clapping brought the women out

of their tents. We must go on, Dr Milican said. If they can, then we can. What right have we to brood?

We had lunch with the camp commandant and joined him for daily worship. A Chinese girl led the prayer. Her hair was pulled back into a pony-tail at the base of her neck. I couldn't stop looking at her cheek bones; high, fragile, the skin quivering over them like the canvass of a tent in a summer breeze (in that other world where tents and camps are for fun). She lost all her family during the fall of the city, but when she stood to pray she looked around and smiled. I felt that smile rush through me. There was something magical in the hut and her eyes. She spoke, stopping every line so a warden could translate. I swallowed and swallowed as if I was drinking in the sound.

Prue rocked, arms behind her back, head bowed, eyes closed.

We pray for the soldiers and all of the families suffering in the war.

For the Chinese and the Japanese.

We pray for peace between our nations. For peace in our land.

We ask most of all for peace in our hearts.

She spoke in a quiet voice that did not waver. For the first time in my life I heard the word 'peace' and it had nothing to do with soldiers or protests. The peace she spoke was a mountain temple with no sound but falling water and leaves. The girl with me. A simple room and soft furniture. Smells of cooking rising into the last of the day. A vision brief but vivid as a prophecy.

After the prayer Prue stooped to scribble a note in tiny writing up the side of a page in her notebook. I searched for the girl among the people. She was in the middle of it all, peering up at the low roof of the iron hut. The angle cast sharp shadows into the hollows of her cheeks and I had a sudden intuition of her skull, her skeleton. I wanted to speak to her, but what could I say?



This is what I have seen. Every view besieges mind and heart, demands attention I cannot give. Yet it is possible to face it all. The Milicans do, and Prue does. We must go on, Dr Milican says, even resistance of despair is a great victory. We eat and laugh, and I feel sick with guilt. To eat is to know someone else nearby will not. But now that I have seen I am responsible. Prue asks if I have washed my hands or said my prayers, looking up at me sideways in imitation of mother, and what is there to do but laugh? How do they bear it? I daresay one can get used to anything.

6th January

Another guest here is an American journalist and photographer named Thomas. He has a family connection to Shanghai, and Rev Milican knew his father. Tom came to the city long before the Japanese. He works for an American paper, sends photographs to friends around the world and helps the press corps get access to Shanghai society. He had a house on the edge of the old city with a Chinese writer friend, but the place was destroyed in the bombing and his friend went to Hong Kong. In lieu of paying board Tom helps the Milicans with their intermittent radio broadcasts from an upstairs room in the house. These usually consist of interviews with one of their house guests or friends, prayers and sermons from Rev Milican, and now a war news update from Tom. Prue says there is a large audience, but I can't imagine it. She's agreed to do an interview next week and Tom has offered to show me the other side of Shanghai.

Photography is Tom's passion. He carries a camera everywhere, banging against his chest in a leather case he made at school. Today he showed me some of his pictures. American businessmen in clouds of cigar smoke and beautiful Chinese girls with diamonds and permanent-waves in their hair were mixed in with rice farmers and

rickshaw coolies, children sitting on upturned ammo crates or clutching a whisky bottle. Tom's photographs are as two-faced as Shanghai itself.

One set of pictures reminded me of the photos plastered around Tokyo that showed Chinese crowds lining the platform of Shanghai station waving flags to welcome the Japanese liberators. Tom's are similar, except he took them himself from behind the crowd, looking in from the station entrance. His pictures show what the Japanese do not: a long row of backs, raised hands and flags, and there in the foreground two Japanese soldiers behind machine guns that are pointed at the people. I always thought the Japanese version was suspicious.

Tom took three pictures at the station in quick succession, so the troop train gets nearer in each one. In the third picture a boy in the back row, bow legged and hatless, has dropped his arm. His flag points at the floor and he's turned his head towards the soldiers, the guns, and the camera. His expression is blank when you first look, certainly there is no pretence at happiness but neither is there fear or malice. I picked up the print and brought the picture closer to my face, so I could look the boy in the eye. His expression transformed. His eyes grew wider and brighter, catching a reflection I'd not seen before. Although his shoulders were back and his chin was raised, there was no tension in the set of his jaw.

He doesn't look afraid, I said.

I don't think he was, said Tom.

Is he challenging them? asked Rev Milican.

I don't think so, said Prue. She took the picture and squinted at the boy. If he was challenging them you'd see it in his face, but — no — he's not looking at them. He's defying the lie, yes, but it's not about the soldiers.

We all looked at Tom.

What happened? I asked.

The train arrived and the boy walked away. The soldiers didn't fire.

Later

Just now there was a stirring beneath my window. I thought it was the soldiers moving people, complaining about some minor infringement of today's code, but when I looked out the only soldiers in sight were standing under a lantern at the far end of the street.

The mother I saw yesterday, who sleeps beneath my window, was standing. She had taken up her children from their pallet and held them. There was a feeble little sound. She began to sing in a whisper and I realised one of the children was crying. I couldn't fathom why she'd woken them and picked them up. I scanned the street. The stirring had receded to tense silent attention; how I imagine servants would await the coffin of their master. This attention was directed to the part of the street I couldn't see. I opened the window and leaned out. A pack of dogs came into view, darting from the side street onto the main road. A rickshaw coolie shouted and picked up his pace. The people tensed, those who could stepped behind fires. The child whimpered and his mother rocked him.

There were at least ten dogs. They walked slowly down the street picking up their paws one by one. Their eyes and coats glistened in the firelight. I've only ever seen so many dogs with the hunt, but these were nothing like scent hounds. They didn't have floppy ears and they didn't bark or yelp. The dogs were slow and kingly, alert, rippling, and better fed than the people who feared them.

When the soldiers caught sight of them they stood still and stared. The dogs had a grotesque symbolic gravity. We all knew that their presence among us and the manner

of their passing, the slow curled lips and glossy coats, were not in the natural order. Months ago I wrote here that I was travelling to Hell. I was wrong. Hell is an ancient horror. Those dogs keep the door of a new apocalypse. One entirely of human making. The soldiers fired three warning shots. The dogs barked and stood for a moment, then scattered into the night.

I will ask the Milicans to let the mother and her children sleep in the house tomorrow, in my room if necessary. I can't leave them down there with packs of dogs about.

7th January

Today was our first meeting with Chinese pacifists. This is Prue's primary reason for being here: to meet what remains of the Chinese FOR, to encourage them, and to hear their stories.

We cleared the clutter from the room behind the kitchen, put all the chairs we could find in there, and lit the fire. The room was once a living room for the Milicans but since the Japanese came it's become a short-term dormitory for anyone and everyone who can fit in. They sleep on the floor or on camp beds, and an Italian doctor has even slung a hammock. He wasn't at the meeting, he avoids us as much as he can. He's only waiting for a shipment of supplies and cash before he can cross back behind the lines to his village in the north-west.

They started to arrive after breakfast, with letters and notebooks and much to be said. Rev Milican brewed as much tea as he could. His wife had been called out in the night to a birth and was sleeping it off. Prue ate the last of the raisins she brought from Japan and began on a batch of persimmons that arrived this morning. She listened,

nodding, occasionally asking a question or making a note. I went out to find the mother from last night, to tell her there was a place for her and the children in the house whenever she wanted it.

Rev Milican had agreed without question. He rubbed his forehead as I described the pack of dogs.

They're getting worse, he said. I used to think they were doing us a service — better dogs than festering corpses. But now I wish the soldiers would shoot the damn things.

He turned back to the stove, shook his head. It's the first time I've heard a missionary say damn. I thought of Bevan, the fat little man on the boat, and wondered what he would make of the Milicans. Heretics, I should think, but then I couldn't imagine how he would fare here, where our civilised values look like trinkets and most of our ideas feel like indulgence at the least. In only three days I've heard the Milicans rise twice in the night to attend to an emergency, the first port of call for anyone in the neighbourhood regardless of race. I know they wake before dawn to pray, or will sit with a sick child so its mother can get some sleep. I've seen them dish out all the food and go without. Prue said most of the contents of their wardrobe is in the streets. What are a million 'damns' compared to that?

I couldn't find the woman. I tried to ask the sentries but they grinned at me and waved their hands, as though they didn't understand. One of them turned away when he saw me coming and fiddled with his rifle. I got nowhere. She isn't there now either, below the window, I've just checked. I'll keep an eye out but I hope she's found somewhere better than here.

When I returned the back room was filling. Prue stood beside the biggest Chinese man I've seen, almost as tall as me and built for a Rugby player. He laughed

when she introduced me, and said, in good English, Getting into the family business are you? He'd just come from mitigating a dispute between a British businessman and the families living in the graveyard near the river. The British man wants them to move on because they're desecrating a holy site and ruining the look of the place. Our Chinese fellow, who calls himself, dubiously, Henry, is a union man and a factory foreman. He's employed by a Chinese company who are trying to re-establish the devastated Chinese manufacturing by opening factories inside the concessions. The people living in the graveyard are mostly families of workers employed in his factories, where board is provided for the worker himself but not for his dependents. I asked him what his plan was.

I must work on the Englishman, he said. You have consciences, I must find his.

Can't you get them somewhere better to live?

Even if his masters were prepared to pay, which they aren't, where would a hundred families go in Shanghai now? The best he can do is stop them from being evicted.

They have trees in the graveyard, he went on, and shelter, away from the road. Not a bad position for today. Tomorrow — perhaps we can do better?

I stared at him, smiling and somehow soft even as his voice drowned out everything and half the room listened because they couldn't speak over him. Prue put a hand on my shoulder. Someone asked Henry a question. He happily talked on, but I dropped my head a fraction and closed my eyes and wanted to be anywhere but in that room. Prue slid her hand across to the other shoulder so that her arm was around me. I felt the warmth of her breath, her head close to mine.

Aylwin, she said, quietly, speaking the name only my family use. Don't be so hard on all of us.

I looked up at her. Her face was fixed and blotchy, sagging at the edges. I wanted to see something else. Radiance, a quick piercing look, or the sort of power that you imagine rushes through the prophet at the moment when he stands up and says, This is the word of the Lord. Prue was a tired old woman. I let her squeeze my shoulders and forced a smile, then excused myself to help Rev Milican (who just now said I should call him Roger, which I shall).

The Prue I wanted was the woman I could remember silencing a heckler in Victoria Park by telling him she agreed with him, and what could they do to fix the problem? Perhaps I was not so well armed as that heckler, but after failing to find the woman outside, and hearing Henry's story, I came to Prue's talk cradling some grenades. I felt them, balled up at the back of my mind, the shadow weight of them in my empty hands. I wondered where Ray was. I sat at the back of the room and my body remembered the cool New York barn, butterflies in shards of sunlight, notched wooden benches. I watched Prue walk up, disappointment playing the memory of a small Chinese man. For the first time ever I was before her in need of what only she could give. I shivered and hid my chin in the wool of my jersey.

Prue began by telling us that if we feel the time for politics and talk is over we are right. We cannot reverse the events that have swept over this city or this country. We cannot return the refugees to homes that have been destroyed and we cannot bring back the dead. There will come a time when we can rebuild as brothers and sisters. When we will bring former enemies together to build homes with hands and hearts which will stand as a challenge to those who want war again in the future.

Grenade number one disarmed, with a soft click and a rolling away. There will be a future. It won't be this way forever.

She went on. For now our task is clearer, and much harder: we must look for peace in all that we do. It is easy to believe that our own lives mean nothing, because we do not hold guns or make decisions. We have no money and no power.

As I expected, Prue told the story of the girl in the refugee camp, and of her own arrest for trying to protect a German woman in Bow from an angry mob during the war. She described how Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze received a letter from the Kaiser agreeing with him that Jesus advocates pacifism. The tear-smudged ink of Kagawa's apology letter from Tokyo to his Chinese brothers and sisters. She uses such stories as a preacher uses the gospels, again and again, finding new meaning, beauty and hope in every changed context. As she did, I glimpsed the prophet I knew and the power I wanted.

Grenade number two rolled away. But all of this was familiar.

What surprised me came later. She asked her audience to close their eyes and imagine themselves in Epping Forest, in southern England. There are tall oaks, and ash trees, pollarded for centuries so their trunks rise as columns to a spreading crown that dapples pale light from the cold blue sky. It is winter and you can see mistletoe high in the branches. Imagine the trees look out onto meadows of grass cropped by grazing. Squirrels, larks, finches, deer. Centuries of kings pursuing wild boar into the shade. This unlikely idyll is in Essex, a long walk or a short bus ride from the noise of Bow and the power of the City of London. And it was once the backdrop for a war. A different kind of war to the one around us now. It was the battle against the enclosure of common land, but it was certainly a war, in the sense that violence was employed by the powerful to get what they wanted at the expense of the weak.

Imagine groups of men and women. They walk with long sticks or shepherds crooks, and sometimes they argue. At night some walk into the forest to pull down



fences with their hands. In the daytime others lead reluctant children along old paths in sight of grand houses. Shepherds walk out to find their herd of muddy sheep or cows on the commons of the forest. The numbers get smaller and smaller. New fences block the way for loppers between the trees. Smoke does not rise out of village chimneys. Rangers set traps and the law looks away. Still the people go out and they walk. They walk the paths and drove roads through the forest and across the enclosed land. The paths are a part of them, and they are a part of the landscape.

The idea began to ferment. It bubbled into life, and the bubbles floated out from local lawyers, to city men, to councillors, until eventually Queen Victoria herself rode down to Chingford and designated the area a public forest for the health and enjoyment of her people. The single man or woman who stepped beneath rustling trees, heard the flying of Henry VIII's arrow through history, impressed an idea into being. They impressed freedom into being with the same feet, the same steps, that impressed the path into the earth beneath them and kept it visible for those who came after.

Prue said that at High Beech there is a gate that opens onto a path alongside wood and grazing land. On one side the path is edged with brambles and elder. On the gate hangs a sickle. Each person who passes takes the sickle and cuts away any overgrowth that covers the path. At the end of the path is another gate. They hang the sickle over the bars of the gate and leave it for the next walker.

She looked around the room. When her eyes passed over mine I felt the look press into me. It was a kindling of significance, moment and meaning pressing together as two hands in prayer. Grenade number three rolled away. The Prue I had longed for was standing before me.

This, she said, is the way we must challenge this war. Yes we could relinquish and pick up our rifle. But does history not show that wherever a man holds a gun

suffering follows? Death and injustice follow. If we truly long for peace we cannot bring it by adding to the sum of violence. As the people of the forest pressed a path into being with their feet, and pressed freedom into being along with it, so we can press peace into being with our actions and our words.

Feed the hungry, heal the sick, comfort the sad, create joy and beauty wherever you go, in whatever way you can. Find God in everything and everyone. Because if God is truth and we are made in His image, then His truth and grace are in each and every one of us. As we do these practical things, she said, we impress practical change, peaceful change, onto the world. At the same time we impress a new idea into being, one which redefines our relationship with each other and with the war. This is the model of Jesus.

What about speaking truth to power? asked Henry.

Yes, she answered, often the practical thing, the risky thing, is to speak to those who stand in the way — but not always. She suggested a test: is what you are saying a viable means to bring about change or is it merely a chance to relieve your own powerlessness?

I felt cool and fresh, as though water poured over me. I remembered dangling my feet in a river near home. Water so cold it made your ankles hurt, and your body cool when you should be baking in the sun. That was how I felt when Prue spoke. Not fired up, not whipped or blown up by hot air. Not even emotional, but blissfully cool. The world slipped back into order. There is always a way forward. Keep to the path and keep the path clear.

I feel closer to Ray today, understanding this. As though I'm watching him through a periscope, sighting him in the distance where I can follow his movements. Relive the first moment, watching him raise the tent, or the night when we sang by the

fire on the lawn. I haven't a clue where he is but it hardly seems to matter. We will find each other again or we will not. What more can I say?

8th January

Prue is at the British Ambassador's residence for the evening. It's the closest she can get to an official visit, with the Chinese government all in Hankow. She went out humming. How different it is to Japan; her pale face when she returned from the government visit, came onto the balcony and leant her head on my shoulder. Though she was quick to remind me that we have our own Imperial myths, and the Japanese maintain they are quoting our textbooks.

This morning we joined Dr Milican on her rounds at a Lutheran hospital in an old government building. When we left the house I still felt cool and calm. I was more aware than usual of the placing of my feet, my grating breath, the looks and calls we received as we went through the city. The air was dry and smelt of burning rubber. A cloudless sky looked down on us but the air was bayonet-cold against my skin.

The hospital treats injured Chinese soldiers and has doctors of their own but not enough nurses, so Dr Milican goes when she can to help with basic care. She used to work in the original Lutheran hospital in Shanghai when they first moved here. We turned down a narrow alley that led to a flight of steep steps. Came out, laughing, onto a small landing at the top of the steps. I looked back down the dark tunnel we'd climbed and wondered how they'd get a patient out if he couldn't walk. It reminded me of the straight lines of a planted forest, looking along the regimented trees to the place in the distance where they appear to meet but for the slither of light, a catch, a window, a door. We had stepped through the light and into another place.

On the ward the soldiers were thin and barely moved in their beds. There was a single window at the far end but nothing of the bright day could make it through the grime to dispel the grey of the room. A stack of Bibles stood by the door. Brown stains splashed across peeling walls. One nurse who spoke English (with a slight, attractive lisp) looked away and told me that there is never enough food. I understand, I said, pointedly, hoping she would look back at me but she didn't. More men died in the hospital from starvation or illness than from their wounds. Dr Milican set about helping the nurses change dressings and clean wounds, and gave out vitamins from her bag. She was a charge of energy in the weight of the room.

A middle-aged woman in uniform came onto the ward shortly after us. She had blonde hair that was dulled by age, and her face was the colour and texture of old milk. The nurse with the lisp ran away from me and began to take the temperature of a patient. The woman greeted Dr Milican and looked at us over her glasses. She asked who we were. Her English accent was a disappointment. Prue introduced us and the woman shook her head. Pursed her lips. Said she was the matron. I wanted to hit her round the face. So much for non-violence.

She explained in a too loud voice that the soldiers were not fit for visits. Especially not from people who didn't understand what they had experienced and would be likely to confuse them. Prue looked sideways at me. It was intended as a warning but I wasn't a dog to be called off, even by her. Halfway down the room Dr Milican changed the dressing on the amputated leg of a man who had turned his face away from her so that she wouldn't see he was crying. He stared at me and gritted his teeth.

Where are the doctors? I asked.

The matron raised her eyebrows in a stagey expression of surprise. I felt Prue tense, draw in her arms, as if she had increased her gravitational pull. She looked at the woman without blinking. The look expected an answer and I was grateful to her for that.

The doctors are about their business, the matron said. The archaic expression caught me. I blinked, and tried to make sense of a code I was sure lay beneath.

Prue raised her head and said, We've only come to listen to the soldiers, and to help in whatever way might be appropriate, with whatever you need.

We have all the help we require, snapped the matron.

The room was full of beds and cots. There must have been a hundred men in there, and there were two nurses and Dr Milican. It smelt of the disinfectant she was rubbing everywhere more liberally than she could afford, but when we came in it had smelt of piss and mould like rancid cheese. It couldn't have been clearer that the hospital did not have all the help they needed. The matron stood with her back straight and her hands under her chin where they held a shawl closed. She had a ring on almost every finger, gold mostly, somehow catching what bare light was in the room to wink at me. Prue leaned a fraction closer to me and I felt the air charge. Anger ignited my body. I was hot, as if I'd never felt cool at all.

Perhaps we could talk to some of the men? Prue asked.

The matron shook her head, and said, I wouldn't want the patients to get agitated. We have our morning Bible reading as soon as Mrs Milican is finished.

Dr Milican, I said.

Pardon?

You said 'when Mrs Milican is finished' — but she's not Mrs Milican, she's Dr Milican.

She tilted her head and her knuckles whitened on the shawl. Is she not married to Revered Milican? she asked.

What's that got to do with it?

How about Nancy? called out Dr Milican. I looked over, she was smiling. The nurse behind her, who was supposedly unable to speak English, stared intently at the label on a bottle, still and wide-eyed.

Perhaps you'd prefer to wait outside? The matron said to Prue, all studied politeness. The service we give here can be distressing for the untrained.

A look passed between Prue and Dr Milican — Nancy — and she pulled me onto the landing. I wanted to go back and stand up to the blasted woman. I demanded to know how she was able to go on running a hospital with such disregard for her patients.

Prue leaned against the wall and put her hands in her coat pockets. You don't know she has disregard for her patients, she said.

I thought it was pretty obvious.

Look at this city, Prue said. She may be trying to do the best with what she has. Besides — she has her own objectives.

I stepped toward Prue but she put a hand up.

Don't allow the thought to fester, she said. I know how you feel but if we begin to trump our own rightness — then what next? Christians already spend far too much time worrying over each other, and that's probably what this is about: territory. Let's not set ourselves the same trap please.

She was right, of course. I shouldn't expect any less opposition from fellow Christians. The woman might have been afraid of us but she probably only thought we were wrong. Humans will do an awful lot when they consider someone 'wrong'. We considered her wrong, but if we let that dictate our response then what was there to split

us? We'd be three English people working out our own arguments at the expense of Chinese soldiers lives. You can't get more bloody Imperial than that.

I put a hand on the wall, leaned forward and spat onto the dirty floor. It seemed the best thing to do. I noticed that my shoes needed cleaning and there was a small hole at the edge of the toe-crease in the left one. I need a new pair but there's no chance of that now. I asked Prue what we could do for the soldiers. She said she'd try to get a donation from the Ambassador this afternoon. That might demonstrate the nature of our intentions.

And they'll spend the money on more Bibles?

They might. But there's no use reading scripture to dead men.

I put the other hand against the wall. Closed my eyes and bent my arms from the elbow until I could feel the cold stone of the wall against the end of my nose. We used to do that as a drill on the rugby field at school. There was a red-brick wall that surrounded the playing fields and we would run from side to side then end to end, pushing up against the stone until we smelt the moss. I felt then that the wall was the edge and limit of my world, that I wouldn't be completely alive until there were no walls. At Wadham we snuck out in the night and climbed over a low part of the wall to visit girls or play cards in outhouses and talk about Spain. There was nothing daring about it except pressing into the shadows when the proctors passed. What we never saw was that the walls were notional. We'd chosen our confinement there as we chose a hundred other confinements, and we only wanted to break out so as to enjoy life inside even more.

When Nancy joined us she breathed deep on the outside air. She laughed, slapped me on the arm, and said,

Poor woman wasn't prepared for you, was she?

It turns out the matron takes orders from a notorious Lutheran missionary who has a reputation for nailing letters to doors when he wants to make a point. Usually the doors belong to missionaries of other denominations.

Nothing if not imaginative, she went on, and very keen on saving souls.

Doesn't leave much room for God does it? said Prue.

Religion can knock God out of the best of us, said Nancy.

She also told us that the Chinese government are no longer funding the hospital. They've abandoned Shanghai, and reports of the hospital have given them an excuse to abandon the soldiers. Now Prue is at Number One House selling the hospital we barely saw to the Ambassador, hoping he won't ask too many questions and will take it on as a mercy project.

The world never promised to make every decision clear or every choice simple. However, one thing today was very easy. Over lunch Tom (the photographer) asked if I wanted to go out tomorrow evening to dinner with him and his press friends. I agreed immediately. I've been desperate to see the Shanghai peopled by the passengers of taxis and rickshaws that rumble beneath my window. The tall buildings down by the water whisper of white gloves and bow ties. I wonder why I long for a glimpse of it? Am I chasing glamour or is it homesickness? Perhaps I only want normality, but there is nothing normal in this Shanghai. The only problem is I've got so little money, but Tom seemed to expect that and asked to buy me dinner. He has an inheritance so I don't mind. I washed my best shirt this evening and polished my shoes. It really is hole in the left one.

9th Jan (early morning on the 10th)



I can't write much — it's almost 3 am — but I want to get something down before the feeling of tonight, the feeling of a dream, slips into dreaming itself, and then to nothing.

This morning was taken up with worship which was bible study, hymns, prayers and discussion. It reminded me of New York. We resolved nothing and I saw no miracles, yet I left the room convinced that every breath is more miraculous than the last. Our lunch of stale unleavened bread and broth was sanctified, the last of the persimmons halved and shared between us. We honoured the sabbath with card games and poetry. Prue recited verses from Tagore's *Gitanjali*, her voice deep and monotone. I made them all laugh with *The Eagle*. Roger stayed seated and stared at his hands, speaking quietly Whitman's *Reconciliation* which I had never heard before. 'For my enemy is dead — A man divine as myself is dead'.

In the evening Tom took me to the Shanghai Club. It's the centre of a cluster of glamour along the Bund that gives Shanghai the face of a great city, if not its body. We walked there along crowded streets, between the refugees, as if towards the plug hole of the city. When we passed through on Tuesday we saw jewellers and wine merchants. Tonight it was crammed with glittering people.

There were street lights. I hadn't realised their power to make a place feel safe and normal. Red-eyed men and women in the shadows.

The club was sweet with tobacco smoke, hot and humming. Heart-racing anonymity swamped me. My head reeled with choice. Even what to order gave me a lurching sense of power. I pulled Kagawa's pendant from around my neck and put it in my jacket pocket. The bar, the Long Bar, is walnut with nickel plating along the edge. The walls are walnut panelled and the wooden stools are made to resemble English pub furniture. The people living on our street would know what to do with all that wood.

Tom pointed out Japanese businessmen in the corner, some German doctors and airmen, the important (rich) Chinese who'd remained, and big-money men of various nationalities clinging on in the city. Tom's father was in business here twenty years ago so he knows people. The table of foreign press were his friends, mostly men and the loudest in the bar.

Whisky sodas appeared. I was happy to ask no questions and to drink. It might have been Oxford again or the boat, except the jokes were peppered with gruesome stories.

I told them about the dogs. Nobody was surprised. A middle aged American (who looked as though he'd been vomited up by a shop selling equipment for the 'gentleman explorer') said he'd been at the graveyard covering the dispute. Someone told him the dogs were now taking remains from tombs that had fallen into disrepair.

Some of the others were in Nanking before the Japanese arrived. Whenever that city was mentioned, a little bald man shouted the name and a dozen heads across the bar snapped round. Our friend raised his eyebrows and his glass, and they turned quickly back to their drinks. It made a change from the studied blankness the rest of the time. Everybody peered around the bar as though looking on equals. As though there were no occupiers and occupied, no possible reason for conflict, no dearly held views, no beliefs. I knew that Prue would hate the hypocrisy, but wasn't it a non-violence of sorts? In the fug of whisky known categories had vanished.

