

*Advance Review Copy  
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# **FLOOD**

*A novel by*  
Innes Richens

## ***Advance Review Copy***

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# PART ONE

On a Friday evening nearing the pale end of August Gregg sat alone on the empty terrace that ran along the back of the hotel. He was drunk.

His band had finished playing hours ago and people had been drifting to their cars or rooms, returning to their lives, a collapsing sense of duties now completed. The widow had left unseen, quietly retreating and with her absence came a loosening, the funeral formalities given permission to fade. Drink and the long hours of the restraint of ritual had eased shoulders and shirt collars.

Those who now remained had left the function room for the bar to mix with other people, holidaymakers mostly, seeking their time on the Cornish coast. The bar held them all loosely, the younger couples in private, delicate conversation, whilst others, older, sat together, not talking, instead staring out of the bar's large sash windows to watch the cliffs and the sea fade into darkness beyond the sharp slope of the hotel gardens.

Gregg felt the dark swell of loss fill the empty spaces in his stomach and chest. As usual, the drink had pulled him into that private melancholy. It had become familiar and comforting, a state of not being, held at the border between the daily acts of living and something deeper, rolling.

This evening, the funeral, the gatherings, the conversations. The events of the previous year. He had been drinking longer than usual. It had all proven too high a tide to turn back and, finding the bar suddenly too confining, Gregg had found his way to the terrace where the air had lifted and there, out there in the dark, the wash of waves along the coast.

He took another mouthful of beer, put the glass unsteadily on the table and picked up his mobile. He thumbed to Helen's number. It took a long time for the ringtone to stop and then he heard her say hello, that familiar voice, telling him she couldn't answer his call at the moment and to try later or

leave a message. Then the long tone. Instinctively he began a message.

'Helen, I love you.'

Behind him, from the bar, came the late-night noise of glasses being stacked. There were still a few people, sitting in twos or threes, talking easily, comfortable alcoholic conversations.

The line clicked, then, nothing. The phone went dimly back to a brief list of his favourite numbers and there, beneath his wife's was his son's number. His thumb moved over it, trembled to connect to the living.

He dropped his phone on the table and looked out across the cliffs, to the wide sea, grey in the light of the moon. Beneath the hotel was a small cove, lying between dark cliffs, its crescent of sand visible in the subtle light that surrounded the coast.

The moon, nearly full, was unmoving over the nearby headland. Later he had no understanding of what pushed him to leave the terrace and find the path down to the cove. Something raw and painful inside reacted to the immensity of the night and the dark, rearing cliffs, to the endless solid sea. He felt suddenly the approaching ache and hurt that had filled the days immediately after Helen's death. The night pulled at the defences he had built around her absence, teasing at the thin pink skin of a scar.

He followed the path down to the beach and the stars multiplied around him as the lights from the hotel sank behind the cliff. He was wrapped in the half-light of a clear night. The hedge beside him reared taller until it formed an arch over the path and he was plunged into a dark tunnel rich with the smell of rot and soil. The noise of the waves from the beach below disappeared, the land silenced the sea. The air became heavy and just as he thought he was lost, that he had been swallowed by the earth, he sensed the light return and the hedge unfurled about his head. He was standing on rocks, the last few before the sand of the beach. The noise of the

waves suddenly returned to him and the rush of the breeze carried the smell of the ocean.

The cove lay amongst a tumble of cliffs, lit by the moon hidden behind the headland and by the pale glow of the sea. The sand, smoothed by the receding tide, drawn afresh, appeared to glow and he saw the coy beauty of the place at night, so different from the splashing brilliance of the day.

He was alone. He stood on the damp sand near the dying waves and looked out to sea. He felt again the heave of loss deep in his chest. The stars, the flat sweep of the water, the dark silent cliffs, the endless beating of the tide on the beach, were indifferent to his presence. He was alone and not even the earth acknowledged him. He lay down on the sand, at the edge of the sea and wept.

In the cooling air the scrape of the horses' hooves on the old tarmac had been sharp and defined. The smaller sounds of harness leather and buckles ran between the mourners standing in a loose and sombre group behind the hearse. Summer had been giving way to a season not yet formed, its subtle signs marking out its arrival in the teasing edge of colder air, the dimming afternoon light.

Conversations were halting, the anticipation of both a start and an end marked out in quiet words and brief phrases. The row of houses, their lean doors and low, square windows huddled to the narrow pavement were still as stones, silent as the mourners. One of the horses hooved at the street, once, twice, the strike of dull metal hurled between the buildings. The tall man standing in front of them, raised a steadying hand to the harness, glanced up to the driver sitting steady and routinely serious. He nodded and the tall man turned from the horses walking slowly through the musicians, laying a hand on the shoulder of the man with the drum and then, pausing briefly to straighten, to tug gently at his waistcoat, he nodded once, raised his right foot slowly to mark the first step. As he lowered it, the drum boomed, its first beat suddenly violent, running like a threatening wave, out along the street, in between the horses, underneath the hearse and into the mourners, gathering them, turning them all to face the coffin. The horses, restless and alert, leaned into their harness. The rest of the band began to play, the somber afternoon was sent away and, for a time, the small market town marked the passing procession.

Four weeks ago, when his phone had vibrated harshly on the bedside table, Gregg had sat up, sharply awake, the day as yet unformed but the insistent shaking of the phone pressing at him to scrabble and reach until he answered.

'Gregg Weston?'

The voice was young, male and it was the matter-of-fact way of the initial enquiry that had stopped Gregg from hanging up.

‘Yes, speaking’

‘Ah, yes, hello. My name is Peter Peters, I work for a Mr Mandesmith, who, sadly, died recently. His funeral is on Friday and, well, the band we booked for it have informed us this morning they can no longer be available. Sickness. Or similar, I think. I was given your number by a colleague at the Rotary, you’ve played there I believe?’ There was no pause, no answer expected, ‘I know its short notice but we wondered if you’d be able to play this Friday?’

Here was the pause though no sense he was holding his breath, simply patient.

‘A funeral?’ Gregg managed to say, ‘Did you say a funeral, you want us to play at a funeral?’ Three times now, he had said the word three times.

‘Yes, that’s correct. It will be Mr Mandesmith’s. On Friday. It’s in Cornwall I’m afraid. A discreet affair, family and few friends.’

In his distraction, Gregg could only offer his usual professional response, the years of taking bookings giving him the way and the words.

‘I’ll need to check with the other members but, let me do that and get back to you? Is this afternoon OK?’

‘That would be good’ and there was relief easing into the man’s voice, ‘Oh er, can you play while you walk?’

The drum counted in the next tune, melancholic, lifting though not slow, like a sad drunk laughing gently. Though his fingers were cold, Gregg quickly found the notes, the muscles recalling more swiftly than slow memory and though it had been some time since he had played in any procession, it did not seem to matter. Within the turning of the street, he found himself glancing around. Here, as the few streets lost their certainty, merged into a cobbled market square, people stopped to watch as the funeral procession emerged, its

presence announced long before by the thumping of the the drum. Today was not a market day, the square only parking for errands and visitors though the afternoon had thinned the cars. The small band reached the end of the first tune. In the break the strike and slide of the horses filled the square, their noise arresting, a tangle of the unusual, their presence marking out the strangeness of the procession. Through the square, people standing in respect, in curiosity, in a child-like glee, then into the narrow street towards a leaning church. On the corner a pub, its upper floor like beetling brows over a heavy front door, thrown open. Standing in the doorway a large man, his arms crossed across the broadness of his chest. As the hearse drew near, the driver reined in his horses, the band paused even as the melody climbed, an unresolved silence suddenly held. Then a minute full of restless stillness and noises distant, unconcerned. The large man nodded to the coffin, then the chief mourner bowed once, turned and the band played, the release of notes sweet as exhalation tumbling down the street to break against the church gates.

### 3

Despite the fading of its history, in the detail of the old hotel there was care and attention. The freshly painted walls in eggshell blue, the woodwork brilliant white and crisp. The carpets, though not worn, had a thinness and plainness that spoke of careful economy.

The afternoon turned towards evening, the first darkening days of winter threatening, not yet time for lights but certainly a gathering in of the hours.

‘Do you think they’d appreciate a bit of blues?’ Jim looked over his pint, attempting a mischievous twinkle which was transformed into a leer by the thickness of his eyebrows and dark beard. Gregg half-smiled and nodded with a hump of a laugh. They had been asked not to play at the wake unless asked. Their instruments waited in the corner next to oddly expectant chairs, ignored by the thirty or forty people who stood in small groups around the large room, almost uniformly dressed in dark colours, the occasional hint of a grey shawl or waistcoat. Conversations were laid like gentle fog around them, serious, considered, the occasional polite and quick laugh.

‘Strange lot aren’t they?’, Jim paused to take a drink, his eyes quietly taking in the room.

Gregg nodded, unsure what to say or even whether it was right to comment on people standing so close. They were standing near a bar, a solid affair of dark mahogany, brass foot rail and pumps, the bright array of bottles lit from above, reflected in the large glass mirror behind. Their brightness oddly contrasted with the sombre colours that swarmed across the rest of the room. Not being part of the invited guests, there only as a courtesy, the band members stood awkwardly, talking to each other, not invited into the other quiet conversations.

‘Mmm, I guess so. It is a funeral though, hard to tell what they’d be like normally’ Gregg spoke into his glass as he

tipped it to see its emptiness. 'Another drink?' and he waggled the glass imperceptibly at Jim.

Waiting whilst the young woman behind the bar drew a pint, leaning heavily into the pump handle whilst the beer frothed down the side of the glass, Gregg took in the gathering in the mirror behind the bar, their faces difficult to see in any detail, barred and blocked by the bottles of spirits and silhouetted against the large sash windows on the other side of the room. They resembled a flock, vague shapes gathered with a purpose, waiting together in their dark clothes, bonded briefly by this event, acting out what is right and proper before dispersing back into the world.

Her face emerged from this dark gathering into the light cast by the bar, appearing as if from the sea gradually emerging into the mirror's brightness, framed between two bottles. She was looking at the bar woman, seeking her attention. Her dark hair, fell simple and straight to her shoulders, her face long but not melancholic, the eyes, too far and too reflected to see them clearly.

Then, in the moment of waiting, she glanced into the mirror, saw him watching and, instead of looking away she turned into the room to face him.

'Do you think you've done enough of the folk stuff to keep him happy then?' she said, no sense of sarcasm, rather an invitation to humour.

Gregg gave a quick laugh and found himself looking down at his shoes, confused by her comment but too polite to show it.

'Not sure ... We, er, we were told we might be asked to continue playing at the ... at this' he nodded to the room.

'She didn't like folk, but her husband did.' Her eyes moved across the small collection of chairs, instruments and cases in the corner, 'I expect she thinks he's had his fair share today and is quite glad to turn it off now. I gather it was one of their familiar points of difference.'

The room did not change but there was a sudden sense of it watching. The woman ordered a gin and tonic and while this

was being prepared she glanced up at the mirror, taking in the people behind them. The pause in their exchange lasted just a little too long and he felt a pressure to speak but, in that moment, he was unsure of what to say. It was nothing to do with the woman but something to do with the moment, the oddness of the funeral and the people who had gathered there. It had been bothering him all afternoon and it seemed to collect in that moment.

‘Not everyone likes it’ said Gregg. It felt instantly weak, small talk at its worst and he did not expect her to acknowledge it, expected her to turn back to her drink which had now arrived. Instead she nodded, did not smile and looked at him directly, studying him as if something on his face had caught her attention and she wanted to lean in a little to see it in more detail. It only lasted a moment and he was unsure whether she actually leaned towards him. It seemed as if she did, it felt as if she then settled back towards the bar and looked out into the room, holding her gin, and said ‘Well now. I think you should play. Charlie would love it. It would be as if he was still here, in the room somewhere. And that would wind up Maureen.’

She smiled then, not at him but into the room. ‘That’s his wife. Maureen.’ And she tipped her chin towards a small, round woman sitting at a table in the corner surrounded by other women. Usually, when Gregg sensed he was being drawn into someone else’s business, he would politely steer himself clear, disengage. Something about this though, it pushed at him. There was a light feeling of mischief that he had not experienced for some time, and so he nodded.

‘Righto, I’ll get the boys started.’

He looked around the room for the others, seeing Dave first, sitting looking bored at one of the smallest tables in an alcove at the end of the bar. He had a pint in front of him that was still quite full, his hand rested around it loosely while the other fiddled with a beer mat. Jim was sitting with him. They weren’t talking, just sitting and they both looked up at Gregg when he walked over.

'We've been asked to play a bit' he said. Dave lifted his drink and, just before he took a sip, said 'I don't know 'A Bit' ... but you hum it and I'll pick it up no doubt.' An old joke but it still made Jim shrug in short, easy laughter.

When they picked up their instruments, the room rippled with it, the sense that something was happening. Gregg expected Maureen to come over in a haste that was carefully designed to convey polite urgency and to stop them but they didn't need much time to get started and so they struck up the first tune quickly. After the muted conversations and chinking of plates, the arrival of music seemed shocking, almost disrespectful. Gregg felt a quick rush of embarrassment, hot in the face, and he kept his eyes on a spot on the pale carpet just in front of them. He thought both Dave and Jim felt it too because, without signalling, they all dropped the volume a little, softened their expression. It helped and the moment seemed to pass as the new sound filled the room. After the first tune, they quickly moved into the next, seeming to sense that in any pause they might find out if their noise and presence were appreciated. Halfway through, Gregg looked up. The woman who had spoken to him at the bar was standing in a small group of people, over near one of the large sash windows, the light soft, highlighting the edges of their shoulders, their faces. She glanced toward him and smiled, pursing her lips a little as if holding down a much broader grin.

Gregg used to smoke. It was years ago and he had given up not long before he met Helen. Although he rarely had the urge to smoke now, the habit of stepping outside a bar or venue at some point during the evening would occasionally return. The wake was in a private function room, off the main lounge and hotel lobby. Another door led outside, to the side of the hotel where a small car park, bloated with cars, was tucked away. Opposite a line of trees, then a narrow stretch of grass before the high netting wire of tennis courts. He weaved through the narrow spaces between cars to stand under the trees. The afternoon had turned towards the

evening, low cloud drifted over but it was patchy, uneasy and the last light of the day held the crispness of a winter promised. The tennis courts were empty, the nets were still taut though, not yet giving way to the closing of the season. At the far end a person with a dog walked along the path that ran alongside them, heading towards the uneven line of the cliffs beyond.

A car started, edged its way carefully out, turning onto the hotels' curving drive. Out of the engine's fading rumble the sound of quick steps, crossing the road toward him.

'You don't look like a smoker.' It was the woman from the wake. She was pulling at the lapels of a plain grey overcoat.

'I hate to think what a smoker looks like.' he said, not really knowing what he was saying, just letting words come. She did not laugh, though nodded in acknowledgement. The topic was not important.

'We enjoyed the music.'

'Thanks.'

She stood near him. He was expecting her to pull out a cigarette or to move on, perhaps heading home but she stood and looked out across the tennis courts.

'We particularly enjoyed watching Maureen put up with it.' There was a lightness in her voice but there was also a sense of a small victory.

'We're used to it. Being put up with. You get used to it when you play these types of things.'

'Do you do many funerals?'

He laughed. 'No, actually, you're right. This is a first.'

'And the last.'

They both said this at the same time, then they laughed. In the pause that followed he looked at his feet then up at the dim sky.

'We wondered if you'd be up for doing another ... er .. 'Gig' is it? Do we still call them that?' she said, "We've got a bit of a party being organised. We wanted a live band and you'd be perfect'

'Sure. I mean I'd have to check with the others, but I can't see they'd refuse. Any excuse to play out. If the date works of course.'

'Oh the date is still being worked out. It will be in a few months I think.'

'Is it a Christmas thing? Office party or birthday?'

'It's for Charlie actually. For some of his friends that couldn't make it today. Or at least weren't invited.' She looked back towards the club briefly then added, 'It wouldn't be a funeral or anything like that, definitely more a celebration. And no family, just friends and colleagues. Not too large really, perhaps about twenty or so.'

Although she was speaking clearly, brightly, her face open and relaxed, he sensed enough in her words to hesitate in his response, not wary but on the verge of asking for more information when, at the same time, he understood she wouldn't give it.

'Sounds good' is all he said. She looked at him, her eyebrows lifted expectantly.

'Have you a contact number or a card or something?' she said and he laughed. They did not have a professional card so he pulled out his phone and held up his contact details while she typed it into her own.

'Ah, its Gregg is it? I wondered. I had to. As you didn't say' she smiled at him, 'I'm Lorraine by the way.'

She looked up the road where the hedges claimed it at the first bend .

'Charlie will hate all this, all this solemn, grey and bland stuff. He'll love that you managed to disrupt it in some way. He loves Maureen of course but I think he'd moved on from that some time ago. Not everything comes from your relationship.'

It seemed an odd thing to say of course, it seemed too suddenly intimate and, perhaps sensing this, she pulled at her grey coat and said "Well, nice to meet you. I'll be in touch and hopefully we can get something sorted. I had better say a goodbye to Maureen and get off.' She nodded, Gregg said

goodbye, raised his hand in a low wave, spreading his fingers wide as she crossed the road. The low, broad door of the hotel swung shut behind her. He became suddenly aware that he was standing there looking at the building. He felt the absence of a cigarette keenly, not craving the draw of the smoke but wanting something to excuse his loitering. The sun flared against the edge of a cloud, dark orange, soft and underneath it was a quick, darting chill.

## 4

The house was the same. Of course it was the same. No-one came here anymore, except him. There was post on the mat, the front door pushing at it as Gregg entered, the hall filled with a patient silence, almost reproachful.

The drive back from Cornwall had started in the silent dark hours before a dawn that made the countryside around the car uncertain, less solid as its light emerged. It was a dirty light, stained and worn after a long summer and as the grey sky had settled overhead, Gregg had begun to feel grimy, a greasy sense of his face unwashed. He had deliberately taken the inland route, straighter with less decisions to make. Though he had waited and dozed in his car, pulled up to the side of the hotel, he sensed sobriety was still unformed, a vagueness settled across him and he had driven with an exaggerated alertness until he found an open roadside cafe to sit over a large mug of coffee, watching the day emerge.

The house was cooler this morning, the last few days seeing autumn arrive more confidently, the last of the summer pushed to the edges of each shortening hour. The light was changing, the earth leaning further away from the sun, the daylight felt stretched across everything. The bed held a brief chill as he climbed into it, and then, with a deep sigh, Gregg fell asleep.

When he woke, the day was beginning to lose its light, still muffled in clouds. The house was cold as he stumbled through it, downstairs, the kitchen, kettle and a coffee. The bitter taste of it rinsed away the thickness that lay across his tongue. He discovered that the single lamp in the corner of the kitchen was not enough to push the late afternoon darkness fully from the room. Here, in their house, there were lights everywhere, selected and positioned by Helen, just so, just so. The overhead lights were functional, full of glare and purpose and so he avoided using them.

The silence seemed to urge him to listen for the sounds of others somewhere in the building. The kitchen was larger than he recalled it, endless counter tops and numerous cupboards, the black worktop shining. Beyond the window, above the double sink, the garden had been washed through with the rains, the more established plants now tousling at the edges of the stonework and paving. Leaves had collected around the patio furniture, clinging to the legs of the table, huddling under chairs. Even in the greying light, he could see that, despite the overwhelming surge of life in the garden, it was empty.

Gregg wandered around the house looking at the things that defined his life before she ... left. He had the odd sensation of being as a stranger in his own house. Everything looked as if it belonged to someone else, that umbrella in the hall, the blue teapot on the kitchen counter, the magazines left on the living room table. Not his but theirs. He felt alone looking at other people's things.

Upstairs the beds. His, hers, theirs. Tom's room, their son. Here was a slight emptying, shelves lacking content, the stand over in the corner that should have had a TV and games console. The desk bare except for its lamp. The plan for their son to go away to university had continued despite everything, in defiance of it, a decision years in the making had, when the moment came, seemed almost impossible to defy.

He never knew why he patrolled the house in this way. Some sense of duty, though he did nothing other than pick the post from the mat and place it with the rest, unopened, near the large bowl on the side table where they kept their keys. He checked the boiler, looked over the house, not expecting anything. He did it quickly, each room visited briefly until he returned to the kitchen and looked out to the garden.

Standing in the kitchen that afternoon he was suddenly aware of a kind of even-ness that had settled over his days. It was as if each day was known, each hour blank around him, and in which there existed only the most familiar of tasks -

walking, eating, washing, sleeping, checking the house. A routine that had the same quality as a slow stretch of river or canal, contained, safe. Not everything immediately visible.

When the doorbell jangled out to echo and tumble into every room, Gregg flinched. An intrusion, evidence of the rest, out there, with an expectation of him that he briefly resented before habit found him opening the front door. Already halfway down the short path sticky with old rain, the woman in a faded red overcoat turned and, marking Gregg's appearance around the door, raised one arm, the fingers of her hand curled, neither a point nor a wave.

'Gregg?'

A small dog tottered behind her, small legs and old age turning the walk into more of a duty than an exploration.

Their neighbour. Jenny. Jess. Joss. No, it was a name that didn't seem to suit her age. He scabbled at it as he took a breath to respond, hoping it would arrive in time.

'Hello' he said, too friendly, too happy, 'How are you ...' Joan! It was Joan, '... Joan?'

'I'm glad I've bumped into to you,' and she arrived in front of him, shorter than Gregg, her long coat sweeping around her, small feet in trainers coming to a standstill, one foot pointed, a hint of ballet. The dog stopped next to her, looking up at Gregg. Its tail did not wag though it seemed happy enough to accept this pause so near the end of their walk.

'There's a parcel for you. I took it in. Well, its for your wife ..' and she faltered a little then, slightly breathless 'I mean its for you, your address and ... Anyway, I'll just pop and get it. Come on Raff'. Without waiting for any response from Gregg she turned again, went out towards her own front gate, pushing the dog through it with a gentle guiding foot and stepping to her front door, her hand already jangling with her keys.

'Its just here. Here you go. I hope its nothing that ruins, I've had it a while. I haven't seen you?'

The soft, unspoken enquiry hovered between them like the proffered box. Gregg took the parcel from her.

'Thank you Joan, that's very kind of you. I'm sure it will be OK. How are you keeping?' he said, smiling at her. Behind her, Raff stood at the front door watching them. Joan hesitated, her hands still reaching up towards him. She turned them, clasping them together as if in prayer. She watched him briefly and then answered 'I'm fine. I mean as far as I can be of course. Its no fun growing old.' She trailed off, her voice ending on a higher note, the questions pushing themselves between them.

'Ok then, we keep going though don't we' Gregg stepped back into the hall, 'Good to see you anyway. Take care.' He pushed the door closed, smiling until the day had been shut out again. The afternoon sunk into dusk, the sky still heavy with clouds. On the back of his hand, where it held the parcel, a raindrop. Through the painted glass of the door, Gregg could see the shape of Joan, still there, watching his house, the dog's lead loose and empty in her hand.

The kettle was beginning its wheezing settling towards the final rumble of boiling when Gregg's phone rang.

'Mr Weston?'

Despite the kettle's noise, Gregg recognised the voice on the phone. Dunkirk and Walleby Solicitors. This was Walleby, his voice even, firm, it would carry to you easily in conversation in a crowded room just as easily as it would soften with a professional respect in the quiet of an office. Gregg had not looked at the number, a spasm of annoyance knocked at this chest. All he could do was confirm it was him.

'Ah, good morning, I've been trying to reach you ....'

Walleby's voice was briefly lost to a febrile connection somewhere, only the final words 'late wife?' caught in a questioning upturn. Gregg considered using the poor call quality, or that he was walking to the shops, that he was busy on other tasks, that it was threatening rain, anything to find a polite and acceptable way to end the call. All excuses faded in the certainty of Walleby's voice and Gregg could only make noises that he hoped conveyed the inconvenience without

sounding childish or evasive. If Walleby noticed, he did nothing to alter course and Gregg noted there was none of the usual concern to check that the call was at a 'good time'. Instead Walleby ploughed on.

'So, Gregg, we've had probate granted for some time now. We've also had a copy of the letter from your mortgage lender confirming it has now been settled from the life insurance. Hopefully you've seen that. There just your late wife Helen's pension to finalise. It would be good to get things finally ... um ... settled but to do that, as you're the named beneficiary, we do need to see you. Can we make a date for you to come into our offices? I have my calendar here now.'

Walleby named a date, he named a few but they could not find a suitable match in them. There was a brief pause on the line, though it was unclear whether this was a sign of Walleby's irritation or merely that he was searching for further dates. Gregg promised to ring back when he had his diary more to hand, his voice thin with a friendliness he did not feel. Walleby sighed, barely audible, enough to signal that his usual plain professionalism had been set aside, briefly.

'Mr Weston .. Gregg .. We do need to finalise this, I'm afraid. From our perspective, there's nothing to be gained from letting it ... Well, we just need to finalise everything ...'

'Yes, of course, I know that. I'll get back to you as soon as I can.'

'I'm sure you don't want this to be any more prolonged than it need be?'

And Gregg, with a barely contained curtness, repeated his commitment before ending the call. A dull anger had crept upon him while Walleby had talked. The world seemed determined to bring to Gregg's feet a constant stream of responsibilities that he had not invited. There was, in addition, a general assumption that he should have some ability to know what do to after such significant events and, yet, he had none, had never wanted any and certainly did not want it now. The whole process of settling and finalising someone's life seemed all too cold, the grinding of wheels, dealt with by

people who did this for a living, their manner and demeanour faultless in its professional sympathies, the language carefully crafted and worn.

Without realising it, Gregg had wandered from the kitchen, through the hall to the living room, the call perhaps distracting his attention from the instinct to move, to get away. He sat now in the large chair next to the slim bookcase, looking out through the window to the street. The arms, though not worn, had the smoothness of use, the frame creaked once as he fell back against it. The light had gone from the day now and against the window the spattering of more rain.

## 5

It is raining and Gregg is standing at the kitchen window looking at the garden. The wooden decking is slick with last night's rain. Where the planks are warped, rainwater collects in small puddles, dark brown stains against the wood. A faint draft reaches Gregg through the window, left on its latch despite the coming cold. The air smells of the water it has held all night. It is not a fresh smell, it is heavy and speaks of long drawn out autumnal storms. Here, at the back of the house, there are no sounds, no sound of the road, no rattle of vans on their morning run, nothing reaches him. Wait, there is one sound. The drip of water, the gutter swollen with the rain, a sound of each drop bursting open on the decking. It seems to disturb Gregg and he moves away from the window, moves up the stairs again, back to the bed.

He does not go to work today, again. He spends the morning in bed, then wanders about the house wearing only joggers, that old jumper. He is faded, diminished.

He eats lunch then goes out. He returns just as the afternoon light has dirtied against the sky and the trees are penned in black ink.

The rain comes again as he is taking off his jacket. It is heavier now. He can hear it first on the plastic roof of the lean-to that covers the bikes near the back door. He puts his jacket on its hook and stands in the lounge where the incessant presence of water is less intrusive.

He cannot abide water. Its ability to be everywhere appalls him. This is known. He looks down at his stomach, the water is even inside him, he is awash with it. He sits in the middle of the lounge. The rain is getting heavier, beating on the window, intruding on everything. The house is full of the noise of water, washing at its pale walls, drenching the tiles of the roof until it seems as if the room is filling with a dark green tide, slowly but insistently it swells from beneath the carpet, washes under the doors, pours through the open window, finding him, folding him into its foaming swirl, closing over his

head until the room is full and the flood stops and he is hanging there in the cold green light of still, deep water.

## 6

It had not rained in days though the stream that ran in the narrow stone channel alongside the main road still tumbled and bustled through the streaming weed and the noise of its passing swelled into the air when the traffic quietened. Gregg watched it as he walked back to the flat. It was flowing past him, towards where the older houses crowded more closely around the road, leaning over the stream to stretch to another ragged roof. His shopping bounced against his leg, the jarring clink of a jar of pickle against the bottle of whiskey. He shifted the bag into his other hand and paused where the footbridge crossed the stream, its short, broad concrete and slim hand rail marking the end of the older village, drawing him into the newer buildings. Of course, he could not afford the nicer places, the thatched and leaning places, the ones with creaking floors or small gardens brimming with hollyhocks and honeysuckle. His was a small flat, the top floor of a more recent development, built in neat brick, its corners and edges marked out in the softer grey of local stone, everything sharp and neat and uniform. At this time of day there would be few people around, most out at work, their parking bays empty so that the space surrounded by the three buildings seemed to be flooded with brickwork.

The sun had gentled in the last few weeks, pulling its light across the land in longer shadows. Everything seemed sharper, more finely etched. A harshness would soon rattle about every corner, each window and passing car before the afternoon drew the sun closer to the horizon and everything softened. The trees still had their leaves, though their vibrancy was long exhausted and now there was a waiting, a loosening and easing that comes before colder days.

The flat was bare, much more so than Gregg had planned. He caught himself. There was no plan, nothing here had much thought to it. There was a fridge, a dishwasher, a washing machine, oven of course. In the agent's details it had not been called a kitchen but a 'lounge diner with preparation

area' and so, in its way, it was a kind of truth, the single column of kitchen cabinets, the short run of a worktop arranged along the end of the lounge. A short breakfast bar, or so it had been termed, marked where the floor tiles gave way to carpet. Here a small sofa, a low table, a TV on a glass stand, a floor lamp. In one corner of the lounge, the window reached to the floor and opened like a door, as if it led to a balcony, as if Gregg could take his coffee there in the morning, though in reality it opened on a metal banister overlooking the car park.

In the days after Helen ... Gregg stopped, seeing himself standing there one hand on the breakfast bar, the other still holding the shopping. The act of putting the shopping away became his distraction briefly and then the kettle and mugs and tea. He supposed there would be lunch soon to think about and so the morning was filled.

Their house had been too big during those days. The rooms too full of air that had not moved enough and sat stale across the shelves, the settee. It clung to the lampshades. The summer had been hot, bright but the house, felt unconnected with the outside world, seemed to sit as still as a dog in pain. For a time after her funeral and busy with such tasks and people that death brings, Gregg had found himself avoiding rooms, shutting doors, ignoring the drawn curtains. He kept to the kitchen and the spare room, washing in the downstairs bathroom. Nothing that had been theirs seemed familiar anymore and so he found himself yearning to be where these things could not be seen.

A sharp flash interrupted the familiar tip towards those thoughts. The sun had found the metal of the flat's front door handle and the sudden point of light reflected in the TV screen startled Gregg. The room held itself still, nothing there, only Gregg on the sofa, his tea cold. It was the emptiness that pushed him up, to stand, to look to the kitchen for something that needed doing. He was not hungry, did not need any more tea and so, leaving the emptiness of the flat to itself, he went out to meet the approaching afternoon.

The village was little more than a line of houses along the road, once a main road and now busy with local traffic. A few, more recent, houses, had filled in behind, particularly on the lower side of the gentle valley, the upper side still covered in woodland, rising to a low hill that quickly folded itself back into the southern landscape. Here Gregg found the path and under the trees he breathed, the season's turning marked now by that small, persistent smell of cooler earth, of leaves turning, a dampness yet to come. The light was bright enough, the slope of the hill just gentle enough to allow the trees to crowd up to its peak without much cluttering undergrowth and, just so, the sun could find its way to touch at the first fallen leaves. The pull of the hill deepened his breathing and, as he stepped into the small, bare patch of grass and thorn that marked the top, he was taking quick, deep breaths and the first prickling of sweat gathered along his spine. Here a stone pushed through the blackberries, moss swarming across it, and Gregg sat, flattening the curving grass around his legs and feeling the hard coldness of the rock underneath him.

There was nothing to see, the trees confident upon the stone and earth had clustered around the crest and so Gregg could only study their branches, the way they twisted towards the sky above, the paling of many leaves and, here and there, the first thin, bare branches. There is never silence in such places and though there was little wind, there was a restlessness in everything, a shifting business that suggested the constant, furious activity of life going on all around him.

He had rented the flat suddenly, unplanned. The village had been a stopping place, one of his growing number of journeys out of their city, picked almost entirely because it had a pretty stream running through it and he needed a break. He had walked through these trees, around the base of the hill returning to the village where nothing seemed to move other than its restless stream. The shop provided lunch, some sandwich he hardly felt and then he spotted the newer build, the flats, their agent's For Rent board leaning out into

the main road. For a brief, sharp moment he felt the surge of promise, a strong pulse, pushing him towards something. Their house would not change easily, each change would be like a slicing, a small exquisite pain that never disappeared, rubbed raw again by subsequent changes. Here, though, nothing. New and bland and connected only with the impersonal. He tapped the agent's number into his mobile and leaned against the low wall, waiting for someone to answer.

Of course real life is never that simple and it took weeks to secure it, agents and contracts and fees, but he found himself one late afternoon arriving in his car, just a large sports bag and some basic provisions in the boot. The rain had eased somewhat and the fine mist of water that seemed to hang rather than fall soon flecked his shirt and flattened his hair but the parking was near the main stairs so it only took a hurried dash to get into the bland dry space of the stairwell.

The urge to take off all his clothes, to go naked, caught him by surprise. It teased at him from the moment he shut the flat's door, hung around him in the cooling air, to do something so intensely personal, a sort of marking of the place. He did not undress, instead threw the sports bag on the bare mattress of the bed and stacked tins and food into the kitchen cupboards. There was a kettle. He had not read the list of items supplied with the flat, only signed at the bottom to accept them.

The flat demanded little of him. Its emptiness, the blandness of the walls, the impersonal plain sofa, the lack of anything other than a kettle on the short run of worktop. It had nothing to offer up to him, only its physical presence and the certainty that, in closing the door, he would be the only person to move between lounge, bedroom and the narrow, windowless bathroom. Now, in the narrowing days of autumn, he realised this was where he existed each day. The old house - their house - was at last elsewhere, still in his ownership but, here in the flat was a bland and welcome

nothingness. His stays at the flat grew more frequent, longer and within a few weeks he returned to their house irregularly.

An unexpected breeze passed across the branches like a wave in front of Gregg, pulling at his attention and he felt again the rock beneath him, cold as if damp, its unrelenting edge jabbing into the muscle at the back of his leg. The breeze sank into the woods and all was still again. Here in the sunlight there could be nothing, no-one, a great absence of anything else, nothing beyond the trees.

The scent of deep woodland caught his attention, creeping, as it seemed, over his shoulder, turning him towards it. The sun had been below the tree line for some time now, though it still struck through the branches in places. He narrowed his eyes. A shadow at the edge of the clearing, still and quiet amongst the restless thorns. The shadows and the sunlight were arranged to obscure and to Gregg there was nothing more than a sense of something else, some other. Perhaps the arrival of another walker. He instinctively listened for a dog nearby, rustling through the undergrowth. Standing too quickly, he became self-conscious, as if caught in some act, aware that he had been sitting motionless and silent in a clearing in a wood.

He stepped back to where the beginnings of a path would take him into the trees, heading further down the valley. He had no wish to engage with anyone. Reaching the first downward turn of the path, he glanced back. Only shadows and the slow waving of a tree branch.

In all the days that had passed, small details of her seemed to be falling away from him. There were innumerable of Helen's habits and actions, sayings and mannerisms that seemed to fill their life together, unremarkable at the time, and that were now, it seemed, drifting away slowly, receding to a distant point. When he was less vigilant, when these thoughts would come upon him unguarded, some of her ways, of her manner of being, would come rushing back. A particular set of words or the way she held a hand or her head ... nothing he wished to name or dwell upon sending it

back to the same distant point almost at the moment of its unfolding. Here, on the side of this nameless hill, there came a sudden expansion of light and memory, of her waving back at him, almost over her shoulder, as he left the house, or as she got in the car for work. All the innumerable brief and temporary partings. The trees and the earth tilted further than the slope of the hill allowed, the sky seemed suddenly close, the heavy press of pine resin rushing at him and he found himself rushing down the path, away, away into the trees where the light now was sinking to the earth in the sighing afternoon.

The sun was still confident as he reached the village stream though now the rooftops and the tree lined edge of the valley above them was drawing it in towards evening. A faint smell of woodsmoke surrounded him as he walked, an early fire or a gardener clearing a morning's work. Though it was still warm, he felt the air against the bareness of his forearms more keenly, the first soft touch of darkening nights ahead. He caught himself, then, in that moment thinking about how he would tell her about his day, how he would arrive home and, in the unpacking of the shopping, recount it to her, how she would find it amusing, that he had frightened himself up on the hill, how they would both forget the story even before the lights had to go on against the dusk. He caught himself thinking it and then he stopped, pausing in his walk. There loomed again something unknowable, unthinkable. He was at the small concrete footbridge that crossed the stream, the path that led down to the flats. The waters beneath it seemed to have slowed, full against the banks but the usual lightness of its twisting through the drooping nettles seemed now a deep, steady flow, pushing sluggishly into the village beyond. There was no sound of it, nothing, just its slow, inexorable push to be past him.

A car rushed by him, then another. Gregg pulled his head up and crossed the bridge, ignoring the stream, and so arrived back into the safe neatness of the flat.

Tucked away behind a rough circle of trees, where the river curved slowly in its bed, was the pub, its gables a little crooked against the falling afternoon light. Gregg was the first of the band to arrive. He had left the flat as the afternoon had begun to falter and driven along lanes now losing their neat edges. The trees had become increasingly gaunt and bare, imperceptibly so over the past few weeks and each day seemed to be giving more away to the coming winter. The drive had been calming, each turn of the road asking for slowness and, up each side-lane or at every cross-road, the promise of something else.

The pub had been hard to find. It stood by itself, at some distance from the nearest village, the edge of the small wood brushing at its front, the river curling around its rear, only a rough and bumpy track from the lane to a sparsely gravelled car park in a clearing of the trees at its front. Even though the afternoon had been bright, here the light seemed never to have been allowed to settle. Getting out of the warm fog of his car, Gregg took in the cold, damp air that hung heavy around the trees, crept up from the river. It had not rained since yesterday, but here it still hung over everything and Gregg sensed that the damp never left this place.

The steep gables to the front of the pub suggested it had once been a house though its austere rearing up amongst the trees did nothing to give away any sense of being a home. A security spotlight clutched at one corner overlooking the parking area, its light wan and ineffectual. A large front door, heavy and bound with purposeful brackets of black metal, pushed easily enough and then onto uneven, worn slabs, and the smell of woodsmoke. A doormat declared 'I live here' and a drawing of some type of dog that had been mottled and thinned by the passage of feet.

The main bar was not as expected. The ceiling was unusually high, white washed walls stretched up into the roof space where beams held still in the shadows. Along part of

the far wall, a bar, bright with lights and bottles, a door to a room beyond. But the room itself was more like a hall. An odd assortment of tables scattered into every corner, chairs leaning with the unevenness of the floor. A large fireplace stood at one end, incomprehensibly large with a brute of a fire basket standing squarely in its depths. Across every wall, even up into the dark of the roof, objects and paintings - a pitchfork, a rusting cog and wheel, a portrait of a castle with one corner ripped away, its frame tilting. It all seemed wrong, or right, expected and apt yet still something not settled.

'You here for the party?' A deep voice and a large, short man carrying several empty glasses on a tray brushed quickly past Gregg. 'They're in the barn setting up. That door on your right. If you want a drink, come and get me.'

The man disappeared through the door behind the bar and Gregg could hear the clatter of glasses being set down, arranged. He hesitated, still taking in the large room. There were cobwebs on many of the paintings and stretching tenuously between the joints of the huge ceiling beams and the unevenly plastered walls. It seemed neglected and yet ... Eventually it came to him. It was theatre. Those cobwebs were not real, surely. The tilt of that painting by design, the roughness of the furniture, even the overly brutish fireplace, it had all been deliberately placed. He took a few steps into the hall, examining the nearest cobweb. It was thread, he could see the knots. That one over there was string, too thick. It was all a fiction.

'Gregg, hello' Lorraine came through the door from the barn carrying a box which she hefted over to one hip as she paused, smiling at him, 'Are you here to help set up?'

The barn, unlike the bar and certainly unlike its name, was small, a wide square room with a small stage at the far end, it had a lower ceiling and while here too were beams they were less thick and painted black. A carpet of dubious thickness sagged beneath his boots, it halted near the stage, giving way to a square of block flooring, the wax of them long absorbed except near the corners where the wood still darkly

shone. In the middle a row of slightly mismatched tables had been arranged and covered in white table linen in an attempt to give the impression of a single, long table. Leaning to its centre, arranging flowers, was a woman, short, slim, working with quick hands. She smiled but said nothing, quickly frowning in her concentration.

‘The stage is not much but, hey, at least its a stage. I’ve not tried the PA yet, thought I’d leave that to someone who knows’ said Lorraine. She was moving towards the side of the stage where a small booth had been constructed from MDF panels, painted black. ‘I’ll leave you to it. Do you want a drink?’

Gregg spent the next hour lost in the familiar routine of set up, every venue different and yet the same. He was calm in his work, letting it fill the minutes, soothed in some odd way by the solving of power cables, mics, the setting up of the sound desk. He realised that in such a room the PA system was largely unnecessary, even his small band could fill the space but he took comfort that, once done, the system would smooth their sound. The single long table did not indicate a large gathering was expected and when he saw the woman who had been arranging the flowers talking to a woman dressed in kitchen whites, he paused to eavesdrop casually. There would be no more than thirty people and whilst there would certainly be enough of the goulash to go round, the chef was less sure of the salmon if there was a rush on it. Distracted by the image of a ‘rush’ conducted by so few, Gregg did not notice Lorraine hovering at his side until she proffered the mug of tea towards him.

‘Think you said this was a celebration? Of sorts?’ Gregg asked.

‘Yep. For Charlie, sort of. Though mostly an excuse for people to get together I think. Nothing funereal so play what you want.’

‘You know we’re supposed to be a folk group?’

‘Sure, that’s fine. Though if you play anything too fiddly-doh I won’t be responsible for my comments.’

There was a pause as Gregg pushed the large chunky switch at the corner of the desk. A deep clunk, a double thump came from the PA speakers on the stage and he nodded.

'Were there quite a few who couldn't make his funeral then? Is this for them?'

Lorraine was holding her mug to her chest. It was empty and tipped into the crook of one of her arms. She was watching the woman with quick hands helping a ponderous man arranging cutlery along the table.

'Yeah. Or weren't invited. Or didn't know him that well. If at all' She called over to the woman, 'Cath, do you want another hand with that?'

Cath stood, looking down the length of the table and, casting a quick glance across at the man who seemed to be straightening each fork he had previously laid, gave Lorraine a thumbs up and a quick roll of her eyes. Lorraine had already crossed the distance between them and, taking a handful of knives began to follow the man's line of forks, laying each one neatly and quickly as a neighbour.

Although he should have been focusing on setting up, in reality there was now little left to do, the routine of it having settled everything quickly, and so he found himself watching the people in the room. They had arrived within about half an hour of the start time, coming through the door with their greetings already warming to their eyes, some hugging, others nodding. They milled about a table near the door where drinks had been set out, forming and reforming small groups. At one end of the table a rather small assortment of photographs had been arranged, each printed on ordinary paper, their edges curling with the ink. Set amongst them, the only photograph that warranted a frame showed a young man, neatly slicked hair, a collar showing beneath a thick jumper. He smiled uncertainly at something behind the camera. Charlie. As people took their drinks they paused before this small collection, pointing and bending over them, occasionally laughing, nodding their heads to each other

before drifting off into the room and other conversations. They all seemed to know each other. It was polite, friendly conversation, never loud enough to reach Gregg, carefully watching them from the small stage. They gathered loosely around a table set out with drinks, though the wine glasses remained neatly arranged, bottles of red and white orderly and uncorked. Only a small disorderliness amongst the mineral water bottles showed they had been favoured over alcohol. People continued to arrive, each calmly and easily enough, joining existing huddles or standing awkwardly with each other in polite conversation until the room finally held the low buzz of small talk.

If he had been asked later when he noticed the change in atmosphere he would have said, without hesitating, it was when Shona arrived. The door from the bar struggled open and there was a man leaning into the room, awkwardly holding it open for someone to come through. He was relatively large and the doorway relatively small and so there was little room for anyone to pass through. This may have been exactly what the man was being told as he seemed to hang there awkwardly for a time and then he withdrew, the door swinging hurriedly. It opened again and the man came through it, swivelling to hold it open.

Shona was small, her body sleight and precise, the arms long, hands held calmly to her sides. Everything about her seemed to constrain itself, held itself in as little space as possible. It was not a kind of withdrawing, more a statement of enough, as if the space she occupied had been judged adequate for her purposes, all else was refused. Under the dirty light of the spotlights that edged the room her hair seemed to be uniformly grey though there was a soft shine to it, around the parting at the crown, and it fell in neat lines away to her shoulders, each side of a long face. As she stepped into the room she paused. Around her people turned to look, casually at first. Then an unseen wave of something seemed to pass into the room, shoulders straightened, heads and faces raised, conversations dimmed. Briefly there was a

tableau, with Shona at the centre. The man she was with let go of the door and its thump of closing disrupted anything further, people moved, the hum of talk resurfaced. Cath with barely restrained haste greeted Shona, her hand extended though Shona did not move and the man was already at her side, gesturing her towards the larger table, smiling at Cath and moving them away. They arrived at the head of the table, nearest the stage and there, where a single seat had been placed, Shona sat. Under the brighter light spilling from the stage, Gregg could see the uniformity of the silver of her hair, the narrowness of her shoulder blades against her blouse, the thinness of her fingers placed calmly upon the table. The man stood at her side, leaning forward slightly. In a high, querulous voice, he asked her if she wanted a glass of water and she turned her head towards him, saying something Gregg could not hear. The man fussed over to the drinks table and Shona remained sitting quietly. Her presence acted as a slow tilt, a gentle pressure downwards and people slowly edged towards where she sat. Cath and another man were the first to arrive in front of her and they started talking, light, easy. Elsewhere the people in the room condensed on her presence, some taking seats along the table near her, others hovering behind Cath. The man returned with Shona's water, placing it at her right hand and, after a brief moment regarding it, carefully turning the glass a quarter turn. Shona turned her head towards Cath, who had continued to loiter nearby, and said something. Cath began to walk up one side of the table, briefly saying a few words to people, laying a hand on an elbow here or gently tapping a shoulder, gathering people to their seats. She moved around them as a net surrounding a shoal until people began settling in their places. The man who had arrived with Shona was now bending forward over her shoulder, listening to her instructions. Eventually he straightened and walked quickly to the side door that led to the pub's small kitchen.

'We're going to start now. Just a short memorial and then we'll eat. I suggest you go to the bar and I'll come and get

you when we're done. Shouldn't be too long. I'll ask them to bring you all some food, yes?' Lorraine had appeared at the side of the stage, smiling at Gregg. She nodded at him then turned, holding her drink away from her and began to walk carefully across the wood of the dance floor, turning her head to say 'Oh, which button do I press to get some background music?'

The bar seemed the better place to be. Gregg found himself leaving the dim interior of the Barn for the brighter space of the main bar. Already settled over small glasses of pale ale, Jim and Dave nodded at his arrival. Jim raised his glass, smiling, 'Let us know if you need a hand in there then?' He mouthed at his drink with appreciation and settled further into the cushions piled around him.

As evening approached, the room acquired an atmosphere. Spotlights hidden amongst the beams and struts lit the roof in different colours. There was no apparent pattern and, whilst the overall effect was haphazard, if left unregarded it created a sense of space and a feeling of warmth across the shoulders. The place was relatively full, many of the tables occupied, a few at the bar, the pool table over at the back surrounded. The usual swell of conversations filled the room, a bark of laughter cresting above it or, from the table at the side of the fireplace where a large group huddled over a board game that seemed to involve a number of cards, the occasional cheer.

'Well this is a bit of a strange one this is' said Dave, to no-one specifically. He adjusted himself in his jeans on the narrow pew that served as seating, eventually pulling a tasselled cushion out from behind him and tossing it to the corner 'I mean, they seem a varied bunch. What are they? A works thing?'

Although his glass was nearly empty, Gregg had not been rushing his drink. The bar was full of noise, an easy restlessness at the point it turns towards the later hours. There was music, though it loitered under everything, never

quite emerging. While Jim and Dave moved from their brief observations of the party to a consideration of the merits and perils of small vans over SUVs as a work vehicle, Gregg watched a sole figure at the far end of the bar. It was the man who had accompanied Shona. He was sitting with a small glass in front of him. He seemed to occupy that particular corner comfortably and he appeared content to contemplate his glass, biding his time, Gregg assumed, until he was needed. Though it seemed odd that he was excluded from the dinner, his presence, at least, confirmed that the gathering in the other room had not yet concluded.

When the lights went out it was sharp and silent. Then a sodden cheer from people near the fireplace, echoed almost immediately around the room. A high insistent beeping from somewhere behind the bar, an exit sign quite obvious above the fire door on the far wall. The fireplace suddenly became a blaze of light in a room no longer awash with spotlights.

The loss of lights had not only doused the music but drawn all conversations together to a shared point of silence, a briefest of unified pauses before conversations once again spun out on their own and the room became refilled with the sound of restrained excitement or fear.

'It's ok folks, only a power cut. Gemma's checking the box. We've got torches if anybody needs 'em. Meantime stay put and enjoy.'

As his eyes adjusted in the light from the fireplace, Gregg saw there was an empty space at the end of the bar, a glass left unfinished, the remaining drink glowing dimly. All around him was in relief, shadows edged in oranges and ambers, twitching in the flames' light, the room restless with it. Everyone returned to their conversations with a renewed energy, less concerned at being overheard.

Making an excuse about needing the loo, Gregg left the bar. In the cool air of the wide hall the light was less certain. Here the night had come rushing in and was pushing into every corner. He left the bar door ajar, allowing a broadening path of firelight stretch to the function room door and here he

paused. Something brought him to a halt, his hand on its handle. The door was thick, substantial, solid wood. Nothing reached him through it, drowned by the sound of laughter and animated debate coming from the bar behind him. He pushed gently at the handle, unsure why he felt the need to keep his presence hidden. The door opened easily and into the gap came a hovering pale light as if from a distant and unformed source. The room seemed silent. In the wavering light he could see the drinks table to one side, the indifferent carpet and little else. He pushed the door a little further, the gap enough to ease his head along the door's edge, to peer into the room.

The light was restless, soft. Candlelight. Along the length of the table a number of them had been placed, their single flames bright points against the darkness that had gathered into the corners. The long table was suffused in it, the white of its cloth glimmering weakly, holding the light gently and pushing it back into the dark until it became a source of light itself. His eyes adjusted, the shapes held in the slowness of candlelight becoming clearer, silhouettes of people sitting along each side of the table, the faces of those sitting on the far side now emerging. Heads were bowed, eyes closed. Each person had placed their hands upon the table, the palms flat and gently pressing into the thin cloth. Some had their hands next to their neighbours, fingers merging together in shadow.

There was silence. Not empty, filled with the expectation of the living. Each face began to hold the candlelight more firmly in a turn of a mouth or an overhang of deep eyebrows, the rounding of a chin. For a confused moment Gregg thought he was observing a painting, each face etched, the dishes, plates, bowls of fruit, the large spray of leaves and flowers, each suggestive of their detail in the guttering light.

Shona was standing at the far end of the table. Her small stature meant there was no sense of looming, though her arms were outstretched, holding the assembled people in her encircling embrace. Her chin tilted to the ceiling, her eyes

closed, here seemed to be the centre of the room, all else falling slowly towards her, the seated figures leaning, being drawn to her.

The breath he had not taken pushed at his heart, thumping twice insistently and he carefully exhaled. Shona dropped her arms, placing her hands on the table, hunching towards the people in front of her.

‘This is the in-between, the days that have no form, no presence, no life. And into it we each will go, again and again. And from it each will come, again and again. And so too our brother and friend Charles, if it be willed, shall emerge. We call upon the Great Spirit, all those entities and energies of the vast cosmos, to direct and guide his spark to us. May he emerge amongst us. May we experience the ecstasy of reunion. If it be willed. So be it.’