We heard an explosion in the distance. Chinese guerrillas are still active in the outskirts of the city. The masks slipped again. Eyes and minds on the Japanese in the corner. They went on talking, smiling. I looked at Tom. He said they maintain it's their forces at target practice.

Dinner was the best I've had in months. There was beef and fish and quails eggs and gin cocktails. I'd have given anything for those quails eggs but Tom waved me off and ordered two plates. He wears a signet ring on the little finger of his right hand with a coat of arms on it. The crest is a hand holding a sword by its blade.

Excalibur? I asked, thinking I'd had too much to drink.

He smiled. The sword has many names. My family were Welsh — Protestants, Round heads, that's why they left for the States in the end.

A king come out of Wales, I said. A nice story.

He changed the subject, but I felt spooked and stalked by Arthur.

After dinner the bar was emptier. We sat on stools and met a New Zealander named Rewi Alley. He's a stocky man with short ginger hair and a nose that points past you. His eyes are pale, light blue, and he's the most interesting man I've ever met. He's been in China for years, working as a factory inspector and travelling all around the country.

Why don't you go home now — with the war? I asked.

I am home, he said.

He wants to help Chinese industry. He believes China requires a cooperative model, flexible, able to hide from the Japanese and to function away from heavy infrastructure. I told him about Kagawa. More drinks arrived, more whisky and we talked and talked and Tom and Rewi laughed about people they know. I stopped drinking and watched them. The night slipped by and if my mind drifted from the talk I could hear machine guns and dogs barking.

10th January

The Ambassador won't donate to the hospital because the government can't be seen to take sides, but Prue did meet a businessman on Saturday who has said he might be able to help. How does she do it? I was with those people all night and I said nothing. She's writing home to encourage donations; money for nurses, and marmite for the nutrients.

Today was quiet. We went around the neighbourhood with the Milicans. One of our jobs was to bring food to an old man who sleeps in a rice sack on the next street over. Roger said they've invited him into the house but he won't come while there are children on the street. They take him food whenever they can. We carried the bowl of rice and vegetables in a box under blankets and clothes to distribute. When we got to the man he was sitting up, talking to a rickshaw coolie. The sun was shining again in that hard winter way. The brightness gave the two men a medieval look, sumptuous and colourful against the dirt of the road and the building.

The street was crowded. It might have been a market in another world, but in this city people buy and sell anything they can, wherever they can. The coolie drove his rickshaw towards us as we approached. He was young and he whistled at Prue and Nancy, angling for a fare. Then he looked at our box. We waved him on and he laughed. I wanted to stop and look at the things for sale. A man had a crowd growing around each of his raised hands. In one was a basket of four eggs, in the other a painted comb. It seemed to be a parable. My mind flashed back to last night and I remembered that Kagawa's pendant was still in my pocket. I could have eaten more of those quails eggs this morning had there been more, and I didn't feel guilty about it. I had expected to feel guilty, but that was the first I'd thought about the meal.

The old man watched us approach. His wrists jutted from his sleeves as though they weren't supposed to be there. Roger and I stopped in front of him and he pursed his

lips, raised his eyebrows. We stood close together so our bodies shielded him from view. Nancy took a blanket from the box and crossed the road towards a mother with a small baby. Children ran down the street to see what she was giving away. With the attention off us Prue slid the bowl from the box and handed it to the old man. He spoke to Roger, who answered, then he began to eat.

The baby started to cry and a crowd gathered around Nancy. I asked what the old man had said.

He wanted to know if we've all eaten today, said Roger.

The man looked between us and grunted, perhaps enjoying the subterfuge.

While he ate Prue sat beside him on the floor and asked about his home, his family, his profession. He answered without unnecessary words and Roger translated. When she asked about his family his response was one word: gone. He used to own an umbrella shop in a suburb of the city. The whole block was destroyed by shelling that started a fire. I followed the lines of his face, thinking about umbrellas and fiddling with the pendant in my pocket. His face was so wrinkled that when he wasn't smiling the skin hung without shape, as a wet towel folded over on itself, but as soon as he twitched his mouth the cheeks and jaw appeared, a hint of how he had once looked. I could imagine him, twenty years ago when Tom's father was in Shanghai, walking along the Bund in clean shoes with a bright coloured umbrella, beside a son perhaps, or a daughter. Such normal things will happen here again, but I cannot imagine them in the future, only in the past.

Prue asked if he collects scrap metal to sell to the Japanese. Most of the unemployed sift through the remains of homes and factories to gather even the smallest shards. Japanese soldiers weigh their loads and pay them for it, then the army melt down the metal for repairs or pack it into bombs as shrapnel. The old man licked his lips

and answered in a long sentence, his features hidden under quivering wrinkles. He finished speaking and in the quiet I heard Nancy laugh across the street. There was something meaningful in the moment that transcended translation, in the sure sound of his voice amidst the bustle of the street, in the strength with which he spoke each word and did not smile. For a second we were still and silent. Then Roger cleared his throat and translated,

He said he won't give a fingernail of metal to the Japanese for them to kill Chinese boys. He'd sooner starve. And he won't give a rice-grain of metal to the Chinese either. He's seen enough in his life to know that fighting, which men think will save them and turn them into heroes, only ever destroys.

What do you mean? asked Prue.

If you lose, you will die, the old man said. If you win, you will spend your life carrying dead friends and dead enemies wherever you go. This is no life.

Nancy came back to us. The young rickshaw driver also returned. He crossed and leaned against the cab of the rickshaw. I looked back at him, over my shoulder. He nodded and I nodded back. I was sure he loved the man and how or why didn't matter a bit.

Prue and the old man stood. He bowed to Roger and Nancy, then shook hands with them, and put his empty bowl in the box. I took the pendant from my pocket and pressed it into Prue's hand. When the old man came to shake her hand she held it out with the pendant, its Hanzi characters visible. He looked down at it and smiled, shedding twenty years.

He read it out: Warrior for peace.

Please, said Prue, a gift from my nephew here. From a young man to an older one who has taught us a new meaning of peace.

Not new surely? he said.

She lifted the pendant. He took it and curled his thin hand over the script.

11th January

A prayer meeting with the pacifists this morning then Rewi Alley came to the house after lunch. Tom was out but he'd come to find me. I felt strange about his appearance here. He was less exciting than he had been the other night. Today he was just a rough New Zealander in a dirty shirt and sandals. There was none of the mystery added by ties and walnut panelling (or whisky and gin). Yet Rewi was as much of an alien in the Shanghai Club, among averted eyes and lowered voices, as he was here among upturned faces recently at prayer. There is something so active about him, so deliberate and present in the room and in himself. I expect he would stand out anywhere.

I didn't want Prue to talk to him, which of course was impossible. Not only were we all in one room but Prue has an ability to sniff out new people long before they arrive. If he'd come half an hour earlier she would have been upstairs saying her prayers (or in Prue's words: practising the presence of God). As it was she bounced into the room five minutes before Rewi and said, I have a feeling about this afternoon.

Sometimes it's just infuriating.

He stood in the kitchen looking from person to person. I wanted him to be charming, I remembered him as charming. I wanted him to talk and ask questions and introduce himself, but he didn't. He shook my hand and raised his eyebrows. He wanted to hear more about Kagawa's cooperatives and to show me some of the resurrected factories of the city.

Of course I wanted to go, and Prue was keen, as she is about anything of that sort. She had to meet her businessman this afternoon and take him to the awful hospital. She grinned at Rewi and said cooperatives were the perfect way to spread the values of peace during a war. Rewi agreed, and said that in fact they were using the war to push through the movement, to build the cooperatives ready for after the war, but they also happened to be just about the only way unite the country in defence. Prue nodded, thinking about it. I'm always surprised by this moment in conversation with her, when you feel her considering, mulling your comments. Why a person like Prue would mull over anything I say is beyond me. She said it is only by bringing the new world into being that the militarism of the old world can be destroyed. Rewi smiled and looked at me. I am learning that he is selective with his smiles.

The first place we visited was on the top floor of a building that was once apartments. There were tall windows and balconies leading off the main workshop but inside boys were crammed together at low benches, sitting on the floor, squinting at stitching on boots. I thought of Daddy's workshop behind the shop in Hanover Square, the boy apprentices I was always jealous of. At the end of the room was a ladder leading to the attic. Rewi told me to climb up and have a look. He leaned against the wall with his arms crossed talking to some boys. They shot quick glances up at him while their fingers went on working. Something they said made him snort and he waved me up the ladder. The floor of the loft was covered with close rows of sleeping boys, some as young as ten or even eight. The night shift, Rewi told me. The boys were telling him a story when I came down, punching each other between stitches. They seemed to like him in the quick, instinctive way boys have. I couldn't understand a word of it but I could see they were trying to impress him. He said something, a single word, and they screamed with laughter and the foreman shouted at us.



We left and moved on to another factory in a basement where more boys were stirring vats of lead paint. The room was dark and heavy with fumes that cooled on the damp bricks of the walls, streaming down into puddles. The boys wouldn't look at us, even when Rewi spoke to them. There were bars across the small high windows and the foreman followed everywhere a step behind us. I tried to imagine day after day, week after week, in that place. My nose stung and I wanted to cover my mouth, to cough, anything. When we came up the outside stairs it was the first time since arriving in China that I'd thought the air of Shanghai was fresh.

Those boys will have lead poisoning, Rewi said, setting off at pace.

I asked why all the workers were children.

These are small factories, he said, the poor end of business and squeezed more every day. The Japanese have flooded the market, lowered the price of goods and the value of labour. The aim is to destroy Chinese industry and create a country dependent on Japanese imports.

He stopped to look at me.

Not unlike what the British did in India, he said.

I didn't want him to think I was one of those Englishmen. I kept my eyes on him and nodded.

Hence your cooperatives? I said.

He smiled, That's the hope.

We walked fast along roads that I didn't know while Rewi explained his vision. Three different kinds of cooperatives, three levels, each more flexible and temporary than the last. The most flexible would operate in villages behind the Japanese lines but away from the main supply routes that extend their control. These operations would produce small essentials and consumer goods for villages and guerillas. They would

have little in the way of equipment and could hide or move on quickly at short notice if the Japanese began to take an interest. The middle group would operate close behind the Chinese lines, able to move if the line moved but producing more substantial items, and specialising in goods for the military. The final group, with its reliance on heavy equipment and complex operations, would be kept in the far west to produce significant items of higher value. All three types of industry would model the ideology of the cooperative movement: equality, mutual responsibility, and national unity. They would also function as two-way propaganda missions, disseminating and collecting information of value to the national cause.

Rewi walked and spoke with the same deliberate energy; not fast, not slow. Three times as we walked he waved a greeting to someone but he never paused or deviated from the slow unwinding of his explanation. He had a vivid, romantic way of describing places. The villages behind Japanese lines were 'frayed out'. The larger operations he imagined serving the Chinese lines would be 'tight and modest', and the west, the land of deserts and mountains I could not imagine, he described as 'the hope of all China'. For Rewi the new world will fall out of the lonely west like a thunderbolt, but first it must be manufactured there.

When he finished we were standing outside a low building with dirty windows. I thought it was another factory but when we pushed through the curtains in the open doorway it was a bar we stepped into. Nicer than its outward appearance suggested. There were low armchairs and stools around painted tables. Curtains and engravings on the wall of forests and rivers. The bar itself was an arrangement of bottles and glasses on long shelves. The barman, a pale man with curly grey hair, sat reading *A Tale of Two Cities* in a high-backed chair. When he saw Rewi he took off his glasses and spread his

arms wide, chuckling. Rewi introduced the man as Boris and ordered whisky for all three of us.

We sat in the window, the low chairs close together, and he told me Boris was married to a Chinese girl whose father owned the bar. He brought the drinks over and sat with us. They switched between English and Mandarin in a self-conscious way, so I became convinced they were hiding things from me. Surprisingly, I didn't care. It was clear that Boris was Russian, or Eastern-European at least, and I don't know Rewi well enough to want to know what the consequences of this friendship are. Talking about communism with a Russian in occupied China is not at all the same as the ridiculous conversations we used to have by the fire at Wadham, when we'd slide easily from rationalism to communism to modernism without a thought. Back then, none of it meant anything. Here is different. I drank and watched them and was happy not to step into a world where ideas stalk real, rubble streets.

Boris was cheerful, full of energy, sweeping hand gestures and deep laughs. After a few minutes he turned to me and said,

So George — our friend and acquaintance Mr Alley had been working hard to recruit you to his cause, no?

I nodded. I'm almost convinced, but I've only been in China a week.

He laughed again and finished his drink. His face flushed red. A Chinese man came in and he went to serve him, then they murmured together on the other side of the room. Rewi said it was my turn, and began to ask about what I'd seen in Japan. I was surprised that he wanted to know about Kagawa. I could remember the way he had looked at me in the Shanghai club when he said, I am home. Then there was the way he spoke about the China, the people and the land. I expected more hostility towards the Japanese from a man as passionate as Rewi. Yet I could see that his persistent interest in

Kagawa was a kind of pragmatism. A manifestation of the same directness I saw in his speech and actions.

I've always associated idealism with Prue and so with a vision of the world that often feels virtually impossible to achieve. Her vision relies on faith in the power released by actions. It seeks transformation of the spiritual as well as the physical. Rewi is also an idealist. Sitting before him as he listened to my stories or explained a detail of his plan, I could see his single minded sense of purpose. His ambition is not discouraged by vast practical challenges, by scepticism or corruption. Yet Rewi doesn't claim or seek spiritual transformation. He does believe that cooperatives could change China and he won't give up until he's brought that idea to life. But it isn't a matter of faith, it's a matter of action. That's why he was at the Shanghai Club the other night. He was looking for anyone he could charm into use.

For the first time I realised that a sense of purpose could come with a detailed strategy.

I looked at Boris across the room. He waved his arms. From the fingers of one hand hung a lit cigarette and I watched it fly back and forth in front of the bowed head of the Chinese man who was hunched over his drink.

His brother-in-law, Rewi said. I suspected he was lying, but rather than pursue it I decided to tell him about the farm in Texas.

We stayed in the bar until it was almost dark. Other customers came and went. Several came in through the curtains, nodded to Boris, then continued through another set of curtains at the back. The third time this happened I asked Rewi where they were going.

Into the basement, he said, finishing his drink.

Out in the street I looked for the basement windows but there weren't any. I walked back to the house with Rewi. I felt relaxed with him, interested and excited, and flattered that he had sought me out. It reminded me that I had felt marked at the start of this journey. That I might still be marked out for something. In Shanghai the intensity of life both multiplies opportunities to do something extraordinary, and reduces the significance of anything one can do. Without realising it I had become dulled to the sense of my own destiny. Overshadowed by Prue and her plans. With Rewi that feeling lifted.

Prue asked all about it over dinner. In fact the whole house seemed excited by Rewi. Apparently he's a minor celebrity. Well known for his work as factory inspector he is credited with several important humanitarian improvements. There's also a good deal of gossip about Rewi. His war record, his family, and his interest in socialism were all mentioned. Beneath this a hint of something else breathed and shifted, but I couldn't reach it. It was nothing really, just the emphasis of a word, the cadence of a sentence, a half comment. Yet it was there, I'm sure. I caught Tom grinning at me and when I could I changed the subject.

Prue's hospital donor looks promising and she said the matron was better behaved. Perhaps it was me she disliked? I went out after dinner to look for the woman below my window again. Still no sign of her or the children.

12th January

This morning Roger told me one of the rickshaw coolies said the woman from below my window was taken by the checkpoint guards and never brought back. They say she was raped. Perhaps killed, perhaps not. Nobody knows about the children. I

should have gone down and brought them straight inside, that night when I saw the dogs. I could have brought them in but I didn't. Now all three of them are probably dead. Roger put his arm round me and said I can't blame myself, that we'll make a noise to the authorities. But I do blame myself. I don't want to forgive myself because I could have saved them. I should have saved them.

He said we would pray for them and I nodded. But I couldn't feel there was any point.

There is a power in the world beyond my understanding. That much I know. You cannot know Prue and not see it. Or Roger and Nancy, even Rewi perhaps. A power exists that can change the world and people in it for the better. Anyone animated by belief in something to do wonderful things is proof of a truth in that belief. The problem is I don't feel it in my heart. I don't feel any power in me. Sometimes I catch sight of their vision and I feel hot or cool, excited or energised. I know that I am a part of something. Yet eventually it always dwindles and fades into nothing, as the day fades to night and my eyes will close their lids on the world. I find myself wondering what was gained by all of those knights who went off to look for the Grail but never found it? I cannot accept that my failures are covered by grace. They gnaw at my bones and my dreams. There is no escaping what I am.

Yet I will pray for the woman and her children because I can do nothing else. I will go downstairs, and I will bow my head before dinner, and I will hear the words of grace, and I will agree. Perhaps I'll run my fingers over the beads. Perhaps it will matter.

13th January

I've just been in the Long Bar again. I let Tom buy me drinks. He's planning a move to Hankow with others from the press corps. The war is heading that way. Why on earth do they want to follow it? I didn't go in to dinner. I couldn't keep up the talk and I felt bad about money. Besides, the gremlin was awake. I wanted to write. Why? I don't know what the story is, but I'll write it. What else is there to do?

It started this morning. Prue came to my room while I was shaving. She smiled off-centre in her way, and watched my movements with interest.

It makes me feel old, she said, I remember when you were so small, with your blond curls.

I had an aunt who was a very bad influence, I said.

Doris? she laughed.

It was easy, normal. She talked about the soldiers she met yesterday at the British cantonment. One showed her the ducks that had taken up residence in the regimental swimming pond, another reminded her of a friend from Bow. They were likeable, friendly young men who thought the war here was a shame.

There was nothing in this to warn me.

I finished and sat beside her on the bed. I suddenly thought she was going to cry but she laughed again, loud in the small room, and put her arms around me. She leant her head on my shoulder and said she was going to do something today, something hard. That if I didn't want to go with her she'd understand and wouldn't think less of me. Of course, once she'd said that I would have agreed to anything. She was going out of the concessions. She wanted to see for herself the situation in the Chinese city and to look for a friend who used to live there. The friend was a young man, a pacifist and a

christian, who gave up a large inheritance to look after street children and paint signs for a living.

Her face sunk and trenches lined her eyes. There are some things which cannot be conquered by a brave face. I knew about war. That 'grand and tragic show'. Even a week in the smell and grit of Shanghai wasn't going to stop me going with Prue. I took her arms from round me and put mine around her instead. Her head in the crook of my elbow. If I did nothing else meaningful in China, I could do this for my aunt. We sat still in the sunshine and flies landed on the stiff water of my shaving bowl. I felt the ghosts who waited beyond the curtain of sight. If I couldn't protect the woman and her children, I could at least look at their suffering and not look away.

I put on the shirt from Tony's father. It seemed appropriate, being thick and almost a work shirt, but I knew that it was too fancy, too spirited, for the task. Before we left, a message came for me by the hand of a well-dressed Chinese boy. It was a scribbled invitation from Rewi to meet tonight at Boris' bar. I didn't go, but at the time it buoyed me. Prue and Nancy read the note over my shoulder and joked about my newfound celebrity.

The day had turned cloudy and cold. At least there was no chance of bombers. In order to leave the foreign concessions by the main road we crossed the bridge and walked along the Bund. We passed hotels and banks, the Shanghai Club. Passed the British ship still floating off the dock, and a single blasted hotel-front that looked like a lost tooth. We came to a checkpoint at the boundary with the French concession. I averted my eyes from the boy-soldiers.

Prue led us through French side streets that had the same human smells and sour burning as our part of the city. The houses stood close together and the streets were only wide enough for rickshaw traffic. People everywhere camped out, walked, drove, sold



or bought, shouted or slept. I saw buckets, hats, rice, blankets, coats, and even a Bible and a jar of pickle offered for sale. An old woman sat on a street corner, folded inside her skin. She shouted to Prue and held out a figurine of a cat. The woman's eyes were closed, arms stretched. I wasn't sure whether she didn't want to see us, or didn't want to observe the possible loss of this treasure. Prue answered gently with one of our few Chinese phrases, *bu yao, xiexie*; No thank you.

We came to another checkpoint. Barbed wire strung across the road. Beyond it the street was quiet and there was rubble in the road. Two sentries stood in our way and began to speak fast in Japanese. We looked at each other. Prue's eyebrows were raised and her hat was askew. Because of the cold she was wearing her cape over her coat. Trying to hold it closed while she fumbled in a pocket for the press passes Tom leant us. She looked like a send up of the inept spy. If we had been up to espionage this wouldn't have been the way to go about it. By the time she got the passes out I was shaking with the effort of not laughing. She gave them to one soldier and looked at me. Then she caught it herself, the sudden vision of our ridiculous appearance. It was too much. We have always laughed with Prue. I heard myself snort. The other sentry turned and I looked at my feet. The soldier handed back our passes and waved us through.

We walked ten yards then stopped and laughed. Gulping. Prue put the passes away and linked my arm. Suddenly we couldn't move. The humour of the situation had left us vulnerable. We could have been back on a hot Harpenden Sunday, standing in line with Roke and trying to pass off second hand knowledge of the morning's sermon as authentic. Mother scowling, us feeling more grown up with Prue beside us. Prue not quite the same as other grown ups. We could have been hiding Daddy's sewing scissors or moving the croquet hoops so that the course was on a hill and Harry would lose. It seemed impossible that such days went on. That across the turning world Harpenden

plodded into the new year while here we stood in the ruins of Shanghai. We stood and looked at each other, and knew that when we looked away the spell would be broken and whatever we saw would be all the worse for coming just after memories of home.

This is where I must tell you what we saw. I have set it up, brought you to this point, but now I do not know how to continue. My mind leaps from one shard of memory to another. War has come to my memory, come to my mind, and blasted it open.

We stood alone on a rubble-lined street. For yards in front of us not a single building was undamaged. A vision of my first day in China rose up; the ruined city stretching away, smudged dirt under a girl's eyes.

I ached for a checkpoint, for the noise of interrogation, for living hands to hold out some useless item. The wind blew cold and foul-smelling. I felt light, buffered, not deep enough in myself. Prue stopped to look along a side street then moved on. Towards the house of her friend.

The destruction varied as we went. Here was nothing but rubble, there a row of houses stood intact. A chimney smoked. Objects littered the road like bayoneted innards. A single sandal, a strip of fabric, a walking stick, a burned book. Prue bent and picked up a pair of eye-glasses with no glass in the frames and the bridge snapped.

There was a Chemist at Wadham who thought it sophisticated to wear glasses with no lenses. Did I think of him then or now? It is as if my mind has shuffled its cards, forcing everything up against everything else.

Prue pointed to the curved burnt eye-slit of a temple roof. She looked at it, surprised. I thought she was going to tell me a story but after a minute she turned and walked away. There were larger ruins. Factories, open mouths filled with twisted metal teeth that were the remains of heavy equipment. Then we turned down a narrow street

with tall houses still standing. The sound of voices from inside. Prue stopped, took a deep breath, and walked on. We followed a map in her mind, both longing for and dreading the destination.

I thought of following Ray through the New York woods and back to a walk along the Pilgrim's Way during my first Summer at Oxford.

At the end of the street was a mangled barricade. We met a bent, old woman walking towards the concessions. She had a baby strapped to her chest that was so small I couldn't believe it was alive. The woman nodded. Prue took out a coin, took the woman's hand and put the coin in it. She tried to refuse but Prue said, It is a gift, and pointed at the baby. The woman couldn't understand but she slid the coin between the baby and her skin. Prue pointed at herself and said, Mur-i-el.

We watched the woman walk away then turned another corner. Here were houses with walls missing. A smell of cooking drifted over us but something putrid beneath stirred an oily feeling in my stomach. Prue stopped outside a house. She squeezed my shoulder and nodded. Told me to wait for her. The door hung open. Although the ground floor stood, the upper floors had been blown off. Prue stepped inside and disappeared.

There was a slab of stone at the side of the road. I went over to lift it with my toe. There was no reason to do it. It was there and I didn't want to look at the empty house and think of Prue inside. So I concentrated on the stone. It was the sort of thing I've done a hundred times before. I hooked my foot under and toppled it away. There was an arm underneath; cloth and bone and a nest of maggots. My body lurched, up and into itself away and I thought I was going to vomit. After the first wave passed I looked along the road and picked the biggest stones and went to them and pitched them over one after the other until Prue came up behind me.

Anything? I asked.

She shook her head and held out a book with a red cloth cover, faded Hanzi characters visible on the front.

What is it? I asked.

His Bible, she said.

We stood and Prue closed her eyes, praying I think. I closed mine and said a prayer, though the audacity of asking for anything there, in that moment, stopped me half way. I spat on the floor and remembered a conversation with Prue from years before. She'd said prayer wasn't asking for things but offering yourself to the force that is ever moulding men and things to higher use. There were black smudges beneath the empty windows of the house. God isn't an eastern potentate, she had said, and I wondered at the time if He was a farmer. There are a lot of farming stories in the Bible.

When we walked back to the main road I turned for home but Prue said,

No. Not yet. I can't.

So we went in the opposite direction, further away from the city where the rubble was less dense but barely anything still stood. We passed a hole in the road filled with sandbags, the remains of a Chinese machine gun post. Thin farmers carted crops past us and looked up at me sideways. At noon we came out on the side of an irrigation channel, brown and ice-edged, and found we were almost in open country. We used a board to cross it, passed between the carcasses of two large buildings, barns or warehouses with writing on the sides, then walked along the channel with trees close by. There was no path here, no signs of life or people passing. After some time we rounded a bend and came to a field.

There were rows of corpses on the ground. A hundred of them in Chinese uniforms. It's months since the battle for Shanghai. Even if they were guerrillas these

boys were long dead. Their bodies were shrunken browned twisted featureless. In the space open to sky, fields shrinking away, a cold wind battered our faces. I gulped it down, body cold, eyes prickling, lids freezing. Forced them closed.

I wanted to open them on empty land or rice paddies.

But the land had turned against us. Or we had turned it out of its place and put something else there that was chewing us up and spitting out boys to lie unburied on cold earth. If it snows tonight as they predict at least they'll be buried, under something, for a time.