Shona held her arms raised, her small hands pale and bright. On her face a smile, awkwardly pushing at the narrow mouth. Her eyes were open, though directed to the ceiling, the whites of them full and featureless.

‘So be it’ echoed around the table, an excited whisper above the candles.

A moment of pausing, a stillness as if posed, the table, the light, each person still, Shona’s small form, it all hung for a moment. Smooth as a skilled servant, a shadow seemed to pull itself from the darkness behind Shona, pausing at the side of her chair. The movement had all the ease of practice and, briefly, Greg thought it might be the man from the bar, emerging from the shadows to assist Shona. The shadow moved again, more quickly now, passing behind those seated along the far side of the table. It moved just at the edge of the light and into the darkness beyond. It gathered itself behind each of those seated at the table, holding its darkest centre behind them even as its edges still crept towards the next, reaching out to them. Gregg felt a horror wash at him, watching the shadow pool behind each bowed head, as if it were inhaling each one, sensing them. Gregg looked away, feeling a tilting, sliding nausea touch the back of his head.

Shona had begun to lower her arms, her face. Her eyes had closed again and there once more was her thin smile. Gregg looked to the other end of the table but the shadows there contained only the restlessness of the candles.

As if awakening from an unexpected sleep, the people around the table began to move. There was a general shifting, the adjustment of bodies held still for too long. Heads slowly raised, eyes were open, some smiled, others blinked. Shona had taken her seat again and reached for her glass, taking in their awakening. Her face remained stern, though she dipped her head in acknowledgement when the woman nearest her extended her hand across the white linen towards her, saying something, smiling. Their hands did not touch, Shona took another sip from her glass.

‘Can I help you?’

For his size, the man had appeared behind Gregg silently. Gregg flinched and quickly turned, carefully pulling the door closed behind him. In the darkness of the hallway, the man was in silhouette, the light from the bar blocked by his broad rounding shoulders, the large head. There was a smell of peppermint on bad breath, shower gel, a house rarely aired. From his voice, Gregg understood it was the man who had accompanied Shona. He stood waiting for Gregg to respond.

‘I was just checking they were all right, with the power out.’

If the man believed him, it could not show in his face, so overshadowed and unreachable that it was. Instead he gave a soft grunt and, pushing his way between Gregg and the door, said, ‘It’s fine. I’ve spoken to the manager. So ...’ And he turned, his back toward the function room door, blocking it. His face tilted up into the dim light and here the large eyebrows cast their shadows and the small mouth drew itself down into the fleshiness of the jowls. ‘You best be getting back. Then. Until you’re called.’ As he spoke the flesh under his chin wobbled.

With a severity exaggerated by the darkness of the hallway, the door behind the man suddenly opened and from behind his large bulk, Gregg heard a tangled confusion of

voices, all seemingly pleading and then, 'No! It's not right, it can't be right!' The voice was strained with frustration, an anger long held and now erupting into words. Gregg heard someone say 'Matthew, please. Come back'. It sounded like Lorraine's voice, calm, common sense.

'No! I can't do this. You've all forgotten her. Why should he ... when she's not ...' and in it came anguish, tears, the voice giving way to a sob. Someone pushed past Gregg, the quickness of it causing them both to step aside hurriedly. A thin man hastened past them, one hand held to his mouth. He rushed through the bar door and headed left, towards the exit.

'I'll go and see ... As I said, best you head back.' The large man nodded towards the bar, his eyes on its door, then he stepped through into the function room, the door opening just enough to admit him, then shutting quietly and firmly. Gregg waited. No further sound came from the room though he had the strongest sense that if he were to push at the door it would not open far, meeting the solid fleshy bulk of the man standing just inside, keeping watch.

The main bar seemed alive again with people. The lights had not yet returned and here and there candles had been lit on tables, along the bar itself, though the light from the fireplace still washed over everything. As Gregg reached the table where Jim and Dave still sat, their glasses nearly empty, Lorraine appeared at his side.

'Hi, we're done with business and people are getting food. Give it a few minutes, and we'll be ready for your talents.' she said, 'Assuming they get the power back on.' The firelight cast half her face in shadow and her smile seemed crooked and did not linger.

'Is that bloke OK?' Gregg asked. Lorraine's eyes snapped on to him, her forehead drawing sharply to a frown.

'What man?'

'He seemed a bit distressed, left in a hurry. Looked like he was quite upset actually.'

'Did you ...' Lorraine started, her head turning towards the door of the bar, then her body seemed to soften, 'He came through here ...'

She turned back to them, her smile had been replaced by a softening, 'That was Matthew ... not sure what it was about exactly. His wife died last year so it's probably that. Poor sod's still going through it.'

Gregg knew, of course he knew, that death, loss was no singular experience, others felt its presence and experienced its separations every day, they were all around him. Since Helen had gone, he had noticed more often other's own loss, each their own story. Death had been there all the time, hidden in conversations and the casual talk overheard in shops, in the bar. Until now, Gregg had not noticed it, just the briefest of dips from the every day into something sensed, beyond thought, soon withdrawn. Now, it seemed to him, it surrounded everyone and every casual comment, each story told in passing, it seemed as if a challenge, a rushing hand towards him and he pushing it desperately away, the shock of it trembling his fingers briefly. Here it was again, that sudden and unpleasant shock of someone else's telling and in it the sudden pulse of anger.

'It didn't look like bloody nothing, all those candles and Shona up there at the head of the table like some priest or something. Casting that great shadow over you all ..' The force of his words failed, something in Lorraine's suddenly panicked face, it flickered only for a moment and then she stood taller, clasping her hands.

'Well, as I said, not sure what it was about, I didn't exactly see' and she turned, leaving them in the deepening darkness as the logs in the fireplace sagged into their embers. Then, with a snap less heard than sensed, the lights came on and the shock of their revealing was quickly steadied by the cheering.

Over the years Gregg had developed a habit of people watching while the band played. In such a small band there

was little opportunity to rest, to step out of the music while other members took over, but he would regularly sense the pieces and passages where he was less needed, where he could let that inner instinct of playing run along smoothly and in those brief moments the small quiet of observing could come forward to take in people's faces, the small stories they formed, stories he rarely saw to any conclusion. He was unsure how he had fallen into the habit of completing these stories for them, it was now a habitual, reflexive act. The briefest of glances or the slightest brush of a passing touch became the story of an affair or the suggestion of a long history of conflict now in an uneasy settling. The truth of it did not matter to Gregg, though he became convinced that in these smallest of acts were the whole dramas of people's lives.

The group on this evening were little different, though they sat at the table longer than most, gathered loosely in threes and fours, leaning in to each conversation. Eventually a few began an uneasy dancing on the parquet dance floor though their conversations seemed to carry on, the dancing only a different way to move and lean to listen. Gregg's attention however kept returning to Shona. She had moved, away from the head of the table, away from the band perhaps. She was now sitting at the other end, the lights just flickering at the edges of her, the changes of colour shifting and blurring her so that her body seemed to flicker. A woman was leaning from a chair placed at Shona's side, saying something, directing her words to Shona's ear. Shona was nodding, tilting her head in a show of listening. Her eyes, though, were directed down the table, at the stage and, even though the constantly restless lights could not reveal her eyes, Gregg was convinced she was watching him. Carefully and thoughtfully. The tune they were playing demanded his attention, as did the next, Jim making some joke at the mic before the intro but then another section where Gregg could look again out into the room. Shona had not moved, her face still directed towards the stage. The woman who had been

talking to her had moved away and now the large bulk of the man she had arrived with was standing over her, leaning in to her ear. In the flashes of yellow and white lights Gregg could see his small mouth talking, then a red light would turn his face to shadow, only the broadness of his cheeks held close to Shona's, a lover in the darkness. Just as Gregg's instincts signalled the need to turn back to the music, the man raised a hand, towards the stage, extending large fingers held loosely. He flipped the hand casually, the pale meat of the palm glowing against the light before curling his fingers closed. The lights held white for a few beats and in them Gregg saw Shona watching him steadily, her eyes suddenly wide in the smallness of her face. Gregg missed his cue and his first few notes were a stumbling. Jim looked sharply across, the brief irritation pushed away as they played on and Gregg found the right notes again, sank into the familiar rhythm of it. When he next dared to look out, it was near the end of their set. Shona had gone, only the empty chair at the end of the table.

When Gregg stepped outside, the day had gone and here, surrounded by the trees, was a waiting darkness, not yet true night, too heavy to be dusk, a sense that merging, slow changes were not tolerated. The rest of the world could spend the early hours easing towards the dark but not here. The windows of the pub were tall and, through them enough light to walk close by its walls, enough to find a path sketched hastily in the undergrowth leading down to the river. Here the sky was reflected in its narrow waters, a slow, thick mirror of the last of the light clinging in the west. The cloud cover, stodgy and clotted in the day, had settled into a drear thick sheet drawing up from the east. The taste of rain was in every breath. Gregg pulled his hoodie closed. Here by the water, the cooler airs had gathered, waiting to push over the banks and creep through the trees. He saw, as if from the corner of his eye, his own breath caught in the air.

A river at night is not a silent place. The wet smack of something stirring under the opposite bank, downstream a

birdcall, the odd sudden ripple of water curling around a branch or a rock and above it the air itself, full of the opening space among the trees, a breeze that ran along the river's course shaking the grasses on the bank where the water curved around the pub. Opposite there was a meadow, a wide open space, bare of trees, the rise of the grasses that hunched over the riverbank obscured the view and the waning light hid everything. Above, almost imperceptible, the shift in the air and light that marked the change from earth to sky.

From off to his left another noise, as of rustling grass, the catch of bramble against something moving. Gregg held still. Nothing and then the noise again. It was this side of the river, with him, not far away. He remembered being told that, at night, if you wanted to see something to avoid looking directly at it, use the side of the eyes. He turned his head slightly away, cocking his ears towards the noise. When it came again he thought he detected movement. Sheep, cows, horses? Were there otters or a dog? Someone from the pub doing the same as him? It all ran through his thoughts until, in the silence after the next rustling he decided to leave, heading slowly and carefully back along the path now darker, less certain than earlier, until the lights of the pub were once more around him.

The trees were less constrained by the mist and the cloud above them. The moon, behind the trees nearer the river, lined the higher branches, dull and gentle. After the warmth of the bar, Gregg felt the steadiness of cold night on his face. He stood for a minute at the edge of the car park. Most of the cars had gone now.

The pub's door opened, a tangling roll of laughter ahead of the last group of drinkers to leave, the large group that had been playing board games near the fire. They were all talking, the jumble of it hovering around them as they moved across to a van parked at the edge. The noise of its engine and the scrabbling of its tyres against the wet gravel replaced by the

steadier silence, just a rushing of the river or the breeze upon it.

The door opened again and this time a quiet figure emerged drawn temporarily against the faint light of the bar, gathering into the shape of Lorraine. She was looking, her head turning, taking in the car park. She spotted Gregg standing nearby.

'There you are. You forgot this' she offered an envelope, 'As agreed, thanks for doing that, everyone said they enjoyed having you there, that it added something.' She trailed away, not convinced enough by her own words.

Gregg took the envelope, put it in his pocket and they stood for a moment facing each other. Though the light gave shape to everything, it did not take in the detail, broad strokes filling over, everything a block of light or shade. The nuance of a glance or the query of a raised eyebrow were not available and so they stood unsure, each realising it would be words here, not subtlety.

'I know you're probably thinking we're a bit weird.' It broke the silence enough for Gregg to give a short laugh, he dug at the gravel with the toe of his boot.

'Well, that's pretty obvious. But, hey, we're all a bit weird really.'

'No, I mean. I know you might have seen ... that you came into the room when ... It was Bramley, he told me. Well, he told Shona actually and I happened to be there.'

'What? The mysterious man? Shona's bouncer?'

'He's her partner actually' she said, though there was almost a laugh hooked onto to the end of it. Gregg had a sudden image of Shona and Bramley as lovers, the bed .. He pushed it away quickly.

'Bloody hell. I guess that makes sense. He's very protective of her.'

'You don't know the half of it. Anyway, what you saw, if you saw ... it's just something we do. When we get together. Don't think it's anything too ...' she hesitated then, reaching for word, 'Too weird. Strange ...'

'Dark? Sinister?' he offered.

'Yes, no that too. No definitely not.' Lorraine paused then, 'OK, look, I don't know what you think about this type of stuff but I'll just tell you. In case you invent something yourself and it's weirder than the reality of it.'

She walked over to where the edge of the trees pushed up against the gravel, an uncertain line of hard dirt and scrubby grass before the undergrowth that scrambled away under the branches. Here there was the path, heading towards the river, the light seemed to have gathered more certainly on the compacted earth of it and she stopped at its entrance, facing into the trees.

'We're a group of people who share the same belief. Or close enough. We're interested in death. Or, actually, in what happens after it, in how we come back or might come back.'

There again, inside Gregg, that pushing wave, heard far off the coast, out there on the deep. Lorraine turned towards him.

'Fancy a walk?' and she nodded down the path, 'Come on'. She did not wait for his reply.

The river seemed to have woken since his earlier visit. Now, with the clouds broken and moving fast across the sky and the hesitant constant light of a half moon on its surface, it seemed more vigorous, the roll of it around its curving more determined, there was less gathering in useless chattering curls at the edges and with it a deep, almost imperceptible rushing of its waters between the banks.

They stood where the reeds and grasses had been flattened at the bank. The meadow opposite lay dark and above them a wind pushed at the branches, a steady waving. Gregg waited, unsure what his role was, a listener certainly, though whether that be to judge, to allow, to confirm, he was unclear. Lorraine had turned up the collar of her coat and stood with her hands in its pockets, watching the steady waters.

'I started going about ten years ago. When my brother died. It was Iraq, he was out there and a mine got him. Got his patrol actually. But he got the worst of it.'

In the pause, Lorraine looked along the river, downstream, to where it turned into its bend and the darkness beyond.

'Anyway, I was gutted. No, that's unfair. I was desolate with it. He and I had been so close as kids, and as adults. I couldn't conceive of his absence. He was only away, he would be back soon, coming into the house with his noise and bags and he was so tall.'

A large intake of breath, wavering. She touched her nose. 'No, the truth of it was too heavy to ignore. But dear god did I try. I couldn't shift the sense of him, still here, still being right here, about to come into view. It drove me mad.' She laughed, 'More mad.'

The night air was twitching at the sleeves of his hoody, creeping slowly down his neck. He could feel the cold of the river rising in front of them.

'Anyway, without giving you my life history, I found this group,' she lifted a hand from a pocket and gestured towards the pub, 'It was a bit smaller at the time. It was a friend of a friend who suggested it, in a kind of casual way one night over drinks. I think she thought she was helping. Anyway, I got in touch. It was email then but Cath, who was there even then, she suggested I meet a few of them, see if it was the sort of thing I wanted. I know now it was also them testing me, just checking I wasn't some weirdo.' She laughed at this.

'They've been good, over the years. I mean at first, I was more interested in the stuff about reincarnation, about how people could come back, how we never really disappear but return. It was all strange and disorientating but also fantastic and, well, hopeful.'

She looked at him then, glancing over to where he stood and he felt the expectation in her gesture.

'Reincarnation? You mean coming back to life? In another body?' He tried to keep his voice level, he was on uncertain ground, the idea of it only ever a distant awareness.

'Yep. Basically, that's it. It's our soul that comes back. In some other physical body, another life if you like. Cath and Charles, Hal, all that lot in there, they believe in it. And more.'

Gregg had come to realise over his adult life that the world was not made up of simple categories, was never as matter-of-fact as his childhood had assumed it to be and that, in fact, it was a complex mess of differences. Right and wrong existed but it was only ever as the hidden structure of things. Beyond that there was so much of life, incomprehensible if considered even momentarily and while he liked to tell himself that he was open to it all, in his more thoughtful moments he realised it was not acceptance that he felt but overwhelming uncertainty. To settle on one perspective and belief seemed to necessitate the rejection of a host of other options and, so, he made no active choices beyond those that had been enmeshed through circumstance, culture and upbringing.

The cold had crept beneath his skin and he felt the first tremor of a shiver, somewhere deep inside his chest. The breeze had settled and with it the night seemed more full of sounds than before, small, discreet noises, the hectic activity of a world oblivious of them standing there amongst it.

'So, that stuff with Shona? What was that about?'

Lorraine shifted, the stamp of one of her boots on the earth either cold or unease.

'Well now, there are some in the group that like to do their rituals. That was a sort of memorial, I suppose, for Charlie. Except not really a farewell exactly, more a calling back, holding out a guiding hand so that he returns safely somewhere close to us. He was a founding member, much loved by Cath especially, perhaps even more so than his wife.'

'And the fleeing man? Matthew?'

'He lost his wife a year ago. We didn't do anything for her, nothing like this. We probably didn't realise how much he needed such a thing. Some don't.'

In the pause Gregg felt a weight of expectation gently laid on his chest. Lorraine was looking into the darkness of the trees beyond them, though the light would not reveal much for her. She shifted slowly, looked down. Perhaps she was watching him, waiting to see if she had been foolish.

'Ok then. That explains a lot. Thanks for telling me' he fought the urge to push past his politeness, to ask at least one of the questions now rolling towards him like torrents at a river's curve, 'That's fascinating. Really. Not something I've really thought about but ...' He trailed off, his words sounding inadequate in the air.

Lorraine turned to him, though she looked across to the far bank, 'Indeed. Not many do. Until something happens in their life that causes them to .... That shakes them perhaps and suddenly all this ...' she nodded at the sky, 'it suddenly becomes...' she paused, reaching for some word that inevitably would fall short.

'Too large?' Gregg said and felt the quick pulse of satisfaction when Lorraine breathed a 'yes'.

They stood for a while, the night no less awkward though somewhere it had eased.

'Gregg,' Lorraine said, 'When you looked into the hall, saw Shona doing her thing, you know ...' She was looking at him now, 'Did you see anything? I mean, anything else. Anything you found strange or, now, thinking back, a bit unusual?'

She laughed then, 'I mean it was all pretty weird I expect but, no, I mean .. oh I don't know what I mean.'

He nearly told her and the words were shaping on his tongue but, with the sharp cut of misgiving and embarrassment Greg pushed them back. Standing here, even here in the large dark, he felt the uncertainty of what he had seen, a play of shadows in candlelight, a trick of his imagination, the product of countless horror films watched at night.

Lorraine turned, looked back up the path, 'I think I'd better be getting back, its getting late. And cold.' She stepped towards where the path folded in the darkness and stopped.

'If you wanted, if you needed, I mean, I'm just heading back to my flat. I've got some whiskey in I think.' But before the words settled across each of them, she gave a shrug, 'Actually, no, forget I said that. Not a good idea eh?' And she disappeared into the dimness of the trees.

During the immediate days after Helen's death, all had seemed horribly normal. The neighbours going to work, returning in the usual way. The way that black and white cat stalked along the fence. The post guttering through the front door. It had all been familiar, almost disrespectful in the way the momentum of it remained unwavering. Gregg had expected to feel an ongoing fight to stay upright, to teeter on the brink of something he dare not contemplate for long. Instead, and for long moments, he found he could settle in the comfort of the usual until, until ... that sudden horror of remembrance. As the months moved past him, these moments of forgetting seemed to spread thin until, under everything, there was a sort of bland normality to the days, each conversation becoming more casual, no longer held together with a shared knowing or the rituals of other people marking an absence and the world receded into its usual patterns.

Even so, catching him unaware, he would suddenly feel alarmingly close to something immensely deep, as if poised on a wavering edge filled with the urge to leap. He overcame it, he thought, by first turning towards those parts of his life before Helen's death but he soon found they were full of her, of them and here was no safety. So he reached further back, to the times before Helen and here, at last, was something graspable, something to fill the hours. He picked his fiddle from its case and, to his satisfaction, found the notes were all still there, a little rough and clumsy at first but soon the habit of it returned. The first scratchy notes filled the house with a noise so shrill, so loud that he stopped playing though moments later began again, more quietly.

To his surprise, eventually a need for work emerged from the strangeness of the days. He had been working in a warehouse, squatting behind a large store on one of the many small, unremarkable estates that tuck themselves away amongst the houses. An understanding employer, reducing

the call on his hours to nil for a time undefined, met Gregg's offer of a return with carefully expressed satisfaction. Aside from the first encounters with others he had not seen since leaving so abruptly, Gregg found his work soon became a conspiratorial companion, filling hours with practicalities and conversations that hardly mattered beyond each shift.

One evening, as he sat in his car in the emptying car park behind the warehouse, he messaged Dave, asked him whether he wanted to meet up and resume playing again. They had stayed in touch and it was an easy conversation to have, safe ground for a casual friendship. They met, and Dave brought Jim and so they began to play, at first their sound technical, steady but soon enough softening into an easier flow. They played again the following week and, by unspoken consent, this became a regular event. One evening Jim arrived with the offer of a paid gig which he casually dropped into conversation as they packed up. In the brief hesitation that twitched at his breathing Gregg felt the urge to avoid staying still and so they played in public for the first time in months. It was a party of sorts, one of those where only the host seemed pleased to be attending whilst the rest milled and mingled amongst the rooms of a large house. Gregg and the band were huddled in an alcove at the end of a long table where a beige buffet had been assembled and he could not help assuming that those guests that picked at the rolls and quiches were, in fact, rather put out by the loud music nearby. However, after, as he came to rest in the silence of arriving home, he realised that, for once, the past few hours had been occupied by motion, the colour of other people and a constantly changing soundscape that had all but subdued the low growling of the darker days.

Occasionally, creeping into the slim, bare minutes that mark the moments in between, Gregg would sense that wavering edge nearby. From the depths beyond still poured something, an irrepressible force, a dull ache that never left him and was, he realised with dull horror, only thinly covered by the usual business of his days and nights. One evening,

he sat in the half light of his car outside the house and, as if caught unawares, the dull force reared like an incoming wave, pushing through his chest, wrapping around his throat and there he was again, teetering over that wavering edge. In the darkness beyond a single voice, his voice, calling out his wife's name. Whether he wept, he later could not recall though he thought not, more likely that he gulped down the rising sob and scabbled from the car, hastily grasping at the routines of the evening.

It did not leave him, however, and the large whiskey that had later followed a meagre dinner seemed only to loosen his grasp of the world until he found himself, crouched and huddled on the floor, his back against the sagging cushions of their sofa, letting out dry sobs and knowing that it was the absence of Helen that lay across his days and, with it, a yearning, such a desperate yearning for her to be present again, to be here again.

Driving down the darkened roads that tangled out from the pub, flushed with the hard, unwavering light of the car headlights, he felt again that dragging, dull force within him. Then the image of Lorraine, her breath clouding her words, looking out across the dim river, telling him about the group. In it something else, a sharp, bright flicker, elusive to him now as if just out of sight, as if grasping for a word that would not come, fattening the tongue with its forming. He found himself holding his breath and, as he rounded a corner a little too sharply, he let it go, feeling the push of it in his belly. Suddenly there was something new in this world, faint yet bright. That his wife might not have truly left, that Helen might still be reachable, still here. Still here. It was inconceivable, horrific and yet, in it, the dangerous temptation of hope. Too much, too much. He focused on the drive home, turned up the music in the car, glanced at the passing silent houses. There still, though, that small bright flicker somewhere off, approaching.

The business of cities had always held a fascination for him. In amongst all the noise and movement, the constant effort of doing and going and existing. In amongst all the people as they ebbed across street corners and through shopping areas, it did not seem to Gregg that here were endless opportunities for being seen but quite the opposite. Here, amongst the many, he would often realise that he could be absolutely anyone and, thus, absolutely nobody.

Near the centre of the bookstore someone had placed two chairs, a low table between, inviting people to stop perhaps, to read. It may have been an attempt to lend the store the furtive, private atmosphere of a much smaller bookshop though here, being a large store and the chairs being placed near the top of the broad steps that divided the front and rear of the ground floor, they rather resembled a display. Sitting in one of the plain armchairs meant looking out and down across the lower floor, taking in the tables of offers and best sellers, watching the tills and, beyond, the brightness of the street. Worse still, the position not only elevated the sitter but instantly put them on display. Anyone glancing up from the floor would see someone apparently perusing them. Anyone using the steps would initially be climbing towards the chairs and, for a brief moment, the person might be struck with a vague sense of supplication. So strong was this feeling that many, when the chairs were occupied - which was rarely - would tip their head towards the occupiers who would inevitably not be deep in conversation but observing all those beneath them.

Gregg stayed on the lower ground floor, browsing the tables. Although his sister had suggested meeting here 'because there's seating I think' he assumed she was not overly familiar with the place and had decided, on seeing these to be the only chairs, that he would avoid them. Rather, he thought, stay here, nameless amongst the masses than up there.

He loved his sister, he knew that. It was with a steadiness, though, derived from years of growing up together, of being part of the same family, in the same places. It was not a wild or deep or effusive love, never expressed much beyond signing cards, the occasional text conversation. Perhaps it was expressed more in the steadiness of their contact, in the regularity of it and the ease with which they both settled into each other's company and role as sibling whenever they met. Certainly they had argued as children, fallen out, forgotten or buried their grievances, moved on to other things, fallen out again but nothing destructive and, overall, it was perhaps a companionship, born out of a realisation that they had been put together with that particular father and mother for those particular years. They had stayed in contact and, Gregg liked to think, this was not through duty but a recognition that, essentially, they did indeed like each other.

When Thea arrived she did so with a slightly scrambling appearance, reaching into the deep tote bag over her shoulder for something, her phone perhaps, already preparing the text to him. She did not see him, despite her looking and it was he who eventually caught up to her, just as she was about to mount the steps, phone in hand.

'Hello sis.'

'Ah, there you are, I was thinking I'd have to text you. Right, where shall we go?' and her eyes fell upon the two chairs nearby, her hand beginning to gesture towards them.

'How about we go round the corner, there's a cafe there? I could murder a coffee' Gregg said, quickly and turned towards the store's entrance.

If Thea had any issue with the change of plan, it did not show, instead putting her phone back into the bag and following him. Gregg heard her make an indistinct noise behind him, though whether she was giving her approval of the prospect of coffee or had caught sight of some book that interested her, he did not stop to enquire. Bookstores, for Thea, had always been a wonderful distraction. She browsed amongst the shelves and tables with a fierce concentration,

hunting with diligence, though often she did not buy much, instead placing any books she had gathered carefully back on their shelves and, perhaps, taking a single volume to the checkout.

The cafe was not particularly busy. A man in a blue walking fleece sat at a table near them, facing them and though he seemed lost in thought, Gregg felt observed. Thea had picked the table while he paid for the coffees. It was a long table, for more than four people, and Thea had hurried past most of the smaller tables in their more secluded corners and placed her bag on this one, looking out the window while she waited.

'Tom is OK, by the way' she said as he placed the tray carefully in front of them, 'You know, you're son. We saw him Monday night.' She regarded him wryly.

He had bought cakes, something oozing with icing and moistness, small flakes of lavender sinking along the top. He nodded and said something short, acknowledging, safe.

'He's doing well at Uni we think. At least he seems to be doing OK. He told me last week that his supervisor assessments seem to be OK.' Thea was watching him as he set the coffee and the cake in front of her.

'He's a bright lad' Gregg said and, coffees sorted and having nothing further to focus on, he sat down, sliding the tray further down the table. He did not look at Thea but instead picked up his mug and carefully sipped at the froth that had started to spill over its rim.

'I thought the cake looked too good to resist' he said and nodded at the plates between them. Thea seemed to notice them for the first time.

'Oh, yes. Yes they do' and she picked up a fork and stabbed straight into the icing, taking a decent mouthful.

In all their years together, Gregg could remember very few times when they talked about much beyond the daily occurrences softening their lives. Even when their father died, though they acknowledged each other's sadness and grieving for a loss that had long been coming, they had not particularly talked to each other. Their conversation had been almost

entirely comprised of reminiscences, that time when, what about that Christmas when, how he would not have liked this or would have laughed at that. It was enough, nothing more was needed, what other was necessary than their simple presence to each other during such moments. In their anecdotes and funny comments, there was an instinctive reaching out for the reassuring ordinary in the face of the extraordinary.

Now, though, Gregg began to sense the approach of something monstrous. All the life they had each experienced, that had previously stood as a wall of light and dark around each of them, it would need to be approached. There were things they needed to find a way of talking to each other about, finally. Such was the sudden dread that washed through him that he almost stood, the muscles of his thighs tensing, almost made an excuse to go, even if just to the toilet, anywhere to place a break in what felt like their inevitable slide towards what they had always managed to keep beyond.

‘Are you going to see Tom soon?’ Casual, light, taking another bite of cake and dabbing at the corner of her mouth with her finger, Thea did not look at Gregg, ‘He asked me to ask you.’

‘Sure. Yes. I’ll message him’ It seemed the best response, quick, giving the resolution needed to move the conversation on. Outside the cafe it had begun to rain, light rain, he could see it spotting at the pavement opposite, could see people looking to the sky, a man pulled at his collar as he walked.

‘Gregg, that’s not ...’ her voice suddenly full of anger, ‘I mean, when are you going to talk to him? I mean properly talk, not just a text here and there. He’s coming to us, me because he just needs .... We don’t mind, of course we don’t, but, well, its not right ....’ And as if she had realised she had already departed from some prepared plan, Thea sat back, letting the fork clink down on the plate. ‘Sorry, its just, I know, I can imagine what you must be going through, please, I mean that, but he’s your son. He still a boy really. And he

needs his dad, particularly now.’ Her voice had raised, it sounded taut, strained with an effort, her mouth wavering around the words, ‘And its even more difficult with you moving out, leaving his ... your home ... so. Sorry.’

Gregg studied his coffee. He could only nod. There was nothing else. He knew that to be a lie. There was everything else but it lay deep and dark and still. There was a silence between them and the noise of the cafe bustled around it. The man in the walking fleece gathered his mug and tray and, as he walked past them, his leg bumped the corner of their table. He gave a vague ‘oof’ but did not look at them.

‘I know. Let me sort it out. I’ll sort it out. You’re right’ Gregg said. Thea was watching him. She had come to a stillness, her usual constant rearranging and fiddling set aside. It seemed as if neither of them knew what should happen next, nothing in their relationship had ever needed them to go further.

‘OK, well, I’ll tell him ... What do you want me to tell him? That you’ll be in touch soon? This week?’

‘Yes, that’s fine. I’ll message him later.’

And so that was it, and, after a moment, Thea reached into her bag, picking out her phone, examined its screen.

‘I’ll have to get back soon. Beccy’s got a thing, at school. Honestly, they just expect you drop everything ...’ she trailed off, placed her phone on the table and picked up her coffee.

His son had always been an uneventful boy, the birth, his early years, even the first hint of adolescence, they had all arrived and passed with a sort of predictability, not entirely free of problems but certainly nothing that could not be expected. Tom, named for a grandfather long passed and hardly known, was a good looking boy, his colouring taking after Helen, the thoughtful, frowning pauses before answering any question of his behaviour were entirely Gregg's. He survived well during school years, standing out enough to reassure yet staying safely confined within a small group of friends to avoid unhelpful attention from both bullies and teachers. He had his passions - the Avengers films in their early years had settled into a stable if less enthusiastic commitment, he was immersed in Minecraft for a while, talking to his friends online in the corner of their living room with Helen's careful, unobtrusive observation. He doted on the neighbour's dog, so much that Gregg eventually negotiated a twice-weekly walking arrangement that saw them taking Freddie across the local fields and parks, much to the bemused relief of his owner.

He had a girlfriend whilst in primary school, though their entire relationship seemed to consist of sharing that day's cake, biscuit or, during the inevitable regular health drives, banana. Later, he seemed to have a particularly close friendship with a boy in his class called Ben, spending their time together during school as well as online. It was Ben who was selected for sleepovers and it was Ben who was invited to day's out. Return invitations were rare though this was less a sign of Ben's enthusiasm and more an indication of his mother's tightly scheduled life, his father having driven away in the family car one summer's afternoon a few years ago, never to return. This ambiguity of attractions seemed to continue throughout his teenage years, though it never appeared to concern any of them to tie it down and so others appeared and disappeared from Tom's orbit, easily and

without any apparent lasting effect, until he was, too quickly, an adult and his life was increasingly obscured to Gregg.

Regardless, Gregg at least assumed time would out it all, perhaps literally. In an odd way Gregg assumed it was the boy's business and not for Gregg to pry and so they carried on in their father-son way. Theirs was a settled relationship, casual, without any hidden barbs or frictions - at least Gregg assumed this to be the case, taking Tom's apparent ease with life as evidence that he, Gregg, had little to do beyond being present at the correct times. When Helen had become ill ...

Gregg was distracted by a girl running, arms held out from her sides, her focus on her small wellington boots splashing through the estuary of puddles that draped across the path.

The bench where he had chosen to sit and finish his coffee lay to one side of the path as it cut across a small park lodged amongst the town's streets. A mother stood, further along the path, an empty pushchair held steady in one hand, the other holding a thermos cup. She was watching the girl make her way down the path and in every aspect of her posture Gregg could see the barely restrained urge to call after her.

In the damp dawn, even the harmonious chimes of his phone's alarm seemed bloated, ill defined. The room was shaded with a day already resigned to cloud and drizzle. Gregg reached for his phone, thumbed and jabbed until the chimes abruptly stopped. As he sank back into the pillow another, more insistent alert and the phone vibrated against the bedside table. Then again, and a third.

'Hope you got back OK. And sorry if it got a bit weird.'

'Bit of a punt but, you seemed interested. Do you want to meet some of the others in the group sometime?'

'We won't sacrifice you ... ;)'

Lorraine's messages, in their lightness also had a sense of a breath held, in anxiety or anticipation. Gregg lay on his back. The ceiling had taken on the grey of the inevitable clouds and, if he did not concentrate, it seemed to slip away into a blur, his eyes fighting to focus. He had woken up feeling vaguely aroused, a lazy erection pushing at his shorts but, although his hand sought it out, Lorraine's messages seemed to interfere, being unresolved, the expectation of them too sharp.

'Don't think I qualify as a virgin anymore ...'. He hovered over the send button and then sent it, then followed with 'OK, maybe. Unsure whether it's my thing but who knows.'

After his shower, staring into a kitchen cupboard at a box of granola that he did not want but knew was the only option, Lorraine's response buzzed on the counter. A laughing emoji for the virgin comment and then 'OK, it can just be informal. A few of us get together regularly, just social. I'll send you the details.'

Then 'Don't feel you have to. Speak soon x'

The river was settling into the evening by the time Gregg looked up from the path. The light had eased from the solidity of the day and the textures of it teased across everything, the paleness of the sky washed away the blue, ushered in the oranges, the ambers and, behind them, like a foundation, the deeper purples and blacks of night. The trees along the riverbank stirred. Amongst them the sparrows, pigeons, a crow, busied against the coming night. Somewhere out of sight, ducks put up their off key braying. It was not a settling into peace but a marking of the turn of the hours, a preparation for a change of light and air.

The path lost the neat lines and pale gravel that marked it out along the backs of the last gardens of the suburbs and with this fading away came the earth and roots, the ragged edges of bramble and nettle that announced the countryside sweeping in around the town. The safety of neatness, of clearly delineated space, was overtaken. Trees were allowed to cross a path with an upheaval of roots. A broken gate leaned a corner heavily on the ground. Gregg squeezed past it though the nettles reached for him, brushed their tips against his sleeve. The path continued along the edge of a field, the grass and wild flowers left to their own cycles for the past summer. The river edged a curve to his right and he instinctively moved towards it, keeping it close. Its water was steady, slow, its movement only noticeable if he stood and watched its banks, the tails of current like broken strands of web reaching to the centre. A pair of swans regarded him from the opposite bank.

The afternoon's events came forward in his mind, like an apologetic deputation, and here in the wider space of the meadow, with the indifferent river, he allowed it.

There had been incense, some stick of it burning out in a corner of the room, though he only now recalled it. At the time its scent had just been part of walking into the narrow room. At some point a wall had been knocked down, two rooms

made into one, a pair of glass doors at one end and the suggestion of a garden beyond. It was light, the settling sun tilting in the wide curve of the front bay window. On a small sofa the deep red of a new bruise, two people already in conversation, quietly turning to each other, holding their drinks. A larger sofa, the same colour, blocked the way into the room and Gregg had to manoeuvre around one end. A man stood there, holding a mug. He had been watching the two people on the smaller sofa but, with a slight shake of his head as if coming out of a reverie, switched his attention to Gregg as he entered.

‘Gregg! You found us OK then?’ Lorraine appeared from the other end of the room, a large glass in one hand, ‘Let me do some introductions. This is Craig. He’s not going to read any poetry this time.’ The man with the mug shuffled, gave an airless laugh and turned more certainly towards Gregg.

Lorraine gestured Gregg further into the room and held one hand out towards the man. He was of similar age to Lorraine, short hair though long at the back, curls at his neck. He smiled and held up a hand as a wave just as Gregg offered his own for a handshake. As he lowered his hand to grasp it, Gregg raised his to echo the wave. They laughed awkwardly.

‘Ey up!’ Craig said and he raised his hand to take Gregg’s so they could finally shake, though it was at chest height ‘Hello. Yes, don’t worry, no awful poems today.’

‘Sure, sure’ Lorraine said and turned away, briefly patting his shoulder and deftly stepping around Craig to move through the broad arch that marked the old wall, ‘He’s not that bad actually.’

Gregg did not move quickly enough and the end of the sofa was in his way. Any move he made to follow her would entail an awkward shuffling around Craig or a request for him to move. Craig stayed where he was, smiling at Gregg, and took a sip from his mug so Gregg settled in front of him, resting a hand on the back of the sofa, too low to appear natural or casual.

‘So Lori’s dragged you along has she?’

It seemed to answer itself and Gregg nodded, trying to smile assuringly. He felt the gentle pressure of interaction pushing him for a response and said 'Do you always ... um .. meet here?'

Craig looked over the lounge. 'Yes. Well, not always but regularly. Cath and John are usually happy to host so its often just easier.'

A short, easy laugh came from the garden, lightly tripping through the double doors, funnelled through the long lounge.

'Shall we go through to the garden? I think the others are determined to stay out there?' Craig said, addressing himself to two people on the sofa. The woman turned to him, though the man was still speaking, and said "Yes, let's. May as well get the most out of these last lighter days. Its been a bit rotten in places hasn't it hello! You must be Gregg, I'm Hal.' She got up from the sofa, a small struggle against its lowness and cushions, and extended her hand. Her drink slopped to the edge of the glass though none of it spilled. It was a light, clear liquid. Her hand was warm, large in Gregg's, the fingers padded though quite firm. It closed around his and lingered a few seconds longer than a usual handshake, she smiled at him while it lasted. She was shorter than Gregg, everything about her seemed to be rounded off and circular. He imagined her calfs, ankles and feet as overlapping circles. A genuine warmth came from her, though briefly he wondered if some of it were affected, ironic even, as if she were presenting her good manners to the others in the room, not in any way related to meeting him.

Hal led Gregg through the double doors, out onto a short paved patio too narrow to host anything more than a couple of chairs. The bungalow had been extended into the garden at some point, the pebble dashed wall of the kitchen ran to an abrupt stop where the paving turned sharply around it to a wider area. More people were standing around a garden table, its chairs left unoccupied. Lorraine was talking. She had acquired a drink, a large glass, blue, like a chalice and full of ice and thick wedges of lime. She cupped the base of it

in one hand whilst holding the flaring rim with her other. As she moved, the chalice moved from side to side, an unconscious blessing of the three people standing in front of her.

‘If it keeps happening I’ll contact the Council again’ she was finishing her story. The other three were nodding. Gregg recognised one of them as Cath, her slight form, her shoulders drawing down with age. She was looking at the man next to her, acknowledging the point to each other. Her dress was light, covered in flowers. It seemed to have soaked up many summers, standing like this on lawns, with the coolness of evening not yet arrived. Its effect was somewhat diminished by the large fleece jacket she had thrown across her shoulders, clutching it closed at her heart. The man was of similar age and tall. His hair was thinning on top and he kept it neatly trimmed at the sides with no attempt to cover the bald patch. He had an equally neat beard, it followed his chin-line, not being permitted to grow out too far, the remains of his younger colouring pushing in amongst the grey.

‘Ah, Gregg, good ... you’ve met Cath I believe. This is her husband John’ said Lorraine and before she could gesture to them, both Cath and John had stepped forward, their hands outstretched to shake Gregg’s. He grasped Cath’s first. There was something more present about Cath, a sort of vibrancy that fitted well into the constant motion of the garden around them. The instant Cath took his hand, after a quick, sharp squeeze she raised her hand, palm towards him and said ‘Good to meet you properly. Oh look, you haven’t got a drink. Let me sort one for you ... what would you like?’ And she was already hurrying away towards another set of doors that opened into their kitchen. As Gregg turned to answer John’s hand slipped quietly into his and shook it gently twice.

‘Welcome’ he said. His voice was soft, not weak but settled.

‘Have you told Gregg all about us?’ said Hal, who had floated to their side during all this though her gaze was

directed down the garden, studying the hydrangeas beginning to droop over a small wooden door in an ivy covered wall.

'A little. Enough.' said Lorraine, 'Who are we waiting for John?' And she turned toward him as the others gathered and the afternoon light softened.

'Well, not much to tell. I've been concentrating on where I last saw her, round by the petrol station. I'm hoping she's a regular but, you know, maybe she was just passing. On business or such.' The man sat back in his chair. The arms of it were fat and round, curving like thighs and he looked thin and lost in their embrace. He did not appear uncomfortable, appeared as if telling friends of another boring morning. Possibly it was, for him. They had gathered in the lounge, sitting on a mix of existing seating and chairs brought in from the dining room. Gregg had edged one buttock onto the arm of the sofa, next to Lorraine. The casual but nimble way Lorraine had introduced Gregg to everyone gathered in the bungalow meant he struggled to recall most names. Alf. Arnie. Arnold, the storyteller was Arnold.

'But nothing yet.' Arnold continued, raised the fingers of both hands briefly from where they rested on the plain fabric of the chair, 'It was her, I knew it. Felt it. Just the way she spoke to the guy who'd parked across two pumps. Casual, friendly but no nonsense. You know how she was ...' He caught himself inviting people to remember someone they had never met and, briefly, looked at his lap, brushing at something on his shirt before replacing his hand back on the plainness of the chair, keeping still. 'Anyway, there's only so much petrol I need. And I can't keep buying coffee from there. Its a bit obvious. Plus its disgusting.' He smiled at them, delivering his final line as if remembering he was meant to be telling a joke.

'Can you remember what time and day it was? Perhaps go back at the same time or day - in case its a regular thing she does?' said Cath. Arnold nodded, bringing his lower lip to press against the upper, though Gregg could not tell whether

this was to acknowledge a good idea or to show he had already enacted it.

Cath observed him, turning her head and shoulders towards him, raising herself from the other armchair. She waited a short moment and, seeing Arnold unlikely to offer anything further, she looked at Gregg. 'You see it's not a precise science, how you know. It can be something about the way they hold themselves, or a particular turn of phrase they always used. But you just sort of, well, get a sense of them. A sort of familiarity.' Heads nodded around him, Lorraine took another drink.

'Lorraine, how about you? How's it been going?' Cath said and then folded her hands to her lap and settled.

Lorraine began to cross her legs. Her foot gently encountered the coffee table and she placed it quickly back on the floor. Her hand reached to the back of her head, began fiddling with her hair and she looked to the ceiling

'Oh god, no. I've had .. Not had the time really. Its been busy at work, people coming back from their holidays and so the meetings and travelling are picking up again. Got a few big exhibitions coming up, so not really had the time.' She paused. In the brief beat of silence that followed someone shifted on a dining chair. 'There has been a couple of things. Thoughts really, nothing material. I thought perhaps. Actually no, maybe not, I'll leave it, I've not really thought it through yet.'

Cath moved forward in her seat, placed her mug on the table next to her and seemed about to respond, to offer up an opinion. Lorraine's attention snapped to Cath, 'I know Cath, we can share anything, no matter what, I know. Just ... to be honest I've been doing other things, not doing this, since we last met so, really, there's nothing to tell. Sorry, I know that's boring, its just how it is. Life demands attention.' She looked around the group though not up towards Gregg. He held himself still, adopting a look of calm but passive interest.

'That's fine Lorraine, that's fine. I know what its like. Life gets in the way. Literally.' Having placed her mug she turned

towards Lorraine, reaching out one hand, a finger half raised towards her, reaching out yet also gently prodding, 'You know what I'm going to say though, don't you? You know I'm going to remind you of the importance of keeping yourself open to it, not letting it pass away?' She nodded each word, her face serious, her eyes regarding Lorraine from the thinning line of her eyebrows.

'I know Cath, I know' Lorraine raised a hand in acknowledgement and then settled back again, giving way. She smiled up at Gregg, briefly, flicking her eyes towards him.

'Exactly. In life there is no room for death' Cath continued to the room. It was said easily, familiar words that, in their use, had been worn into something safe, inconsequential though Gregg felt them catch at him, just briefly, snagging like thistles. 'When our loved ones return, if they've returned nearby, then they need to be sought. They may sense you, may have some sense of something left undone that needs their attention but it never comes into focus perhaps. So they need to be found, they need to be seen or else, perhaps, they fade or settle into being something else for a time.'

Cath was talking to Gregg again, though she took in the room gently as she spoke, a benevolent and fair teacher. There was brief pause, a sense of reflection held individually.

'I can say something' said a youngish woman sitting in one of the dining chairs set at the other end of the sofa, pressed up close against a standard lamp so that the shade brushed at her head if she moved.

'Please do Ella.' Cath gestured at her to carry on and then picked another biscuit from the plate nearest her.

'OK' said Ella, and she steadied herself in her seat, looked briefly at the floor, 'I finally went to see the person I told you about. The one offering tarot readings and such. I went last Thursday to see her. I had to tell her about me, give her a sort of brief bit of history. We did that by email. So she'd have it all before we met. Anyway, I went to hers last week as I said.'

She stopped. Gregg saw her take the breath that was needed. She put a hand to her face, touching her lips briefly.

It may have been trembling but she replaced it under her leg swiftly. Gregg watched the group, noticing Cath glance towards her husband. His head was tilted, the nearest ear lifted towards Ella, his eyes considering the pale plaster of the ceiling.

‘Go on Ella’ said Lorraine.

‘Well, anyway. It was all a bit weird. I mean, more weird than I’d expected. I told you, haven’t I, I’m not sure about that stuff, the cards, divination, that sort of thing. Not because I don’t believe, I don’t know what to make of it really, more that I’m not used to it. Anyway, it was a bit strange. She lived up that new estate, off Harefield Rd, so at first I thought I’d gone to the wrong place. They’re still building it so the roads aren’t done and there’s building stuff everywhere. But she’d said she was there and to ignore it. Anyway, her house was lovely, new and she’d not been there long so it was a bit bare. Except where she saw me, that room she’d done.’

As Ella spoke, the others listened in their various ways. In the room an easy familiarity hung around them and Gregg saw then the routine of their gathering caught suddenly as a tableaux - the sofas, the scattered dining chairs, plain plates of biscuits and the languid attention of each person. It was as a mild disappointment in an uneventful Sunday afternoon or as if catching the mundane moment of a daily chore. The stories and discussion were rendered unremarkable by the comfortable scatter cushions or the china statue of a balloon seller that occupied the windowsill. Gregg felt the draw of it both in its familiarity but also in the promise of a gentle drawing out of an ache or a long-awaited confirmation.

‘Anyway, she told me she sensed strongly he was connected to the church, possibly a priest’ Ella was drawing her story to an indefinite end. ‘I’m not sure he’d be happy hanging around a church. He didn’t like vicars, he said they were unwitting participants in a big scam.’ She nodded, though her eyes were wide by now, appealing to the others. ‘Maybe it’s karma ...’

By the time the conversation had turned to the natural softening of an ending, the sun was low, passing out of sight behind roofs and trees, and people had begun to drift away, shuffling on coats, making protracted farewells. Gregg stood with Lorraine in the hall as she gathered her tote bag, searching through it for her car keys. Cath was busy rearranging the dining chairs around the table, correcting what John had started but clearly left incomplete.

‘What I don’t get, I suppose, is I thought reincarnation just happened in babies.’ Gregg said, hesitant with the awkwardness of the ideas, ‘I mean, I thought you just came back as a new child was born. So I don’t get how people are looking for their ... um ... others in adults. Surely they’d be looking for children?’

‘And that would be a whole host of problems, god’ Lorraine found her keys and held them above her open bag as she considered his point, forming a response but Cath, from the doorway, perhaps detecting another opportunity to teach, said ‘You’re right Gregg, that does happen but there are also many who believe that a lost soul can translocate, can find a way of being in an adult. A sort of hosting arrangement or co-habitation perhaps.’

‘And I hope there’s some choice about that. God, can you imagine ending up in some of the people out there’ Lorraine, nodding to the front door, used it to begin her exit and before Cath could offer any more, Gregg was out into the chilling early evening air with the light dimming and the path easing into the earth around him.

'What time will you be coming over tonight? Dinner's usually at 7pm X'

The kiss in capitals, predictive text giving more weight to the gesture than Thea might have intended. The evening was settling around the edges of the world, the sky a darker blue above the line of conifers that hid an industrial estate. Over there, across the river's lazy curl and beyond the rough, forgotten grassland, the roofs of the housing estate seemed to darken, as if wet though there had been no rain that day.

Gregg paused. Not ready to drive home after leaving Cath & John's house, wrapped in an unfamiliar lightness that seemed to resonate with the paling sky and easing air, Gregg had walked, not intending anything other than to find the edge of the huddling bungalows, and here was a path and then, a small delight, a nameless river.

There was a brief break in the tall yellowing grass that ran along the bank, a crumbling ledge of earth and stone marked a rough step to a flat area of hardened mud, the grass short, its edges drooping to the river's waters. A spot for fishing, bird watching. He studied the message from his sister. So much intent in such few, harmless words.

In the days that followed Gregg's exit from the family house there had been silence. Tom, Thea, even the solicitors, no messages, no missed calls. Each evening he returned to the flat he expected a car hovering, perhaps Thea waiting by the main entrance, her face serious, concerned, her anger barely concealed. But no-one came and there were no messages and the expectation of the next contact grew heavier each day, until, after a day spent watching his phone and checking the windows Gregg realised anything that Thea might throw at him would be preferable to this silence. He messaged her, rewriting the text several times, the words not coming until his throat almost closed with frustration and he flung the phone to the end of the settee. Eventually he sent a message that, he knew, was weak, half hearted and bordered on the flippant

when all he wanted to do was apologise, show that he was aware of his actions, that it was in some ways not of his will, but the words were not available to him. Thea's response, about half an hour later, was overly sympathetic, overly concerned and all Gregg could hear was the simmering frustration, held back in the knowledge that she was dealing with something beyond her own experience and thus liable to crumble at the slightest provocation.

It had been Tom's idea, suggesting they have dinner at Thea's, an obvious, clumsy and wise gesture, and both Thea and Gregg went along with it, acknowledging privately that in all their own efforts neither had come up with anything as simple. Gregg replied, a quick 'Sure, that's good, see you later x' and placed the phone back in his pocket but it had vibrated again before he removed his hand. A reply from Thea 'It would be good to talk about what you want to do next x'. He did not respond, placed the phone in his jacket, looked out over the river. There was a sense of thin walls being slid out of sight, the slow removal of the safety built from familiarity, from each person holding the fiction together and, beyond, that cold blank darkness.