Prue squatted by one of the boys, bodies. Tender, she pulled his collar straight and lifted with two un-gloved fingers the identity tags strung round his neck. She looked at them, dropped them onto his blood-thick shirt.

Have you got a knife? she asked.

I gave her the puny schoolboy thing and thought of the boy's wounds under jacket and shirt. Not made by that knife, oh no. Prue cut the leather strap and slid one tag free.

What are you doing? I asked, shivering.

If we can't bury them, she said, we can at least record their names. For their families. We'll take one tag and leave the other on the bodies. Give the tags to someone official — Roger will know who.

Are you sure we should?

Who else is going to do it?

She was right. Silence and emptiness pressed in. Even the rubble teemed with life compared to this place.

So we began. It would take time, but this was the task before us. Prue went from body to body. I followed and took the tags. It should have been the other way around but we didn't speak. The wind rolled over her back and smashed into me.

I dropped tag after tag into my pocket. They rattled when I walked. Metal on metal jarring, the final sounds of those names.

It was hard to tell much about the soldiers, but although I tried to stop it they came to life in my mind. All the life they'd lost. A feeling grew that they were brothers and by the final tag I would have laid down my life if I could have. I would have done anything to erase the hour we'd just passed from history.

Prue stood over the final body, eyes closed, head bowed. Pray, I wanted to shout out. Prophecy to the bones. Raise them up. Put flesh on the bones. Muscles, sinew, skin, blood. Prophecy to the breath. Put breath into the boys, into the earth, into this dying sinking shitty place.

The boy that Prue stood over had no legs. She came and gave me his name, and my knife, and put her hands on my shoulders. She leaned her head close to mine until our foreheads touched and I felt the warmth of her skin.

We stood, and she squeezed my shoulders. Aylwin, she said. Aylwin, she called me; my name from home.

Before we left the clearing she stopped and kicked a hardened churn of mud. She took a stick and poked, scooped away the mud. Her breath steamed. She pulled something from the mud and held it up. A jagged, scarred, palm of shrapnel. It looked like part of a metal bucket, but thicker and heavier, the edges spiked and green. Prue said she would take it back, to America, to England. Her face was red.

I'll show them this, and I'll tell them where we got it, she said. They won't have any excuse — they'll know exactly where their scrap iron ends up.

I'm looking out of my window now. Night in the British Concession. Nothing visible but the dark and my face, reflected, not changed, but looking out through changed eyes. There's a moth trying to get to my light. It keeps flying into the glass, bashing against the unseen wall and sliding down to the frame. Yet each time it shakes itself off, tests its wings, flies off again. Then into the glass again.

On the road back here, after crossing the irrigation channel, we found a group of dogs poking and snorting in the rubble. We walked close together, almost touching. As we approached the dogs turned, one by one by one, black eyes and wet snouts, until they all looked at us. We kept on walking and they began to move in with their tongues out. I smelt the rotting meat on their breath. I thought of the soldiers lying in their field. The dogs sniffing them out. The woman below my window. I picked up a rock and threw it as hard as I could. They ran into the ruins. I threw another rock, heard it bounce on something hard, and then another. Prue put her hand on my arm. I could feel the muscle overstretched and alive.

The final memory arrives with the sound of boots. A squad of Japanese soldiers, boys, marching towards us. We saw them from a long way off, poking at a group of bedraggled Chinese and pointing into a box. I cursed them. What more could they steal from these poor people? They advanced towards us, stiff in a cloud of dust. They were in the middle of the road and so were we. I looked at Prue. She shook her head. Suddenly fear tugged at my feet. I resisted and we stayed in the middle. Walked straight towards them. Just before they reached us the officer halted his men and shouted an order. They jumped apart to let us through. Saluted. The officer smiled and spoke to us in Japanese. Prue shook her head, said, English.

Welcome, he said. He held out his box. Inside were carrots and some long leafy green vegetable and hard-looking lumps of bread. Food, he went on, for Chinese poor.

I wanted to hug him and spit at him at the same time. I wanted to want to kill him and his smug fresh soldiers. Or I didn't want that. Both. I don't know what I wanted. Want. I wanted to be home and warm. When I got here I wanted to be out. In the Long Bar I wanted to be asleep. The moth has not moved for a while. I think it is dead. I want an old school tie to wear.

14th January

In Harpenden there was a man who lived in a hut at the edge of town. A sometime farm-hand, often drunk, who roamed the fields and smelt bad. His name was Arnold. As children we knew to look for him asleep beside the path across the green. We dared each other to poke him with a stick, to step close enough to touch his beard or the hole on one side where an eye was missing. Arnold rarely spoke and when he did the words were a howl. The result of a mouth that wouldn't be controlled. What struck me most about Arnold was that he didn't look old. When I was young I was convinced he was a force of nature, a spirit, who existed and had always existed to trouble this pleasant slice of green England. Mother, on the other hand, fretted over Arnold. She would spot him sleeping where he shouldn't have been, or winding along the road, and would run out with a mug of tea, or a blanket, or a scarf she'd knitted. I once found Daddy in a dark room watching Arnold bellowing, crying, bent double in a field behind the house. I thought this was odd behaviour and not covered by the admonition to love neighbours. Unlike the children of other farm-hands or the people we met in Bow,



Arnold was not, to my childish brain, a neighbour. Here was something utterly unlike us.

When I was older, perhaps twelve or thirteen and old enough to know better, I made some remark about Arnold to Harry. I don't remember what I said but Harry frowned and took me out to the garden. The bellringers were practising. The sun was out and butterflies flew through the long grass by the fence. Harry told me that Arnold had fought in the war. That he joined up young, lied to the recruiting officers, and went to France when he was barely fifteen. They had been in Sunday school together, back when there were only 2 age groups. Three of his brothers were killed before Arnold went, and another died later. The shock of it killed their mother and their father drank himself dead. Arnold had half his face shot off by an angry farmer on the German border after the armistice.

I listened to him describe the boy who had become this husk of a man. I thought of Mother knitting for him, as she might soon knit for baby grandchildren. The German farmer who had perhaps lost a son or a brother of his own. The bells ringing, tolling, the names on the new plaque in the parish church. I saw that the wound Arnold carried, the great storm of emotion and grief and fear that he sunk in drink each night and raged against beneath English stars, was far less ugly than the wound in my heart that did not know he was a man, had once been a boy, and was sprung from the same fields and trees as I.

Ye have seen what ye have seen, says Arthur to his knights. They must chose what they commit their lives to. I have seen what I have seen. It is time for me to chose.

15th January

Rewi came here again this morning. I was holed up in my room, hoping to miss Prue and avoid thinking any more about war. He was wearing a long coat with a fur collar and a ridiculous furry hat with ear flaps, in the Russian style. He took one look at me and laughed.

You look terrible, he said, sitting on the bed beside me.

I had on that shirt from Tony's father and said a friend gave it to me.

He laughed again, said, Not the shirt, your face.

He should take a look at that hat.

He looked along his big roman nose and asked why I didn't meet him on Thursday. I told him I had a bad day and haven't slept much since then. He slapped me on the back and said rugby would cheer me up. Lo and behold there was a military game this afternoon, French against British soldiers. I couldn't believe it.

He gave me a sideways look, Or you might want to wait until your Aunt gets back?

That settled it. While I changed Rewi lay on my bed, hands behind his head, and told me about his brother who's an All Black. Apparently rugby is the national sport of New Zealand and being even the brother of an All Black adds much to your credibility. He barked a laugh when he said this, spinning his stupid hat, and I felt more normal.

We went for lunch before the game at a hotel on the Bund. Walking there in the winter sun, water stone sky winking, I could hear British and American and European accents. It didn't smell either, with the wind coming off the water. We could have been in Paris except for the rickshaws. Rewi pointed to some British sailors hanging over the edge of their ship to clean the side. We leant on the railing and watched. It was bliss to feel there was nowhere important to be. Prue would be doing some work, talking to

someone, or writing notes about conditions up the side of her full notebook, but my absence meant nothing.

We watched the sailors for a good time. Rewi asked about home, school, Oxford. His mother's British and she's taught him a lot of rubbish about the place that he is sensible enough to suspect. That workers in London receive free housing or that the King still hunts in Hyde Park. Further along the railing a smart young Chinese man was also leaning, watching the people pass. While we talked he must have slid along and before I noticed he appeared beside us. He greeted us and Rewi raised his pale eyebrows.

I got very nice girls for you, said the man. I had no idea if he was addressing me. He must have been a pimp, but I've always imagined you'd know a pimp when you saw him.

Rewi enjoyed my surprise. It seemed forever before he said, Not today thank you — then something in Mandarin.

The young man frowned. No no? No girl today? I have also nice boy?

Rewi answered with a sharp spray of Mandarin that made the man scuttle off along the river bank. When he was far enough away Rewi snorted and put his head back.

I hope he didn't shock you? he said. I told him we don't usually get such offers on a lunchtime walk along the Thames. But I'm not a fool, I know the reputation of Shanghai.

You couldn't possibly imagine, said Rewi. If this city were a person she'd be a man dressed as woman serving opium to naked Europeans in a sauna.

I'll be honest, I didn't know what to make of that.

Lunch was delicious. Warm, spicy, fish soup with rice, and gin spritzers. Followed by chocolate cake and soft nutty cheese. (You can't imagine how I've missed cheese). One can hardly find wine here with the climate, so everyone drinks gin or whisky or (Rewi says) Chinese liquor. It feels strangely sophisticated and rebellious to have gin for lunch, though I expect the ambassador can manage to find wine.

Rewi told me he met a Chinese regiment in France during the war and decided then that he'd come to China. He fought at the Somme but he must have been very young. He can't be much older than Harry. He bounced from topic to topic, letting me eat and listen while he described long walks in the countryside around Shanghai, rice fields and marshes, trips to islands in the waters near the city, Buddhist monasteries, lakes, mountains and temples. He's helped rebuild flood damaged villages in the interior, distributed famine relief, and adopted two Chinese sons. There is no pinning Rewi down. He's a modern day Marco Polo. Sometimes he seems to be a great explorer, at other times a preacher of industrial change, and yet occasionally I believe he's a prisoner held here by something I cannot fathom.

We took a rickshaw to the rugby match. On the way Rewi finally asked about Thursday. He did it in a quiet voice looking away along crowded streets. I hesitated, but I knew I would tell him. During everything he'd said I had felt a welling up. Not a desire to talk, but a dry, pressing longing to be a part of what Rewi was doing. He was similar to Prue in that. You can't help but want a share of the passion, or to be the object of it, to have done something worthy of it.

I told him everything about our walk in the ruined city, Prue's friend, and the dead soldiers, feeling high and precarious in the rickshaw, and too visible. It was as if I was trying to describe the effect of a powerful play to someone who didn't see the performance. The shared language was missing. He would understand the actions but

not the power that they exerted. My words seemed bent out of shape in the glinting, gaudy day. Yet Rewi let me say it all, murmuring, What next. When we got to the part about the Japanese soldiers on the road I said I'd wanted to kill them. That was a lie and I blushed but Rewi didn't see. He said that the dog is an animal of the Chinese zodiac and usually considered auspicious, or bringing good luck.

I stared at him.

I know, he said, and licked his lips.

The rugby match was behind the barracks at the British cantonment. The field was humming when we arrived. European men and women stood around, talking and sipping cocktails. The players were running laps of the pitch. They passed balls and dodged round each other. Blue French on one side, red and white British the other. The logos on their shirts were regimental. Rewi slapped me on the back and I wanted to run and jump. I was surprised that I felt much better for having told him about Thursday.

He greeted people with the same slow look and loud voice as he used with me. Ignored others, screwing up his nose and pushing me past them. Some well-dressed men talked with heads together and looked our way. There were stalls at the edge of the field and at half time Rewi bought us Shanghai Dumplings: a steamed bun fried with meat and scalding soup inside. It was warm and rich. The salty liquid soaked the dough so it dried my mouth as I ate and made me want more.

We stood as close to the edge of the pitch as we could, near the touch line at one end. The play charging towards me, the power bearing down, was as close as I could get. I longed to run into a tackle. To feel the brace and engage of muscles and the pain of the stretch. To run lungs-bursting with clarity of purpose. I shuffled along the line as the play moved across the pitch and Rewi laughed. When the match was over (the

French won) I was focused and relaxed, moving directly, without strain or excess. I felt I was the point of a drawn sword; calm, still, and ready.

I came back to find Prue. I wanted to feel that way when I saw her. It didn't last the journey, though, overfed and pasty on my rickshaw behind a skinny coolie. She was alone writing letters at the table when I came in. She'd had another meeting with the pacifists and told them about Thursday, as if they needed to be told.

How are you feeling? she asked.

Fine. I'm obviously fine. How am I supposed to feel?

I sounded hard but she didn't seem surprised. She watched me without moving, tired or resigned or disappointed. A small woman washed up on a shore of papers.

I had come close and looked down on her. I realised how much bigger I am, the rugby player bearing down. I could hurt her, not that I wanted to, but I could. I put my hands on the table and leaned in and felt my power. Not a bad feeling.

You're angry, said Prue. About the soldiers.

She was right. It sounded too simple but she was right.

You should be, she said.

You should be.

She nodded and her eyes never left mine. Her finger tapped the paper, a blur at the bottom of my vision. The image of Mother stole across her face in a frown. My anger and hopelessness ebbed.

I'm sorry, I said.

Don't be. I've been angry for thirty years.

I didn't believe that. Prue was laughter and passion and miracles. She never seemed angry.

She pulled out the chair beside her. Do you think I could do this if I wasn't angry? she asked.

I didn't sit. I looked at my foot, the shoe with the hole.

I'll try to remember what she said next. Details have hazed but the shapes remain.

There are different kinds of anger, Prue said. She learnt a long time ago to be wary of the fast anger that flares up. It's real of course, but it's hot, and it heats the parts of yourself that want to feel righteous until they boil over. Then what began as anger at someone else's mistake becomes a justification for your own.

I poured myself a glass of water, without speaking, drank it. Poured another, and sat beside her. This was an old, hollow echo. I remembered that someone in New York had declared righteous anger the enemy and Ray asked if they would ever use violence in defence. It had seemed abstract. Now I thought of the woman below my window. I wanted to make a point. I said to Prue,

I've never felt less righteous.

She leant back in her chair and I could see that she was thinking. She didn't want to tell me what to feel and I wouldn't let her get away with that. I'd come this far. It was time for her to help me.

What's the other kind of anger? I asked.

It's like a wound, she said.

I saw cracked blood against dull bodies of flesh.

For her anger is an ever-present pain that needles her insides until something can be done. The pain is there in the joy and in the sadness. It's a constant reminder.

How can a person live with that? I asked.

I don't know, she said. Certainly I can't let it rule me — that way lies despair. But there's no escaping, no suppressing the wound with beliefs or platitudes or clever words. There's no medicine for this because it's part of the cure. Real hope needs to look the darkness in the face, then step into it and walk through it.

I wonder if I have heard these words before? There might be a road, stretching out from somewhere, coming and going, along which I walk. Now all roads lead to France and heavy is the tread of the living; but the dead returning lightly dance. So it turns and turns about, and we repeat ourselves and wonder what it is that makes us special or marked. I see now that I am not marked. Juliana said it, I could have gone to Spain. Yet I went on believing in destiny, walking after the footsteps of the prophets, and darling Amelia believed I should look for the Grail. She never knew this place, and God forbid that she ever will.

What if it's all too much? I asked Prue. What if I want a wife, a family, a cottage with honeysuckle round the gate?

She smiled, creased her eyes, put a hand over mine. So familiar it hurt.

And why shouldn't you? she said. There are different paths.

Not for me, I thought, and somehow she saw the thought.

Small acts of resistance matter, Aylwin. (Someone else has said that, but who? where?) Don't give in to the demon, the despair that says we must succeed or die, conquer or be conquered. We're most powerful when we choose to act for peace, no matter what we did yesterday or what we'll do tomorrow.

She unwrapped her shawl and slung it around her shoulders again. Pulled tight, as though it held her together. Prue has always been a strong woman, tall and vigorous, but that means nothing here. I am stronger, bigger, younger. Why should she be given the strength to do what she does? Her shawl is knitted with a wide stitch so it has



hundreds of little holes. Mother used to have one similar. She would punish me for sticking my fingers through the holes and working them round and round until the wool gaped and sagged.

Prue scraped her chair close to me. She put her elbow on my shoulder and stroked my hair as she had when I was a small.

What do you want? she asked.

I want to do the right thing.

The answer was out before I'd let myself think but I was impatient with her questions. I wanted answers.

There is no right thing, said Prue.

There must be wrong things?

Perhaps — but looking for the right thing is a distraction. Look for the things you can do instead, the useful gift only you can give. And trust the rest to God.

She sighed and rubbed the shawl across her upper lip. Then she realised what she was doing and laughed.

I'm always looking to do the right thing, she said, but in that moment I understand the choice isn't between every possible action or word, it's only between the things, the various things, that I myself can do.

She picked up her pen and spun it on the tips of her fingers. A drop of ink fell on the table. She put her finger on it. Went on, saying,

Just as you chose your next word not from all possible words, but only from those that make sense next in your sentence. I can travel, I can speak, I can listen and write, I can certainly pray, perhaps I can teach. I can tell the truth and I can help. So I do those things. But I'm not Nancy. I can't deliver a baby or broadcast a radio programme. Do you understand?

I did, but it brought me no closer to what exactly it is that I can do. Years of expensive education and I've not even started in this real world.

I put my arm around Prue and kissed her. She squeezed me tight and I wanted to tell her what she meant to me. That I think of her whenever something funny happens, or when I see a ludicrous Englishman, when someone helps a stranger for no reason but kindness, and when I walk through the woods on a summer evening. I said nothing though, and she got up. Asked if I wanted tea. I didn't. My head ached and my eyes stung. I felt there was nothing to do but sleep and sleep.

Yet here I am back at the page and awake, arched, willing myself into something. In the almost dark, squinting at a page itself darkening with words. All we ever seem to do is talk, talk and play games outside, nurturing our bodies while our spirits shrivel. What joy is it that keeps Prue going under the weight of her wound? Is it yet another grail I cannot find?

My window is open a crack, a cold smell of burning and sewage creeps in. If I look I might see the smudge of a plane drop a bomb on the horizon. Downstairs they are singing *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.

17th January, afternoon

Another Sunday. Another morning of worship welcomed us like homecoming. The ritual is comforting, especially this morning as we took Eucharist with crackers and rice wine. Beyond belief, which ebbs and flows with the passing days, there is a deeper language in these acts. It pulls me back from all the noise to a quiet place where ends and beginnings are not so different, and pure ideas still burn as a candle in an empty

church. A life studded with such moments of intentional confluence is held together by the connections, growing yet rooted.

After the worship I lay in the Italian's hammock and listened to the Milicans interviewing Prue for their radio show. She made Tom laugh so hard he had to leave the room so as not to ruin the broadcast.

I spent the evening with Rewi and Boris last night. I'd agreed to meet Rewi but I couldn't remember the way so I asked Roger. He'd never heard of Boris and asked what sort of place it was. I said it was just a bar and Boris was Russian (actually I asked last night and he's Polish). Luckily Tom does know Boris and gave me directions. Then he asked me to play racquets with him tomorrow. The question was so unexpected I stared. First rugby and now racquets? Apparently there's a court in the barracks and Tom has diplomatic clearance to use it.

When I got to the bar the shutters were down but light showed beneath them. Inside it was hot and shadowy. There were sweet-smelling candles and lamps on the tables, flowers from God knows where floating in bowls, women at the edge of the room with false eyelashes, capes, and lipstick on. It was much busier than the other day, but there was none of the ceremony of the Shanghai club. Here the patrons watched each other, or invited themselves to your table, laughed, spilled drinks, got too close. We sat in the same place as before. Boris came and went, and others squeezed onto stools beside us or shouted over our heads.

I met Chinese student. His name was Liu Chao. He's recently down from University in Hong Kong and a disciple of Rewi. He had the same slow and deliberate way of looking at me. I was afraid to make a fool of myself. Rewi introduced him, looking like a proud parent as he sipped his drink and flicked his eyes between us. Liu began to talk in sharp flat sentences. He told me that China has the greatest culture on

the planet, was the most ancient civilisation, a nation of unparalleled beauty. He said it had been hampered for centuries by greedy landlords and monarchs who kept the peasants in bondage. Then western powers had deceived and robbed the Chinese, and the revolution delivered another warlord to power while the bourgeoisie sided with whoever looked likely to protect their wealth.

They were passionate words, compelling and grand. It was odd that his voice didn't rise and he didn't ball his fists or gesture. Despite that, I believed him. Or I believed he meant what he said and the familiar power reached out from him, different though he was from Prue or Rewi. His eyes fixed only on me, as though he'd been waiting for me, to give me this particular information, this speech, and perhaps he had. Yet at the same time I felt he would say the same to anyone, with equal conviction, and that he would repeat it again before the firing squad. Liu was a Communist. He didn't say it but he didn't need to. All that rhetoric, the Oxford Union, what nonsense. Here was real conviction, and Rewi smiled on us. After a few drinks Liu tried to teach me Mandarin. Rewi corrected his English and they both laughed at the sounds I made.

18th Jan

I woke to find this book open on my bed, a storm of tight black letters squalled across the yellow page. Mostly illegible. I must have decided to write again in the night but I can't remember now why or what I wrote. The writing curled up one page and down onto the next, tucked under itself, and sometimes ran more than once over the same line. A few days ago Prue was writing a letter and ran out of space at the bottom of the page. She began to write up the sides, covering all the edges, until I thought she would never

stop. Dear Dorry has young eyes, Prue said. She held up the paper by one corner and looked it over. She was only disappointed there was no room for a drawing.

We had coffee today (so much pleasure from such a small thing), so I bolted for the kitchen and took the book in hope of deciphering something significant. Prue came in, declaring, My kingdom for a cup of tea. She saw the book, squinted and laughed. Asked what I was writing. I didn't tell her I've been keeping a journal. I'm not even sure this is a journal. I said I was trying to write about life in occupied Shanghai. She made encouraging noises and settled to tea and *The Times*, which arrived yesterday from London with the coffee but is two weeks old. After a time she looked up.

Who are you writing for? she asked.

I shrugged. I have no idea. She took a sip, nodded, and asked if I wanted her to get in touch with her man at the Manchester Guardian.

So there it is. Before I left home I told Roke I could write to earn extra money while I was away. It's why she bought me this book, even though she'd grimaced and asked who would want to read it. I haven't thought about it since, about the money that is. Writing itself has been enough. Sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee and looking at my words on the page, I felt charged with life. With light, energy, something of the winter's beauty. Whenever someone opened the door to the street light flooded the room and the page shimmered. The letters stood out from the paper, stood to attention. I imagined that if I blew on them I could send them spiralling and floating up into the morning air. History folding me into itself.

Roger had contacted a man with Chinese military connections, a businessman who was the brother of a general. He's sending a son out to Hankow to work in Chiang Kai-Chek's government. Though Rewi says it's nothing resembling a government, and should properly be called a racket. This man agreed to send the name tags we collected

from the dead soldiers with his son for cataloguing so that families could be informed, but he wanted to meet us first and Prue certainly wasn't about to hand over the errand without vetting its executioner.

He came in the middle of the morning. A small, immaculate man, gold watch chain and long fingernails. He wore a three piece suit with fine pin stripes. I was mesmerised by the narrow cut and the precise stitching, saturated suddenly, alarmingly, by the memory of Daddy's voice. I thought I could smell chalk in the air.

Roger greeted the man. They were friendly, shook hands and bowed, but with a strained air I'd never seen round Roger before. Straight and wary. They spoke in Mandarin then switched to English. The four of us drank tea. The businessman dabbed his mouth with a handkerchief between sips and speaking. He listened to our story and noted down the location of the bodies. Then he explained that his son had been offered a good position and that he, the father, didn't wish to jeopardise that. He needed to be sure that these soldiers were loyal Chinese men fighting to protect Shanghai when they died.

My mouth tasted bitter from the tea; something rotten was going to raise its head. Once I would have been disappointed, perhaps even surprised. Now I crossed my arms and imagined the man at the top of a crumbling cliff. Roger's eyes twitched a fraction closer together, his face stiffened. He watched Prue. She asked the businessman to explain. He coughed. Said there was some confusion in the final days of the battle concerning which battalions were fighting where.

Tom once told me about the Doomed Battalion. The group of Chinese soldiers left to guard the retreat who would be abandoned to the Japanese. They dug in and fought for days on the edge of the International Settlement until the British, tired of their own positions being hit by the crossfire, negotiated the evacuation of the battalion and the supposed surrender of the city.

We all looked at the businessman. We needed him if we were to have a chance of restoring honour to the dead boys or peace to their families. Surely this man was sympathetic or he wouldn't be here? We had nothing to offer him. Prue described Chinese uniforms to him and said that this was what the soldiers had been wearing. It wasn't true. Some had been wearing uniforms but many were missing parts or had extra jackets, the wrong colours. The man nodded and thanked us for taking the time to collect the tags. I knew we were dancing but I didn't know the steps.

They did not wear the communist uniform? he asked.

Prue said no, and weren't they a united front now anyway? They were, he answered, but their leadership was separate and his son could not register the deaths of soldiers not listed as Nationalists.

He said this with no hint of deception, which made me suspect it was a lie. Of course what he'd said made sense but I have been here long enough. I've been in the Shanghai club and seen the marble-smooth masks of the Chinese who sit across the room from Japanese occupiers. The western powers are playing here, fighting a proxy war at the expense of the Chinese, but it isn't only them. The wealthy Chinese, the powerful Chinese, are also playing the game. They play with the blood of their countrymen. That's war: the powerful winning with the blood of the rest.

Prue retrieved the tags and poured them onto the table between her and the businessman. He didn't flinch. She picked a tag from the pile and placed it on the table, square with the edge. Then she took another and placed it beside the first. Then another, and another. She lined them up, a frontline between her and the businessman. He watched her and sipped tea.

Please can you read that? she said to Roger, pointing at the script on one tag.

He did.

And the next one please.

He got the idea and began to read each name. Roger's tone barely fluctuated as he spoke. Prue looked at the Chinese man. There was a power emanating from her that made my pulse race. I wanted it, and was afraid of it, and it was so intangible I willed time to slow so I could relish every second.