Once, on a bright summer lawn, in a park with a municipal neatness, Gregg sat half listening to a conversation nearby. An older woman sitting in a flimsy camping chair, her hat with a brim overly wide, its practicality obvious on such a blazing bright day, though she sat in the shade of a lime tree that had stretched beyond the restrained borders, across the path to shadow the edge of the grass. A bench nearby, its wood greyed with neglect, had been rejected as a place to settle and the woman reclined now in her chair, gathered in by its narrowness, her plump knees almost level with her chin so that, foetal-like she had to gather her arms against her chest. She was talking steadily to a younger woman who sat at her feet, her bare legs carefully arranged against the tartan blanket. The younger woman was picking at strawberries from a tub, selecting each one carefully though her attention seemed to be elsewhere.

'I think some of the most interesting people I know have never known what they want to do with their life' the older woman said. A brief pause, then, 'they only know what they want to do next.' She shifted in her flimsy chair, its squeaking exaggerating the movement so that it seemed to Gregg, lying nearby, listening surreptitiously, his hat pulled over his eyes, that she was about to pitch over, to fall upon the young women sucking strawberries at her feet. Instead she gave a soft harumph of settling and carried on, telling the young woman about her plans to take up watercolours after her 'procedure', the word slowed, each syllable articulated knowingly.

Though the details of the woman's life were available to anyone who cared to listen, Gregg had let her voice sink back into the ambient, gentle swirl and flow of the city on that summer's day. The memory had stayed with him, committed in some way to a more resilient part of his brain, and had been recalled and presented to him on more than one occasion recently. It all seemed as if some hidden hand had organised its reappearance, coming again to him now as he stood picking seeds from the long grasses at the river's edge.

He realised, of course, that he had proceeded through his life in just such a way, never forming a larger sense of any plan other than that which presented itself to him in each day. It had never been thought out, at least not by him, though others had of course presented various components to him, ready-made, often as if off-the-shelf, pre-manufactured and unquestioned. And never complete, only ever a part so that, with it, came the expectation that Gregg must have a larger undertaking in mind. To Gregg it seemed as if he had gathered each component and placed it somewhere about himself without any real understanding of whether he would use it. Childhood, school, relationships, love, travel, reading, watching, working, fucking, parenthood, they were all just parts that loosely fell together by common experience and from it he expected to emerge a sense of something larger and unique. It never seemed to arrive.

He was aware that, over the past months, another component of the human experience was being offered. Loss. He was not so unaware of himself to be surprised by the tidal force of its slow arrival but its un-welcome presence could be ignored whilst the rest of the world carried on. In the details of each day - the flat, the band, the awkward exchanges with Thea and, more sporadically, Tom, the careful compassion of people - whilst all these continued it was as if he could turn his back to the sea, acknowledging its presence, the steady roar of its approach, though never seen.

In the presence of the group at the bungalow, however, there came an unsettling, as if, beyond what had been constructed for him, there was a great plain, or a forest, disappearing into a darkness without paths and here he was building sandcastles with the ocean to his back.

The flat had the coldness of hours usually spent asleep when Gregg pushed open its door and switched on the light. He was tempted to find the thermostat, boost the heating for an hour but the thought seemed too glaring and practical, he did not entirely feel like chasing out the night. The overhead light was too bright and so the lamp in his lounge became the only light. He moved around the flat restlessly, turning on a single bedside lamp in the bedroom as he left his clothes in a pile at the foot of the bed. At the moment of pulling at the duvet something slowed him. His flesh was beginning to tighten with the cool of the air yet he did not want the oblivion of sleep, it seemed only to offer darkness and a smothering. He found his dressing gown, pulled the blanket from the bed and went back into the lounge. A bottle of whiskey stood at the side of the microwave, and here was a glass and so the acid swig of warmth that he had craved since leaving Cath's house.

He found an old horror film on one of the channels. An undefined horror, a beast, was pursuing people in an old house. He kept the volume low and it was only the screams that penetrated beyond the small pool of light that held him at one end of the settee. Though he was warm, the air around him was not. Sleep was not announcing itself though he felt weary, a vague ache in his hips and here at the wrists, deeper in the bones. He pulled the blanket closer, huddling tightly against the hard arm of the settee. He reached to the floor where he had placed the whiskey and poured another into his glass. The warmth of it seemed to spread quickly up his spine, out along each rib.

The woman in the film screamed, pressing herself against a closed door, her eyes wide with the terror of whatever was looming at her, out of shot, in the shadows. The shrillness of it lifted Gregg's eyes from the floor, watching her. The third whiskey had been too much and now he was caught in between the weariness of the late hour and the restless,

scratchiness of his thoughts, unable to move yet feeling the twitchiness in his feet and the bitterness on his tongue.

The knock at the door did not startle him. It was assured, even, no urgency. Three knocks. He lay there and in his haze imagined it was in the film, that he had brought it out into the room only through the daze of his thoughts. It came again. Three knocks. In the film a woman was being chased through dark woods. Gregg sat up, pushing his backside into the sidearm, pulling his knees to his chest, the blanket high around him. He looked at the door of the flat. A ragged light from the hall ran an uneven line along its bottom edge. Then three knocks again, confident and quiet, steady. The line of light seemed to ripple and shift until it settled again.

There was a small tickle of sweat beading in the small of his back. He watched the front door. Nothing moved, no further knocks, the light steady. He sunk down, curling on one side, feeling the steady back of the settee and, beyond, the dimmer shadows between him and the door. The film had finished, the credits rolling up the screen, the next suggestion from the channel already counting down. He picked the remote from the floor and jabbed at it.

The house lay quiet. On the path to the front door a heavy dandelion had flourished and departed, leaving only flat, limp leaves splayed across the cracking tiles. Entering a house that has not been occupied for some time feels like an intrusion. Shoes lay at the foot of the stairs and here a splash of flyers on the door mat, both marking an emptiness and an absence. There was nothing he did not recognise, it was all familiar and he moved through the hall to the kitchen with a care, listening for what he knew would not be there.

The kitchen was brighter, the light from the large window laying evenly. The day was overcast, again, one of any number of unremarkable days that marked the end of autumn. Gregg placed the flyers from the doormat on top of others that he had piled neatly against the fridge and stood at the window. The garden was modest though Helen had attended to it, shaped it and it had been full of the curves of paths and bushes beyond the small patio. Now it looked unattended, the fuchsia drooping to the soil, the apple tree bare and the rhododendron sagging into the lawn. The house stood quietly around him, paused. The flutter of a sparrow across the window broke his contemplation and he began to think about what he had come for, warmer clothes for the coming months, better socks, some sheet music he knew he had stuffed in a drawer.

As he set foot on the stairs his phone vibrated and he paused. The thin notification on the screen, was titled 'Tom the Boy' and then the tantalisingly short start of his message; 'Hi dad, could you...' Gregg opened the message. It was short. He was asking for a pair of joggers, a couple of t shirts from the house. Then, a second text, 'If I had a set of keys...' The words were sparse and to the point. In this house, here in the silent hall, it was horrifically easy for Gregg to read into the words anger, despair, accusation and, realising it, he put the phone back into his pocket and made his way up stairs, adding Tom's requests to his own list.

He walked quickly to the drawers in the main bedroom, kept his eyes steadily on them and quickly found what he needed, leaving the room a little too sharply and catching his shoulder on the door-frame. He stood in the hall and pulled the bedroom door behind him. It rubbed along the carpet so that he had to tug it closed.

In Tom's room he found a pair of joggers, the t shirts and began to leave. At the door he paused and there seemed to lay gently across his shoulders a weight that pushed them towards the floor. He lay a hand on the door frame and turned back to look at the room. It had started with the intent of being neutral blues, greys, the furniture white, a tasteful circular rug the colours of the sea. As Tom had grown up the original design had been overlaid with all the interests and habits of a boy growing through his teenage years. Pictures had been replaced with posters, the duvet was a bright chaotic design of a game he played almost to obsession online with his friends. In it there was the suggestion of his son as if nearby, just about to return. The room still smelled of him and standing there he sensed the incoming rush of something, a roaring, turning depth. He felt his legs weaken and the urge to sag against the doorframe nearly overcame him. A noise, downstairs steadied him. A movement perhaps, as if someone in the kitchen, opening a cupboard, making a drink, the small sounds of daily living. Gregg stood at the top of the stairs, leaning out to listen. Now there was only silence and yet he could not shrug off the sense of someone listening to him, having caught the noise of his movement on the landing.

'Hello?' He was aware of how weak, how ridiculous calling out to an empty house would seem later. He began down the stairs, carefully, still listening. As he reached the hall, a voice, quiet, from the kitchen

'Gregg'

In the instant he heard it, it seemed to be whipped away. The voice repeated unhelpfully in his head, turning over and over until it became impossible to tell whether it had been real. He walked into the kitchen, holding his breath. It was

empty. The light duller now. There came the first hesitant raindrops hitting the window, large and fat. Then the rain beating against the glass, gusting in an erratic wind. Here, on the kitchen table, a box of cereal, cornflakes drenched in honey, the lid resting open.

As Gregg locked the front door, scrambled through the steady rain to his car, he could not recall whether the cereal had been there when he arrived.

'I can introduce you to some people. If you'd like. They may be a little, let's say, unique? If you want to hear some real experiences that is, rather than all that woo-woo stuff and what not.'

Lorraine watched Gregg, her usual carefully constructed casualness set aside. The queue moved forward slowly. The woman in front of them began asking for her order, though it seemed rather complicated and involved several questions about the type of bread used in the sandwiches. The young woman serving her answered each one politely enough, though with an abruptness that was driven by the increasing size of the queue.

'Do you mean people who have, um, found what they're looking for?' Gregg asked, though he feigned casualness, stooping slightly to examine the cakes in the display case.

'Not exactly. But these are real people. Their experiences might be interesting or helpful. They're not all fairy tales, if that's what you're implying?'

Gregg nodded, glanced at her, 'OK, sure.'

'I can be around if it helps. I mean I can come with you to meet some of them if you don't want to go alone. Or not, whatever works' she hesitated and then added, 'Actually it might be interesting to hear what you think of it all, even if I'm not there. So maybe, if the dates work, we can kind of do this together. Oh, a medium cappuccino and a flat white. To go please.'

The woman in front of them had been served, though she was still talking to the barrista even as they turned to attend to Gregg and Lorraine.

'I'll get these' and Lorraine was already flourishing her phone, stepping in front of Gregg.

With Lorraine distracted by the business of paying Gregg abandoned an attempt to create a light-hearted response and instead repeated 'Yes, OK, sounds good.'

'OK. I'll have a think about who and get some dates' she said and, having tucked away her phone and settled into waiting for the drinks, turned to him, her face struck by an idea 'Actually, I'm overdue a few visits to some of the centres so it could be good to double up some work with meeting the folk I have in mind. They're not all local - can you get some time off?' She did not seem to expect a reply, her mind having formed a plan and settled on an agreement. Instead she swept up the coffees as they arrived and handed one to Gregg even as she began to weave past the queue to the door.

Outside the town was busy, a lunchtime on a Friday at the end of the month. Relatively small, the market town was swaddled amongst the long hills and curving plains of the Wiltshire countryside.

'I'll message you once I've contacted a couple of people.' Lorraine said, 'I'm really sorry, I have to head back now, I've got a meeting at 2. See you soon' and she walked away, her coffee and sandwiches carefully poised in each hand.

If there was anything mystical about the hall, it was the absence of any furniture other than the circle of plastic chairs over to the right hand side, under plain windows where sunlight seeped in to lie on the old parquet flooring. Along the far wall a workbench had been fixed, a worktop on thin metal legs running the width of the hall. There was nothing on it, nothing to indicate the industry suggested by its length. Gregg felt, for an instance, that life had moved elsewhere.

‘Please settle wherever you feel most comfortable.’ The voice carried a hint of false sociability, a familiarity based in its routine. The woman speaking stood near the circle of chairs, rooting through a plastic box, though she gestured and briefly raised her head to smile towards him. Gregg considered whether his car would be an acceptable interpretation of her invite but the person behind him squeezed past gently and began careful steps towards a chair, the floor beneath her treated as if ice despite its weary varnish. More people had arrived before him and as Gregg took his seat he took in each of them, feigning a friendliness that he only partially felt. A middle aged man in a patterned shirt. Two women, too thin. An elderly woman who looked around inquisitively as if she were in the wrong place. A younger man, almost a boy, looking sheepish and shy though wearing orange trousers.

‘That’s it, just wherever you feel comfortable’ the woman said, standing up now, a notebook in one hand, her smile beatific. There seemed to be no suggestion of humour as she gestured at the only seating available in the bare hall. ‘Welcome, bright days to you all’. And so, with the general restlessness that marks a beginning, the group gradually settled and Gregg within it.

When Lorraine had sent him the link to this workshop, he had assumed she was playing with him, perhaps an act of camaraderie to send him what appeared to be an example of everything she had decried to him. New age woo-woo, spiritualism for suckers with more money than sense,

charlatans and tricksters. Lorraine had expounded her argument at length as her coffee turned cooler and the buses rattled past the thin cafe windows. The note that accompanied the link was brief, simply saying 'Cath says this might be worth a try' and that the woman who ran these courses was 'probably one of the better ones'.

Julia was the woman who ran the course and here she was, settled on her chair regarding each of them in turn, letting the air settle, bodies shift, breathing gentle.

'For this morning, consider this to be a special place. Not just one of safety and protection but also one that, as we work, becomes sacred. The toilets are to the left of the main door and there's no fire drill scheduled.'

Gregg felt his breath tighten his chest, the muscles of his back grip more closely to his spine. He had never considered the sacred, never thought to pursue it, thinking instead it was for other people. He knew the transient loss of self that occurred in the occasional experience of good music, though he would never consider that to be anything other than his own inner self reaching out when called. Here, in this bright hall, the last autumnal days easing around them, sitting here as such abstract things as sacredness and space were spoken about in the same breath as tea-breaks and toilets, it seemed so jarring that Gregg felt displaced, pushed to the side of his own body as it curved against the brittleness of the plastic chair. The sensation was brief. Julia began to ask people to introduce themselves and this pushed him back, his attention turning quickly inward to form some words in readiness.

The drive out to the venue had been quiet, the lanes curling easily through momentary huddles of trees, their leaves fallen now, lining the edges, pushed and worried into the verges by the constant passing of tyres. Though early, the sun was already confident, low to the horizon, throwing every edge and line to a sharpness that foreshadowed colder winter days. At one point the road buried into a larger wood, curving up a hill, and he opened the car window, the rush of his

passing crowding in and then the smell of the leaves, the woods and, beneath it all, the deep earth.

The hall was in a market town that had once been small but had crept out along its lanes over time, each house tasteful, respectful of the longer years of older buildings huddled about the cobbled square of the market place. The hall itself was possibly once a warehouse, though it had been rebuilt at some stage with a new roof and much of the brickwork looked fresh, only the broad, dry beams of its end walls seemed to have been left. Inside, all trace of any era had been removed, so effusive the whiteness of its paint and the lightness of its relatively contemporary floor that it almost denied any functionality, only standing as unoccupied space.

By the first coffee break, Gregg felt both more settled and yet more anxious. The introductions and the initial sessions had done much to allow everyone a chance to ease any concerns over being with strangers and to replace this with a faint sense of shared work. However, the strangeness of their work did little to reassure him that there was not worse to come. They had meditated and visualised. They had shared their stories. They had drawn and scribbled and, briefly, they went outside to walk in nature, a thinning copse at the back of the church serving the purpose. In the giving of each person's story, there again was the familiar, the loss of someone loved, the search for some spark of them remaining or even returning to the world. Julia had not encouraged any verbal telling, instead asking them to draw or write notes and then to choose one line to describe their personal aim. It all felt deeply uncomfortable to him.

At first he chose words that were bland, factual, stuck only to the facts of his wife's death though this left him incomplete, a pressure inside him, pushing at the centre of his stomach, urging something more. These were words about the past, nothing of the future and, realising these would not do, he wrote 'I am still looking for her.' And with them came a rushing nausea that tilted the whole bright room and left him grabbing for the harsh ridge of his seat. The word 'still', in his uneven

hand, lay there bare and unmoving while the rest swayed until he closed his eyes to still it. Opening his eyes, he felt embarrassed. It could not be true, this was a fiction and yet in it came a quiet sense of satisfaction.

Others worked silently around him. The man in the shirt seemed to crumble into tears, silently wiping them with his fingers while he drew. Julia, passing amongst them, paused, a hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her and then returned to his work. By the time they each shared their brief summary, Gregg had begun to feel deeply grateful to Julia. There would be no baring of souls here, no long expositions on beliefs nor detailed accounts of transformative experiences. The two thin women seemed disappointed when Julia firmly stopped one of them as she began a long history of her own ill health, 'just to give some context' and asked her to summarise her aims here today. The woman did so (a hunt for some lost part of her own soul) and sat down, her friend briefly resting a hand on her shoulder.

During another break, Gregg sipped his coffee and wandered towards the doors, feigning an interest in what lay beyond as a polite way of distancing himself from the group. The conversation as they prepared their drinks had been mundane, casual, polite queries about where people had come from, what they did when they were not here. The older woman began a conversation with the young man about how he'd arrived at 'all this'. Julia was talking to the two women as the man in the shirt hovered nearby. The sunlight outside had firmed towards the mid-day, the roofs, the brickwork of the houses, the still branches of the oak that leant out across the garden wall of an old inn, they were all softened now, no longer etched so confidently against the light. The air held some warmth, a soft reminder of a summer now passed. Gregg walked to the curving end of the market square where a low wall marked the edge of a small car park and placed one foot on it, taking in the town as it crowded in at the crossroads beyond.

A stone cross on a leaning plinth formed the centre of the square. Stone that had the look of age, its edges uneven, wavering their way at each long edge, the cross formed of broad, squat arms, a rough circle at their centre binding them all. Its age was constructed carefully for around its base names of the local dead of distant wars. He could not make them out, only their even lines burrowing into the stone. As he watched a dark bird alighted on the cross, a crow. It perched restless, peering sharply with slanted head at the roofs, the trees that lined the churchyard, at Gregg.

Such a symbol! He felt he ought to rush inside and tell them, explain his visitation and then the truth of it settled on him. A crow on a cross. A daily occurrence. Gregg shuffled his foot in the loose leaves that lined the base of the wall and laughed at himself. There, deep within, there was the pull of it, the yearning draw towards something he could not explain and so he dismissed it as fantasy, pointless daydreaming.

The rest of the workshop seemed to hover over the same territory, the hours until lunch quickly filled with more inner work, carefully curated sharing and more meditation. The finale seemed to be the final meditation. Julia talked them through it, giving them imagery rather than allowing them to roam free. There was a path in a woods and a cave, a hidden door, a long trek to some cliffs. It was all surprisingly enjoyable at some level and Gregg pictured himself alone in a vast landscape of valley, of forest and heath, the quick and ragged tumble of stone to a restless sea.

It was only as Julia asked them to imagine a formless light approaching, to picture it forming into a human shape that Gregg felt the first queasy tremor of unease. Even before Julia's steady voice directed them to see the person they had each been seeking, the light that had begun to form in Gregg's mind had taken on the most expected shape, a memory of her perhaps coming to serve some purpose now. It did not fully form, and as if pushed away after a moment's temptation, it quickly faded and sank down the cliffs before him, into the sea. And so, during the long silence in which

they had been invited to spend time with those that had appeared before them, Gregg sat upon an imaginary rock, above his imagined sea and watched the flat blue imagination of a sky until Julia recalled them all.

One of the thin women felt a disappointment that she clearly needed to express, the twitchy anger of it etched into the firmness of her sharp jawline. She leaned forward, clasping her knees with both hands as she spoke about feeling very little, experiencing not much. Her anger ran towards Julia though stopped short in the space between them, stalled perhaps by the confident calm acceptance of Julia's intent gaze. The thin woman made her point twice, then again, different words, each a little more ragged and sharp until her exasperation hung like a mist around her.

'It can happen' Julia said, 'It may not be the right time for you. Or them. This is not something in our control, it is not our decision. It is easy to say, yet harder to do, but trust, be patient and what will be, will be.' As if detecting this would not be enough and, perhaps, finally letting the sting of the thin woman's anger niggle at her, Julia added, 'And sometimes, it is often the person still living who decides last to be ready.'

The two thin women left as soon as the workshop ended, their rapid steps across the hall full of twitch and hurry. They seemed to be conversing with each other in a low exchange of noises, glances and quick, darting hand gestures and they were soon gone into the early afternoon. The rest of the group loitered. The young man stacked the plastic chairs and, there being no obvious place to put them, pushed them neatly against the wall near the workbench. The man in the shirt and the older woman helped themselves to another tea, rescuing spoons from the scatterings of the earlier break. They talked easily though seriously. Gregg found himself standing near Julia who was packing her plastic crate. She glanced at him, smiling.

'Have you any plans for the rest of your day?' she asked him, though her back was turned to him as she carefully folded large sheets of paper.

'Oh, not really. Just back home now. Though its a lovely day so I might go for a wander before I set off, have a look' he said. There was a pause, he felt that every placement of his feet and hands was wrong, obvious. The push of a question was at his throat and yet he did not know what to ask. Julia made affirming hums then stood, casting her eyes over the nearby floor to check all had been gathered in. The young man, having completed his chair duties, had begun to make a slow way back towards them, he seemed to hover in indecision about where he should go, leaving did not seem to be his preference.

'Cath recommended you.'

It was a little blunt, and with a spurt of panic, Gregg realised he had nothing further to say, not being clear why he'd said it in the first place. Julia's eyes widened and she stopped brushing her hands on her dress.

'Oh yes? Of course. I know Cath. And John' and as if making up her mind, Julia turned, picked up her crate and began towards the doors. 'I hope you got what you needed. Give Cath blessings from me if you see her.' And then she was gone, silhouetted briefly against the afternoon light pushing at the doors.

Through a broad arch, a ragged lane into the tangle of the older buildings, along a wavering wall not high enough to hide the outer edges of the small churchyard beyond, the grass here neatly mown, the paths trimmed and edged. The forgotten dead, a phrase that came to him as Gregg slowed before the lane turned away. Here, in this corner near the church itself, the gravestones leaned, their inscriptions washed smooth from each season's passing, the stone patched with moss, stained. No flowers in efficient plastic vases, no sense of a personal touch, only maintained in the passing routine of the church. No remembrance in anyone living, the forgotten dead.

The day had turned towards a clouded sky during the later hours of the afternoon. The sudden, gentle shock of unseen rain on his cheek, and then another. He hunched his

shoulders against the ending of the day and turned back, following the narrow street toward the town's centre where there would be life.

Gregg is walking along the edge of the pavement. He steps into the gutter of the street occasionally when he needs to get around someone coming towards him. The rain is firm, slicing down urgently. The pavements are dark with it. Then it is too much for the drains and small tributaries and torrents begin to form along the paving, in the curving edge of the road. People seem to disappear, the pavement less crowded except for a few who hurry and hasten, their faces downturned so that each must dodge the others. Umbrellas worsen it and people start to move with awkward, small, hurrying steps, erratic as they hop over puddles and side step away from others.

Gregg, however, does not change his pace. He walks slowly. There are droplets arranged along the rim of his cap, the collar of his raincoat high, covering his ears, his mouth lowered into it. He keeps his hands in the pockets. He does not seem to be heading anywhere with purpose, he follows the street, as it snakes between the buildings, runs alongside mysterious walls, the ivy breaking over the top, past a small shop selling needlework, sketches, faintly delicate jewellery. Here the path turns down a short incline and ends at a gateway set into a wall. There is no gate, just the narrow entrance where it once stood. He takes a hand from a pocket and briefly brushes at the stones of the arch as he passes through it. Beyond, there is a small park, it was perhaps once a walled garden, a kitchen courtyard. Now it has a few narrow beds, the last long and wilting stalks of the flag irises crowd out other plants. The rain is forcing some of the longer stalks to lie flat along the cobble stones and they gleam, dissolve into the mortar and grout, the yellowing at their edges bleeding into the stone. There is a bench set against one wall. A hydrangea has been left to grow untended in one corner and it sweeps its hunched, crooked branches over the arm of the bench. Gregg sits the other end. The wood is wet.

The rain is unrelenting, decisive, rushing down to hammer and pound, each drop crashing and splashing against stone,

leaf, wood and earth. The air is full of it, full of the noise of its falling. The town is pushed away into silence, there is only room for the sound of falling water. It falls on Gregg, his coat now so wet that it too has gone silent, the rain no longer popping against it. Leading out from the other side of the courtyard there is another gateway. This one has a wooden door. It is closed and when Gregg looks up, there, in the gateway where he entered, there is another door. It is closed. He sits in the small courtyard alone and the rain grows stronger until it is more like a waterfall, pouring into the yard. Water creeps quickly across the cobbles, rising against the soles of Gregg's shoes. The roar of the water is everything and everywhere. Then water begins to brim at the tops of the walls, pushing over from the other side, trickling down the stone as if the courtyard were a small bucket pushed slowly into a pond. There is a moment when the water bulges at the rim and then the tension breaks and it pours and pours in. It rises up around Gregg while water streams down each wall. He is sitting in a box made of water. Then it lifts him from the bench, his body stretching out and he begins to float. The water is a restless churning against the stones as it rises until the yard is full and then the noise stops, the rain eases and there is nothing but a deep pool and Gregg floating on his back in it looking up at the low clouds, the troubled sky and all around him a grasping cold.

Gregg had once convinced Helen that his was love at first sight. She had been standing in the kitchen while the party climbed into those late hours of noisy business, her back against the huge fridge. Gregg had just arrived, late as usual, tumbling into the long front room behind Dave who immediately recognised a group of his friends. Finding himself suddenly abandoned, Gregg had instinctively moved towards the kitchen, pushing past the clusters and groups of other people, all soaked in their laughing conversations. Billy Idol's White Wedding played from speakers somewhere in the corner, the sneer of his voice weaving through the laughter. The kitchen was at the back of the house, two steps down from a small dining room, the table pushed up against the window and cluttered with bottles, bowls of crisps, dips, a half eaten quiche. More people, and here, where the music was merely a thump echoing through the door frames, the conversation steadier, nimbler, passing from one to another. Seeing no-one he knew, he kept moving. He was drunk, the hazy, warm kind of drunk that has been lifted from glass and bottle by good company, laughter, a sense of the hours unimportant.

Standing at the top of the two steps into the kitchen he could see down its entire length. Low hanging lights with broad, metal shades ran along the middle, they obscured many of the faces and so he plunged in, with a distant realisation that, before he reached doors to the garden at the end he would have to find an excuse to stop, to talk to someone. It was as he was pushing himself past a large man who was in the middle of an enthusiastic anecdote about fireworks, that Gregg caught a flash of green out of the corner of his eye. It was a woman in sage green trousers, pleated at the waist, a plain white shirt with an overlarge collar. She was standing in front of a large fridge and she moved to one side to let a small, thin man get at the ice cube dispenser set into the door. They were laughing as he pressed his glass against

various components. Suddenly a spatter of ice cubes falling and catching the rim of the glass. One shot across the floor to slide against Greggs boot and he crouched awkwardly in the gathered bodies to retrieve it, grabbing once, twice until he had a firmer hold.

'I think you dropped this?' he offered it to the woman in the sage green trousers and she laughed and he was in love.

At least that is how he told the story to Helen, years later, his eyes wide, like a boy telling tales to adults.

'It's true, it is! It was instant!' he would say. Never mind that he had simply sought to save himself the embarrassment of reaching the end of the kitchen with no-one to talk to, never mind it was with a sense of relief rather than a burst of love that he drew up in front of her, seeing her notice him. Never mind any of that, perhaps it was true. The years had smudged the story, and the night had seemed as of a beginning.

Sage green. A faint, stylish stripe, cuffs turned back to just above the wrists. In the brilliant white of the small gallery it stood out and Gregg's eye caught on it as he glanced away from the conversation about frame rates in which he found himself unwillingly immersed. The man in the sage green shirt stood momentarily alone as the swirls of other people moved around him. He was looking out a nearby window and though he stood relaxed and tall, one tooth had crept over his bottom lip to gently chew at it. Around him the slow movement of people passing continually through the room, moving in consideration, pausing to take in each exhibit, stepping closer to read descriptions, a knee bending before it. The man in the sage green shirt did not seem concerned with joining them, instead looking from the window occasionally to glance across the room in the direction of the exit. His drink stayed ignored in his other hand.

'So, have you seen the Ghalee exhibition yet? At the Maddison?' A large man leaned in, the lights of the high gallery ceiling reflecting from the receding hairline. He

grinned at Greg, a haphazard top row of teeth sliding into view from pale, fat lips. They were yellowing at the gums. 'Its rather striking' he added, the words full of breath.

Gregg could think of nothing in answer, only the truth and whilst he did not think confessing he had heard of neither would particularly bother the man, he also sensed there would be a small triumph handed to him. In the hesitation, Lorraine spoke, 'No, no I haven't managed to get there yet. Too many other things on at the moment. You know how it gets.' This seemed to satisfy the man and he began a long explanation of the merits of making the time for such things.

It had been an excuse, the trip to this exhibition, a way to introduce Gregg to the first person on Lorraine's list, a photographer, or artist, she had used the words interchangeably. The purpose of these meetings had not been defined, or even discussed, much beyond her initial suggestion, using some unexplained judgement that each would serve some purpose for Gregg. Lorraine had invited Gregg to this first meeting in her casual way, the brief text message managing to cast it as something interesting whilst also a dutiful chore of her job. 'Supporting a friend' is how she explained it, 'he was part of the group until recently. Think you'd find it, and him, interesting. He's got a couple of pieces in the exhibition.'

And there would be a bar. Plus it was London so plenty of other options.

Gregg caught the afternoon train, the small station serving the sprawl of tidy houses clustering around the old villages that had once buried themselves into the chalk of the South Downs. The train had been overheated, the lights harsh against the fading afternoon skies and Gregg found himself watching the passing fields, the loop of a river, the running fences with a sort of melancholy that might announce illness. London was, of course, busy, the pavements itching with people and the air warm despite the glowing amber of the winter sunset turning the buildings dark. He felt a chill across

his forehead, down his arms, the subtle ache of an early cold. It was probably simply tiredness, these past few days restless with disturbed nights, his mind picking over recent weeks, pulling at them for no other reason than to keep them close.

Oxford Street had the heaviness of a river in full spate, the pavements sodden with shoppers, spilling into the bus lanes, flooding across the pedestrian crossings. The evening's dark hovered over the constant flux and flicker of the lights, sputtering from the signs, washing at the pavements, laying solid blocks of cold across the lines of flat shop windows. There were so many conversations it was just an ebb of noise, running along the street, mingling with the sound of brakes and traffic, the shout of someone on a phone. Gregg pushed his way along, heading towards the large open space that was HMV's front doors, the security scanners pillar-like and then into the broad ground floor. Here he browsed for half an hour, picking and flipping vinyl to read the notes, stooping to see the Blu-rays on the bottom shelves. Then back out into the thronging street. He had agreed to meet Lorraine in a pub off Oxford Street. She had been up most of the day for a work meeting and they had agreed a meal would seem the least hectic way of spending the time before the exhibition's opening.

The pub was part of a chain, heavy with oak panelling, paintings, an ornate bar the length of one wall, brass foot rails and shining black marble top. It was busy, the after work crowd settling in. Towards the back tables and booths and there was Lorraine, shrugging her jacket off, smiling briefly at the waiter who was placing menus on the table. She looked neater, more formal. Gregg had the brief moment of disorientation on seeing someone in another context but there was the bottle of beer in front her and another waiting for him and there was the Lorraine he recognised, smiling up from her study of the menu. The meal had been good, though Lorraine commented bitterly about the price being mostly for 'arranging some sausages artfully on a plate'.

The gallery was in one of the small, unremarkable streets that had attached themselves to Oxford Street and they walked, the evening now settling in, every light sharper and brighter, the streets restless with the endings of days and the beginnings of nights. Across a small park with a single ring of trees surrounding an abstract sculpture and they were into the cobbled and bricked lanes. Here were not shops, these were boutiques or galleries, where the act of buying seemed vulgar. Gregg looked in at a few windows, though most were obscured, tastefully frosted, a slim door assessing anyone approaching. Distracted by dinner, conversation, the sensations of walking through the busy city, Gregg felt brighter, the earlier settling fog of a cold pushed back by the cooler air and the beer, a distant hovering fuzziness.

They had agreed to try and arrive early enough to avoid a late night home but not so early as to be among the first few guests, standing awkwardly in echoing spaces. Their plan seemed to work and in each room people had gathered to talk, their backs to the exhibits. Gregg and Lorraine did not feel self conscious wandering from room to room taking in each display.

It was near a large photograph of a person sleeping, just the tousled hair above a blanket that was worn and tasteful, that someone leaned out from a small group, extended her hand to Lorraine's elbow and called her name. They had once worked together, it had been, oh, at least a couple of years and yes, they were well. And so both Gregg and Lorraine had been drawn into the conversation and it was as the plump man with yellowing teeth began to talk about Ghalee, that Gregg noticed the man in the sage green shirt. As the plump man talked, he gave the occasional snuffle in between words, the sentence rising to it only to descend again, gently gathering pace towards a promised full stop that never quite arrived. The man in the sage green shirt was standing by himself near the other wall. At one point he shifted his weight onto one leg, raising the foot of the other imperceptibly from the floor, the knee pushed out. The movement stopped Gregg

turning away, its subtleness seemed to rush against something within him, a memory not fully formed, only ever noticed in passing.

'Oh, that's Archie!' said Lorraine, the words a little too forceful, the conversation that had been in full flow interrupted, 'Sorry, we do need to say hello to Archie, he's why we came, excuse us.' She took hold of Gregg's arm and pushed him steadily towards the man in the green shirt. The group closed behind them, only the plump man's snuffle marking the resumption of their conversation.

'Archie! Well, here you are then, wow.'

The man smiled, his long face lifting, broadening with it and he opened his arms to receive Lorraine's incoming hug. It was ungainly, enough awkwardness to hint at a passing unfamiliarity with such close social gestures, enough ease to show it was welcome.

'You made it. Thank you so much, I do appreciate it.' He stood back, turning towards Gregg, 'You must be Gregg, nice to meet you. Lorraine's told me about you.' There was that awkward pause as each of them realised the ambiguity, the suggestiveness of his words and then Lorraine said, 'Well, all good, Gregg, all good of course.' They laughed briefly and Lorraine, turning towards the room, asked Archie to show them his exhibits.

The evening seemed to drag out. It was not the subject matter, the photographs on display were varied in content and quality. Gregg regarded many of them with an awareness that these were not for him, that their intent and meaning was beyond him and though he knew that a collection of pictures that merely showed the everyday would have also disappointed, he, as usual, felt the combined thrill and confusion of seeing art. Archie guided them from room to room, picking out exhibits for them, ignoring others. His own works he seemed to pass over and it was only that Lorraine gently tugged at his sleeve as they passed that they found themselves in front of a modestly sized photograph of a swirl of colours, jades and pale pinks, turquoise and opalescent

greys, all in a fan-like gradation, each humming with moisture.

'I noticed these shells, in amongst the pebbles and seaweed at the high tide mark' said Archie. He was looking at his photograph. There were a series of them arranged in a neat matrix on the white wall. 'They were all quite fragile, just picking them up would often destroy them.' He reached out to one of the photographs, as if to run his fingers along the concentric circles of the shell.

'That next room has some, shall we say, more challenging stuff. Maybe not, though, it depends on ... well, shall we go through?' said Archie and, without much thought, Gregg began the polite business of pushing past people towards the door.

There were just four photographs in this room, each reaching from floor to ceiling, filling the walls, each an extreme close up of female genitalia. There is a correct, though undefined, period of time to loiter near any deliberately provocative or explicit exhibit, long enough to demonstrate it has been given due consideration, short enough to convey there is no unnecessary voyeurism. They said little, regarded each image in turn and it was Lorraine who led them, carefully, into the next room.

'Well, even I don't need to see that' she said, her glass covering her mouth, her eyes moving mischievously between Archie and Gregg. Archie snorted into his gin and tonic, the edges of his mouth quickly creasing upwards.

The energy seemed to flow away from the evening around 9:30. Though there were still people gathered in each room and one or two late arrivals, the sense that what had been planned had been done now relaxed across each conversation. People were leaning on doorframes, sitting on the small tables set up for drinks. Laughter was louder, more pronounced.

They were standing near one of the tall windows, dark now though scattering the lights from the street below. Lorraine

had spotted someone she needed to catch and had disappeared with a determined smile.

'I hear you've met the indomitable Shona?' Archie said. Although he was taking a drink, the glass did not obscure the smile, nor the mischievous raise of an eyebrow.

'Not really met, not exactly. I saw her' and he immediately sensed his attempt at polite and casual disinterest had been undermined by his quick darting look at Archie, 'I mean, my band played one of their .. er ... get togethers.'

Archie tipped his glass towards the light. It was empty and he lowered it to hold it awkwardly at this side.

'Yes. Lorraine told me' he seemed to look around the room then. It was the casual glance of people-watching, but Gregg could not avoid the sense that he was being invited in to a more knowing conversation, 'She's certainly a character. If I were a writer, there's a whole book there. With her. And her large shadow, the silent one.' He looked at Gregg directly now.

'Yes, I've met Bramley.'

In the pause, Lorraine re-appeared through the doorway and began skirting her way towards them, around the loose gatherings, smiling gently at no-one in particular though it gave a sense of purpose and familiarity, arriving before them, smiling and nodding her head as if winking at them. Then, gathering herself she said 'Sadly, I think, I guess we had better be off. The last train's at just before 11pm but an earlier one would be better. I've got work tomorrow.' Lorraine placed her empty cup on a nearby table and, flushed with wine, took her coat from her arm and began to put it on. In this brief moment of distraction, Archie leaned gently in towards Gregg.

'Good to meet you Gregg.' He extended a hand, an imperceptible bow ducking his head, 'If you want to chat anymore about that group. And all that ... I'd be happy to oblige.' He turned to Lorraine as she finished shrugging her thick coat more comfortably across her shoulders, 'Done all your deals then? It would be good to catch up sometime. Perhaps somewhere less arty? You've got my number.'

In the gentle assurance of his voice, it was hard to know whether he was addressing Lorraine or both of them. It didn't seem to matter in the brief passing moments of departing and soon Gregg and Lorraine were out in the cold air of the city. Winter had been arriving slowly in Gregg's village, marked by the turning of the leaves, the slow baring of the hedgerows, the smell of woodsmoke on the air in the evening. Here, in the city, where there could only be the darkening of the days and the cooling of the airs to mark the season's arrival, Gregg looked up at the strip of sky above them. Lights and buildings pushed it away and it was only the distant chill of a breeze on his face that seemed to suggest, beyond all this, the immense movement of the seasons toward each other. As they turned the corner, a blast of fried chicken from a small take-away, then the deeply rich, enticing smell of spices and fats from a restaurant.

'What did you think of Archie then?' said Lorraine as the train steadied itself against the slow pull of its engine. The platform, shifting hurriedly past them now, ended and with it the bright lights of Waterloo station and they were out into the wide dark and light of a city, gathering speed towards home.

'Seemed nice,' Gregg said, 'I mean, er, sorry, nice, what does that mean? He was very affable, is that the right word? Not what I'd expect from an artist. Not that I'm sure what an artist is really.' The wine and the beer had loosened him, every joint felt released, his head warm with it but the world was not about to tip or swing, there would be only this sense of comforting tiredness.

'He was one of the Group you know?' She watched him steadily, 'Was quite a regular up until fairly recently, though not sure why he's stopped coming.'

Gregg nodded. The carriage was full. A woman reading her mobile phone stood near where they were sitting, holding on to the top of Lorraine's seat. The low notes of different, restrained conversations eddied across the seats.

'He lost his husband. He passed over, I think it was about five years ago.' Lorraine leaned in towards Gregg though she

did not lower her voice. The woman with the phone flicked her eyes up from her screen towards them briefly. Lorraine leaned back and looked down the aisle casually.

At first Gregg assumed it was the lateness of the hour, the lull of the wine and the oddness of a train carriage at night.

Lorraine had departed at an earlier station, the carriage filling with the quiet activity of people gathering bags, coats and politely making their way to the doors. As the train buried its way into the countryside, shedding the rigid skin of brick and tarmac, finally curving free of the lines of terraced houses, the carriage had gradually emptied, each station drawing out more people. Since the last station, Gregg had assumed he was the last, the carriage filling with an emptiness. Outside, a darkness occasionally streaked with a passing light or, dotting amongst distant trees, the headlights of a car briefly wielded over a hill. He had begun to sink into his body, the natural tension of being amongst others falling away gradually, the sense of a day now done and a return to himself alone.

Once, on a week's holiday down along the western peninsula, Helen had made Gregg stop the car along a narrow lane. A wooden sign had declared 'Pottery For Sale' at the last junction and here, in the gateway of a small set of buildings, was another, leaning against the stone wall. The workshop had been small and surprisingly cold, despite the blustering blue skies that had been following them all afternoon. Helen had found, in a small box on a side table, a tangle of necklaces, each made of shells strung on a leather thong. The potter, a woman who seemed startled by their arrival, put down the sandwich she was eating and told Helen it was her niece who made them, from 'stuff off the beach'.

The memory of Helen's shell necklace rose from its deep waters. He knew exactly where it was, here was the drawer and there its small box. With the realisation that he was quickly drawing forth all of its detail, he looked sharply away from the night outside.

Perhaps it was a noise that drew him out of this natural meditation. A shifting, some sense of someone else, a few

rows behind him. It was quite probable, of course, empty carriages, even at this time, were not common and so, after the first brief jolting to awareness, Gregg steadied. Now, though, that settling sense of ease that had been creeping across him was set aside and he found himself studying the reflection of the carriage in the long dark of the window next to him. It was sharper now, as the lights of the carriage held out over the deepening evening, and the carriage tilted out into the night, empty seats each side of him, his own face, pale, transparent.

There was still that sense of another, somewhere behind him, buried in the lines of seats nearing the exit, their presence washing at him. It seemed to grow as he gave it his attention until he thought he caught the slightest movement, a restless shift in the seat or a faint sigh. He gave a shake of his head, looked at his hands. He had not brought his headphones, thinking it unnecessary, and in his bag the only thing to read was the exhibition brochure, thrust into his hand by Lorraine as they left. She had darted over to the unsupervised table where piles of them still lay and snatched one quickly, passing it to him with a quick delight. He began to leaf through it, the smell of its print still soaked into the paper. Towards the end of it, there was a print of one of Archie's exhibits and, smaller still, a photo of him. He was looking off to the left, as if something had caught his attention just as the photographer had pressed the button. Gregg had seen such types of photos before, in the backs of books, on websites. The pose amused him, the message unclear. He studied Archie's picture and saw that he had not quite achieved the pose as intended, instead there was a smile hinting at the corner of his mouth and he seemed as if he were about to give an instruction to someone, not seen. It was not the vaguely romantic or earnest portrayal that he had intended. Then Gregg noticed something around Archie's neck, smudged by the size and quality of the photo it looked as if it were a string of shells. A quick, insistent pressure

began in his chest, as if a thumb had been pressed there and not removed.

Another shifting behind him, so discernible it made Gregg look up from the study of Archie's picture. He looked round this time, into the carriage, turning to peer between his seat and the next though his view could go no further than the seats behind. It was if the other person had heaved themselves up in their seat and then let themselves land back heavily. There, in the reflection that just caught the seats nearest the exit, there perhaps was the suggestion of someone, in the window seat, a dark shape of a shoulder or an arm. It was difficult to tell and, at that moment, there was the sudden rush of lights of a passing station, the noise of the train thrown back at its windows as it passed under a foot bridge. When the reflection returned, the dark shape could now be just the arm of the chair, or a shadow cast by the overhead lights.

Gregg turned back in his seat. His station was minutes away, though not soon enough to gather his jacket and stand. In the stuffy warmth of the carriage he felt a heat rise to his chest, across his shoulders, a prickling along his spine. The brochure was still in one hand, a finger inserted to mark the page with Archie's photo. He did not want to look again and so put the booklet back in his bag, telling himself it was best to get organised ready to depart, looking out into the night hoping for some sign of a familiar landscape but there was little but darkness.

The shifting came again and then a sigh, clearly audible. With it came a sense of relief, something so definite and tangible could only be another person, going on to one of the last stops, perhaps even similarly drowsy with earlier drinks or a late end to their working day. Gregg settled in his seat. The opening chimes of the tannoy seemed unreasonably loud, though the flat sensible voice announcing his stop, repeating it, was steadying. He rose from his seat, pulling on his jacket, picking up his bag. He deliberately kept his back to where the other person was sitting, feeling a need to look a nonchalant

late night traveller, disinterested in the detail of it, accustomed to the routine. When he had finished, he began to turn towards where the person sat and hesitated. Something pushed him away and so he turned in the other direction. As he reached the exit, the train began to slow, the pull of it leaning him forward. He reached out a hand to steady himself on the last seat and, in the act of pressing the button to slide back the exit, he turned as casually as he could to look down the carriage. It was empty, rows of seats in the cold lighting. In the last row though, a figure, seated nearest the window, leaning against it where the lighting seemed to cast a shadow. It raised one arm, extending a hand towards him.

The knock at the door was light though no less determined. Its triple rap started Gregg awake, the armrest of the couch hard against his jaw, a dull ache already teasing at his neck. The knock came again, harder this time. Though his heart was racing, Gregg moved, hauling himself from the couch, throwing back the duvet that had slipped almost to the floor. At some point in the night he had pulled on joggers, they rucked up to his knees now and he pushed them down again with a bare foot. He could smell himself, the close, warm smell of the body asleep, vaguely off-putting. The morning had progressed without him, the light around the curtains held the steadiness of a cool, dry day. The flat was not cold, the air faintly warmed by an earlier push of central heating.

Again the knock and this time a voice, calling his name, a mix of concern and irritation that could only be his sister. He checked the flat, quickly grabbed the bottle, the glasses, pushed them into a kitchen cupboard and, smoothing at his hair and face, he opened the door.

Thea had raised her hand again, to knock, the other grasping at the strap of the messenger bag thrown over a shoulder.

‘Were you asleep?’

Both accusation and bewilderment. He nodded though said ‘No, I’ve just had a slow morning, that’s all’ and he invited her in, standing back to open the door wide. Thea’s eyes were instantly everywhere, taking in the bland, empty flat, the island of the settee and TV near the middle, the rumpling of the duvet over one arm. She inhaled deeply and noticeably then regarded him.

‘So you’re not at work today?’ It seemed a pointless question, her arrival answering it for both of them, and he almost responded as such until he sensed the irritation already lining his throat.

‘No, not today. Do you want a tea? Coffee?’

'No, I can't stay too long, well actually, OK, if you're making one. Coffee.' She walked into the kitchen area, placing her bag on the counter, 'And they don't mind then? All this ... you having more time off?' She picked up the kettle to fill it, speaking a careful casualness over her shoulder.

The kitchen was tidy enough. Even in the dreariest of moments Gregg found himself maintaining the conduct of his basic routines and chores. They passed time, were neither important nor likely to overwhelm and, other than the risk that his mind would retreat in its boredom to subjects he would rather avoid, they would often fill great blanks in his day where otherwise he would be left in his own company. Consequently, his flat was tidy, sparsely furnished, neat. If this was a disappointment to Thea she did not say it, though her glances remained restless across counters and carpets, up and through the open door to the bedroom where, other than a pair of jeans lain across the bed, all was an empty orderliness.

The coffee had barely been made when Thea said, 'Look, Gregg, I don't know how to say this so I'll just say it.' She took a breath, lifted her mug to near her mouth and held it there. She was leaning against the kitchen counter, one hand resting on her bag, her legs crossed at the ankles. Gregg, sitting on one of the insubstantial stools that usually nudged against the small breakfast bar, sipped his drink and watched her.

'I think you need to sort yourself out a bit. I don't mean to be unkind, god knows I would not claim to truly know what it must be like to ... to be going through what you're going through. And I will do whatever you need to help. But I do think you need to think about ... do something now about ... the house .. or this place .. well, your living arrangements generally ... which one do you want? And there's Tom as well. It's been months now since you've really spent time with him. Tom's fine by the way .. Well, I mean, as much as you can be in the circumstances. But he's also not .. I mean he may be technically an adult now but he still needs something from

you. You're his dad. I'm just worried that this will affect him ... both of you, and for a long time if you don't take ... if you can just find a way to be with him. I don't know. I don't really know what to suggest. You need to do something though Gregg.'

Her voice rose in the last few sentences and, before it could break into some emotion that would rarely have featured in their conversations, she stopped, as if holding back her breath and she placed her mug firmly down on the counter.

'I am' he said, 'I mean not about Tom. I don't mean ... it's just ...' he stopped, hearing all the defences assembling in the words. He took a breath but before he could arrange something less impulsive Thea threw her hands upwards, holding them briefly at shoulder height, fingers taut with the frustration that caught in her voice

'Well, I don't know what to say. It doesn't look that way. It just looks like, well, like you're floating through life. This past year or so, you've just not been here, well you have but it's like you've just not done anything, not moved. You don't work much, you don't see Tom, we hardly ever see you ... I mean really get to see you, Gregg, you. Honestly I can't tell if you're floating or drowning or something else. I don't know.' Her voice, lowering and losing its weight with each stumbling word, eventually softened into silence. Gregg, in the face of her frustration, felt the words slip too easily away from him until all he could do was say 'I know, but ... I am doing stuff. Now. I mean there's a few people, a group' but the sudden enormity of having to explain to Thea something that he had not fully grasped himself, that was only a rushing roar of ignorance, of expectation and fear, it reared up like a dark wall and put away any other words. He stood helpless.

'A group?' Her voice held a probing note of hope and, seeing Gregg standing there, his mouth still open in an explanation that he could not give, she had a rare sense of a moment held delicately. 'OK, a group. That's good. I'm sorry. I don't mean to get so cross, it's just frustration, I want you to be OK, I ...' but anything more would have marked a change

in how they had always been and so she took a deep breath, picked up her mug and placed it on the draining board near the empty sink.

'Well, I need to get going.' She looked at her phone, 'we've got a new client coming in this afternoon and I haven't had a chance to look through the slide deck but hey, its all the usual stuff.' She smiled at him, inviting him to rejoin her in the usual routines of their lives. As she left the flat, she turned, gave him a hug and, without looking at him, said 'Let me know if there's anything I can do. Love you'.

‘Shona would like you all to come and take your seats.’

Bramley stood at the end of the table where the teas and coffees now lay in disarray amongst paper plates of custard creams and plain hob nobs. He raised his arms as if to embrace them all, his soft chin rising as he spoke until he seemed to be looking down his nose at them, an effect that confirmed for those standing closest to him that this was, in fact, exactly what he was doing.

‘Now, we have a new member this evening, so Shona has asked that we welcome him in the usual way’ he continued as he ushered the group towards the circle of chairs that had been gathered near the stage. The hall was lit brightly, hard overhead lights. The heating had been on at some point and fat pipes ran along the walls to inadequate looking radiators thick with paint. Despite this, the hall did feel turgid with a heat lingering from an afternoon of after school clubs and yoga classes. The group began to take their seats.

‘Could you leave your cups on the table, there’ll be time for further refreshments later’ Bramley said and his mouth thinned, the corners of his lips going pale as they lifted. Gregg realised he was attempting to smile. It was disconcerting on a face usually serious with the diligence of his role as Shona’s ... Guardian? Protector? Lover? It was never that clear. Though Bramley was always busy organising for her, minding to Shona’s requests, passing on her instructions, it was done with the attitude of a man convinced he was in charge even though this was clearly not the case.

Shona sat quietly on her chair, nearest the stage, watching people take their seats. She nodded to those who caught her eye, her smile unwavering. Her feet were neatly arranged side-by-side, the toes of her flat shoes just touching the wood of the floor. Her hands rested in her lap, each laid carefully on a thigh, the silver rings that wrapped slim bands around the delicate fingers occasionally catching the light as she lifted, lowered, lifted, lowered them slowly. Bramley, waiting until

everyone had settled, raised his arms to take in the circle of people before him, holding them there briefly before lowering them and himself into the chair left vacant next to Shona. The broadness of his body engulfed it, sliding it backwards enough to squeak briefly against the waxed floor. He shifted, leaning with a heavy sigh to one side, plucking at the fabric of his trousers to straighten them and, finally, settled into a pose that mirrored Shona.