At first the businessman didn't move, but after five or six names his face cracked, pursed at the lips and his eyes drooped. It was a simulacrum of humility and sadness. Prue didn't miss a beat and Roger seemed connected to her power. He went on reading the names as she turned over more tags. The time that passed was pulled so tight that now I want to pick it over I find there is nothing there and my thoughts slide off it. What I know is that it worked. After many names the businessman's eyes suddenly flicked up and Prue stopped, her hand mid-air. His lips retreated then curled into a clown's smile. This was the first real expression that had crossed his face since he arrived.

Miss Lester, he said, thank you for your service to the people of China. He jerked a little bow with his head, his body strangely still. He said he would make sure the tags were taken for cataloguing by the hand of his son.

So it was over and the man left. We three were quiet and didn't know what to say until Nancy came back and asked what had happened. The opportunity to tell the story relieved some of the strangeness. We laughed at the businessman and felt sure that we had won.

Tom came in after that and I told the story again on our way to the barracks. The atmosphere there was different today. No cocktails or food trucks, and no smart suits or high hats. Everything was straight lines and featureless following. Tom was known. The soldiers greeted him with waves and shouts and whistles, then narrowed their eyes at



me. It was an uglier, more uniformed, Oxford, with an alarming current beneath the surface. Still, it was fantastic to play. To exert myself and push all other thoughts from my mind. Tom was surprisingly good (for an American), but I beat him twice. We laughed a lot and talked between games about the sort of world we'd like to build.

When we were packing up at the end Tom stood up too quickly from his bag and turned to me.

Your man Boris, he said, his father-in-law's running an opium cafe in the basement of the bar — a luxury place. Did you know?

I wiped the sweat from my eyes and looked at him. His face was soft and serious, blotchy from exertion. I know about the opium problem here. Prue has talked for years of Japanese drug sellers avoiding the law. Still, I thought you'd know when you were in an opium den. Though I thought I'd know a pimp when I saw him, and what was it Rewi said about Shanghai? I told Tom I'd suspected as much and turned away to put on my jacket.

Just thought you should know, he said. It might not be safe.

And what about Rewi?

He shrugged, said Rewi has his own game to play.

I'm not an idiot, I said. He didn't say any more. I wanted to get away from him. I wanted to have a hot bath and dress for dinner, and drink wine and eat roast beef. Is there nothing in this city that doesn't straddle a deadly current?

19th January

I dreamt about the piece of shrapnel last night. The one we took from the field where the dead boys lay. My dream world was a wonderland in which all the places of

my life opened into one another, or were stacked as Russian Dolls. I began at home and I knew what I was doing. I found the shrapnel under an out-of-style hat in Daddy's wardrobe. Then I was in New York. Ray was tossing it into the air and catching it with one hand, standing on the road looking along the Brooklyn Bridge. The window opened and the shrapnel became the centrepiece of Maurice Bowra's table in Wadham. It was on Amelia's lap then holding down papers in an office where Prue stood with a man in a suit and her hair blew about unnaturally.

Before I reached Shanghai the world fell to dust and ash around me and I woke but was not wholly free from the dream.

That shrapnel might have stayed buried and unknown. Now it has a life larger than itself. I drew maps of its possible origins and futures. I tried to imagine a conversation between Prue and the businessmen she would take it to. In London or New York or Los Angeles. Each man would say it had nothing to do with him. It was only business. He didn't chose war. He couldn't control it. If not him it would be somebody else. She would describe the ruined city and tell the story of our walk. The man would listen, nod, speak about his own war, the brother or cousin or friend he lost. He would thank her for coming. He would say to their colleagues that she was mad, that there was nothing they could do, but that night he will dream of bombs.

I wanted to hold the shrapnel but Prue had it in her room. She was going back to the Lutheran hospital with Nancy and the donor she has secured, to finalise the arrangement. I asked why she kept going, what she expected to happen. She shook her head and frowned. She didn't go to buy action with her help, she helped because there was a need.

Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers — but who are they? I used to think peacemakers were the ones who talked about peace, but watching Prue now I think peace and war themselves are merely incidental.

I waited until they had gone and the house was quiet then crept into the room Prue shares with two missionary teachers and a Chinese nurse. The iron nested at the centre of a pile of clothes in her scarred leather case. It was unevenly weighted to the eye, blooming from an off-centre heart, a metonym of the explosion that shaped and deposited it on that field. I picked it up. I imagined it would be very heavy but it was not. Ray could toss it up and catch it. It was the weight of a stone good for skimming and warmed as I held it.

I began to feel conscious of it and shy of my uninvited presence in the room. The metal was dull. There was none of the Grail's shining glory, no descending from clouds (though it might have fallen from the sky), and no strange vision. Yet it did hold power. I marvelled at the small thing in my hand, the life it did not contain but could destroy. Awe crept and tingled along my arm. The soldiers were powerful here but it was men like me, the sort of man I might have been, in suits and ties and offices thousands of miles away, who held power over them. Prue was right. Goodness and kindness are no defence. Almost any man with a gun believes himself in the right. It is us — people like me — who turn these objects into killers.

I dropped the shrapnel. It thudded into the clothes. I left the room and left the house. I still felt the shape of it in my hand. When I came to a shop I decided I wanted to smoke, so I went inside. The window displays were bare but odd things cluttered the shelves, none of which were very useful. Ornaments, flags, cloudy bottles of perfume, mah-jong sets, paper flowers, pamphlets, and pairs of rope sandals. There was a hand-sized statue of a black dog with its pink tongue lolling and grey eyes. While my eyes

adjusted to the gloom the door opened and closed again. The dog flashed in the light. Someone passed behind me.

I waited and steadied myself. Then I walked around the shelves towards the counter at the back. There were low voices and whimpering. Another voice, hard and demanding, then more low talking. The hard sound stopped me. It was a voice speaking Japanese. I could not be seen and I didn't know what to do. I could turn and leave. But then I saw myself in the bow of the Queen Mary, speeding across the prairies, pulled over thousands of miles to meet this moment. Was I a shrapnel man or not? The Japanese voice came again, quieter, different somehow. I wrenched my feet from the ground and walked around the corner. There was a Japanese soldier at the counter. Behind it was an old man and two children, both very young. They hid behind the man and held onto one another. The smaller one was crying into the man's leg, the whimpering I'd heard. The soldier's mouth and eyes were wide but he made no sound. I didn't understand what was going on. The old man's eyes flicked between me and the soldier. The crying child sniffed. The older one whispered to him.

Then the soldier put his arms out and leant forward onto the counter. His shoulders dropped and he let out a grunt. His shoulders shook. I took a step closer and saw tears on his cheeks. The man was crying.

I didn't think about what to do I just went to him. The soldier, as I got nearer, looked more like a boy. He sobbed, and the child began to wail. The old man waited for me to draw level with the soldier then turned to pick up the child. He hushed him, spoke sing-song words into his ear. I wondered if the soldier would hit me if I touched him. He turned his head, saw me, and closed his eyes as though he hoped never to open them. His face was almost green and became slack. His hair was short and neat, but his collar was frayed and browner at the edges. His brow and cheeks twitched but he didn't open

his eyes. I closed mine for a second and opened them again to look straight into his face. I could believe this was a mirror. Whatever haunted him I seemed to know, deep, without words.

The child grew quiet. The soldier was quiet. The shop was still for a moment. The man lowered the boy, who still looked at the soldier with wide, watery eyes, and took two battered packets of smokes from beneath the counter. He slid them across, one to me and one to the soldier. I offered him money but he wouldn't take it.

Outside I took two cigarettes from my pack and the soldier lit them. He didn't try to speak to me in English. I wanted to ask him if he was all right but it felt wrong to force him out of silence. I dreaded a return of the cold, commanding voice. We smoked, not looking at one another but close together, leaning on a wall. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. It was a picture; him I think, or a similar young man, with longer neatly brushed hair and a clerk's suit. He was sitting on the floor before a low tea table. I remembered Kagawa strolling through the streets of Tokyo in the centre of a crowd of children with no shoes on. In the photograph two small children stood beside the man, one on either side. They were so small they barely reached his shoulder and head even though he was sitting. His arms were round them. I looked at the soldier's face beside me, young and unhealthy, a shadow of beard, dirty fingers holding the cigarette. He sniffed and wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. I understood that they were his children.

We smoked another then shook hands and walked away. I went to Boris' bar but it was early and nobody I knew was there, not even Boris. A pretty girl brought my whisky and hurried away. I wished she would stay and talk but I didn't dare ask. I had Tennyson in my pocket and when I opened up to read I found the monk Ambrosius

speaking to me; For good ye are and bad, and like to coins, some true, some light, but every one of you stamped with the image of the King.

I came back to the house, to dinner with Chinese and Japanese friends of Prue. They are mostly people she met on previous trips, one or two faces from this time. I intended to tell the story of the soldier in the shop because I thought that it fitted the narrative. When they arrived though, I couldn't. I sat in silence and listened. Then I wrote it here instead.

20th January

The Lutherans have asked Prue and Nancy to visit another hospital where more Chinese soldiers are being treated. They were happy about the idea when they got back yesterday and I was surprised. I suspected there might be a catch. Yet when I mentioned it to Prue this morning she laughed and asked if I'd been reading her mystery novels. I retorted that I had in fact been reading Tennyson and she arched her eyebrows. I thought I should go with them though.

The hospital was in an apartment block on the edge of the international settlement. It had been abandoned by most of its foreign residents and missionaries had occupied four floors. All the patients wore identical regulation pyjamas. There was the same acrid smell of hungry breath as at the Lutheran hospital, masked by the stink of Nancy's disinfectant, but the rooms were clean and the sun shone through large windows. The apartments had obviously once been grand and the residual decor gave the place a holiday feel. There were columns and curtains, even the odd painting. It caught me up and I bounced along the parade of beds in a bubble of happiness, as though not a day had passed since I set foot on the Queen Mary.

The men waved to us, sat up or called out. A pretty little nurse from Brighton, with dusty blonde hair and a missing front tooth, walked me along and translated. Most of the soldiers wanted to explain how they got their injuries, or to talk about their wives and children. Some said things the nurse refused to translate and they laughed or winked at her. Others described villages in provinces I'd never heard of. I couldn't imagine such places beyond picture-book drawings: flat, wet fields of rice, the bulging Yellow River, cities busy with rickshaws. Some of the men looked down when I needed to move on. Others looked me in the face and asked that I tell everyone what the Japanese have done in their country. I said that I would, and felt a growing ache in my throat.

There was one soldier who stood out. His bed was wedged into a corner at the end of a long room. He had lost an arm and had a dressing on his head. When I reached him he was sitting up, back rigid, looking ahead. I half expected a salute, and when I greeted him he answered in clipped English. He had been educated at missionary school and spoke very well. He offered no more information about himself. He thanked me for coming, said the men would take comfort from it. It was shadowy in his corner and the walls were yellow without the bright light. The nurse walked away to speak to another patient. A soiled feeling descended that dampened my earlier enthusiasm.

It is you who should be thanked, I said, for such service to your country.

He laughed.

I shook my head. At the other end of the ward Prue was describing the Houses of Parliament.

China has abandoned us. It is only a matter of time, he said.

His eyes roamed over me, not with any intent but looking to see. To see what I would say or what I would do. They were gold splashed brown, the colour of polished oak reflecting the light.

They have lost the battle, I said.

The truth is that they saw they could not win and ran off. Left these soldiers for the Japanese or whoever else should chose to pick them off. The soldier said he understood, that they were right to retreat. There was no bitterness.

China has many men and many miles, he said, and mountains, and rivers — these are her strengths.

The soldier was proud of it. I wondered what the man behind the soldier thought. I should take Rewi to meet him.

I said I would like to see more of China. He nodded and told me to go to the Communists. I took a breath and resisted the urge to turn and look at Prue. I don't know much about communism really, and even less about Chinese communism than the Soviet brand. People say plenty that's good and plenty that's awful, depending on their view. The man smiled for the first time, his face tight with meaning beneath the bandage. Even his shoulders looked wider, and I noticed that his feet hung over the end of the bed. He said I must go to the Red Army. I said there was no time, but he wouldn't have it. I had not seen China until I had met the Communists.

They will show you China, he said. Go north and west, you will find them. The people will know where to send you.

I thought of Liu Chao's passionate words about his country. Now this maimed soldier was made a man again by a hope. Must there be some truth in an ideology for people to feel so much about it? But then young people gladly lay themselves beneath the discipline of fascism, and for what? National glory? Is that enough?

You will see, said the soldier, that this is a great land. You will see it all.



He laid a hand on my arm. I felt small and meaningless in the vast unknown world between us. For a second we were there, together, in the line, in the battle for something that mattered.

I asked him if he supported the Communists. He looked away from me. We all long to believe in what gives us hope. Without looking back he repeated the tired line that China has a Popular front, that Nationalists and Communists are united in defence of the country.

Better fight together than slaves to the Japanese. He spat as he spoke.

I'd alienated him without meaning to. I'd let doubt into the conversation. I wished I hadn't, but I see doubts everywhere.

I'm not a pacifist, I said, the words fresh and out, like daffodils, before I'd had a chance to notice them. We looked at each other, frozen for a moment with Prue's voice behind us. Then I turned to the window and a kingfisher floated past, still and light as a paper aeroplane.

The soldier coughed and said, It is no bad thing to hate war.

I do hate war.

He said again that I must see more of China and I said I hoped I would. His breath was fast and sticking. The nurse came to move me on.

I looked back at the soldier when we left. I'd already forgotten his name. He was still sitting straight but his breathing had calmed. His face was relaxed. One hand rested on the sheet pulled over his legs. Somehow I knew that he was not looking at the bed opposite him, the feet of the beds so close you could barely walk between them, or at the yellow wall, or even at the city skyline through the window. Here in the corner of a hospital was one man who did look beyond it all, much further, to a China that I could

not imagine, stretching away from us across distance and time. The China I longed to know.

I didn't come back with Prue and Nancy. The hospital was near the remains of a bombed out warehouse that was abandoned after fire gutted it. Rewi pointed the place out when we visited the factories. I had thought at the time it would have a splendid view, being tall and close to the smaller buildings of the Chinese city. The door was gone and it was easy to get in. I climbed up stone stairs, stepped over fallen beams and the mangled remains of machinery where the explosion and fire had left it. One side of the building was open to the air and still shed dust and masonry. It thudded and smashed to the floor as I climbed. This danger has stopped the building being reclaimed by the homeless. Though I expect it won't be long.

On the top floor there was no glass in the window frames. I climbed up onto one and looked west, over the Chinese city. I could see the point where I thought our dead soldiers were, where the remains of the city gave way to farmland and reached to the horizon. From so high I could see undulations and pleats in the terrain. Rivers veined the landscape. It held me unlike any view I've ever seen. The mess of the ruined city, the particular shapes of the buildings, the colours — scorched brown and black in the city and in patches further out, then a startling spinach green, bashed silver and copper clouds hiding distant hills. Brown doves dived past.

I went on watching even after my arms and legs ached. Farmers brought carts towards the city, progressing in a swaying line. Three salvage parties picked through the remains of collapsed buildings. Children played in a street with houses on only one side. Japanese soldiers marched along the edge of the French concession. Occasional cars and rickshaws passed beneath me. I watched the slow progress of the day and I felt a slow losing of myself to one reality, that was also a slow waking up to another. Or a return

after a long walk. The huge scale of this country, the alienation I felt when trying to understand it, was present and stark before me. I could not turn away from it because it mattered and would go on whether I looked or not. This certainty showed me to myself, both less and more than I had thought I was. I no longer care about my reasons for beginning. I want to know China.

If I was a deck of cards that had been tossed into the wind, now, slowly, I was gathered together once more and put in order.

There was far more movement towards the city than away from it, but I noticed a lone figure walking away towards the countryside. As my eyes settled into the distance, the figure sharpened. It was a European man. He had pale brown hair, suit, tie flapping in the wind. A closed umbrella hanging from his arm. I couldn't see his face but I had the sense that I knew him. It wasn't Rewi, or Tom, or Roger. It could have been one of the missionaries or doctors I've met, but why would they be walking away so steadily and taking nothing with them? I panicked for a moment but did nothing and it receded. He knew what he was doing. Or he didn't know and it didn't matter. I am not a pacifist, I'm not even sure I know what a pacifist is, but I am no warrior either. I am something else. I watched the man until I became aware that I was very hungry and he was only a spot on the far reaches of my vision.

21st January 1938, Morning

Something extraordinary has happened.

Prue got a telegram at breakfast. It came with a pile of letters and parcels so I didn't pay any attention until she held it out across the table. I was eating like crazy. I did last night as well. My first thought was bad news from the family, but Prue was

smiling. It was from a man at the Manchester Guardian. A good man, Prue said. He was happy to take me on as a freelance correspondent, no guarantee to print anything but an address to send work to. Prue sipped tea and watched me. She looked as she often had when mother was laying down some particularly stringent piece of legislation.

Good news? she asked.

I think so, I said.

Thank The Lord.

Thank you Lord, I parroted, the way we had as children. We both laughed. The laughter sounded like home, the taste of scones and honey, cold clay tiles under sock-feet in the morning. There is something of that little boy still left in me. I read the telegram several times more. It was short, angular, functional. It gave nothing away. I could see no clues in it about my future.

Prue went back to her letters but a few minutes later she leant across to me again. She held a parcel before her. I had forgotten entirely, but in the first days after we arrived someone offered to smuggle Prue a film reel of the atrocities in Nanking. I thought nothing would come of it.

It's here, she said.

On our table. There was no way to watch the film now, but it couldn't be ignored. Roger took a bottle of rice wine from the cupboard and poured us each a measure. We drank in silence, quick and deliberate. I remembered armistice day, the traffic halting around Trafalgar square and the red of poppies, a minute of silence in chapel trying not to look at the faces of boys you knew had lost a brother or a father. This was different. There are no neat names carved onto a memorial or written in a book. Not yet, perhaps never. This is chaos swarming over ordinary people. Then again, perhaps it is the same. I thought of Eucharist, the same wine, and finished my glass.

Prue broke the silence and said we should think about moving on to Peking, her and I that is. I slid the package containing the film towards me, to feel the bulk of it, the truth of it. The next stage of our journey. After Peking will be Japan again, then India for me, and — home. It is strange to even write it now that it exists again, in my future, out of this cloud, away from this city.

Advice poured forth, warnings and stories, trains, boats, roads, all the nonsense occasioned by long distance foreign travel, even before a war is factored in.

I sat in silence, somewhere else, welling up, opening, as though I could see myself for the first time. I was there, among tea cups and the spread of papers and letters and orange persimmons, and at the same time within the whole spread of time from tiny me with my toes in the Kentish sand up to yesterday looking out over Shanghai. The journey, this world circuit as I so grandly saw it, was but an open wound, present and painful and soon to be closed. The thought stabbed through my chest and I struggled to breathe. I stood, despite Prue's frowns and Nancy's questions, and I came up here. They did not follow.

I have written it. I can breathe again but the pain has not lifted

I must find Rewi.

Later

It was too early for Boris' so I walked towards the Bund. I found Rewi standing outside the Shanghai Club in a white hat. He bowed, as though we'd arranged to meet.

Come along, he said, and took me by the arm and walked me back along the river, through the French concession and into the old city. He pointed to a boundary marker with a wave of his arm. Chinese characters branded on a slab of metal chained

to a rock. I tensed, but he talked on as though he didn't notice, about Confucius and holding the world lightly as a delicate flower, or something of that sort. I didn't listen. I don't think he knows the first thing about Confucius. Still, it was a comfort to have his voice beside me, calm and firm and compelling as always. I believed him without having to listen. I was excited by his nonsense just because he said it. Somehow Rewi's arm on mine kept the memory of rigid bodies in the frost at bay.

We picked a route between the rubble, turned away from the road I took with Prue and walked until we came to the edge of what had once been an ornate pleasure garden. It was quiet. Thick plants dulled the outside world into a series of distantly observed movements, snatches of sound. There were flower beds turned to dense thickets, trees which would soon blossom, huge plane trees with canopies like a woman's permanent-wave, pagodas and huts, some ruined utterly, others standing proud and chipped, little bridges across streams and ponds where lilies swarmed, or reeds obscured the water and planks were missing from the bridges. We saw few people and the quiet shocked me. It should have been unpleasant, reeking even in winter of overripe vegetation, but it reassured me to find such rampant life.

We lay on grimed benches on either side of a path and looked up at the sky. The light blue through pale clouds gave it the look of fine pearl, specks of planes moving across. At the edge of our view was a huge tower, part of a temple or shrine, all sharp corners and going up and up to what seemed a narrow point. Rewi said the Japanese use it as a flak cannon tower. The gardens were the place of execution for communist rebels earlier in the decade. Everything has a new use, but nobody told the plants. If I stayed there long enough, not long really, they would wind their leaves and stalks around me until I was nothing but a lump among the flowers.

I told Rewi everything that happened this morning. He wasn't surprised. Then I told him what I saw yesterday; the man walking away through the ruined city. I said I thought the man was my Uncle Kingsley, who's dead of course. He died when I was born and if there's any of Kingsley in me then it must mean something, to see him on the road like that.

Rewi was quiet for a moment, and I watched a plane bank steeply over the river.

What are you going to do? he asked.

I thought about it. Everything had changed. I could make money from writing. There was so much I could already say, a flood of ideas welling at the back of my mind. Over it all, like sparkling jetsam, floated the knowledge that I could stay in China. I can stay. I don't need Prue anymore. There's no reason why I want to stay, but I don't want to leave. I want to be with the people I've met, with Rewi and Liu Chao, with Tom and the press corps, with the refugees, even with the soldiers. I need to be with them, to listen to them, if I'm ever going to do something meaningful. All this time lost. All this weight bearing down on me as I tried to be Prue. I saw now that would never work.

I rolled onto my side and looked at Rewi across the weed-pocked path. A faded blue and red pagoda poked out between bushes behind him.

I want to stay here, I said. I want to help you.

The feeling I'd had this morning, the pain, the noise, the uncertainty that had dogged me for months — it all snapped off. All was peace. I'd never known anything with such certainty except that I should board the Queen Mary at the start of this trip. Now I was here. If I don't stay I know I will spend the rest of my days wishing I had. Amelia, Ray, Juliana, Prue, even home, Roke, Mother and Daddy, all drifted away and there was nothing but quiet. Stinking plants and Rewi.

Good, he said. Then he pointed at the sky. The planes had grown into circling vultures. They came towards us low and fast. I sat up. They boomed over us, past the tower then dropped something and arced away. They dropped bombs of course. We watched them fall and disappear then noise swamped us and time bent over itself and snapped back, and we saw smoke and dust rise a mile or two from where we were. Real and not real. As comfortably alarming as a first trip to the theatre or the picture house.

Good, Rewi said again. I was breathing fast. He brushed at his arms. They were covered in moss from the bench. I'm filthy, he said.

The bombs had been close. That is how life will be. Not just for others but for me. I asked Rewi,

Which do you value more, your life or your jacket?

He turned and laughed. A big, deep, farmer's laugh that in the dying garden, with the planes circling away and a drizzle of dust settling on his orange hair, was the best thing I have ever heard.

Thank goodness we're dirty, I said.

I came back to the house and found Prue at the table again, holding an orange persimmon in her hand that looked like a Christmas decoration. I told her I want to stay in China. She bit into the fruit and chewed. A dribble of juice ran down her chin.

What will you do? she wanted to know.

I don't know.

Well, she said, smiling, that's the ideal place to start from.

Everything thing has changed. The dust rising up where the bomb fell was the uncoupling of past and future, even as I had the faint sensation of permanence. I thought that my new life was in Rewi's laughter. I already know better. That is for now, next is — who knows what? I will stay in China. Some words of mine will speed their way



home and into print and truth, because we must always tell the truth. How simple that seems in the nursery or the chapel, but what is the truth about China? About me? About Rewi? About Peace? I'll write a truth that's vanished before it's even been read. Prue said to do what only I can do. The single honourable thing is to search for the truth in the rubble and hold it up to the light. With words, with hands, or feet. It doesn't matter which. I will give my life to seeking a truth that vanishes as soon as I set eyes on it.

As ye saw it ye have spoken truth. The Grail was never Peace and who was George Aylwin Hogg? The travels begin here. They will end where they end. Perhaps I'll find a story good enough to hold the blood at bay. Perhaps not. For now, thank goodness we are dirty and I am not a pacifist.

Still, I'll hold onto the words: peace and grace. They're all we have to remind us of our hope. They are the only way to speak of our better selves.

## **A Peace**

**May 1941**

The hall is chilly. Shadowy, despite the shards of sunlight slices through the windows as though everything is normal.

Ben disappears up the stairs. The front door stands open behind me, a tang of smoke on the afternoon breeze. As my eyes adjust I see children run past, swerve around a chair then a camp bed. On the stage Shantih dresses three girls in saris. In a corner a young woman weeps. All around me people sit with blankets, chipped mugs, bags, plants, clocks, Sunday suits, pictures, jars of pickle, wooden toys, or anything else that could be pulled from the rubble, that now serves as a reminder of normal life — because despite the sun this is not normal, barely even human. We exist now in an heroic and degrading dream.

I look down. On the floor by my feet is a cake stand next to an umbrella and a role of typewriter paper. These objects are as dislocated as us, adrift as our dreams, their life and ours reduced to the single imperative of finding a safe place, of survival. And yet — what? And yet. I pick up the cake stand and take it upstairs.

The steps are lined with a sand bucket, whistles, torches, lanterns and gas-masks. In the clubroom Ben and Nan fill large urns of cocoa. I put the cake stand on a table, near the wall, out of reach.

"Patrick back?" I ask.

"I sent him to wash his face." There are streaks of soot across Nan's forehead and one cheek.

"I've seen you cleaner," I say.

She tuts and moves to the next urn, "Stir that."

"So what did he say?"

"Starch works fetched it."

"The Queen's Head's flattened," adds Ben.

"Poor woman —"

"The Catholic church lost one side —"

"Over by the canal took it hard —"

I look through a dirty window. Smoke drifts from the canal, where the blackened outline of an oast house is still being soaked. Out the other way is the hole in the skyline where the chimneys of the match factory should be. Closer to us stands virtually nothing: single walls, the odd cluster of houses, part of a terrace, and Bow church, a looming, stately ghost in the smoke. We have repaired our doors, replaced the windows we could, boarded up others, and somehow we still stand. It is tempting to say that we pay our dues with urns and risk, taking food and drink down to the shelters at night and helping the worst hit. But we know better. Nan's was one of the first houses hit. Now she shares a bed with two of her grown daughters.