Shona watched him settle and, when Bramley eventually looked to her, she nodded.

'We'll start with our usual moment of silence, of remembrance,' Bramley began, starting to close his eyes before opening them again hurriedly, looking at Gregg, 'For your benefit Gregg, we spend about five minutes in quiet reflection, thinking of the person or persons we seek, expressing our gratitude for their return and letting them know we are here, we are ready.' He paused to shut his eyes, his head lowering to his chest to push at the skin beneath his chin, 'Some might call it meditation. We don't.'

The group settled, heads lowered and so Gregg followed suit. Next to him Lorraine briefly turned her head towards him, smiling gently, before her eyes closed.

Gregg had meditated. Every piece of advice, whether researched or well intentioned, seemed to refer to the powers of meditation to heal, to renew, to calm, to vitalise, to manifest and to make happy. He had never formed the habit of it. It was not boring, as some of his friends claimed. Neither did he find it enlightening. For him, it just passed time. Gregg had wondered if, having arrived at such an unemotional experience of it, he might have inadvertently taken a step towards enlightenment. Helen had been more keen on it, though haphazard in its adoption - to the extent that he privately thought it stretched the definition to refer to it as her 'practice' on the infrequent occasions she would disappear to the bedroom to meditate. Usually after a more stressful day.

Even so, Gregg used what he knew about meditation to sit there and pass the time.

Bramley announced the end of the five minutes in the manner of an announcement in a store drawing attention to closing time and waited for the quiet shuffling of bodies that followed to settle before saying, 'Welcome everyone, it is good to see you all. And welcome Gregg. I know you have met some of the group before informally. Tonight is our regular gathering and we hope it will serve.' Bramley's eyes moved continuously around the group, never settling on anyone in particular though giving a good impression that all were within the arc of his attention. 'Although, tonight Shona has something a little more special for everyone, partly in recognition of our new member but mostly because, six weeks ago, as some of you might know, Shona entered into an intense period of her work, spending time and energy reaching out and ...'

Shona, who had continued to sit motionless except for the slow turn of her head to smile softly at them all, placed a hand on Bramley's elbow. He paused only briefly to then continue, 'And so, Shona would like to share with you tonight some of her learning, her insights with you.'

To Gregg's left, an older woman gave a sigh of delight, raised her hands to be held prayer-like before her mouth, watching Shona intently. A stillness had settled across the group as Bramley made his announcement, a steadying of attention. Shona remained smiling, watching the group until she was satisfied by some indistinguishable sign that the moment was hers. Her head inclined towards Bramley who pushed himself from his chair and, taking a lighter from his pocket, lit the candle that stood on a low table at the circle's centre. Then, with surprisingly quick, soft steps, he left the circle heading to the rear of the hall and, with several clicks, the lights were turned out. They each went out sharply, retreating into a gloom of shadows. The candle seemed suddenly bright, a different light, moving and unsettled. Faces were etched boldly, the shadows forming features drawn in concentration. Across the circle, Shona's face was suddenly different, as if the wavering candlelight had revealed about

her an intensity that had been hidden beneath the constant, weak smile and the conserved silence. Her eyes were wide and the smile had gone, the mouth small now, the pursing wrinkles at the lips edges as pencil strokes on heavy paper. Bramley returned to his seat, scraping it as he sat, his heavy breathing disrupting the stillness that had crept across the group. He settled and, placing his hands in his lap, bowed his head as if in prayer, his eyes retreating into the shadows cast by his eyebrows.

'I have spent time on other planes, journeying, working there' Shona began, her voice high, softly pitched, 'I have spent time there and am exhausted, the energy I have given and been given, this exchange has now completed and, after this evening, I will rest for some weeks.' She lowered her head slightly though her eyes continued to move across each person gathered around her. 'I have learned a lot, of course, and though I cannot share all, I did receive a message which may be relevant to someone here.'

It felt to Gregg as if they had descended into such stillness. With the adjustment of his eyes to the dimness, he could now see the distant light of the streetlights through the high, narrow windows near the ceiling. Over there was the startling green of an exit sign.

'Know that all of us here are seeking someone. Many of you here will find them. Your searching will be rewarded in time. However, you will know, that there are lessons for each of us to learn, things we must do before we are reunited. For some these will not be easy, for some of you it will take effort and patience and guidance. Know that you are not alone, for we have this group, we have the work that we do. Through our continuing effort you will succeed.'

'There is an energy, a force that has joined us. It seeks one of you. A shadow, as if seen at the edge of your eye, just out of sight. It has recently returned. It came through unbidden, summoned in ignorance, it has come through us, through me, but the person who summoned it did so unwittingly, naively.'

They may not even be aware that they have done this and, so, in their innocence, these forces may do them harm.'

Shona closed her eyes and, taking a longer breath, leaned forward slightly, the light of the candle bright on her face, rubbing away many of the shadows and lines.

The thump of his heart, a sudden flushing in his face. Anger, creeping into the back of Gregg's throat, bitter on his tongue. He held it there, clenched his jaw shut to hold it. It was a sudden wave pushing at him, pushing at his back, threatening to break across his head, so forceful, part of something larger and he could not define it, its presence unfamiliar and huge. He found himself shifting in his seat, leaning back, crossing his feet. He looked at Shona who had not opened her eyes, sitting still and small. Bramley, however, was observing Gregg, his gaze studious and wary.

'One of you must seek guidance. You must ask yourself if you are prepared for what comes, to accept the path ahead and what it asks of you. Show wisdom, seek guidance.'

In the pause, only the thump in Gregg's chest marked the time. Bramley continued to watch him, heavy brows unmoving, ample lips gathering to a thoughtful pout. Gregg shifted, convinced that the beating of his heart must be visible, the fabric of his shirt pulsating with guilt.

'I have other messages, for others. But not here, not in the group. I will contact each of you separately so you may have them' Shona said and then she took in a deep breath and let it out with a faint, long sigh, her arms coming to her sides, her chin almost on her chest, 'Know that we are all part of something bigger, something beyond us individually. Bless us all.' Gregg expected her to collapse, to fall slowly sideways to be caught by Bramley. Instead Shona raised her head, the weak smile had returned and she looked around the group then rubbed her palms lightly against her thighs, once, twice and sat again as she had sat at the start of the evening. Bramley moved then, standing, disappearing into the darkness outside the circle and, with a rapid clicking, lights came on, hard, washing out everything. The group looked at

each other, some smiled briefly before looking to the skylights or studying the floor. Bramley extinguished the candle, pinching it out briskly and then stepped to Shona, leaning forward, studied her face, one fleshy hand patting hers, covering it completely. He sat down in his chair.

‘Shona will probably want to rest now. As you know this work exhausts her. So we are going to close and then I will take Shona home. I would ask that you don’t bother her tonight with any questions.’

At this Shona glanced at him, her smile picking up at the corners briefly, she moved a hand towards his elbow then withdrew it.

‘You can of course email me and when Shona’s rested I’m sure we can respond. If that knowledge is available to her of course.’ He nodded, just once, there was no invite to contribute. Instead he said ‘So, let us finish ...’, looked once around the group and then closed his eyes. This time the five minutes seemed to last longer.

‘Shona would like to talk with you.’ Despite his size, Bramley had the ability to appear quietly, unobserved at Gregg’s side. Lorraine and Hal, who had just started a half-whispered conversation about the evening’s intriguing messaging, turned away, retreating even as they carried on talking, nimbly shifting to an easy discussion about plans for the weekend until Gregg found himself singularly the focus of Bramley’s attention. Bramley held out a hand, directing Gregg to where Shona now stood near the exit, watching them quietly. No-one had approached her after the group finished its final contemplation, instead drifting towards the trestle table to see if the water was still hot enough for another tea. Shona busied herself with her kagool, a powder blue, its hood neatly turned down and she was left like a teacher at the end of class, the rest leaving her warily apart, aware of the invisible lines of difference marked out between them.

‘Um, OK.’ He knew it sounded weak and compliant, but the act of refusing seemed fraught and awkward, and he found

himself being led by Bramley to where Shona waited. Now her plain face seemed to switch to its faint smile, a pretence that Gregg's arrival was unexpected.

'Gregg. I wanted to say a welcome to you personally. I know this is the first time you've been to the group. Well, been to one of our full groups I mean' she tried to giggle then. It was brief and tailed into a high note that held a cynicism frequently used, 'So I'm not sure of your expectations, I know you are early on your path. I wanted to say that if you have any questions then I would be happy to help. Bramley has my email, that's the best way of getting in touch.' With an accustomed ease, Bramley already held a small, plain business card on the expanse of his open palm. 'I sense you may have questions. Or perhaps you may already have had some experiences. These may be troubling to you?'

Shona waited, her smile fixed and held too still, too long so that a falseness hovered between them.

'Bramley tells me that you may have seen us, at our gathering for Charles' Shona continued, 'It must have looked a little confusing and I know it was an accident so you are not to worry. I just ask that you respect our little group and don't jump to conclusions about anything you may have seen?' The question came so quietly that it was only in the small pause and the slight raise of her faint eyebrows that Gregg felt it. Bramley shifted his weight though it only seemed to make him loom even closer.

'No, of course not. It's all fine. And Lorraine has ...' he stopped, suddenly aware of Shona's attention on him, her leaning in. 'It's all fine' he said, though his voice was drained of any conviction. Shona regarded him a moment longer and he watched as even the weak smile receded from her lips.'

'Well, do not walk the path alone. All I can say is that it can be ...' she paused, the word held back as she searched for another, 'disorientating. So, if I can help, then, please, get in touch.'

She leaned forward, holding out two small hands toward him as if to clasp at his. Gregg had not taken the card, did not

take Shona's hands. In the moment, he saw in Shona's expression a softening, a widening of the eyes. Something seemed to struggle to surface from her face, like a badly hidden bruise. It disappeared sharply and she withdrew her hands.

'Anyway, there's my card' she nodded to Bramley's waiting palm and, now, Gregg took the card. 'Well, I will just use the facilities and then let's go and see if we get wet then shall we?' and she turned towards the entrance of the hall, leaving Bramley watching Gregg.

Gregg felt the closeness of the wall behind him, the small heat of nearness perhaps as a warning hand. With Shona's departure, Bramley's size grew more confidently over Gregg, the dark brows now underlining that broad forehead. He was regarding Gregg with a curiosity, though there in the firmness of his lips was an anger, held close to a contempt Gregg imagined might be directed at him rather than out into the world. Gregg grasped for something to say, anything and as the words untangled and he took a breath, Bramley said quietly 'Do not run from this. You must not run. Accept Shona's help, she knows what she's doing.'

Gregg, his mouth still open to speak, though now emptied of words, felt the wall behind him make contact with the ridges of his shoulder blades, softly, insistently, as in a small shock. He had rocked backwards as Bramley spoke and briefly his attention became occupied with righting himself. In the moment, Bramley turned slowly and began to walk to the entrance as Shona appeared, small, busy, fussing at her anorak. She greeted Bramley with a thin smile and they both moved together, out into the dark rain of the city.

'I think it was when Shona told me that Steve was not ready to see me, that I should just grieve, and rest, and move on,' said Archie, 'I think that was when I had the first inkling that something was pretty rotten.'

The climb up the hill had not been steep, but it had been steady, the long slope rising above the soft flat of the Somerset wetlands. Despite the bareness of the trees that ran along the foot of the hill, the day had a warmth about it, though the air was harder with the early winter. With no breeze, there was little to stop the low sun from teasing at his skin. They had coffee in the village, a small cafe shop that seemed to be relaxing into the relief of the quieter months ahead. Archie knew the path, pivoting at the narrow stile set into a neat stone wall, the gravel scraping under his boots.

They stopped, just below the brow, where the hill seemed to knuckle over into a more abrupt fall to the woodland beyond. The view to the south was across fields, copses, the straight grey of the main coast road then, beyond, the shimmering of a sea. Summer seemed to have paused out there, the sun unsettled across the wave tops, the blue sky.

'Yes, I've met Shona' said Gregg.

'She's not the sort to let any newcomer go too long without her scrutinising them. God, did she find you out, talk to you with that bloody little smile on her face? So helpless, so innocent.'

Gregg laughed, nodded, 'Yes, I got all that. She questioned me. Though, it's a funny thing, I didn't know she was questioning me at the time. It was only later, only then did I feel like ... well, I don't know, it felt like she wanted a lot more from me. As if I was concealing something from her that she knew about already.'

'Yes! That's the one. God. It did all seem so helpful at the time. I mean I wanted to hear it, all that stuff about relationships between souls never really ending, just changing and ...' Archie tailed off. He had looked sharply at

Gregg even as he had heard the force creeping into his words, 'I mean, not that I'm rubbishing all that, it's just, well it's her. Shona. And what comes with her.'

He looked up the hill and shifted his weight. 'Come on, nearly there. We can have lunch at the top. You did bring lunch right?'

When Gregg had messaged Archie a week ago, working through the words carefully before sending, the reply had been reassuringly quick.

'Yes, I'd love to. Sounds like Shona's up to her usual tricks. I'd be happy to give you my thoughts. How are you about walking. In the outdoors. With hills and rain and stuff?'

From the hill's top there was a good panoramic view from the north, across the east and then south to the distant coast. The sun had reached its highest point for the day and they both sat, legs extended onto the grass, facing it. There was a calmness over everything, not a stillness but an easing sense of things taking in the light.

With just the cooling tea left, their conversation had drifted into individual silences. The day was strong, bright, the air lined with a cold night ahead. Down the northern edge of the hill a thin copse of young trees, their skinny trunks and branches gathered tight. From this the sudden shouts of rooks, a ragged outcry and the small, dark shapes tumbling out of the tops of trees and settling their flight across fields.

'You know, it's been five years now. It feels such a long time and yet he still feels here.' Archie picked at his boot, removing a leaf, letting it flutter into the grass beside him. 'I don't mean really here. I just mean in my head. As if he's just gone somewhere. I know he's not coming back, it just feels like he's on some long journey or in another country.'

The air held all the stillness of a winter's afternoon. Gregg looked out to the haze of the horizon.

'I don't want to assume anything, I mean, about you. And god knows I don't want to hurt any hopes you might have but,' he took in a deep breath, 'I'm not sure I believe he's ever

coming back. That I'll find him. Or he'll find me. He's just gone.' There was sadness in the lowering of his voice, though it was still steady. He looked at Gregg, 'I don't think that's what you want to hear right now so ... sorry'.

Gregg shrugged. In all the previous weeks he had not considered the possibility of Helen's absence. A true absence. To hear it now offered, so carefully, was as if to be held by the collar of his shirt, firmly and suddenly. In it he felt the rushing approach of something, a slow rising of a thickness, creeping into the light air, dimming and ponderous and immense. He shifted quickly, bringing his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. Archie watched.

'And just because that's where I am, doesn't make it true. For you. Or anyone I suppose.' Archie raised one hand, it tentatively moved towards Gregg before returning back to the flat stone. 'And don't let Shona hear me talking like that either.'

They laughed, short and brief. The sun lowered itself towards the far sea and the rooks wheeled below them.

'Come on, how about we go down the steep side? We can get back through those woods I think. There's a good pub in that village over there I seem to remember.' Archie levered himself up, dusting the back of his pants, taking up his rucksack to stand smiling at Gregg. With the sun brightly on him, there was a softness about the way he held his hands, loosely near his side. The ease with which he smiled, that small offering of a hand, it all seemed to settle across Gregg gently and the rising thickness of other days receded until here he was, upon a sunlight hill with someone else.

It was a little early for serious drinks when they arrived at the pub so they each settled for a half and found a table in the low lounge bar, near a window. The fireplace held kindling and paper ready and a vaguely bored girl wandered in to ask if they wanted it lit. They politely declined and she left them. The walk had been easy after the initial sharp descent, the path zig-zagging its way down through trees that clung to the

slope. The ground became wet under the trees along the narrow valley and their boots slid regularly in the uneven mud. It caused each of them to whoop with laughter, grabbing at a leaning trunk to steady themselves. Nearing a gate, the path became waterlogged, a flat stink of a muddy pool had spread from the dank grasses either side and they picked their way through the longer bracken and brambles. Archie held a branch aside for Gregg over a particularly rough patch of muddy water, Gregg's boot twisted and he felt the sickening slide of his foot into deeper water. Archie grabbed his arm and hauled him to where he was anchoring himself to the peeling bark of a silver birch. By the time they climbed the rotting wood of the stile and stood on a narrow lane they were laughing easily. Archie pointed up the lane, catching his breath, saying the pub was not far now.

With the warmth of the cider now easing itself into his legs, loosening his chest, Gregg asked Archie about his husband. There seemed to be a sort of ease between them, as if their personal lives had been brought to sit beside each other without comment or the necessity of explanation. Archie, one hand placed around his glass, looked first to the window and then glanced at Gregg.

'Well, we'd been married a few years. But we'd been together longer, I think it was eleven years. We got married because we could, then. I know that sounds a bit dry but the grooves of our relationship had been worn in well before the law changed so it was more of a practical thing, it sorted out things like wills and mortgages.' He raised his glass and rolled his eyes, 'I know, very romantic.'

The door to the bar opened and an older man came in, a dog shadowing behind him. He said a hello to the bored girl who recognised him and then he went off to one end of the bar, the dog tucking behind the stool where they settled.

'When he died, it was a shock. I mean the cancer was quite advanced and all the chemo only seemed to drag out the inevitable and ... well, I don't suppose it's ever enough. Time, I mean. Afterwards I fell into a sort of hectic busy-ness,

filled my days with ... I don't know really, just chores and sorting and doing stuff. Anything. I didn't want to stop, have time to think. I even cleared the attic out, which Steve would have hated.'

There was a pause. The afternoon was stretching slowly into the first suggestion of an evening. Outside the windows, the shadows were sharp and leant heavily against everything. As Archie spoke, Gregg could sense within himself that slow turning, as of waters at the bottom of a deep well becoming restless. He stayed still, attentive.

'I thought I had found him again. Once. A few years back' he paused, examined the dog with a soft smile, 'Lorraine had come into the shop, arranging some exhibition or something, and I found out almost by accident that she'd known Steve. They'd both worked at the same gallery in the 90s. Anyway, she had to come in a few times to get this exhibition sorted. It was some dreadful thing about urbanism - all piled bricks and small weeds growing in concrete. I must have still been a bit raw with it all because she ended up suggesting the group. You know how she is - manages to dismiss a thing whilst promoting it at the same time.'

He smiled back at Gregg then, for a brief moment.

'Anyway, I must have been taken in a bit by it all because after a few months of Shona's gatherings, I met a guy at an exhibition and, well' he coughed, shifted in his seat, 'I thought I'd found my Steve again.' The words were softer now. 'Not him entirely, but something familiar, something like finding your way after getting lost. And, for a time, which seemed much longer than the weeks it actually lasted, I suppose I fooled myself that life would just continue, a little bruised perhaps, but essentially of the same quality as before. Except, obviously, it wasn't. And, looking back now, I suspect I was probably a bit difficult to be with because I wasn't truly there with him, this guy, I was just looking at the past.'

The dog shifted, sank more fully to the wooden floor, sighed into sleep.

‘So you won’t be surprised to hear it didn’t last. I’d love to say he grew fed up, he was the adult and confronted me, tried to set things right and then walked away. But he didn’t. I went to his flat one afternoon to find him moaning under what I can only describe as an obese and aggressive bearded man. Anyway, that was it really. But what was interesting, I think, was that it shook me out of whatever had gripped me. This was not Steve, how could it be? And suddenly I knew it to be something else, something far older and universal and, oh just so tiring.’ He laughed as he lifted his glass then looked at Gregg ‘Besides, Steve hated beards so ...’ but the joke was pale and insubstantial ‘But, and I’m embarrassed to admit it, that sense of him has never left. You know, a kind of ‘what if?’ that keeps coming back. Even though that particular bloke wasn’t anyone more important than a crisis, I can’t seem to shake it. Some days it all feels like such self-delusion, others it is the reason for getting on, to keep going. Sorry, I don’t know if this any use. I feel I’m not offering you anything either way.’

‘It’s OK, I think I understand. Did you keep going to the group?’

‘No, not really. I think I went to a couple of the informal gatherings, not the formal stuff with Shona. I couldn’t bare it really, Shona’s weak attempts at inscrutability, her gentle, insistent questions - they would all make me feel a fraud I suspect. You can’t really tell Shona that you don’t want to believe but neither do you want to let it all go.’

They sat for a few minutes in easy silence. The afternoon had cooled and the bored girl returned, lit the fire without asking them. They watched the paper take furiously before settling into the heart of the first logs. The room was filled with the assurance of warmth in the cracks and spits of the first true flames. The dog had woken to take it all in.

‘Lorraine’s suggested I meet a few people’ Gregg said, still watching the fire, ‘I think they are people who have had some experience with this sort of thing. Though I’m not sure what sort of experience. In fact I’m not really sure what Lorraine is

trying to do - only that she's suggested meeting a few people away from all the organised formalities of the group.'

'Mmm, perhaps. Lorraine's an interesting sort. I don't know her well enough but I suspect she's a good person. Deep down. She's probably trying to help in her own way.'

'Yeah, I think so. The people she's suggested are scattered about around the country so I'm going to take a bit of a field trip, try and see them all on one trip, probably about a week. Lorraine wanted to join me but can't be there all the time. But we'll meet up at points throughout the week.'

'When are you going?'

'In a few weeks time, we're meeting the first person, a woman down in Devon then back across to East Anglia - Hunstanton I think she said. Then its further north for the third person.'

Archie seemed to turn inwards, as if an elusive thought needed pulling forward, then he said, 'Well, and this is just an idea, I'm due my annual artistic retreat.' He exaggerated his pronunciation of the words, marking them in the air with one hand, 'I have use of a cottage just over the Scottish border. It's my uncle's, he doesn't use it often, but it's not a bad little place. If you wanted company, I could come with you. And you're more than welcome to stay at the cottage for a while. I'm usually there for a few weeks. I've a studio behind it so whilst I may not be around much, you're more than welcome to enjoy the countryside around. It's beautiful up there.'

He watched Gregg with a casualness that conveyed a polite caution until, with little hesitation Gregg nodded, 'Oh, yes, that would be great.' And, having found something to plan, something with hard edges and full of practicalities, they made their arrangements as the fire warmed the room and dusk settled like early smoke across the rooftops.



## PART TWO

Above the door, fixed into the ivy that clung to the narrow porch, the black outline of a cat, its back arched, the tail bristling. A small plaque, its yellow lettering faded and weather worn 'If the cat doesn't like you, neither will I' and several exclamation marks.

'Not passive aggressive at all then' Gregg said. Lorraine, her hand half way to the door knocker, half turned a smile towards him and then knocked.

'Sylvie's not a regular member. We chat online a fair bit though. I've not seen her for, oh, months I think. She can be a bit ...' The door opened. Sylvie filled the narrow space of the hall, leaning against the open door, one hand like unbaked dough resting on the wood.

'Lorraine! Come in, come in. Don't mind those boxes, they're for the tip. And you must be Gregg, come on in.'

The day had started drizzled and dour, flat cloud everywhere, the roads damp, the air still soaking with the heavier rain over night. Archie had picked Gregg up in that cold, empty hour just before dawn when the light lay brimming at the edge of the world and the air cooled to a mist in front of his face. The train had not been empty, the first commuters looking settled, waiting out the stops. Gregg had walked the length of the carriage, surreptitiously glancing at each of the people already in their seats before he sat near the exit. It would only be a few stops, they had agreed a journey further into London unnecessary. He had not bothered with his jacket and remained poised to get off and so, when he met the chill of the air hanging across the small platform, it seemed as if the day ahead would be colder.

Archie was walking into the station as Gregg exited and they both turned towards each other, hands extended in a halting gesture. There was a pause, a handshake seemed too formal, and Gregg was unsure of anything else but it was

Archie who came in, their shoulders touching briefly, his arm flung round to pat him twice on the back.

'Are you sure you've got enough there?' Archie nodded at Gregg's rucksack, the straps tangling against each other. He opened the boot of the car to reveal three or four bags, different sizes though not matching. 'There you go ... the difference between us queers and you straights ... luggage.' He laughed and, taking Gregg's backpack, he fitted it into a space that had been left and, pressing the button to see the boot slowly shut, he grinned.

'Shall we then?'

The roads were picking up the usual morning traffic by the time they had crossed the gentle green and dark of the Hampshire countryside. The A303 held a determined business across all its lanes. They spoke little, each still in their morning ease, and the road carried its miles lightly.

'We might be a little early for Lorraine' Archie said eventually, 'We can grab a coffee no doubt.' They had agreed to meet Lorraine at the Starbucks near the junction to Andover where she had been on business the previous day.

'It'll be better than the hotel's breakfast. Well maybe' she'd texted him, with an emoji that looked either sickly or drugged.

Another hour and the neat brown cafe, barely tucked away amongst young trees, had curved into view. The coffee was pungent and sweet, the rolls doughy at their centre. They sat in the window where all that could be seen was the passing traffic, their chairs just too low and too far apart to support anything other than the occasional comment. Travel brings with it a sense of suspension, strangeness. People moving in spaces only designed for these transient moments, the faint friction of excitement hovering, the potential of other places around the next curve, at the next turn.

Half an hour later, Lorraine arrived, her silhouette somehow now familiar to Gregg, framed as it was in the glass doorway, against the brighter light of the morning beyond.

'God, traffic. And, well, I couldn't get moving this morning. Hotel beds!' She said, rummaging in a smart laptop case for

her phone, looking up at the menu behind the serving bar, 'Do you want anything? I'm just having coffee. I suddenly realised the hotel breakfast was included so, you know, might as well.' And before either of them had a chance to answer, she was wandering over to the counter, still rummaging in the bag.