"All better," says Patrick, jogging into the room. He is a small, loud, Irishman with so much energy I expect he could light the room if we were hard pressed. He took over management of Kingsley Hall a year ago, when Doris left to start an evacuation school in the countryside for Bow children.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Almost," says Nan.

Patrick whistles a tune.

"What happened to your face?" I ask.

"What?" He puts his hands up.

"I've never seen it so clean."

"He's a pale beauty," says Ben, smirking.

"You beggars."

"Now, now — I'll get the food." Ben leaves and returns with a box of bread, biscuits, and a grey slab of cake from the previous day.

"That cake wouldn't tempt a dog."

"Shut it you." Nan pushes the two men from behind. "Come on."

They take the cocoa and a bag of cups and leave me alone. Their laughter echoes and dies. Four months ago this room and the reading room were as full as downstairs. These days there is less need. Not because the raids have softened, but because so many have already moved away. So much is already in ruins. I wonder whether to try to sleep, whether they will come again tonight, whether there is any point wondering.

I hear steps but do not turn. Squeeze my eyes tight. The steps approach, closer, falter, then two warm hands on my arms, the almost touch of a body. The smell of lavender.

"Are you all right?" Shantih asks.

I let my head slip back, so it rests on hers.

"They've just gone."

"I know."

"I don't know what to feel. One moment it seems there's nothing left — but then you look again and —"

"People break easily — but they also mend."

"Some don't break."

I watch the traffic on Bow Road through the gaps in the shattered terraces. Mostly fire engines, ambulances, army vehicles. There are people on the street too, and a few shops open.

"We are still standing," says Shantih, as though she can read my thoughts.

"How did they like the saris?"

"Very much — it's a game for them."

"Until they want to take them off."

"Or until someone mistakes them for an Indian." Her voice is tired, beyond the simple fatigue of a sleepless night.

"They'll want henna next," I say.

"I've almost used it all."

"Send for some more — a boatload of henna. For morale."

"And mango — I long for mango."

"As the Englishman longs for beef, so the Indian pants for mango."

She laughs quietly and I am pleased. I put my hands on hers, on my arms, pull them down and together so she holds me. The skin on her hands is dry, ridged with scars from previous nights of bombing and days spent moving rubble and blasted glass. She wanted to be a warden but they said a foreigner could not engender the right community spirit.

She drops her chin onto my shoulder. "I wasn't expecting last night."

"Do we ever?"

"No. But I didn't realise — I thought they were over. Why did I think that? And then when it started —" she swallows.

I squeeze her hands. "It's over."

"For now."

We breathe together and I close my eyes. She slides her left hand from under mine, raises it to my face and runs the back of her knuckles over the skin of my cheek, down to my chin, my lips —

"Hello ladies."

We tense and turn, but it is only Susan. She is leaning in the doorway with crossed arms and an utterly inexplicable air of the Riviera.

"Good afternoon darlings," she says.

The dark, lumpy mass of her uniform is broken up today by an oversized belt with mirrored patches, and a large cream silk scarf wrapped in swathes around her neck and shoulders.

"When did you become stealthy?" I ask.

"I'm not at all . You were — preoccupied."

Shantih raises her eyebrows and shrugs.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I say.

We all laugh. It is a relief to play this familiar game. Susan steps over and pulls us both into a hug.

"Any chance of tea for a working woman?" she asks.

We carry our teacups onto the roof. Susan and I sit on a little bench looking vaguely towards Kent and the coast. Shantih plucks dead flowers from the untended roof garden.

"It's good to see you," I say, looking at Susan's uniform, which at closer range I can see is grimed and ripped on one shoulder.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see the pair of you. What's the head count here?"

"All household accounted for — thank God. And Ben and Nan were with us this morning. But Bow's a mess — what was left of it."

"I guessed — there wasn't a chance of trains and the traffic's horrendous. I had to walk from Whitechapel. Stepney's flat and still burning."

"I suppose you got it bad?"

She looks into her tea. "It was the fire."

"Each time I think it can't get worse — "

She lights a cigarette. "We've done well so far — haven't we? I saw a paper seller last night, just off Leicester Square when the siren went — a young lad — and he was grinning, shouting: evening edition — cup final results."

"Perhaps we're all mad?"

"House of Commons was hit."

"No?"

"They're madder than most." For a second she studies her cigarette. "And the Abbey."

Shantih sprinkles flower remains over the side of the building. A breeze catches them, turns them over, and whisks them towards the city. She sits on the floor in front of us, her back against the low wall and her head leaning back.

Looking to the sky, she says, "May we not catalogue?"

"If you prefer." Susan sounds unconvinced.

"The trouble is —" I say, "you don't mean to but its just — my mind is jammed full. I suppose it's worse for you?"

Susan shrugs. Stubs her cigarette out on the floor and flicks it over the wall past Shantih's head. Then she leans back and adjusts her scarf, pulls it left and right. After her first night working the ambulances she got her hair cropped short. Now she keeps it

that way, cutting it herself. She looks like an unusually elegant boy. I breathe in deep, savour the tea and the illusion of peace. I imagine the light, shuffling steps of Gandhi, pacing up and down the roof ten years ago — but I cannot bear it.

I turn to Susan. "So what brought you over?"

"I can't cross the city to check my friends are alive?"

"How kind."

She rolls her eyes. "It was something Dickie said."

"You spoke to your husband?" Shantih asks, smiling.

"We're very civil these days. I'd have come sooner but —"

"You have to save lives?" I say.

"That's the hope. Did I tell you he's not at the War Office anymore — it's the propaganda thing now — I forget what they call it?"

"The Ministry of Information," says Shantih.

"That's it."

"And?"

"Your name's come up."

"Mine?" I stare at her.

She sucks air through her teeth then pulls out another smoke. "They know about those letters — the ones you brought back from Germany? Well — they know about the published ones. You remember they were all worked up when they came out — suggested they might be forgeries?"

"Nobody knows the letters came from me except Ben and the translator."

"And Peter — we assume," says Shantih.

"They do now," says Susan, sniffing.

"How?"



"I don't know — perhaps they only suspect, perhaps Peter told them?"

"He's at the Home Office, not propaganda."

"Well — Dickie asked me about it at the weekend."

She swivels, leans her back against the arm of the bench and puts her feet on the seat. "Of course — I said I have no idea what he was talking about, and don't we have better things to do than go chasing after letters that may not exist? And for good measure I asked if he was ready to join the real defence work."

"What did the poor man say to that?"

"He said I don't understand anything."

We laugh and Susan touches the flare of a match to her cigarette.

Behind us, a creaking noise rises from the ground, like something ancient waking from a long sleep. The day shrinks, tightens around us, the noise hangs, reverberating inside me, familiar, unnatural, until the sound of rubble crashes down, a wall falling, overtakes it and barrels through our semblance of calm. A cloud of dust floats up on the other side of the hall, all light and innocence. We do not look at each other.

"Why do they want the letters?" I ask. "I thought policy was to focus on the effort at home?"

"For propaganda, yes, strengthening resolve," Susan grips her knees between her arms, coughs and continues, "but there's another plan afoot — a new bombing strategy — it's already happening Dickie said. As well as strategic objectives Churchill wants to terrorise German cities and target civilians, to break their morale — when people here find out they'll need every bit of evidence they can get their hands on."

She is unblinking, determined. I struggle to understand.

"Dickie said that?"

"Not those words —"

"They wish to demonise the Germans," Shantih says. "It is not beneath them."

There is no resentment in her voice but the words are a knock, unexpected pain. I get up and walk to the end of the roof. The collapsed building is in the next street over, where a shop once stood with rooms above. The front of the building has fallen in over the rest, as a single book standing on its end might fall.

I turn. Susan and Shantih both suck on cigarettes. Even Shantih needs something to take the edge off these days. She has one knee up and her elbow on it. Together, in the sun, they make a loose symmetry, almost festive, like something from the front of a postcard. Susan waves a hand about as she speaks. My heart beats hard against my ribs. We will not say it, but it is just possible that last night could be the worst we will have to bear. It is always possible. Yet there is an old leather suitcase and two empty buckets beside the bench. Things that should not be there. A greasy, charcoal smudge on the horizon. And yet, and yet. We are hemmed between despair and belief, but eventually there must be an end to it.

I walk back.

"What fell?" Shantih asks.

"Hood and sons — the grocers."

She nods. Neither of us wants to say good, but that is the truth. The building has been empty since before Christmas. It is somebody's home but nobody's life this time.

The dust makes the air dry and clagging. I drain the last of my tea.

"They can't republish the letters without permission from the *Daily Herald* — and they should ask me."

"The ministry might come straight to you. There's a hunch you have more," says Susan.

They both look, wait.

"What?" I ask.

"You do have more — don't you?"

I nod. "Does Dickie know where I am?"

"I doubt it. I wouldn't tell him — and if I did he wouldn't listen."

"To hell with them all."

"Easy," murmurs Susan and moves her legs, patting the bench.

I sit and lean forward, rest my elbows on my knees, let my head hang on the hinge of my neck.

From the stairway Nan's voice calls Shantih.

"It'll be the saris," she says.

"Saris?" Susan asks. I shake my head.

Shantih finishes her cigarette and puts it out on the wall, leaving the butt like a bullet casing on the mortar between slabs. There are shadows beneath her eyes. She squeezes my shoulder and walks away.

"How is she?" Susan asks.

A squad of planes crosses the sky south of the river.

"Unbelievable — you?"

"Well — I keep thinking I shouldn't be managing — but here I am."

"I know."

She leans forward. "Feel this," she holds out her arm.

"What am I feeling?"

"My muscles."

"If you say so."

She gets up and lifts the bench, with me on it, a few inches at one end. "I feel strong — the food is abysmal but we thrive." Her voice cracks. She sits again.

"Some of us," I say.

She finishes her cigarette with a long suck and lights another.

"How do you have so many smokes?"

"They give us extra — for the stress."

She flicks her fingernails together. For all her strength, for muscles and belts and scarfs, there is no disguise for eyes that have seen what she has. In the distance are shouts of workmen, ringing tools, sirens, the call of a man selling cabbages. Here is quiet and Susan flicking her nails and sniffing, sucking on cigarettes.

I put my hand over hers.

She snorts. Her head falls forward into the folds of her scarf.

She squeezes my hand, "Do you feel stronger?"

"You can't fear death all the time —"

"It's more than that —" Her eyes rush from side to side.

"I understand," I say, to stop her from talking. I look away.

"I don't want — any of this, but — I don't want that feeling to end."

I pull my hand away from hers. She turns, crosses her legs, puts out the cigarette that has languished between her fingers. I have made her ashamed but it is a lie. I do know what she means. Our lives are impossibly significant these days — we never know, we cannot live up to it.

"What time do you start?" I ask.

"Six." She looks at her watch. "I should go."

"Thank you for coming — and for telling me about Dickie."

"Stupid man." She shakes her head.

"Look after yourself." I say, and hug her.

"And you darling — and please — be good."

Left alone on the roof the bitter taste in the air seeps through to my mind. I wonder why I made Susan feel she was wrong. I have lived for years clinging to the belief that our actions matter. Here we are proving the point and suddenly I am afraid of it. And then there are Eric's letters. Our country did nothing for those letter writers when we had the chance. The government, through instruments like *The Times*, actively encouraged scepticism and played down Nazi brutality. I have seen what Hitler and his friends can do. I expect much worse is yet to come. Meanwhile our city is being destroyed and our leaders prepare to unleash the same or worse on German cities.

I cross my arms on the back of the bench and rest my head on them. I could join Helen, my sister, with the children, safe in the country. I could take myself away to a place where the war is distant and manageable. I could risk the Atlantic to get to Prue.

I imagine her here, next to me. She stands by the wall at the edge of the roof, leans her knees against it and looking out across Bow. She has her sleeves rolled up. She has been cleaning, finding us again beneath the filth. If I come to her, sit here on the bench, and tell her what Susan just told me?

She would not tell me what to do, I know that for sure. But she would believe that our actions still matter.

Perhaps it is enough.

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Later on, I stamp into the hall, the hush of absence demanding noise. The urns are in a row like obedient children. I pour tea from a saucepan into one of them.

Ben comes in from the road.

"What're you doing back?" I ask.

He perches on a cabinet full of hymnbooks. "Couldn't get a train — I started to walk but only got to Stratford before the siren went."

"You look awful."

He puts his hand, palm up, to his slim face and rubs vigorously. It brings the blood up to his skin and brushes back his grey hair. He does up another button on his shirt.

"Better?"

"No." He has the look of a young man inside an older man's body. "Did you lose your tie?"

"I don't remember."

"That bad?"

"Exhausted."

Ben has been a part time warden for the last year, at home in Loughton, as well as going on with his normal job at the *Daily Herald* and supporting Kingsley Hall. He was at his post all of last night and cycled straight here this morning, when he could see the fires still burning. His bike has taken leave of him during the day, so he is stuck. It is not easy for him to be away from his family during the raids.

I put a lid on the urn. "Why don't you go down to the station?"

"Give me a break."

"You've not slept for two days."

"I won't sleep down there."

"We can handle it."

"You've not slept either — if I'm here I belong with the hall."

He pulls himself up from the cabinet and comes to the urns, lifting the lids, checking they are clean, sniffing the contents. I feel strangely better knowing he is here, though I would never let him know that. He has on his shoes today, but I wish he did not.

"What?" He glances at me over his shoulder.

I shrug.

"My face still horrifying?"

"Absolutely."

He stands up straight, puts his hands in his pockets and sticks out his chin.

"Better now?"

"The perfect Englishman."

He finishes checking the urns and begins to tidy away excess chairs, slowly, not wasting energy.

After a minute he puts down a chair and sits on it. He is looking up at one of the pictures on the back wall. It is a photograph of Kingsley, Prue's younger bother, whose legacy after his death in 1914 allowed her and Doris to buy the original hall. From here it could be a picture of any young man. Square chin, dark eyes, dark hair.

"Do you still think of him?" I ask.

Ben looks over his shoulder at me. "Not as often. It must be the same with your brothers?"

"I suppose. Thought I didn't know the older two anyway."

"I'm sorry."

"Will you tell me about him?"

"Kingsley?" says Ben. He pauses, turns back to the picture, scratches his head. "Once not long after they moved to Bow, he dressed up as a fortune teller — skirts and all. He made a booth in the corner of one of their rooms in Bruce Street, out of old crates and a draining board. Then spent the night divining hocus futures for all and sundry. Half of Bow came to see him and everyone came out smiling, whatever he said. That's what he was like — he could always imagine something better for you than you could yourself."

"He never saw this," I say.

Ben looks towards the stage, drops his head. "Kingsley didn't have to live through this — or the first war, thank goodness — but make no mistake, he knew what the world was."

"He was young."

"Yes," He shuffles his chair closer, all his gentleness and warmth suddenly focused, lit up, as though he is telling me the end of a great story. "but Kingsley looked pain in the face, for days, years at a time, and still he held onto love and beauty and truth tighter than anyone I've known. Live that way and a person can find the strength to be real — something to be proud of."

The words drift past me, just out of reach, but an image surfaces in my mind; Ben standing in front of the Communists without any shoes on, smiling. A gash on the heavy door of this hall.

I rest my head on his shoulder. The planes are coming. He puts an arm around me, warm and surprisingly strong. He smells of sweat and sugar and mint, so incongruous I want to laugh, but as comforting as the smell of home. I listen for the planes. They are coming; we will be here and they will come and something will happen; people will die. On the palm of the stage lies a sari. Empty as a shed skin. The



hall was built to be an open hand in prayer. We have not slept, we have nothing, only hands, hearts, prayers I am not sure I believe but which come anyway, familiar and inadequate as words, and the walls of this hall. The planes are coming but I remember the feeling I always forget to expect: when the raid begins fear falls away. The walls of Jericho at the sound of the trumpets.

Shantih and Patrick come through the door by the stage. They each carry a large saucepan. One contains tea and the other vegetable broth. Steam fills the air, the sweet salty smell of the soup. They are talking about Yeats and Easter 1919. Their voices echo. How feeble, only four of us. But this is all we have. Two of our household — Billy and Nancy — have gone to Sarratt for a break, to help with a camping trip for the children at the Kingsley Hall evacuees' school.

"Never fear — the cavalry's here," sings Patrick, when they reach us.

The sound of the planes is louder. How long has passed? The strange contortion, the elastic feel of time during an air raid, has already begun.

Ben sits up. "Look at this — we're relying on the colonies to do the work for us."

Patrick grins, "No change then."

"I'm an old man — and an old Englishman, lest you forget."

"You're no older than me boyo," says Patrick.

"Nobody knows your age."

"Aye — they can guess well enough. We should hand over to the young ladies."

He holds out the saucepan of soup. I pick up an urn for him to pour into. Ben and Patrick return upstairs to bring the rest down. While they are gone, Shantih brushes the hair back from my face.

"Ready?" she asks.

I am not. How could I ever be ready?

I raise my eyebrows. She picks up my hat from the table and pulls it, gently, onto my head.

When we have filled the urns there are two of tea and one of soup. We have shoulder bags with what's left of the bread and lots of cups. The aircraft are above us. The pulse of engines beats in my chest, a warm tremor, tapping AA guns, the sound of the planes, the air that we breath, the city, the war, all here, inside and around us.

I look at the others. At the lines on their faces.

An explosion. Distant enough. Another. Closer. More come and then — a sucking, swampy vacuum pulls the air from me. An explosion very close.

We throw ourselves to the floor — two three four blasts.

I squeeze my eyes together. In the dark a canvass is ripped through to a greater darkness, the explosions around us invisible, tiny inside the universe, the eternity that holds us together even as we try to pull apart with all the human strength we can muster.

The planes roll on. Explosions quieter, for now.

I look for Shantih, put my hand on hers. She opens her eyes. Lets out a long breath. We pull ourselves up, check each other, the building. Explosions sound both east and west. Ben flinches.

"There'd be better ways to arrive," says Patrick, brushing his trouser legs.

"And you bothered to wash."

He stops trying to rub the dust off.

"It would have been better to get to the big shelter first," Ben says.

Patrick whistles.

"We should go now." Shantih, small and serious, is already moving back to the urns.

"Quite right."

"Come on — saddle up." Patrick swings one of the bags onto his shoulder and picks up the soup urn. We move to the door.

Outside the sky is blanketed with planes. Flames fly across blue-black night.

"Bloody incendiaries." Ben rests the tea urn on the pavement. Looks at me.

"Give me that —" he says. "You stay here."

"What?"

"Give me the bag."

"Why?"

"If they drop half as many as last night there'll be all hell. The Hall's full of wood — it's got a roof like trough — if an incendiary comes down there it'll stay. We need someone here to put them out or we'll go up in a flash. "

"Why don't you stay?" I say, but too quietly.

"What? Come on — quick."

I look at Shantih. "Give it to him," she says.

I hand over the bag. Watch them run across open ground to the corner where a house still stands. They are so small amidst buildings and rubble with the height of the sky bearing down and the planes above. They push up close to the wall, wait, then turn, and disappear.

They are gone and I am alone. I walk upstairs, through the blacked-out clubroom with only the light of a torch, piles of tinned stew against the wall, a cricket bat, the cake stand from this afternoon on the table. Through the reading room. Empty bookshelves, table covered in candle stubs. And into the bathroom. I turn the tap. Nothing happens, of course. Then a creak, and water begins to beat against the pipes, as if a great bird is trapped inside. I hold my breath. The beating speeds up, horribly

bashing inside my skull, until a few drops splutter and a stream splashes onto the ceramic.

In my surprise I watch it run for seconds before I remember I should stopper the plughole. When I turn off the tap the quiet shrinks beneath planes and explosions.

One blast — west towards the City — another — distant, probably across the river — do not move — a third — louder — much nearer — sucks at my legs but I clench — ball my hands — refuse to drop — feel the rhythm of my heart in my hands. Remember to breathe.

I slide soap over my arms and face. Ignore my shaking hands. Dust and grease fog the water. I washed this morning, but it is impossible to escape. I splash water on my face, on my neck, splash, harder and harder, not caring if my blouse gets wet, if I look a mess. Run dripping hands through my hair, peel it back from my face. For these seconds I do not think about bombs.

I let out the water out and climb to the roof.

The sky is clear except for clouds of planes, floating, and between them flares racing, twisting, diving to earth, carving scars across the dark, bright pops of gunfire, and further down still, the seventh circle, ruins, flames claw the night, tiny silhouettes of people.

I walk around the roof, all the way to the far corner and back, winding through the roof garden. No fire here. In the distance is the roof of Bow town hall, an even newer building than this, where local fire-watchers are stationed. I stand straight, feet together, facing them, and salute. My arm weightless in the huge night.

I walk around the roof again. Then twice more. My clean hands are bright in the moonlight. It is probably light enough to read. I am passing along the line of cells that cling to spine of the building. The doors are open. The rooms shadowy and warm as

caves at the end of the day. I stop at my door, pale hands on the doorframe. Step inside and pull a tin trunk from under the bed. Take out papers, letters, notes, works in progress, drafts, articles, drop them all beside me until I find what I am after. At the bottom of the trunk is a bundle wrapped in newspaper and tied with a strip of leather.

I take it outside into the light. Explosions — still — rock — the city. But I look at the bundle in my hands, steady somehow. The headline on the paper it is wrapped in reads: *More Jews pour into Dover*. I reach the bench and sit. The imprint of Shantih and Susan remains, in the air, the faint scent of lavender from the herbs of the roof garden, even in the midst of this night. I untie the strap and unwrap the package. Inside are ten large envelopes, the letters and documents from Eric, and four smaller ones containing translations. I lift them close to my face. The smell, sweet dusty sealed paper, ink, the trace of chalk from my little desk, already the smells of years lost to me, and I am hurtling back, to the zoo, the flags of Berlin, the grand streets of Munich — the flames race past, London is alight — and I remember smart men in fine suits and boys with big smiles, Prue holding the hand of a magistrate's wife, a short man watching us across a museum, and another, a tall, thin, sad man who drew his fingers across the wet skin of a piano in a city marked to burn — there is a fire near Bow church — and a memory flickers across these pages, of all of the places where our lives have been, where lives have been, the paths we have walked, put to the torch and set blazing, a chain of beacons ignited across Europe.

Explosion — near the town hall.

The opening and closing of doors. Voices. From below. I stand up, heart drumming. Then I remember the field hospital in the park beside us, they will be bringing in the injured. I wish I had gone with the others. I sit again and pull a sheet from one of the envelopes. My hands shake.

It is a letter from a man who begs Eric to take his young daughters out of Germany. It says little about the man, nothing of occupation or history, perhaps Eric knew, but the few lines promise all the money he has in exchange for safe passage. The words and time and the night slip over each other. Who was the man and where are his daughters? We did not publish this letter. I read it through again. Who was the man? Listening to explosions — quieter now — shouts — time passes — I don't know how long —

I stop reading, look up. Along the line of planes and into empty space.

Empty?

The wave of planes ends. It is a shorter raid. And almost over. But as I watch the last bombers approach a sprite of flame flicks out, across the sky, a finger picking me out, an incendiary falls, so slowly that it seems to be flying, floating to me, and it lands with a vicious hiss among the plants of the roof garden. It splutters. I think it will go out. Then it cracks. Flames bust out along leaves, stalks, branches. Another incendiary falls, and a third, next to the first. How are they landing so close? I stare at the flames consuming our plants and herbs, beans just starting and meant for food. Letters in my lap, planes above. The last of them. Letters in my lap. Why am I here? Don't let them burn. Don't let the hall burn.

I bundle the letters. Turn and run towards the stair door, hose and buckets. But first my room, drop the package on the bed, then back to the hose. I grab it and open the tap with quick turns and pain in my wrist. Pray out loud for water. The hose stiffens and unravels with a hiss as I run.

The fire is growing, purring, smoke curling, woody, sweet and noxious, burning herbs. I cough. My throat is tight. Flames cover the plants, fill the roof garden, lick the

stones. There's not much time. The heat is in my face and on my arms. Turn half away, grip the hose with both hands, release the tap. Shout wordlessly as water surges out.

I start where the flames are small, work back along charred stems and soil to the heart of the fire. It's a miracle the water is running. At the hottest point flames dance on brick, sway towards me. The building is burning. I run the hose from side to side as fast as I can. Water barrels out, drenches everything, the flames begin to shrink.

I hear a plane above. Close to me. There must be a bomb. I turn without thinking — to see where it will land.

The ground shakes and I fall back. I think I'm unconscious. I cannot see but the roof spins and I am underground then flying between the flames and darkness — For how long? Then a ringing in my ears, and the night newly quiet.

I take hold of the bench. Pain guns down my back. I fell on the metal tap, the end of the hose. My head thumps but I pull myself up, pick up the hose, turn the tap; nothing. Water dribbles out. I turn it back. Nothing. The main must be hit. The fire is almost out, but sparks and smoke kindle between the shells. I run to the stairs and pick up the two buckets; water and sand. Throw each onto a smoking shell, but now the centre is burning. I try the hose again then look around. The floor is drenched. I unbutton my blouse, take it off, lie it flat on the floor, push down so it will absorb water, as much as possible. I pick it up, sopping, and walk towards the fire, hold it in front of me with arms wide, hands open in prayer, hot little flames, this is my only chance. I brace my arms and lean forward into the fire.

Flames sizzle — hiss — the fire dies. The roof is quiet. The shirt is warm.

I am crying.

Shouts from the direction of the last bomb, a hundred yards away, if that. At least it's near the hospital. I spit black mucus and soot. Lean against the wall and slide to

the floor. My breathing is loud, blood roaring in my ears. The growling retreat of the planes, AA guns, all quieter. Over the river searchlights weave.

My bare skin is cold and I begin to shiver. A single sheet of paper lies on the bench, the letter I was reading. Somewhere in this night, in Germany or London or who knows where, is Eric, if he is alive, and the man who wrote that letter and his daughters. Any one of us could be beneath a bomb tomorrow. The Hall would have burned tonight, but I was here.

I tear up the letter. Stand to retrieve my shirt, black and burnt right through. Beneath it is a mess of wet, matted, charred lavender and mint. I blow on it. Ash and burnt leaves rise up. I cough. It is warm but no embers show. I sprinkle the torn remnants of the letter onto the ash and push them deep into it with a stick.

I do not feel relief. I feel as if I am not really here at all.

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It is only when the all clear sounds that I wonder why Shantih, Ben and Patrick have not returned. We usually do at least two runs down to the main shelters in a night, and this was a short raid. They should be back by now.

I am pacing the roof, watching the progress of the fire in the distance. I stop. Fires, beacons, guides I cannot follow sounding an alarm I do not hear.

Where are they?

I have put on a clean shirt and rewrapped the parcel of documents. Heeding Susan's warning, I hide them behind Shantih's drawers where nobody will look. I sweep the remains of the roof garden, pushing wet soil and ash around the wet stone. It is best



to keep busy, but I no longer need to be on the roof. I have survived. Kingsley Hall has survived. Another air-raid, another night, another escape. An increasingly implausible state of affairs.

I close my eyes. *The world is His and He is in it.* This favourite phrase of Prue's is little help. I should go downstairs, see if they are back.

My footsteps echo. I keep stopping, thinking the sound is another. The first floor is empty. I pull up the blackout blinds in the club room and see Shantih and Patrick turn the corner from Bruce Road. They are monochrome in the moonlight. I feel a sudden lightness, a soaring, and the blur of my mind peels open to clarity. I jog down the stairs and out into the street.

They come slowly. I want them to come faster. I want to sit down and rest. Yet they come slowly. Too slowly. They carry only two urns.

They stop in front of me and look at one another. I do not know what is happening. I want to turn and run. Shantih puts her hand on my arm.

"Everything all right?" asks Patrick.

"We had a fire — it's out now."

He nods.

"Has Ben gone home?"

As soon as I ask I regret it. I do not want to hear the answer. Shantih shakes her head.

"Oh."

Patrick swallows.

"That last one was over Campbell road."

"We were coming back."

"No."

"Half a block of flats came down — we were just past — he wanted to go back — check for survivors — the first floor was barely standing — old fella trapped inside —"

Patrick stops. He looks at the floor and the urn in his hand swings.

Shantih speaks quietly, "He went in."

The night splinters. Cracks. Breaks.

"We knew there weren't much time," Patrick says. "The roof came down. It trapped them."

Shantih's hand is still on my arm. Nothing looks different. I was here, pacing the roof. Ben was there, under the rubble. The terrible scope of the world takes all breath, all words.

I stare at them. Empty. The space between us a wound. The night air cold on my hot face. Sirens, the inexplicable clarity of a man's voice I do not recognise in the distance.

Closer. Patrick speaks again. As though he must. As though he cannot stop.

"We got them out when the crews arrived. He was brave. They all were. Talking a lot and praying I think. Talking to the other fella. We got them out —"

He looks at me, desperately, as if there is something I can say. The words he speaks do not sound like him. They do not sound like anyone, only the sickening, bland, words with which everything is reported in the papers now. Unless it is German brutality. I'm sick of plucky firemen, expert doctors, and sacrificial nurses. I'm choking on National Spirit, the People's War, we all deserve a medal, everything so brave, so proud, so British. Those who die are heroes and nothing grisly or unfair or utterly

heartbreaking happens to us plucky little Londoners. Nothing we can't manage. Yet beyond the pages of the papers those Londoners are learning what dead human flesh smells like when it burns and seeing babies with their skulls cracked open on the streets where their own children once played. The same children who now risk their lives to kill a greater number of enemy children more quickly than they can be killed themselves. What have we done? How have we allowed the world to become like this?

Shantih squeezes my hand. "Dorry?"

I nod.

"Sorry — what?"

"We've been at the hospital —" says Patrick. "there was nothing to be done."

I remind myself to breathe despite the pain. I know this feeling. I have been here before. Different war, same pain. I know the words Patrick speaks are the only words he has to describe what has happened. Language cannot contain this. But I see the look in his eyes: watery, red-ringed confusion, deep tired, defeat, wrestling with something, imagination, fear, horror;

There is blood on his shirt. I put my arm out and he steps into it. Lets me hug him. He sobs, once, then tenses.

When I let go his cheeks are wet.

"He was —"

I nod.

"A hero — No—" He spits on the pavement. "He was bloody brilliant. Bloody bloody bloody brilliant."

We shut the door and walk in silence up to the roof. It is a beautiful night. Even with the glow of fires and the smoke of a thousand ruined cities. The moon hangs at peace, the stars as polished silver.

Patrick goes to the men's side. Shantih and I walk to our rooms. She stops outside her door and leans her knees on the parapet. I stand behind, but I do not touch her. She looks like the figurehead at the front of a ship.

"Are you hurt?" I ask.

"No — but — my mind refuses."

"Of all the people —"

"It is not based on worth."

"I wish I'd been there."

"If you weren't here the hall would be gone."

"But still —"

She turns, nods. Then steps towards the door of her room. I step up too. As we are about to go inside I look across. She holds her head high. The line of her chin, neck, shoulder cut out against the night. Strands of hair fly out, silver in the moonlight.

I put out a hand and take hold of her arm. She looks at me. Steps back. Her face is close and I think that the light in her eyes has not gone out, not entirely. Any space at all, even air, any of this night left between us is too much. Everything that has happened is already too much.

"Don't leave me," I say.

She wraps her arms around me, pulls close, the smell of her drifting and covering me, and we are finally still. I cry, but eventually the tears stop and leave only heaviness. I concentrate on the warmth of Shantih. Our lives have become very small; now, here, this, but I can feel more than I ever imagined, standing like that, with nothing but cotton between us.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Go on."

"Do you wonder why we survive?"

"Do you?"

"I asked."

"It is not over — I do not think we were chosen."

"And if it's all for nothing?"

She pushes back gently against my arms holding her. I am surprised to see that she looks calm.

"It is always for something —" she takes my hands, "but it might be down to us to make it."

I pull her towards me and kiss her. Afterwards, she turns me around without letting go. She leads me away from the night into my room.

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Billy's grating voice carries from the porch into the hall. We are coming to the end of the prayers. Bowed heads over curved black backs, an earnest moment that demands belief or nothing. My own mind is blank and thrashing around for a distraction. I try to listen to Billy outside but I cannot make out what he says.

I close my eyes and think about God. There is nothing but great distance, distance and Prue, neatly, inevitably. She would want to be here if she were not in South America. She would say: trust God and let Him hold you up, the world is God's and He is in it. Despite the pain. It is not far from what Ben said. The last thing he said to me. I used to sniff at such phrases. I thought they were consolations for the weak, or mental gymnastics for the stronger. I thought they meant believe blindly, chose faith over truth.

Yet that cannot possibly be Ben. And it is not Prue, or Shantih. These are the people I know who have faith that transcends them, but also somehow makes them bigger and more fully human. All I can think is choose truth — whether the loss of a brother, or the truth of science, or the disappointment of ideology — and *also* choose to have faith in the goodness of the world. A faith that can eventually grow to encompass such truth could yet mean something. Choose to go on into the darkness, not away from it. *His power it is holds up the cross That holds up Him.* An Indian prisoner making saris that will eventually clothe bombed out British children.

I pull the arms of my scratchy black cardigan over my hands. This is all very well, but putting such a faith into practice is a mystery to me. A flicker of movement across the light, a hand on my shoulder. Billy.

"Somebody outdoors for you."

There is a car a little way down the street and Peter leans against its back door. I walk to him, the clacking of my smart shoes like ugly laughter. Bright summer light shines off metal tangled in rubble. It should not be beautiful, none of it should.

Peter is smoking and offers me one from his silver case. I lean against the hot metal of the car, close to him, so that I can also feel the heat from his body. He is wearing tweed, which is odd, and his beard almost shows through, spectral but suggesting he did not shave this morning. I am not surprised at his hair though, which is now a weathered grey. This happened very quickly, over the space of two or three months, when Edward joined up at the start of the war. His eyes on the other hand, are still very blue and glint in the sun. Those eyes watch me curiously. Always scheming, I think.

"I hope you've not brought bad news?" I say.

"No — bad news I'd send in a telegram. The world is upside down."

I snort. "Becoming an optimist?"

"Good God no."

"That's reassuring."

He turns his face up to the sun and stretches his neck. I enjoy the spinning feeling from the strong cigarette, not like the cheap ones Susan gets, and the pleasing heaviness that follows. Peter finishes his and grinds it beneath the heel of his Oxford.

"I wanted to see your face when I told you — Ed's coming home."

"Is he hurt?"

"He was injured in Iraq — last week I think. It's his arm so they're sending him back."

"Poor boy."

"But he's coming home."

I put my hand over my eyes but tears still come. Peter pulls me close. I try to wipe my face on the top of his jacket.

"How bad is it?" I ask.

"We'll know more next week — but if they're not keeping him out there for treatment —"

He tails off. His eyes are wide, dismayed, as though he has found himself somewhere he wished never to be, not unknown, but no less surprising for its familiarity. He fumbles in his jacket for the cigarette case and lights another. I lean back against the car.

"And the other children — are they well?"

"The country air agrees with them. William wants to be a farmer, Dorothy a writer —"

"Of course."

"Quite. The older girls got glowing reports from school. Then I come back here to find parliament bombed and half of the city scorched to pieces. It's —"

He sighs. Leans an elbow on the roof of his car, rubs his forehead, smoothing it back into a strange tightness.

"How are you?"

He waves his arm. "Helen's overjoyed about Ed."

"I can imagine."

"It's nice to see her happy." He breathes out through gritted teeth. "I tell myself — we are making progress — slow — but we are."

"We the country or we the family?"

"The country."

"Oh."

"What's happening in the Middle East is important."

"I'm sure."

"And there are other plans afoot."

"That's good." I try to sound genuine but fail. "There's a lot we don't know, isn't there? We the public."

He glances at me, to check, I think, whether I have an ulterior motive. Evidently satisfied, he answers,

"Not much — but enough."

I nod.

"I can say —" he goes on, "a new agreement with the Americans looks hopeful."

"That's good?"

"Of course — it'll clarify things."



"Doesn't anyone talk of peace?"

"For God's sake Dorothy."

I am not surprised by his sharpness, although I have not seen much of Peter in the past two years. He sent the family away after war was declared and exhausted himself travelling to and fro to visit them.

People begin to come out of the Hall in pairs, threes, families.

"What's going on in there?"

"Memorial service — for Ben Platten."

"Ah —" he gestures at my clothes. "I'm sorry — I interrupted."

"It was the end."

"Last weekend?"

I nod. Peter crosses his legs and arms, drops his chin onto his chest. As though holding himself together. I have been angry at him for so long, but now I realise that the anger is gone. Like so many things, our relationship has not turned out how I had hoped. Yet here we still are. I squeeze my arm between his elbow and his body, poke at his hand. He looks up at me.

"I'm sorry?" I say.

He nods.

"You're allowed to be happy — your son's coming home."

He smiles, squeezes my hand. "We're as bad as each other. But you must know — it's all about peace."

"It feels more and more as if it's all about war."

Across the road an old man moves bricks from the remains of a house, one at a time, piling them in a corner.

Peter drops his hand, speaks quietly. "Don't you love this country any more?"

"What?"

"Do you believe in what we're fighting for — our way of life — our freedom —"

"Freedom isn't British."

"I asked if you love this country."

"Yes of course — sometimes — and sometimes no. I don't."

He shakes his head.

"Listen —" I take his cigarette case from his pocket and light us each another. "I believe in freedom, I believe in equality before the law, justice, yes I do — and perhaps we're fighting for those things — but it doesn't make everything done in their name right. Don't look at me like that. I wish that I could unsee it — but — when we stop millions of people from controlling their own destiny — that's not freedom. When we starve children — not freedom. I do love this bloody country — I love the people, and the uninspired cooking, the paths across the fields — even the blasted rain. I love it all — Peter — whether I like it or not and seeing this — day after day — is tearing me apart. But the thing that scares me the most is that we could lose it all — in a flash — easily — just by assuming our rightness."

"We are in the right." He slaps the roof of the car.

"Nobody is right Peter — not with people dying — daily — across the face of the earth."

An image rises behind my eyes: soldiers, civilians, children crawling through red dirt and dust. I swallow and blink it away. In the distance is the groan and shudder of rubble being moved. Peter and I stare at each other. It is like looking at a stranger you almost recognise. He has slipped away. His face is without a ripple, only his oddly blue eyes flick out at me from stillness.

"Will Ed go straight to Stroud?" I ask.

"Hospital in Oxford first."

"I'd like to see him."

"Of course — we could travel together?"

"That sounds nice."

"And you'll come to see us all soon?"

I nod.

He looks at the ground and pokes the cigarette ends with his toes. I have always wished we were easier with each other, but this is how it has been. Meaning and menace held together by misunderstanding.

"I'd better get back in," I say.

"Right then — but — there's one more thing."

"Yes?"

"The chaps in the Home Office are trying to find a source for some letters that were published before the war."

I look at him, straight. I try not to let my expression change, to remember to blink.

"Published where?" I ask.

*"Daily Herald."*

I swallow. "What kind of letters?"

"From German Jews I think."

"Is that what you're working on these days?"

"I'm just doing them a favour — your name came up. I thought I could check.

While I'm here."

"My name?"

"Do you know anything about it?"

Blood thunders in the back of my throat. I struggle to speak. "Sorry — I can't help you."

He considers me.

The thin wittering of a distant radio begins. I put my hands in the pockets of my skirt.

"That's a shame," says Peter. "They want to archive them with other evidence, documents relating to the war."

The lie rolls off his tongue so easily that I want to slap him.

"I haven't got them." I say, smiling, because it is almost the truth.

"OK." He leans, and kisses me on the cheek. "I'll be in touch about Oxford."

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I do not return to the main hall but slip upstairs, past people with teacups and dry cake, onto the roof. I need the space, solitude, my smallness beneath the sky.

Where the fire was the floor has been cleaned but charred remains of plants still stand in their soil, nature and city twinned in ruin. The air has the taste and smell of scrubland. It reminds me of that part of every garden where things do not grow. I want to rub the ash from the plants across my face.

I lie on the bench with my head resting on the warm wood. The sky is blank, cloudless. I wish it was my mind. I long to be empty, pale, and clear.

A shadow passes over and does not move. Shantih is there. Her hands on the back-slats of the bench. The nails are bitten back, fingers long and thin.

"Are you unwell?" she asks.

I sigh. "No."

"Then you'd better come."

"Not now." I close my eyes and tug at her hand.

"It's your room."

Eyes open. "My room?"

"Yes — come." I let her pull me up.

She walks away, vision dissolving at the edge of thought. She is wearing a black sari with looping gold and silver embroidery along the edges. Beneath the surface of the fabric more gold and silver is woven into constellations that glint through shadow. I want to watch her forever, to map her, but she turns at the door to my room. Crosses her arms and the muscles in her face tighten.

When I reach the door and pull my eyes from Shantih, I see chaos. The room has vomited up all trace of me. Drawers are open, clothes spew out. The bed is stripped, piled with unbound paper, and my books lie on the floor, pages spread, everything soiled, violated. I cannot move.

"I didn't think I had much," I say, trying a smile.

Shantih puts a hand on my back, between the shoulders.

"What happened?"

"I came up after the service —" she says, "heard moving. I thought it was you, but there was a man — I did not know him — he left when he saw me and the room was like this."

I feel her hand on my back as if at the end of a long rope, the only thing that holds me from drifting off.

"Why — do you think?" says Shantih.

There is only one way to find out. Only the essential, important, or comforting came here from the house, so it is easy to remember what should be in the room. I quickly check clothes and bedding. Re-shelve Tolstoy, Kipling, Schreiner, Tagore, Blake, Ruskin, Woolf, Brittain, Gandhi and Prue. All keep silent. A framed portrait of Gandhi done on a typewriter is returned to its hook. Next are bundles of pamphlets and unread left book club paperbacks. That leaves my papers mounded on the bed and flapping at the edge of the room. I pick up a handful and flick through. Words scurry across the page. I cannot check all of this, I can barely remember what was here. I reach for a small open trunk to rehouse them; its lining is torn. Cotton printed with bluebells gashed, brown leather visible through the lips of the hole. I look at the papers. And that is when I realise —

"There were letters in here." I point at the trunk, lean my head against the bed.

"All my letters are gone."

She looks around. It is a gesture. They are missing.

"Why?"

"I was with Peter."

"When?"

"Before — the man, was he short? Dark eyes and neat dark hair? Glasses"

"I think so."

"Looked like a mole?"

"I don't know — why?"

"They want the letters from Germany — the ones Eric gave me. That's why this happened. He was looking for them."

She nods, slowly, everything else terribly still.

"And now they have what they want," says Shantih.

"No they don't."

She frowns.

"The letters weren't here."

"So they took the wrong thing?"

"They've got Harry's moaning and Prue's cartoons of missionary women."

She giggles. Laughter springs up in me and bubbles over, and we laugh together until we are hot. I close the trunk and sit on it. Poor Harry. Shantih leans against the doorframe with her eyes closed.

"Can we do the henna?" I ask.

"Now?"

"Why not?"

She looks at the indecent state of the room. As if the contents of my mind are on display.

"Leave it —" I say, getting up and taking her hand. "We'll go to yours. We don't have to think about it."

Originally I asked for a henna tattoo as a tribute to Ben, to mark the day of his memorial in a gesture of public mourning. When I suggested it to Shantih several days ago she said, "It's a good plan — and your design should have a svastika."

"A what?"

"You know that symbol — the one the Nazi's use."

I turned. She grinned at me through the steam coming off a pot of tea.

"Why?"

"Hindus use the symbol — for good luck. In Sanskrit it translates as: *all is well*. You should try it. See how long before you're in the war office."

"Or prison — on evidence that fades daily."

We laughed and rejected the idea. Now I am lying on Shantih's bed, in warm shade, half-blinded by the bright rectangle of the door through which city sounds ebb and flow. Shantih paints henna onto my foot, coils it around my ankle. I think of the svastika, the use of one thing to say something else that leads to the subjection of all other meanings. Or is meaning only imagined in the first place? Either way, one abhorrent usage has the power to render all others obsolete. Yet there must come a time when we will reclaim our world from this flood of violence. Then ancient meanings and new imaginations will both be needed.

If any of it means something to you, then you will know that it is true.

I close my eyes. The pressure of the stick, painfully satisfying, the tickle of her hand, the warmth of her body where my leg rests in her lap. This is no longer only about Ben. It is public bearing of all that we have lost, a place from which to begin whatever comes next. Shantih's hand inscribes dye onto my skin. The pressure moves up to the soft flesh of my calf. I want her to go on, all the way up the leg, to cover my whole body. I want to feel her hands on every inch of my skin. To mark every part of me with this moment.

But — Peter. Why did I have to think about him?

I open my eyes. Shantih's brow is furrowed, darker in the creases. She glances at me and back to her work. Draws the lines quick, clean, deliberate. Any hesitation and it will be ruined. The dye on my foot is already tightening, drying into life.

"Yes?" she asks.

"I hid the German letters in here."

She lifts the stick from my skin. "When?"

"On the night Ben died."



"Where?"

"Behind the drawers."

She pauses. Then, "Why?"

"I don't know — the fire, Susan — I was afraid."

She lifts the bowl of inky paste, moves it to her other side, adjusts her position, and dips the stick again. She puts it back to my leg, slightly firmer than before. The same movement, dip and draw, repeat and repeat.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

She licks her lips. Dip and draw. "It was lucky they were not in your room."

"Yes — but —"

"What?"

"I think I should destroy them."

Dip and draw. "You think he will return?"

I look at the ceiling. There is no reason for Peter to doubt my word, or for the other man to doubt the evidence of his search, but we live among sights that should not be so. I have thought for years that the short man with the mole face was German, but he cannot be, not if he was here, today.

"Some were published — they will survive."

She nods and licks her lips.

"If I give them up now they'll be used to justify more suffering."

"But — they could yet stop it," she says.

"It isn't their story."

"Who?"

"The Government — it isn't their's to use."

"And it's not yours?"

"Exactly."

"But it was entrusted to you."

She slides the stick behind her ear. I am caught and confused. I let her lift my leg, gently push my skirt above the knee, then lift the other next to it. She runs her finger down the uncoloured one, tracing an invisible image of the henna on the other, over skin that tightens and prickles without dye.

"I'm sorry," I say, longing for something more from her.

"See — the pattern is only visible on this one but it lives here also — in its absence."

I can barely hear, my ears are blocked by the feeling of her fingers on my skin.

"Is there any more?"

She checks the bowl and nods.

"Keep going — please."

For a moment I think she will not, but then she straightens the first leg and I feel the stick scratch over the stretched skin of the second.

When she finishes I do not move. A flame of fear has flashed into life. That familiar fear of being wrong, of doing the wrong thing.

"Look at me," she says.

She is tapping the end of the stick against her lips. She stops, and brushes the hair from my face, a signpost that old categories, old fears, no longer matter.

"You are right of course — love your enemy —" she says, "but suppose those letters are all that remains?"

I nod, relief rushing over me.

"What did Eric ask of you?"

"To write — and to take care of the documents."

"To protect the memory of them as best you can."

I remember opening the first letter in a little room in a zoo. Hebrew script span across the page, threatening to take off. I knew that the letters were not mine, and yet somehow justice demanded that I act as though they were. Any risk I took was nothing compared to the storm of those pages.

I take hold of Shantih's hand. "Preservation, then, rather than destruction?"

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We walk out of the station, between the neat, new houses with their bay windows, and into Epping forest.

The town sits on the edge of the common land as though on sufferance. The forest has roots in an age of horses, bows and arrows, wild boar, and further back to ages we can only imagine, beneath golden oak-leaf sunsets. It remembers hunting horns, the rustle of velvet, shepherds and cowherds, blood, and an impermanence of life we've only recently recalled. The town, in contrast, threw up its suburbs in barely a season. Houses with space between them but nothing behind, the appearance of being dropped here where they have no business. I know that the other side of the town has been bombed, but I can't shake the feeling that it couldn't survive a raid. One shudder and these pretty houses would tumble. The trees would sneak in again and the foresters would come to pollard them, and the cattle would roam, as though people were never here at all.

As we walk the neat streets women frown at Shantih, children look with their mouths open. It is a relief to get under the trees and into the quiet. A dusky, stippled,

fresh light plays over us like cool fingers. We see nobody on the path except an old man walking four spaniels. The quiet invades me. We do not need to speak. The path rises and falls but always moves eventually upwards until we reach the edge of Loughton camp. Shantih hooks her fingers around mine and we stand, looking.

The ancient trees reveal their roots and the marks of pollarding. They stand as fists driven into the ground, knuckles knotted with age, sentinel arms guarding the camp. The green of the young trees makes these trunks stand out. They might be shadows, except they make one long to touch them. I wonder if they could be summoned, woken, called to our aid, we who own this forest of theirs. Yet they are surely above our troubles.

We step between the trees and turn to circle the barrows. I am holding Shantih's hand, here in the shade of the forest. We must make this circuit before we begin. The camp was once a homestead. Children ran after falling leaves and climbed the trees. Not these trees, their grandparents perhaps, thousands of years ago. They lived on the land and so it was theirs. Now it is ours.

There are dry leaves, husks of conker, and moss underfoot. Wind whispers through branches high above. The young trees shake in approval. We complete our circuit, our summoning, and step between the banks and into the camp. I take out a trowel and drop my bag.

The earth is hard but my hands are scratched and calloused, so it hardly matters. Squatting, I begin to dig. The hole doesn't need to be large. Shantih looks down on me and out into the twisted wood. When I stop digging she drops to face me. Her eyes are quiet, firm, but my mind is loud and rushing through time and space and all that has happened. Fear roils inside me, clamping onto heart and hand, cutting the supply of reason. She puts her hand over mine on the trowel.

"We need to do this," she says.

"What if we lose the spot or the paper decays?"

"Then so be it — when this is over there will be truth enough. The world will clamour for truth — you'll see."

I nod, my neck creaking like an old tree.

"Remember," she says, "preservation."

I long to fall into the quiet of her eyes. These days, quiet is the last thing we can find. Bombs are only the start. We shout endlessly, viciously, at each other, or about each other, as if shouting ever changed anybody's mind. We shout our grief at the heaven, shout at the enemy for revenge, shout instructions, and all the ways in which we believe we are right, shout our names in the vain hope that the world will hear and remember. We even shout love that our love will be known, and justice, that our fairness may be proven.

Shantih's eyes once asked questions, poked and probed, taunted her detractors with the innocence of a child who has stumbled upon a robbery. Now they are quiet, because it is only in the quiet that we can hear. Only in the darkness that we see a candle's light.

I nod. She takes the package of documents from my bag. They are sealed in a leather filing case. I finish the hole, making it deeper than it needs to be out of fear of animals. We say nothing. Shantih places the case into the earth. I think of funerals, wonder where we will put the dead if the war goes on. Then take a handful of earth and sprinkle it over the leather. Nothing happens. No vision, no revelation. I glance at Shantih.

"You can only do your best," she says. She drops a handful of soil into the hole.

We bury the documents and letters. I imagine Peter, standing in front of a man wearing an identical suit to his, saying he can deal with me, that he will get the letters, that we must keep on bombing. I will not be a part of it. I cannot.

When it is done we climb to the top of one of the barrows and look towards the city we cannot see. It may as well not be there, but it is close, we know, and would be here now if people had not fought to keep this land public against all the sensible arguments put forward by men in expensive suits. I have done my best to honour Eric's request to publish, to write whatever I could. Now we have done our best to honour his request to protect the documents. Whether it is right, I cannot say. Shantih leans against me in the sunshine.

Sometimes you can stare at a thing for so long, waiting to see the light, waiting to understand, waiting for certainty that never comes, for evidence, but while you are busy looking the story is writing itself in the book of your heart. Truth creeps in quietly from the side, from the dark, whispering; a still small voice beneath the earthquake of our striving.

The wind in the trees.

Shantih stands on her toes and kisses me. I close my eyes for a moment then let her lead me by the hand into the forest.

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Some weeks later, on a heavy, hot, buzzing afternoon, two children lead me by the arms around the edge of a field.

The sun is still high over the valley, so the golden stone of the ridge shines delicately and precisely as a painting. I watch the backs of the children's heads just ahead of me. Long grass flicks against my legs and remembers my own childhood summers; battles fought from fortresses in fields soon to be harvested, covert berry eating and cold, weedy, rock-bedded streams to wash away the evidence, stalking badger sets in ink night-black forests. Days when we clutched our freedom with a desperation that drove us to run as far and as fast as we could, to read a whole book at every sitting, and to break bounds whenever possible. I focus on the feeling of sun on my skin, and breathe deeply. The late summer is just as I remember it. Sweet ripe smells, warm dusty wind and the edge of decay. There is the tickle of heat at the back of my throat and the slick of sweat on my forehead.

"One more thing to see," says the girl on my right. She is Dorothy, my niece and namesake, nine years of age.

"I'm tired," her brother William says, pulling on my arm, dragging his feet.

I bend down and let him climb onto my shoulders. He is four and a half, and too big for this. I almost cannot stand.

Dorothy leads the way. We duck into a coppice that juts from the edge of a wood. I expect it to be cooler but the sticky heat crouches in the shadows and heaves with insects. We follow a hard, brown, path. Feet-battered and exciting. It winds between trees so we cannot see ahead and none of us talks. The wood creates a hush that demands attention. Even children as worldly as these know that at least half of all the good stories happen in a forest.

Birds dance from branch to branch overhead. Something rustles the bottom of an elder bush. The path rounds one bend and then another, squeezes between wrinkled trees that lean to embrace. We push through this gateway and we have arrived —

on the edge of a huge bomb crater.

I am stunned to see it there, rooted for a second, as my mind catches up.

The crater bisects the path, which once went straight across but now clings to the edge of the hole.

I put William down and take his hand. It is clammy and my own completely covers it. The three of us step as close to the edge as we dare. I have the idea that I should not allow the children to do this, but I cannot bring myself to take it from them. The sides buckle and slide away beneath us. At the bottom lies dry ash and dirt. Roots reach over burnt offerings of trees that once lined the path.

William hangs from my arm over the edge.

"Daddy says it was an accident — that it was meant for Bristol," he says. "They don't want to hit us."

"No that's right — they were probably looking for Bristol."

Little Dorothy looks at me sideways and crosses her arms.

"Is this what it's like in London?" she asks.

There is a green stain on her dress, probably from the rotten stile we climbed earlier when she refused my help.

"No — it's different."

The crater does not remind me of the blast sites in London. Its empty, screaming mouth suggests something else. An image rises; men scrambling, slipping, sliding, sinking down wet walls of holes whose thick mud clings to them.

I step back from the edge and pull William with me. Dorothy watches but does not move. I should say something to reassure them.

The wind blows a twig from the edge of the path over the plumped lip of the hole. It skitters down into the mud.



"Come on — it's time for tea."

I turn them back the way we have come and William begins to run towards home. I doubt he can remember London after two years away. He is the front of a new generation whose earliest memories will be families with absent brothers and fathers, planes, air raids, gas masks, shelters, wreckage. Perhaps fear, but perhaps not, if they know nothing else.

I am thinking this, and it surprises me when Dorothy takes hold of my hand.

We walk in silence, listening to the waves of rustled leaves break around us.

Then, without looking at me, she asks, "What's it like?"

Her face is set, serious and not at all childish. There is the seed of something starting to germinate in this niece that I do not see in either of her parents. A bravery, or a desire to see the world as it is, which echoes inside of me and bonds us a little more tightly. I do not want to lie to her.

"You'll see for yourself when it's over. There's an awful mess — but they clear the worst quickly."

She nods, slowly. "Daddy won't tell us."

"He probably doesn't want to worry you."

"Is it scary?"

We emerge from the trees into sudden sunlight.

"Not how you expect," I say. "It was at first — but you have to get used to it or you'd go mad. "

"So you're not afraid of dying?"

"I don't know — you can't think about it — you're powerless. So you have to find things to do — be useful or die."

I can see William, almost home now, a little racing head above the grass. Dorothy pulls at a stalk, breaks off the seeds, discards them, and puts the stem between her teeth. I may have gone too far. My sister will berate me for scaring her children.

"Do you know anyone who's died?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Someone you love?"

"An old friend called Ben."

She swallows. "Didn't he go to the shelter?"

"He was trying to help an old man — he was trapped."

"That's brave."

"He was a good man."

"I don't think I could be that brave."

I look down at her. Her hair is dark auburn, flickering and moody in the sun. I take her hand again and she doesn't resist.

"I think you could — if it came to it."

She throws the grass stalk away. "It doesn't matter anyway — after this, what will there be to fight for?"

"And where have you been on your adventure?" Peter asks, when we arrive.

"To the river and the hay bales," says William.

"And the crater." Dorothy sits, helps herself to cake.

"Your Aunt doesn't want to see more of that."

"It's fine — I don't mind." I give Dorothy a look to affirm our conspiracy. She smiles and swings her legs. Peter rolls his eyes but Helen does not notice.

The tea is laid out in the garden of the old farmhouse. The farmers have long moved to a newer house in the village but the barns and stables still surround this one with the noise of their work. The oldest barn, across the courtyard, has been converted into a dormitory for COs assigned to land work. They come past in twos and threes for their tea, laughter and conversation drifting from where they gather around a long table outside the barn.

Helen talks to her children and fusses over William, who paints himself with strawberries. Her hair has begun to grey, and she looks like our mother. I watch her, at the centre of her galaxy of young people, and I feel the familiar, heavy pain beneath my ribs.

The older girls — Harriet and Jemima — are back from school for the summer, looking held-in and feminine in homemade garden dresses. Harriet is seventeen, sharp cheekbones and full lips under golden hair, although she is still girlishly slim. Jemima is a ruddy, athletic blonde like her mother was years ago. They both look at Edward as though encountering a new creature. He is silent, his empty sleeve swinging in the breeze. I remember these three, closest in age, used to play games under his direction. Pretending to be archaeologists or scientists they would uncover an ancient civilisation, or cure a disease, and release ghosts and demons in the process.

When Helen smiles at Ed he smiles back, but he avoids conversation. He doesn't eat, and asks the maid for coffee instead of tea which makes his mother frown.

I stand to refill my cup and join him on the bench on the patio. We look out on fields that rise up to the long scar of hills. He watches vaguely as the girls fight over biscuits and Helen cleans William. I am on the same side as his missing arm — the right one. He uses the left to sip his coffee. It shakes. He sees me watching. I do not look away.

"Getting easier?" I ask.

"I have to remind myself it's not there." He turns away. "You might think me callous — but it's like losing a person."

He watches the COs walk back to work along the path at the edge of the field. I am close enough to see fine stubble twitching on his cheek. His skin is still dark from the middle-eastern sun, so he looks even less like the rest of his pale family. It is almost impossible to connect this dark, quiet, mutilated man to the little blond boy who ran everywhere. Yet the connection is there and something learned in those early days, unfathomable, has made this man.

He tops up his coffee from the pot on the floor, twisting to pour into the cup that rests on the arm of the bench. I do not offer to help him, but I am tense. I do not want him to drop it.

"I hear things have been bad in London?" he says.

"Bow's half flattened." We look at one another, face to face, and neither needs to add or subtract. Ed takes a crumpled packet from his pocket.

"Smoke?" he offers.

I glance back at Helen. She frowns. Peter chuckles and shrugs.

"Yes — thanks."

"I meant to tell you," he goes on, lighting us both, "I saw Uncle Harry."

"What?"

"When I passed through Cairo on the way home — he came to see me."

I have no idea what to say. I last heard from Harry more than six months ago when he was waiting for a ship. When he left for army training he had a sudden resurgence of enthusiasm for letter writing. Perhaps he was ashamed to write to the rest of the family, but his letters to me got longer and longer. It became impossible to stand

his weekly reports. Even reading them felt like a lie. I hardly ever replied. After Dunkirk I told him he did not have to write if he preferred not to, and I would rather he did not consider himself bound to me in any way beyond the legal. He wrote a spiteful response saying he would respect my wishes and I need not expect to hear from him again. In a way it is easier not to know where he is.

Ed seems to read these thoughts. "I'm sorry — I know you weren't living together — before —"

"No — it's fine. He's my husband. Was he well?"

There is a slight pause before his answer that I cannot read.

"He looked smart — as always. He's attached to the staff. It's a good position."

"Good — safe?"

"Relatively."

"I shouldn't think he likes that."

The maid comes out and goes to Peter. He says something and points to me. She comes over and hands me a slip of paper. It is a telegram marked urgent. Edward sucks on his cigarette. He looks suddenly pale in the sunshine. His eyes sagging and hooded. His Adam's apple quivers.

"Take your brother and sister inside for their baths," Helen says to the older girls. Harriet crosses her arms, resentful and pouting, and I think she considers resisting but nobody pays her any attention. Soon the strange change of mood alarms her and she pushes the others towards the house. As they go, little Dorothy stops to look at me, still holding an unusually large strawberry. I have the eery feeling of foreshadowing that you sometimes get from unusual children. I nod to her, barely a movement really, but I am sure that she sees it.

As soon as the children are out of sight and earshot, I open the telegram. I understand the words of its short statements, but I do not understand their meaning. The others watch, silent, and a sparrow lands on the table unmolested to pick at crumbs. When I am sure I have read correctly, I look up.

"Well?" Peter asks. He uncrosses his legs and leans forward.

"It's from Doris. Prue's in jail."

"Where?"

"Trinidad."

"But that's British," Ed says.

Peter recrosses his legs and puts his hand over his mouth in a fist. His eyes are wide. He is thinking fast.

"I don't understand." Ed's voice is high and tight.

"I think —" I turn to look at him. I expect him to look angry but he does not. I remember a small boy who looked at me that way, standing beside a trunk on the first day he left for school. A boy who became this man. His right leg moves up and down. I put my hand on the knee, gently. "She's been detained by the British Government in Trinidad — I think it must be a mistake."

"I just — it doesn't make sense. How did this happen?" He looks at his father who is silent.

"It says: *Doris and IFOR investigating. Expect appeal.* So that's good —"

"Is it?" he shouts.

I close my eyes.

The silence that follows is no silence really — everything around us continues. The voices of the COs, the traffic of cows coming for milking, the wind, birds, a tractor in the distance, a dog barking. Normal country sounds, and four silent Londoners on a

patio among the dying fuchsias. Yet it is a silence, in as much as the old arguments are silent and taking stock. I know how Edward feels because I feel it too. Something fundamental has changed.

It is Helen who breaks the moment. "Eddy, don't get worked up. You don't know Muriel — she's always been reckless."

"But not criminal," I say.

"Exactly," he says. "What's the charge?"

"It doesn't say."

Helen shakes her head. "That woman doesn't know when to keep her mouth shut."

"That doesn't make her a law-breaker," Ed says.

"If she's against the war?"

"She's against all war — not just this war. Speaking against war isn't the same as helping the enemy."

"Are you a pacifist now?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

Mother and son stare at one another.

Helen continues, quietly, hoping, I think, to sound calm. "We cannot allow the war effort to be compromised. People like you are giving too much."

"You don't speak for me."

"Excuse me?"

"I didn't fight so that innocent people could be locked up."

"She's not innocent."

"She's not plotting."

"Her ideas are dangerous."

"She's an idealist —"

"She's a fantasist —"

"That's enough — both of you." We all look at Peter. His hand is still in front of his face, blocking my view of his expression. His eyes look a deeper blue than normal, in the pale brightness of this blue afternoon. I think he knows that Ed is right, but also that such definitions do not exist in wartime. He looks at each of us, me last, then says, "I will not have this family destroy itself."

Ed rests his single elbow on his knee, leans over it. He is shivering. I want to put my hand on the curve of his spine. I want to walk away, to find somewhere to think. I do not know what I want. I am adrift. The string that has bound me to Prue, that has pulled me through the sea of darkness and always hauled me up onto dry land, has been severed at the opening of the telegram. I am alone. Beside me Ed fumbles for another cigarette. I breathe in and turn back to Peter.

"Perhaps you can help?"

He lowers his hand, and looks at me with as much sympathy as he can muster.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Can you make some calls? Write letters? Whatever you can find out will help — make sure there's pressure going down the chain."

"You think this is a petty official?" Ed spits onto the patio as he speaks.

"I don't know —"

"They all follow orders — and all the orders come from one place." He looks sideways at his father. Between them hovers the ghost of his invisible arm.

Peter looks back without speaking. Muscles in the side of his face twitch. He blinks, twice, lingering.



"What are men across the world fighting for?" Ed smirks, knows he is drawing his father out. "Do you even know? The freedom to hate Nazis? Is that it?"

Peter's nostrils flare. "I did everything I could to prevent this war."

"Now you betray the men dying?"

Peter's face is red and his voice is loud. "Remember that I fought too. And my friends died —"

"For what?"

"For our freedom."

"Freedom for some people — when it suits others?"

"You're thinking like a child —"

"Don't tell me what I think."

He stands and hits the bench with his leg. The cup falls. Smashes onto the patio, spraying shards of grey-blue across the stained stones like water. His pinned sleeve hangs limp, a flag at half mast.

A strange noise rises, an almost-animal whimper, grows and appals. Helen holds her face between both palms, far away from us. The men look afraid, suddenly, frozen and unwell. I feel a tug from deep within memory. We have lived this moment before. A different father, another son, another war. I should go to her, but I do not want to leave Edward with his father.

"Ed — look at me," I say. He does, but slowly, as if only half in control. "I understand what you're saying. You're not the only one who feels it — but it's not your father's fault. Whatever he's done — he always thought it was best for the country."

He shakes his head. "I know — but — I can't do this —"

"We have to focus on getting Prue home — and not only Prue."

He is still shaking his head.

"We don't have a choice — we have to keep going, we have to build what we believe in."

He sits, close to me, and reaches his hand across his legs to take hold of mine.

"I don't know — what use am I now?"

"It's okay not to know."

"I hate this." Tears pool under his eyelids and I think of that little boy, my nephew, and I want to put my arms around him but I do not.

"You are important now — you have to believe it. Because you see the world — you see it as a whole — and you're not afraid of our mistakes or our success. That's what Prue would say. Because this, where you are, is the only point from which we can start to change the world."

"What if it's too late?"

"Perhaps it is, but this isn't a book — something must always come after. So we'll keep on standing — and shout as loud as we can to wake up all the good we can find — wherever it's buried — we'll call on it to walk with us into the future. But whatever happens — we won't give up. And we will not be silenced. We lift our heads, and we tell the truth, and we show what it means, we forgive others and ask them to forgive us, and we learn how to love each other, every day — and whatever else we're doing — every single day we will shout and sing to wake up ourselves and the world or die in the attempt. Because otherwise — what does it mean to be alive?"

His hand in mine is no longer tight. Helen is quiet, but I do not look at her, or at Peter. I focus on Edward, and I know that nothing else matters now but what happens to the surprised, delicate look in his eyes.

"Do you believe that?" he asks.

Beyond him, on the dirty tiles, the glaze of the smashed mug flashes in the sun, and the tears on his cheeks flash with it. I ask myself if I believe what I have said. A gentle feeling settles across my chest, a sadness that holds inside of itself a promise of joy. This feeling, I suddenly understand, is there unnamed in a hundred little things, in every hundredth of a second. In a tear beneath the sun of an August afternoon, or a broken mug, a fine khaddar sari, a henna tattoo destined to fade, a story buried, waiting for the right moment, in a soldier's arm outstretched, in a gift that is needed, a harsh word left unsaid, in people rushing through dark streets beneath a sky of bombers, in love watered by grief, or in any of the other graces that continue unchecked and unknown to define our lives and our pain. This is a better feeling than any great belief because it is life, and life is in it. It is a better story, because it is only from the telling that belief in it can come.

I fold the telegram in my lap. We will get to work on freeing Prue, perhaps Edward will help. Then we will continue. We will continue, and we will continue and we will continue. The string between us is not broken. It was just never really there to begin with.

## **Rejoice, Small Man, In This Small World Of Mine**

### **July 1945, the final pages of George's journal**

The Epilogue of a man  
or Where do we go from here?  
or What is peace?

Wednesday

The fever is worse this morning. I slept late after writing late and didn't hear Rewi and the boys leave for the hike. When I woke my clothes were drenched and hot. Robert came to check me. He said he would go after them to get Rewi back. He's gone. I don't know what time it is.

I have slept again. I think. Everything aches, especially my neck and jaw. I think it is Tetanus. The toe, the jaw, the fever. Mother will be angry I wasn't wearing shoes when I hurt my toe. It won't be Tetanus. They will get medicine. I've survived worse.

My bed is surrounded by people but it cannot be or are we on a train? We're crammed in and I'm sitting on a goat and people sleep standing up. I've been here before. I'm not wearing shoes and I'm worried I'll stub my toe. At the stations I watch the people. I want to know where they go once they leave the city. How do they live through this? Wait — I've seen it. I know China adapts, retreats, regroup. Buries the equipment and waits for soldiers to pass. Tramps over cold mountain paths to settle again, puts an ancient temple to a new use. I know these things because I have seen them and I have

done them. Perhaps it's not China, only people. Humans. This is how we live and make meaning from chaos.

We're on a train; Prue is here, and Dorry, but are we leaving or coming home? It doesn't matter. We're laughing. Somehow we have always been together.

I watch the people. I want to know where they go and what they do. There are pony tales and shaved heads, old men with bedrolls, families with everything from the stove to the Bible and their wedding clothes packed up. Over there is an old man with nothing but a jar of pickle and an umbrella. He is very smart.

The people have gathered around my bed

I'm watching them

I know they go because they dream of a new China to lead a new world  
perhaps they are mad foolish perhaps but

I dream of it too

I dream of a world where there is peace and singing and cool air and mountain streams  
and we are all dirty

If any of this means something to you then you will know that it is true

the man put his jar of pickle on my bed

it is cool running over my skin

now Rewi is here with cold compress not pickle

he says it is tetanus

## **How is Muriel Lester's activist practice and philosophy manifest in *Between The Wars*?**

In 2010 I was commissioned by two anti-war organisations, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Pax Christi, to create a piece of theatre about women activists. One of those women was Muriel Lester. A founder member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and later one of the organisation's key campaigners, Muriel was also a lifelong champion of social reform. The more I read of Muriel's writings, the more I was compelled and challenged by the story of her life. As a character I found her complex and unflinching, yet likeable. Her story provided an unusual view of twentieth century history. So I set out to write Muriel Lester and her activism into a novel, in the hope that such a novel might also take on the function of the activist it represents and provoke change in its own right. To achieve this I needed to look deep into the events of Muriel's life and to understand her influences. As I did so, I found that her activism made its own demands on the form and style of the novel. The more I understood and tried to emulate this activism, the more insistently it cast itself into doubt, until what began as a novel about Muriel Lester became a novel about activism, and an exercise in activism in the spirit of Muriel Lester. This essay is an analysis of the activist practice and philosophy of Muriel Lester, and the process by which it was manifest in my novel *Between The Wars*.

From the start I was fascinated by the apparent contradictions of Muriel's life. She was a wealthy, well-educated girl from Essex who chose to live for many years in the slums of Bow, East London. She committed her life to campaigning against war, whilst around her the world fought two global wars, used the atom bomb, and begun the

Cold War. A privileged white woman who thought herself ‘very lucky to have been born with the knack of enjoying things’<sup>1</sup>, she became friend, host, and supporter of Gandhi. Yet nothing encapsulates the contradiction of Muriel better than an episode during the Second World War. On the 19th August 1941 she was taken from a boat in Trinidad and interred by the British Government in a camp outside the capital, Port of Spain. She was accused, as she put it, of ‘an offence against Colonial Regulation X.Y.Z.’<sup>2</sup>. The government offered several of her alleged statements as proof that ‘Miss Lester’s activities abroad are more likely to hinder than advance Great Britain’s war effort’<sup>3</sup> (especially given the signing of the Atlantic Charter earlier in August). However, during the furore of letter writing which followed Muriel’s incarceration Lady Baldwin, wife of three-time British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, wrote to Muriel’s sister Doris to offer help. She even declared: ‘Your dear Muriel is a saint’<sup>4</sup> (though Lady Baldwin did not share Muriel’s pacifist position). What was it about Muriel’s stance that had led to internment despite such high profile, establishment support?

Although she was released in November 1941 on the condition that she return to Britain, her account of this period illustrates how her philosophy confused and troubled officialdom. The following exchange between Muriel and an immigration officer is typical:

‘He looked at me rather searchingly, "Don’t you resent my detaining you?" he asked.

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Lester, *It Occurred to Me* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p.64

<sup>2</sup> Muriel Lester, *It So Happened* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1947), p.180

<sup>3</sup> Nevin Sayre private papers, quoted in Jill Wallis, *Mother of World Peace; The life of Muriel Lester* (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1993), p.201

<sup>4</sup> Lady Baldwin, quoted in Wallis, p.204

I considered a little. "I don't think I do. Evidently you think you've got to do it. So I suppose you must."

He swung round on me menacingly again. "Does that mean that you don't blame Hitler for doing things *he* thinks right?"<sup>5</sup>

The officer's behaviour here is puzzling, even if allowance is made for the fact that Muriel has reported it herself. At first he wishes to understand Muriel, he looks at her 'searchingly'. Perhaps he is drawn to her or even impressed by her, and his question seems genuine. In turn she answers honestly, almost kindly. So his menacing response feels all the more disproportionate. His insistence on bringing Hitler, the enemy, and so by extension the nation, into the conversation jars. It could be mistaken for satire. What began as a question of personal feelings became a trap to determine political allegiance.

This pattern recurs across many events in Muriel's life; the conflation of personal belief and public action, the removal of the boundaries which allow national narratives to take priority in the public sphere. She was determined to model in the personal what she believed in for the public, and vice versa. Even those who disagreed with Muriel's views were often, like the immigration officer and Lady Baldwin, impressed by her. Such authenticity enabled her to manage the apparent contradictions of her life and to work consistently for social and political change over the first half of the twentieth century. I will refer to this work as her activist practice, and to the ideas and personal habits which underpinned it as her activist philosophy.

Muriel herself defined her practice, somewhat grandly, as follows: 'Our business is to stop war, to purify the world, to get it saved from poverty and riches, to heal the sick, to comfort the sad, to wake up those who have not yet found God, to create joy and

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<sup>5</sup> Wallis, p.195



beauty wherever you go, to find God in everything and everyone.’<sup>6</sup> This description also makes plain the essential aspects of her philosophy; opposition to war (‘stop war’), speaking out for justice (‘purify the world’), working for social justice (‘get it saved from poverty and riches, to heal the sick, to comfort the sad’), the spiritual and personal roots of peace (‘wake up those who have not yet found God’), the artistic element of activism (‘to create joy and beauty wherever you go’), and universal brotherhood (‘to find God in everything and everyone’).

Muriel developed this philosophy under the influence of a variety of sources. She moved within a spiritual activist melee which included well known figures such as Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, C. F. Andrews, George Lansbury, Sylvia Pankhurst, Vera Brttain, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and Nevin Sayre. Muriel drew from the philosophies and experiences of these friends to craft her own practice. The ideas of non-violence and civil disobedience explored in India had a particularly strong impact. She also always returned to scripture and the understanding of Christ that she had begun to develop in childhood. For example, when she first encountered the factory girls of Bow, in East London, and began to involve herself in social projects she found it necessary to reevaluate her faith; ‘to reinforce the peculiar importance of doing Jesus Christ the honour of taking him seriously’<sup>7</sup>. She read Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of Heaven is Within You* and wrote that ‘once your eyes get open to Christian pacifism you can’t shut them again . . . you can’t unsee it.’<sup>8</sup> Muriel later went on to develop a mystical spirituality most notably influenced by Ignatius Loyola, Brother Lawrence, St Francis of Assisi, and Evelyn Underhill. On top of all this Muriel found wisdom amongst her friends and

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<sup>6</sup> Muriel Lester, *Training* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1942), p.3.

<sup>7</sup> Muriel Lester, quoted in, Wallis, p.23

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p.20

neighbours in East London; ‘fairness . . . honest facing of the facts of war . . . tolerant objective truthfulness and imaginative understanding.’<sup>9</sup> The combination of political non-violence, radical Christianity and mysticism, with her practical experience in Bow, aided by her privileged position and prodigious talents as a storyteller, characterise Muriel’s life. These major influences on her practice and philosophy underpinned the central ideas of *Between the Wars*, and also provided the key to its form and style.

The definition above demonstrates that Muriel understood the grand questions of pacifism and religion to be intimately connected with practical problems such as poverty, health, and education. She always sought to address both, seeing in each cause and solution for the other. This was an extension of her conviction that the personal and the public, belief and action, are one and the same. In her 1937 book *Kill or Cure* she included the full text of the 1921 founding declaration of War Resisters International which identifies the causes of war as ‘the instinct of egoism and greed’ and ‘all agencies which create hatred and antagonism between groups’, including ‘between races’, ‘between religions’, ‘between the classes’, and ‘between nations’<sup>10</sup>. Muriel saw the practical outworking of such antagonism in the daily sufferings of her friends in Bow. From the start I knew that a novel exploring her convictions would need to deal in both ideas and practical social activism, but I came to see that the form of the novel would need to reflect her particular understanding of the relationship between the two.

Muriel went further than War Resisters’ International because she saw the practical and the ideological linked through the prism of scripture, and the figure of Christ. Muriel saw Jesus as a world-changing individual, the archetypal activist, who stood at the heart of her philosophy. In *Kill or Cure* she tells a parable of non-violence,

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<sup>9</sup> Muriel Lester, *Kill or Cure* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1937), p.58

<sup>10</sup> *Declaration of the Was Resisters’ International*, quoted in, Muriel Lester, *Kill or Cure*, pp. 123-126, p. 125

In this story a violent man is befriended by a non-violent individual, only to reveal that the pacifist is Jesus and the story is reimagined from gospel accounts of Jesus' healings<sup>11</sup>; 'in this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear'.<sup>12</sup>

For Muriel the activist was to emanate Christ in two ways. First in specific acts of social justice (in her parable the violent man is naked until Jesus gives him his coat). Secondly the activist is to point beyond herself to larger truths, as Christ points beyond himself to the nature of God. In the Christian tradition this idea is incarnation. Christ is considered both fully God and fully human, God incarnate into human form, which means that 'Christ is a manifestation of the absolute within the setting of this world'<sup>13</sup>. Or, to put it another way and to quote the scriptural Jesus, 'a tree is recognised by its fruit'<sup>14</sup>. The activist (or the follower of Jesus) is recognised by their presence and action within day to day life, as opposed to by statements of belief or purity customs. This same action points beyond the individual to what they believe. 'Christianity is a materialist religion, claiming as it does that the Incarnation is the key to our existence and purpose'<sup>15</sup>. For Muriel incarnation into the material world was the model for powerful activism in which the activist became the message. At the end of her parable in *Kill or Cure* Muriel affirms these two elements of Jesus as role model; 'There is the Leader for us ordinary people. Let us be careful not to forget the coat.'<sup>16</sup> Incarnation of the idea, and practical social justice.

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<sup>11</sup> Lester, *Kill or Cure*, p.120-121

<sup>12</sup> *Holy Bible*, TNIV (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004), 1 John 4:17-18, p.928

<sup>13</sup> Cannon L John Collins, *Faith Under Fire* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1966), p.274

<sup>14</sup> *Holy Bible*, Matthew 12:33, p.740

<sup>15</sup> Collins, p.129

<sup>16</sup> Lester, *Kill or Cure*, p.121

Another key part of Muriel's activism is 'to create joy and beauty wherever you go'. In her definition this is second only to finding 'God in everything and everyone'. Muriel saw that there was power in creativity, that art and activism were connected. She wrote that 'ours is to keep sensitive enough to be in contact with God daily, to practice life as an art.'<sup>17</sup> This creativity which was so characteristic of Muriel's understanding, is also integral to understanding incarnation. God is seen as creator, and this creative God is manifest in and manifesting through Jesus in the process of incarnation. Christ both demonstrates and actually creates the new world order through his presence and actions for social justice. The activist then points to the idea through incarnation (being manifest in the world), but also creates herself and the new world (manifesting through) in the process of incarnation, of living out conviction in the ordinary moments of life.

Henry Thoreau wrote that as a person 'advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined . . . new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him'<sup>18</sup>. This is the power of the incarnate activist; impressing into being new paths of thought through the mind, just as Thoreau saw the way feet impress paths into the earth. It is not clear if Muriel ever read Thoreau, but Gandhi cited him as an influence and so we can trace a link between their ideas. Muriel often demanded change, but for her the real challenge was to 'practice life as an art'. To craft a life, and a mind, which embodied change in its habits and practices. The core of Muriel's philosophy was The Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus says that 'If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles'<sup>19</sup>. Such an action not only points to larger ideas beyond itself, but actually

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<sup>17</sup> Lester, p.10.

<sup>18</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden', in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. by John Seelye (New York: Penguin, 1984), p.372

<sup>19</sup> *Holy Bible*, Matthew 5:41, p.734

steps towards a world where such ideas are the norm by creating it on a stretch of dusty road.

So the idea of incarnation suggested that the novel would need to represent Muriel's actions in a realistic material world, to make the character herself incarnate. In doing so the form of the novel would mimic the form of her activism by focusing on the transformation of narrative moments through the person of the activist. It could strive in turn to transform the world of the reader. To incarnate Muriel into life appeared to require a conventional form of historical realism. The idea nods towards Lukács and his preference for 'critical realism'<sup>20</sup> over formal experimentation as the approach best suited to the meaningful interrogation of society necessary for activism. In fact Lukács went as far as to identify a 'connection between realism — i.e. a writer's critical understanding of the world he lives in — and the struggle for peace'<sup>21</sup>. For him characters were crucially moulded by the social forces and possibilities of the world around them. In order to create 'a dynamic, complex, analytical rendering of social relationships'<sup>22</sup> in which the potential for change exists, the writer must create meaning through the selection and use of meaningful and realistic (in this case historical) details. If the world, or history, is presented in such realist terms, Muriel could be seen to critique and challenge unjust realities, and create an alternative within the material world of the novel, as she did in life.

Erich Auerbach also supported this approach in *Mimesis*. He identified both the Old and New Testament ideas of incarnation as crucial to the development of realism in fiction. For Auerbach the Judaeo-Christian scriptures are essentially 'a history of

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<sup>20</sup>Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Trans by John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1969), p92

<sup>21</sup> Lukács, p76-77

<sup>22</sup> Lukács, p82

personality'<sup>23</sup> in which in the details of realism point to the work's greater meaning. The complexity and changeability of characters forms the essence of their reality, and so it is a key part of establishing meaning through story; 'In the midst of misfortune and in their humiliation their acts and words reveal the transcendent majesty of God.'<sup>24</sup> If such realism was to be effective for *Between The Wars*, and also serve as a representation of the key place of incarnation within her activist philosophy, it seemed integral that the reader be given an accessible and rounded picture of Muriel in which she remained dynamic, open to change, and 'fraught with background'<sup>25</sup>.

My first attempts to create such a narrative led me to write Muriel in the third person and in the first person from her perspective. While the third person Muriel was distant and rather pious, first person Muriel was strident and uncompromising. Neither seemed desirable or to adequately represent a woman of such charisma. Even if the novel could wrangle attention from the reader through plot, it became clear that these Muriels had the potential to alienate a reader. The third person Muriel was difficult to engage sufficiently with the questions of belief and motivation, so the resulting work would add little to existing biographical accounts. The first person Muriel, in telling her own story in light of her strong beliefs, left little room for the cheerful humility that is characteristic of Muriel's own writings (which largely tell the stories of others within the broader context of her life and journeys). When I abandoned these attempts I began to see Muriel and her world come to life more vividly through the voice of Dorothy, and later in George's journal. I saw that such an approach, though more subjective and restricted, might in fact be much closer to Auerbach's 'history of personality' because it

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<sup>23</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans by Willard R Trask (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 18

<sup>24</sup> Auerbach, p.18

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12

could give a variety of perspectives on Muriel's successes and failures. I also got to know Muriel better. I realised that a more radical understanding of incarnation, and what Muriel meant by it, could help formulate a better idea of the aesthetics of the novel.

John Caputo has also called for a more radical understanding of how incarnation functions in scripture<sup>26</sup>. He suggests abandoning the traditional theo-logos of theology in favour of what he terms theo-poetics. Caputo identifies 'logos' as the practice of argument, or logic, in which theology becomes the work of building belief systems and philosophical structures around or on top of scriptural narrative. These systems are derived from narrative but cement a single absolute interpretation. Each reading is used to demolish previous logos structures and establish a new standard, only for the pattern to be inevitably repeated. There is no room for new insight, or the personal, subjective view. The system produced by a theo-logos approach must be consistent and complete. If challenged and found lacking, it is discarded and replaced by a new systematic reading. Auerbach also identified the role of interpretation in scripture, pointing out 'the antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning'<sup>27</sup> — that realistic story does not lend itself to simple definitions or explanations.

However, while Auerbach maintained that this repeated re-interpretation is an unavoidable consequence of scripture's claim to absolute truth, Caputo's theo-poetics strips away argument and returns to the moment of incarnation in the scriptural story. This unclear meeting of image, character, language, and narrative points to something absolute but is divested of absolute meaning itself. The poetic space is instead discursive, not unilateral, and exists outside of rigid systematic structures because of its

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<sup>26</sup>John D Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49

focus on story over explanation. Caputo suggests that ‘a text admits of . . . endless reading and rereading’<sup>28</sup>. Such an approach leaves room for the subjectivity of multiple interpretations which nevertheless may coexist. In fact, Caputo’s approach likens scriptural story to language itself, and invites creative translation. At the heart of this idea is a more nuanced understanding of God. Caputo suggests that ‘God is a question, not an answer, the most radical thought we can entertain, that exposes the questionability of all other answers we think we have’<sup>29</sup>. It is this God-question then who is incarnate in the story<sup>30</sup>. Caputo’s theo-poetics suggests a different way to think about incarnation. Rather than a single, realistically bound, ‘manifestation of the absolute within the setting of this world’<sup>31</sup>, he invites us to remember the ‘scandal of particularity’<sup>32</sup>, or subjectivity, at the heart of the Jesus moment.

Despite its realistic cultural setting, the incarnation presented in the Gospels and the New Testament is a narrative unsettled by the subjective lens of individuality. This ‘scandal’ is hiding in plain sight once a nativity-play reading is cast off. Not only does Jesus express his ministry largely in acts and stories for, with, and towards a vast array of individuals, but the whole story is told through the radically different testimonies of four gospel writers (notwithstanding the apocryphal gospels). These four writers take liberties with the material, have competing agendas, and in fact tell different versions of all the major stories. Incarnation then does not offer a concrete, realistic example. Instead of strict realism, scripture presents an opportunity to engage in creative

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<sup>28</sup>Caputo, p.100

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>30</sup> This may remind us again of Lukács who affirmed Chekhov’s idea that any ‘reasonable question’ posed by a writer in his work, looking objectively at the questions of the day, has value even if the answer he proposes to the question is unreasonable. (Lukács, p.68)

<sup>31</sup> Collins, p.274

<sup>32</sup> Collins, p.109



conversation. 'Its focal point is not Being but Becoming . . . Not the changeless One . . . but rather His energising Thought - the Son'<sup>33</sup> .

Muriel understood this more radical incarnation and the subjective nature of scripture from a young age. She recalled one afternoon when she was a child, singing hymns to herself and finding they 'challenged my common sense . . . Could I love Jesus? Yes, easily. He was fine. Could I love God? I was very sad to say I could not, unless the hymns were untrue when they talked about punishment and justice and mercy and blood'<sup>34</sup>. Her unease with traditional teaching about Hell was supported by her father, who she describes as 'a passionate iconoclast of the old legalisms'<sup>35</sup>. This episode shows Muriel's early realisation that God and Jesus might exist beyond religion and the narrow realm of objective theological concepts. Caputo sees just such an understanding as crucial to theo-poetics: 'God is more important than religion as love is more important than faith'<sup>36</sup>. The faith that Muriel discovers later in life comes, ultimately, through a moment of revelation, prompted by scripture, but greater than what she finds there. 'This precious Faith that has come is beautiful and comforting. I pray I may keep it for ever. It enables me to do all things'<sup>37</sup>.

This view of incarnation invests every person with subjective value and agency in their encounter with it. A one way intervention, becomes a mutual, two-way engagement. This is reflected in Muriel's desire to 'wake up those who have not yet found God'<sup>38</sup>. The verb 'wake up' suggests a break from traditional evangelism. Rather

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<sup>33</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 2002), p.24

<sup>34</sup> Lester, *It Occurred to Me*, p.6

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Caputo, p.117

<sup>37</sup> Lester, quoted in Wallis, p.20

<sup>38</sup> Lester, *Training*, p.3.

than teaching a set of values Muriel understood that her role was to facilitate a change of being in others, from not engaged with incarnation, towards an open conversation. She wrote that God 'is always pushing His people out into further regions of thought. With every fresh discovery mankind discovers a little more of God. Patiently seek the truth. Certainly one of your most cherished convictions may be threatened if this new line of thought is true, but why have you been cherishing this conviction? This new idea may lead to something nobler; it looks promising.'<sup>39</sup> She did not understand incarnation to be the descent of God from a far away place into human form, but rather the ultimate expression of the God who is already 'in everything and everyone'<sup>40</sup>. Her instruction to find God is better understood as an encouragement to *see* the divine. It not only led her to share the 'recognition of the sanctity of human personality'<sup>41</sup> declared by War Resisters' International, but also to go further and to actively cast herself and her own convictions into doubt in the presence of others. 'This is called kenosis and describes the act of self emptying'<sup>42</sup>. It was a further step on the road of incarnation, recognising that God was expressed fully in a man who washed his followers' feet and died the humiliating death of an outcast.

In *Between The Wars* I sought to reflect a more complex, subjective incarnation that would engage the reader in conversation about Muriel's ideas. The novel, like Muriel, had to be rooted in its own questionability to avoid the danger of becoming propaganda, Caputo's logos. The first step was to reveal the writing process of the narratives. The opening and the use of the present tense suggest Dorothy is recalling, or re-conjuring, the novel's events with a particular agenda. George's narrative is told

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<sup>39</sup> Muriel Lester, *Ways of Praying* (London: Independent Press Limited, 1948), p.63

<sup>40</sup> Lester, *Training*, p.3

<sup>41</sup> *Declaration of the War Resisters' International*, p.125

<sup>42</sup> Peter Rollins, *The Idolatry of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), p.100

through the journal form, with the possibility that this may have been edited or compiled by Dorothy. Throughout his journal he comments and wonders at the development of his own story; ‘The gremlin has a hold of me.’<sup>43</sup> He does not shy away from the reality of his own construction of the story, or his grandiose Arthurian ambitions. Similarly, Dorothy does not conceal her own intention to amplify the meaning of their actions ‘before our lives become only history’<sup>44</sup>. They both discuss the role of writing within their practice of activism. Dorothy wrestles throughout the novel with the role of story, the politics of representation, and the relationship between truth and fiction. Her struggles reflect central concerns of my own writing process. All of these techniques offer the audience space to consider and question the narrators’ reliability and the choices they make; to engage in reading and rereading the ideas of the novel. They are intended to challenge a naturalistic, deterministic approach to history, and to mitigate any sense of inevitability inherent in the realistic historical setting of *Between The Wars*.

The characters also occupy a discursive world. They question themselves and others, and actively engage with ideas of activism, truth, and justice. The reader is invited to join Dorothy and George as they grapple with Muriel’s philosophy. As Dorothy and George discover their own responses to her incarnation, they become their own, new, incarnate narrative of activism with whom the reader is also invited to engage. So there are three incarnations, triply subjective, allowing them to point together to a more complex set of ideas and questions. To avoid a sense that the reader is being directed their two central stories move outwardly in opposite directions. George travels from confidence to uncertainty and Dorothy from uncertainty to confidence. Yet

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<sup>43</sup> Alexandra Martin-Carey, *Between The Wars*, p.180

<sup>44</sup> Martin-Carey, p.5.

while these trajectories mirror one another they move across very different timeframes. George's journey is almost all contained within the four month period covered in his journal. He experiences an intense period of disillusionment with his inherited pacifism. Whereas Dorothy's route begins years before the main action of the novel. Her early changes, including her travels in India with Prue, are represented through memory, flashback, and her writing. The present of her narrative instead focuses on the movement from a place of uncertain commitment to one of confident commitment.

Both characters also take the same journey from dependence upon Muriel to self-reliance (even if George is still, to an extent, dependent on Rewi at the end of this process). Their journey to greater independence as activists in the world is akin to Muriel's 'waking up'. In Shanghai she tells George he must 'look for the things [he] can do'<sup>45</sup>, rather than attempting to copy her. He must look for what her incarnation points to, rather than succumbing to legalism. For all of their differences, Dorothy and George are both forced to confront the difficult, contingent nature of activism, and indeed life, whereby outcomes are always unpredictable and action comes at a cost. This contingent, unpredictable activist-idea-action relationship reflects the complex writer-reader-story relationship in all texts of incarnation. The crossing yet parallel narratives aim to prevent the novel becoming didactic. Instead they open the door to a subjective experience in which the reader may challenge the characters and their assumptions, but remain invested in their stories.

These attempts to complicate the novel through the presentation of apparently conflicting journeys, recall Brecht's adage that 'the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed.'<sup>46</sup> Much as he might

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<sup>45</sup> Martin-Carey, p.327

<sup>46</sup> Bertholt Brecht, 'Brecht On Theatre', ed. by John Willett, in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, ed. by Time Prentki and Sheila Preston (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp.28-32 (p.31)

have disliked the comparison, a precursor to Brecht's alienation technique could be seen in the insistent, contradictory, and unclear stories of the gospels. I also see the discursive heart of *Between The Wars* in the context of participatory practices, such as Boal's Forum Theatre. Here spectators become spect-actors and are invited to participate in the action themselves, making suggestions about how to progress or resolve the story and playing those ideas out. Boal considers his theatre 'is not didactic, in the old sense of the word and style, but pedagogic, in the sense of a collective learning.'<sup>47</sup> It can be argued that the practice of novel reading is both inherently participatory and pedagogic, in that at the very least the reader learns about new characters and events. This approach to making art seems in harmony with Muriel when she wrote of serving God that 'To fulfil this great destiny it is necessary for us to preserve the open mind, open to truth from whatever angle it comes, for truth is God.'<sup>48</sup> Muriel, like Boal, believed in collective and ongoing learning.

So the particularity of incarnation upholds the value of the subjective human experience. Yet it also tries to 'break the grip of material actuality and open our eyes to being otherwise, to a dimension beyond reality that lifts the limits imposed upon us by presence and actuality'<sup>49</sup>. It shows a new, larger way of seeing and being in the world. As well as people, Muriel is clear that meaning, what she called God, is also found in 'everything'. This alludes to events, to moments, and to the physical world. The phrase she uses in her definition ('find God in everything and everyone'<sup>50</sup>) is a key phrase used in Jesuit theology and refers to the mystical elements of her faith. In such a model

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<sup>47</sup> Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, trans. by Adrian Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p.7

<sup>48</sup> Muriel Lester, *Why Worship?* (London: Independent Press Limited, 1937), p.27

<sup>49</sup> Caputo, p.68

<sup>50</sup> Lester, *Training*, p.3.

incarnation not only highlights the divine potential within humans, but within all expressions of the physical world. ‘The ancient sages say that when Moses comes across the burning bush, he doesn’t take his sandals off because suddenly the ground has become holy; he takes his sandals off because he’s just now realising that the ground has been holy *the whole time*.’<sup>51</sup> Muriel’s vegetarianism and her commitment to spending time in the natural world illustrate the importance of materiality within her philosophy. Epping Forest held particular power for her. Standing close to her childhood home, and mythologised by its political significance, it encapsulated the alliance she saw between divine and natural against the evils created by man; ‘Soon the glades of Epping Forest enticed me to forget all man-made misery . . . Once more straggling wild roses caught hold of me’<sup>52</sup>.

This expanded understanding of the material world came to play an important role in the novel. George and Dorothy relate strongly to their material environments and reflect upon them as sources of revelation. While they both encounter incarnation in the people they meet, they also often conjure key physical images to make sense of their stories. In Cologne, Dorothy notices this effect; ‘I am ambushed by reverberations of this image’<sup>53</sup>. The places of the novel ring with hidden stories, images that remember other images and moments. Kingsley Hall for example is never only a stage for the scene in question. Beneath the surface are Gandhi’s quiet footsteps, Dorothy and Harry’s wedding, Prue, Kingsley himself, and all the accumulated scenes of the novel. Sometimes these images lie quietly beneath the narrative, but at other times they intrude

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<sup>51</sup> Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* (London: Collins, 2013), p.182-183

<sup>52</sup> Lester, in Wallis, p.179

<sup>53</sup> Martin-Carey p.223

on the characters thoughts and words<sup>54</sup>, nodes of meaning beyond the present and actual of the story.

*Between The Wars* also occupies physical and narrative environments that may be familiar to many readers from other fiction, film, and television; the poverty of east London, Communists and Black Shirts, New York, Nazi Germany, the Blitz, and war-torn Shanghai. These environments suggest to the reader an accessible kaleidoscope of tropes, stock characters, and assumptions. Yet the actions of the novels' major characters challenge such assumptions. The ways they speak and think, and their desire for peace in a world the reader knows is hurtling towards global war, undercut easy stereotypes. In doing so the novel re-renders to the physical and narrative environments their potential for inclusion in Muriel's understanding of the divinity of the material world. Like people, even the least promising environments, perhaps even the least promising stories, contain the potential for transformation.

Incarnation influenced Muriel's work in one final way; it showed her the power of storytelling. As well as being incarnate into story, the biblical Jesus communicated complex ideas by telling stories, or parables. Muriel also used story to express her activism. She was suspicious of the traditional, moralising approach to sermons, and in 1935 refused to take part in a US National Preaching Mission until she gained reassurances that it would include all denominations and reach all sections of society. In *Kill or Cure* she even retells a story from her own life anonymously and in the third person, perhaps to reduce the risk of appearing too concerned with her own beliefs. Although Muriel strove to 'purify the world' of injustice by speaking out against oppression, she learnt an important lesson about methods from Gandhi. His 'Vow of

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<sup>54</sup> 'I breathe in deep, savour the tea and the illusion of peace. I imagine the light, shuffling steps of Gandhi, pacing up and down the roof ten years ago — but I cannot bear it.' (Martin-Carey, p.380). 'I thought of months before, following Ray through the New York woods and back to a walk along the Pilgrim's Way during my first Summer at Oxford.' (Martin-Carey p.358).

Truth', as well as advocating truth telling, contained two further components: 'You must see everything you can'<sup>55</sup> he told her, and also insisted she try to meet with all relevant political parties (including the Viceroy of India) before speaking publicly or commencing any other action.

Gandhi's ideas elevated the value of each individual, and Muriel took them to heart. She talked and listened to a wide range of people. She sought to look truthfully at situations and to communicate that truth, putting emphasis on the experiences of individuals, whether politicians or street-sweepers. This practice not only meant seeking out hard facts, but searching for stories of hope in apparently hopeless situations. *Kill or Cure* again demonstrates this, using a proliferation of characters and stories to record a vision of pacifism. Likewise, Caputo's scriptural poetics is 'more inclined to see history in terms of innumerable little narratives, competing stories that throw the big picture into question . . . [to] keep an eye out for the little ones, the voices and languages and peoples of the past that were ground up in the Big Story that history tells'<sup>56</sup>. I always knew that in a novel the character of Muriel would tell stories and parables. I came to see that the novel itself was also such a parable, turning the activist life into story as Muriel did in her speaking and writing. I too was unconsciously following the Vow of Truth. I tried to see everything and to consult all perspectives before completing the final text.

At the end of *Between the Wars* Dorothy writes: 'sometimes you can stare at a thing for so long, waiting to see the light, waiting to understand, waiting for certainty that never comes, for evidence, but while you are busy looking the story is writing itself in the book of your heart. Truth creeps in quietly from the side, from the dark,

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<sup>55</sup> Lester, *It Occurred to Me*, p.135.

<sup>56</sup> Caputo, p.65.



whispering; a still small voice beneath the earthquake of our striving.’<sup>57</sup> Dorothy understands that meaning will emerge through the story they are living. In the same way Muriel’s incarnation through narrative can elevate her story to greater meaning. Writer Nadine Gordimer has termed this the aesthetic of witness, ‘the transformation of events, motives, emotions, reactions, from immediacy into the enduring significance that has meaning’<sup>58</sup>. Through the eyes of Dorothy and George the reader witnesses Muriel in action, hears her stories, and talks with her. Rather than a set of recorded facts which proceed logically through her life, the reader of the novel is offered engagement with a dynamic, changeable, character who acts on and in the world around her<sup>59</sup>. As Muriel offers the characters stories to understand her activism, the novel offers the story of Muriel and the other characters. Muriel herself is a transitory presence, which reflects her position in history, but she exerts a constant power over George, Dorothy, and even other characters in the book. This is an attempt to re-render meaning to her story, which has been de-contextualised by its distance from, and difference to, mainstream narratives<sup>60</sup>.

So incarnation as storytelling returns, perhaps, to where I began and the impulse to render Muriel into life using narrative. However, the journey through a more complex analysis of incarnation and how it underpinned Muriel’s philosophy left me woken up to a new way of understanding the novel. It had become not a story about Muriel, but a story about what she believed, whether others could also believe it, and what that might

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<sup>57</sup> Martin-Carey, p.396.

<sup>58</sup> Nadine Gordimer, ‘Witness: The Inward Testimony lecture (5th December 2001)’, *nobelprize.org*, <http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=419> [accessed 20th November 2015].

<sup>59</sup> There is still a similarity here to Lukács’ description of character in his ideal critical realism, though in *Between The Wars* the stories of Dorothy and George offer the reader a forum to experiment with responses to this character, as well as creating a lens of subjectivity.

<sup>60</sup> Professor Keith Robbins noted in his introduction to Wallis’ biography of Muriel Lester that ‘From one point of view, her life at this distance no doubt appears to be a kind of descant, a difficult and hard to sustain variant of the major tune (violence, conflict and war) being played so often by the human race during her lifetime.’ (Wallis, p.v)

lead them to do. So it became a story about activism and an interrogation of the role of story in activism. Through an honest attempt to manifest Muriel's activist practice and philosophy into fiction, I found that all certainties about the novel that resulted had dissolved. Incarnation demanded for Muriel a serious recognition of the divine in all, which was 'to learn to think like God [which] means to ignore barriers of class, race and nation . . . the dropping of all labels'<sup>61</sup>. To take this seriously means 'placing ourselves into question through the presence of the other.'<sup>62</sup> The novel, I discovered, must root in the fallibility of its own form. Muriel wrote in 1934 that 'language is the means by which human beings misunderstand one another'<sup>63</sup>. She went on speaking and writing for the rest of her life, but always placed herself into question and remembered to listen. It is this which led her to be circumspect with her anger, and even in prison to respect the dutifully obtuse immigration official. I too had placed myself into question and had come to accept the possibility, indeed the almost inevitable fact, of the novel's failure to provoke quantifiable change. However, this no longer seemed an adequate measure for activism.

With the possible exception of Gandhi, external assessments of Muriel and her colleagues are not positive. 'As part of a mass movement they have been singularly unsuccessful'<sup>64</sup>. Yet I found the combination of idealism and pragmatism in her writing both inspiring and endearing. Her story surprised me and her tenacity impressed, presenting the mystery of a motivation that seemed so much greater than the sum of its parts. The activist works for change, of course, but like the artist she also keeps alive the

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<sup>61</sup> Lester, *Why Worship?*, p.27

<sup>62</sup> Rollins, p.141

<sup>63</sup> Muriel Lester, in *Harijan*, (March 30 1934), accessed via the Muriel Lester Archive, Bishopshate Institute.

<sup>64</sup> Caroline Moorhead, *Troublesome People: Enemies of War 1916-1986* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p.Xx

possibility of another world; 'when we write we feel the earth move . . . it is not frozen . . . there is no status quo.'<sup>65</sup> In Muriel's philosophy it is never ultimately possible to change anything but oneself. It is this change of self that incarnation invites, and which holds the potential for all other change. 'We are heirs of the beauty and joy and the glory of the very universe. We must enter into our heritage. We who are awakened and alert. Human nature is a far finer thing than we have been told. Each of us is much stronger than we imagine.'<sup>66</sup>

6,282 words

### ***A Note***

*This essay exceeds the approximate 5000 word count suggested in the rubric for the Practice as Research: Contemporary Novel PhD with the approval of my supervisory team.*

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<sup>65</sup> David Grossman, 'PEN Freedom to Write Lecture (April 29th 2007)', c-span.org, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?198061-1/freedom-write-lecture> [accessed 20th November 2015].

<sup>66</sup> Lester, *Why Worship*, p.53

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