They had arrived at Sylvie's cottage midmorning, a few minutes late, but the parking was easy enough and Lorraine knew the house. Archie, declaring he had long wanted to investigate some local art gallery and shop, excused himself and walked off down the sloping lane into the tightening knot of buildings that clustered in the fold of the cove.

The cottage was one of a row, each unlike the other, each built differently, for a different and distant purpose. They were set below the road, where the natural slope of the hill took the village down into the valley and so it was they descended out of the weather, away from the grey skies and into the warm narrow spaces of Sylvie's cottage.

'Leave your shoes in the hall please!' Sylvie called back from the room at the end of the short hall. The noise of a kettle, the thump of a cupboard door and Gregg assumed it was the kitchen.

'You know about the cats right? I told you about them?' Lorraine whispered at Gregg as they were pushing their shoes into the narrow space between the bottom of the stairs and the pile of cardboard boxes next to the front door. Gregg nodded.

'Are you both OK with cats? I'm sure Lorraine's given you fair warning.' Sylvie's voice was light, accustomed to a kind of bustling daily activity, 'Come on through. Tea or coffee? We have both.'

Gregg had been expecting a room full of cats, on edges and shelves, tabletops and windowsills, watching, moving with a conserved violence, threading themselves around his ankles. The kitchen, however, was empty, surfaces clear, only Sylvie hefting herself between the small kitchen table and the

worksurface, pouring hot water, lifting packets of biscuits from cupboards.

‘Lorr, could you get me a plate from that cupboard there, thank you.’

Gregg hovered in the doorway, the kitchen was small, the ceiling low, made lower by the addition of spotlights attached to the narrow painted beams. The space seemed too small for Sylvie, everywhere she went it was with a manoeuvre or a combination of side steps, lifting wide hips across spaces, well known, instinctual. She had added purple to the plain brown of her hair and, as she moved through the window’s light, her head seemed surrounded briefly by a translucent haze.

‘We’ll go through to the lounge, a bit more space in there. If the moggies aren’t all in’ she peered through the kitchen window, ‘They don’t like the wet stuff.’

The door to the lounge dragged on the carpet, Gregg leaned into it.

‘Just give it a shove, I keep meaning to get someone in to sort it out.’

The room was warm with the small fire in the stone fireplace. There was a sort of thickness to the air, a binding that held close the faint smell of woodsmoke, a sweetness of incense and something else. The door seemed to gently push at something behind it and a white shape darted towards him, he stopped abruptly. A white cat pushed past him, then a tabby peered around the door, watching the white one. It stepped out towards the hall more carefully.

‘Ah no, Harry, not out here. Nor you Lucy, back you go. Gregg can you just shove them back in, just nudge them with your foot, they’re used to it.’

The white cat looked nonplussed at Gregg’s approaching foot and then hopped back into the lounge.

‘Best get in and close the door. They’re little tinkers the lot of them. They’ll be out and up those stairs and on me bed before you can say drat you cat.’

Busy with controlling the white cat, Gregg did not take in the lounge until Sylvie, shoving the door closed with her backside, gestured towards a generous couch that ran along the large front window. They were too large to be ornaments, those slim figures ranged along the deep windowsill. The light behind them washed them of any detail, their colours flattened against the grey. As Gregg moved towards the couch, two of them moved. A head turned towards him, a tail flipped carefully and he briefly hesitated, unsure whether he should intrude further, risk disturbing their quiet observation.

'Don't mind them, they'll just sit. And judge' Sylvie laughed and rolled on large hips to an overly cushioned chair the other side of the fireplace. It was draped in a tartan blanket the colours of autumn. Pillows were tucked into its corners, with delicate ivy leaves stitched across their corners. 'Except Jonas, he's a sweetie, not a malicious bone in his body. Aren't you Jonas?' A small cat stretched out towards Sylvie, yawning, and then hopped on to the small table beside her, his paws making no noise, gentle as dandelions.

'Good names. Your cats, I like them. Original' Gregg said.

'Well, they were named before they got here of course' Sylvie reached up and tugged the blanket across her shoulders. The room was warm, the pressing heat of a constant wood fire and closed doors.

'Lorraine tells me you're new to all this?'

Throughout these initial introductions and the settling of the coffee & biscuits, Lorraine had said little. Polite, smiling, she offered friendly answers to Sylvie's questions. Now she was sitting next to Gregg. A black and white cat had appeared on the arm of the couch and Lorraine was stroking it. It arched its back at each stroke. Gregg looked at Lorraine but her attention remained on the cat.

'Well, yes. I mean it's all a bit new. And I'm not sure ...'

'Whether it's all crap and nonsense?' Sylvie said, 'Been there. It can be bewildering. Not helped by there being a load of rubbish talked about it by people who don't really know what they're on about, in my opinion. I mean, remember that

bloke, what was his name, Jason, Justin or something' Sylvie leaned her head towards Lorraine who pulled a knowing face and nodded. 'He called himself, didn't he, called himself something like Jupiter Eveningstar. Or Janus Lightstar, or Buzz Lightyear for all I know.' Her voice rose, the words filling with a laughter that rose to the surface as large bubbles until she clasped one hand to her mouth to mime stifling it and squeezed her eyes shut, her shoulders shaking. 'Oh my god, he was an arse.' She laughed silently some more, shaking her head.

'But seriously, he was a fraud. Only out for the money or the status or some ego trip.'

She took out a tissue from somewhere in her cardigan and dabbed at her eyes then, taking one of the cookies from her plate, bit from it a large mouthful, her lips wide, then her chin working steadily, rolling it around her mouth in order to continue talking.

'So what can I tell you' she regarded the fireplace, 'Well, it's not that complicated. My belief is that we all have a soul. In fact that is really who we are. The body, see, is temporary, just something our soul resides in for a time. And when the body dies, the soul is released, then it finds another body and away it goes again. For a time. And so on.' She paused, the cookie still held in one hand, the crescent of her first bite curving past her fingers. She seemed to be lost in thought for a few moments then, with a quick shake of her head and a careful blinking of her eyes, she regarded Gregg.

'It happens quite quickly, the soul coming back, quite quickly. So, it can happen while others are still in their same body. You know, still alive' and she nodded at Gregg, encouraging him to understand.

On the windowsill behind him, there was a shifting, the movement given away by a faint sliding of shadows. He felt a firm, small paw press against the top of his shoulder, testing. A golden cat clambered down his chest, landing in his lap, each paw firm, circling until the cat faced him, the face teased with fur. A deep purring began, vibrating down each paw.

‘Oh Jess. If you don’t want her there, just drop her on the floor. She’s a bit of a tart that one.’ But Gregg made no move to remove her and she settled, curled up across his thighs, the purring warming his belly. ‘It’s fine’ he said.

‘I think Gregg might benefit from hearing a bit more about your story, Sylvie? If you’re happy to tell it, that is’ said Lorraine, her voice gentle, its usual confidence carefully withdrawn.

Sylvie nodded. She had taken the rest of the cookie into her mouth and was chewing it slowly. It filled her mouth completely, drawing her attention. She raised her fingers to cover her lips and nodded again. Outside the repetitive beeping of a reversing van struggled through the window. From his lap, Jess looked up, over his shoulders, ears sharp and in each cat the same casual alertness, the rigid ear, the turned head. Sylvie, finishing the mouthful, gestured at Gregg with one hand, calling his attention to her.

‘Well, I won’t bore you with the lot, how long have you got and all that.’

Lorraine shifted, edging herself towards the front of the couch, placed her mug on the low footstool in front of them.

‘I had my first miscarriage when I was twenty,’ Sylvie continued, her voice settling into a story told regularly, ‘I thought that was it, then, that we wouldn’t have any more. Rather that I couldn’t have any more. I was a bit naive back then. Anyway, I soon learned that weren’t the case, when I found myself pregnant again the next year. We hadn’t been consciously trying, although I suspect we were both hoping.’

She paused, reaching for the plate. It was empty and she placed her hand back on the arm of the chair, her fingers tapping briefly before settling.

‘Anyway, Lucy Anne wasn’t to be. Stillborn.’ She nodded, her eyes small and distant, ‘Looking back, that was probably what started the end of our marriage. It was not a good time. Anyway, well, I won’t tell it all. I must have been put together wrong or something. It all looked normal, you know, when they did tests and such like. But it just didn’t work right. My

second marriage, it didn't last too long after the next still birth. Harry. That was Harry.'

In the pause, it was only Lorraine who shifted, pressing a hand into the seat cushion to lever herself more firmly against the back of the couch. There was a stillness in the room, the small form of each cat waiting for Sylvie to continue.

'They'd be adults now.'

Gregg felt a careful weight on his chest. The purring of the cat on his lap had stopped and it lay there a tense, gathered warmth against him. As Sylvie had been speaking, he sensed the slow nearness of something vast, imposing, like cliffs rearing up behind Sylvie and with them ambiguous dread seemed to push itself between them all. He felt himself become still, hold ready.

'A few years later, I met someone. He was nice, attentive. We didn't marry, but we got on. He didn't want kids of course, had done all that with his previous. But it happened anyway. Jonas, then Millie. That's who they'd have been. He was caring, my other half, didn't run but, I don't know, it must get to you. Anyway we sort of carried on for a few more years, until he moved out.'

The room, the small garden, the road above them, all seemed to have moved to a distance. The fire had settled into an even glow, one small flame flickering in the corner. Gregg reached for some words, found nothing but an empty space and so settled on trying to convey a mix of attentiveness and sympathy in the way he held his head, the stillness of his body. Sylvie sat for a moment, both hands stretched across the arms of the chair, pale, soft. Everything held still, there was no release, it was not done.

'Then, you'd think I'd have done by then wouldn't you, but it just happened. A one night thing. I'm not even sure he wanted it. Actually I'm not sure I wanted it. The one night thing, I mean. Anyway, he disappeared like lightening of course and I had to go through it by myself this time. Jess. That would've been her name. Jess.' The purring in Gregg's lap started up again, a gentle vibration against a hand he had not realised

he had laid softly between the cat's ears, slowly tickling the small forehead.

'Not long after, I moved here. I love it here, my own place.' She looked down, watching the cat in Gregg's lap, 'I mean our place, sorry Jess'.

There was a moment of tilting disorientation, the floor seeming to heave up, the cushions of the couch seeming to enfold him. He felt small, everything around him expanding. The cat's purring deepened until it thrummed down his legs, up through his stomach to wrap itself around his lungs and push the blood into his face. The white cat that had been sitting all this time on the side table next to Sylvie stepped across the arm of the chair, onto Sylvie's lap, a single meow and in it Gregg found the distraction to let go his held breath.

'But it's OK now isn't it Harry? Yes, old man, it's better now. And I have you all here, each one of you.' Sylvie offered her fingers to the white cat, it pushed its head underneath them, again and again.

'You've chased it all away, all that stuff. Chased it all away and, so, here we are, aren't we.' She leaned her face towards the cat who lowered its head, pushing it towards the supple flesh under Sylvie's chin.

Lorraine shifted in her seat, uncrossing her legs quietly.

What words could he offer, what could possibly be enough.

'That's so ... I'm so ...' he said. Without lifting her face from the cat in front of her, Sylvie waved one hand towards him, 'Oh it's OK, it ancient history. And, well, here they are, here they all are. With me.' Her eyes lifted, looked across the room to where Gregg sat against the light of the window, 'They're always near, you know. Always near. Always.'

Then, as if waking from a nap, she seemed to reappear whole before them, here in the room again. She took in Gregg and Lorraine sitting opposite her.

'Can I get anyone another cup?' and began to haul herself out of the chair, the white cat nimbly hopping to the floor.

\* \* \*

The day had brightened, the sky restless with clouds moving steadily up the country. They had stayed for another cup of tea. An awkwardness crept between them, nothing that halted their chat, the words friendly, casual but there was something underneath that had caused Gregg and Lorraine to quickly finish their drinks, had given Sylvie a restless activity, constantly tidying away, washing up as they talked. They had moved into the kitchen before they left, leaving the cats in the front room. As they put on their shoes and took their coats from the hooks in the hall, the lounge door, standing slightly ajar, framed a golden face watched him say his farewell.

‘Five? She had five children still born?’ They were standing by the car, Lorraine playing with her keys. There was no sign of Archie, though he had sent a thumbs up sign in return to Gregg’s text.

They had parked in a small parking lot behind what looked like an old pub, long since closed, a For Sale sign leaning at its corner.

‘And a miscarriage’ said Lorraine, and she examined her hands briefly before looking up, staring at the empty windows of the pub, ‘I can’t ... horrible. I mean for her. Just horrible. I can’t even begin to imagine.’

Gregg leaned against the car, feeling a wave of tiredness suddenly. Lorraine was nodding, leaning forward to peer around the corner of the pub.

‘You’re a bloke so ...’ she seemed to check herself, glancing down and then at him, ‘I mean, you just wouldn’t. Neither would I to be honest.’

Archie appeared from around the empty pub, striding against the pull of the hill. He had a small brown paper bag in one hand and dark bottle in the other. He tried to wave but it only looked as if he were showing off his trophies like child.

‘If you’re thinking of having lunch here, think again. I don’t trust the look of the woman running the pub - she was having a smoke in the doorway and giving me the evil eye!’

They drove through a countryside that ignored the approaching arc of the afternoon. No-one seemed to want to

speak. Gregg watched the passing fields, the brief clusters of houses, then the flat directness of the dual carriageway.

‘Are you two hungry?’ Lorraine asked as they pulled into the car park at the cafe where they’d had breakfast. Archie’s car was tucked into a corner. ‘Because, I need something to eat. You don’t want to see how I drive hangry.’

It was too late for lunch and the cafe, though not empty, had that neglected feel of mid afternoons. In one corner two women chatted, their children having fun climbing the neighbouring tables. A small queue at the counter, though most took their drinks and headed back out to their vehicles.

‘Can I ask a question?’ Gregg turned his cup, around and around in its saucer, ‘Its probably a bloke kind of question so forgive me’

Lorraine nodded, her mouth turning towards a dry smile.

‘Is it true? Sylvie’s story. Is it true - six children, all ...’ he glanced over towards the two women. The children were screaming in joy, rocking a table until one of the women held out a restraining arm.

‘Well, yeah, I know what you mean. It’s a lot to take in, when she gives it to you like that. And I guess it’s unlikely we would ever find out. I expect we could search for records or something ...’ she frowned, shook her head at herself, ‘and anyway, what business is it of ours? It’s obviously what she believes, what she feels she has survived so who are we to take that off her.’

The traffic that rushed past them was getting busier, the first of the midweek journeys home or the end of the school runs. The trees here had lost their leaves, though the browns and coppers of them were strewn across the blunt grass of the verges, pushed against the glass of the cafe windows.

‘And it’s still separate rooms you’ll be wanting?’

It was not until they were carrying their bags down a narrow hallway that Gregg heard the word ‘still’. A brief moment of disorientation and, almost, a hot flush of embarrassment. It had not occurred to him how they might look to others, he and Archie, travelling together. Archie had booked the accommodation, at least for the first few nights, and Gregg had let him. It had not been accusatory, he realised, more invitational. God knows, in the years she had been running a bed and breakfast the stout, gently cheerful owner must have seen all variations of human connection. It was not that Gregg had any qualms about being with Archie, nor that others may make assumptions about who he was and how he loved. It was that others may somehow see a connection between him and another person, a connection that did not exist, that he might have to correct or deny and, in so doing, expose another’s assumptions, give them a brief moment of discomfort and embarrassment. He did not dwell on that other feeling, that swelled suddenly and bluntly as he realised how he and Archie might be seen, that the world had already forgotten his loss, that, even in its untruth, any suggestion of a relationship with another would commit his marriage to a forgotten history.

‘Will I need to talk loudly over breakfast about women and kids and the state of the housing market?’ Archie had opened the door to his room and was standing, his bag over one shoulder, smiling at Gregg hesitating in front of his own door. Gregg laughed, brief, soft and shook his head shyly, as if Archie had seen what he had been thinking, as if admonished gently.

The house was long, huddled up against a rising escarpment of gritstone, one end dipping into the narrow strip of woodland that snaked along the base of ragged rocks. The evening was clear though the presence of the trees and the looming headland pushed it away and the house and pub

next door seemed permanently overcast. They had a forgettable meal at the pub, a meagre collection of locals gathered in the bar while Gregg and Archie sat in the snug. Archie asked about Sylvie, coaxing Gregg to tell her story with an easy casualness that barely disguised his interest. After, walking out into the cooling air of the night, Archie asked whether Gregg fancied a walk before bedtime.

'It feels a bit too soon to turn in' he said. They had lingered over the remains of their meal, had another drink but still it was early. The dark had crept in though somewhere up above the sky still hummed with the last of the sunlight. They soon found that the road and the paths along the valley's edge had already settled into the dark and, unable to see far, they were driven up the sharply rising valley side, towards the last of the day above. The steep path soon laboured his breathing and Gregg stopped, leaning on a rock, looking out across the treeline. In the west the deepening burgundy and orange of the day's edge was settling below the horizon. All before it was in shadow, a landscape hidden, broad sweeps of a painter's brush. Archie, a few steps ahead on the path, had paused, his breathing a soft though steady pulse.

The top of the escarpment seemed only a darker line above them. They walked on, only briefly before the land flattened and before them was a field of ghosts. Gregg felt his heart stutter, his breath catch and, in the moment of disorientation, he saw before him a thin crowd of spirits waiting silently, facing him, as if to receive him into their midst, the dim vaults of the sky above. The birches were young, their silvery bark pale against the ferns and the path moved amongst them, disappearing into an older, darker copse of trees that hid the land beyond. Archie hesitated, turned away from the ghostly trees, stepped from the path to stand on a large, flat rock that hovered near the cliff edge.

'I bet the view from here in daylight is beautiful' he said and Gregg nodded in the dark. While they stood, caught their breath, Gregg was aware of the gathering of birches behind him, that silent congregation, solemn accompaniment to his

unease. He looked out across the land though his attention was drawn continually back to the trees, their presence pushing at his back like a gentle, pointed finger. Eventually he glanced back towards them. The shadows had darkened between them, yet still their slim trunks held out against the coming night, a dim and grainy gathering. There, near that tree that had an awkward curve in its trunk, a shadow darker than the rest seemed to rest a hand upon the bark. Gregg found he could not turn back, watched for the movement he knew with an ache of horror would come. Then the hand lifted from the tree, quickly lost in the dark though as if reaching for him.

It felt like a disconnection, a confusing sense of the pressing dark and a landscape huge and silently gathering close and unseen. They felt their way back down the path, each step a sensing, a cautious hope to meet solid ground. Gregg held his hands out in front of him, reaching for the solidity of a branch or stone that would only occasionally offer up a brief steadiness. While they had been standing at the top of the valley, the night had settled securely below them and now, in the meshing silence of the trees, there was only a solid darkness, the lights of their accommodation or the pub not yet close enough. They scrambled on, laughter like a calling out to each other. The ground was suddenly treacherous under Gregg's feet and he felt himself tipping down the slope. His hands found Archie's back, shoulder and they steadied each other.

'Hang on, hang on. I'm such an idiot. My phone!' Archie said. A fumbling and then with a rude sharpness a harsh, small light shocked the mud and stones of the path beneath their feet into a pale relief of lines and shadows. With this light, they made a more certain progress. Behind him Gregg could feel the closing darkness, washing in like a line around rocks as they passed and with it he could not shake the feeling that somewhere behind the dark shadow floated, watching their pale circle of wavering light slowly disappear down the hill.

The brightness of the day caught them by surprise, Archie commenting about getting his shorts out again as they left the car in one of the small side streets. It had been cobbled once and now a thin tarmac had been barely applied, a hesitant reckoning with history that did little to overcome it.

Lorraine had suggested a lunch at the arts centre, the cafe being good enough and her schedule and the locality limiting their choices. It was a small town, rarely mentioned beyond its immediate geography, and so the arts centre seemed to be a valiant attempt to impose a sense of the external world permanently amongst the local. Perhaps at one point the building had been a workshop or warehouse, the curving brick of its entrance, now filled with heavy glass doors, and the tall narrow windows above hinting at past industry. Its interior was a wash of white made brilliant by the sunlight and the numerous spotlights smuggled into every corner. The cafe was small though not empty. This surprised Gregg, who had already prepared himself for the discomfort of being the only customers. People knew each other, it seemed, and they leaned across chairs or paused at tables to talk. A gathering of loose acquaintance that filled the place with enough life that it was with easy comfort they settled at a corner table.

The journey across the country had been an unremarkable one, dual carriageways and roundabouts, the land flat and functional around them, traffic busy enough. It seemed to Gregg that here, between the hastening roads, were places unacknowledged except to those who lived and worked there and it struck him that it was in these vast acres that the country truly resided, not in the ragged loudness of cliffs, mountain and moors but here in the plainness of the fields, the circling estates and thin villages, the endless miles of it between the tight tangle of cities.

'Hello boys!' Lorraine came into the cafe, her dress patterns of deep red and blue and, briefly, with the light and the bustle, it was if it were summer again. She knew the man

working behind the cafe's counter, stood talking to him easily as her coffee was prepared, a sandwich selected and held loosely in one hand.

'Well,' she lowered her voice as she arrived at their table, 'I can say it to you two but this latest exhibition is a bit shit' the last word whispered, almost mouthed at them and overtaken by a narrow smile. 'Still, not ours to question why, just to do the marketing. Though how to make people come all the way out here to see a load of glass jars with bits of rubbish in them, well, let's just say I've got my work cut out for me.' She ripped into the flimsiness of the sandwich's box with the satisfaction of someone caught up in the certainty of a challenge ahead that would be easily overcome.

'How's it going? Enjoying your boys trip?' she said. She became focused on managing the over-filled sandwich to her mouth and soon she was chewing in that awkward way when in company.

'Well, we haven't been up to much really, since we last saw you. After Sylvie. Mostly just travelling' Archie said, watching Lorraine struggle with her sandwich and then gently pushing a napkin across the table towards her. Lorraine nodded, still chewing and looked at Gregg. There were a few moments of hovering silence between them before Lorraine could speak again

'Yes, on reflection, I'm not sure Sylvie was the best choice for your first person. Although I did warn you these would be real people so ...' she shrugged, lined herself up for another bite from the sandwich, this one more modest, allowing her to continue speaking in a halting way, politeness and haste pulling at her mouth 'And how about you Gregg? Any thoughts? Revelations and awakenings?' Though asked casually, her chewing slowed, the sandwich hovered near her lips, her eyes settled on Gregg who smiled cautiously, inviting in the humour of her question, a humour that he was not convinced had been offered.

'I'm not a huge fan of cats' was all he could find to say, fearing anything else would lead them down uncertain paths.

Here amongst the comforting restlessness of the cafe, the bright clean walls with the sunlight carefully drawing out the windows' edges, he felt the inner urge to keep any sense of dimness, of shadow away. Lorraine regarded him briefly and then, starting up her chewing again, said 'OK. Are you ready to meet Margaret and Graham then?'

Their coffees had sagged, the foam clinging to the rim of the mug, the table now littered with their empty plates and packets. 'I said you'd be at theirs about 3pm. They're expecting you Gregg but I didn't mention you Archie, though I don't expect they'd mind. Or say anything if they did. Sweet couple. A bit dull I seem to remember but nice enough.'

'The sea at night is better than my husband.'

Margaret looked from the plain and broad window, ignoring the brief remaining stretch of road and the rocks that stood against the tumbling seawater, looking plainly at that wide space where the waters jostled and then, further out, shifted ponderously and, still further out, the flat unmoving line tipping over into sky.

If Graham took any offence at her remark, he showed nothing. He picked up a mug from the tray placed on the coffee table, turning it until its handle faced him, his fingers large, grasping the full body of it and then he settled back into the armchair. It suited him, the brown of its cloth in harmony with the tans and creams of his sweater, the musky brown of his corduroys. So settled he seemed that Gregg expected to see him tip back his chair, raise his slippered feet on some hidden footstool emerging from the chair's base. Graham shifted deeper in, his legs neat, his feet remained squarely on the floor.

'It sends me off straight away. Usually.' Margaret sniffed, a deep intake of breath, her shoulders shrugging and then she turned back towards Gregg, smiling. 'How's the coffee?'

Gregg, still struggling against the image of the sea sending Margaret to sleep whilst her husband, presumably nearby, lay expectant, answered,

'Yes, thank you, its good.'

'We don't talk to many people about this you know? Just some from the group. Though, saying that, its been some time since we've even done that really. They all know ... That's right isn't it Graham? We haven't really talked in some time. Still, Lorraine tells me it might be useful. For you. And since you contacted us.'

Graham sipped his coffee. His eyes watched Margaret then looked away, to the large window that spread itself across the living room wall. Gregg nodded and waited.

'Well, so ... Ian passed a while back now. He was ten so what's that? Twenty five years now? That's right Graham, isn't it? He drowned, quite suddenly.' She paused, placing a hand on the windowsill in front of her, looking out along the long, broad stretch of the beach to where the sea beat constantly at its fraying edges. If there was any emotion, it was imperceptible, her figure silhouetted by the grey light of the sea and the sky. Gregg wondered whether any drowning was not sudden and the rising thought of a slow immersion, a suffocation was quickly pushed away. He noticed Graham shift in his chair, raising a leg as if to cross it and then settling it back on the floor. Margaret moved away from the window and lowered herself, mug in hand, into the other armchair, opposite Graham.

'He hasn't returned to us yet' she said, shifting her hip against the arm of the chair, 'You can't force these things, its not up to us.' She looked into her mug and swilled the coffee, 'That's right, isn't it Graham?'

In the space left Graham nodded. He was watching her, gruff in the presence of a stranger though his eyebrows softened as he looked at his wife. There was a pause, into which poured the sea beating distantly against the shore. A stronger wind had rushed across the wide bay and was now pushing at the window which, though solid enough, vibrated the reflection of a lamp that threw a half hearted light into the room.

'If you don't mind me asking' Gregg said. Margaret looked up at him, a steady look, her mouth still downturned from her lost trail of thought. 'How have you looked out for him? I mean how do you try and see if he's here, returned?' He came to a halt and sat back against the sloping cushion of the settee. 'I mean, sorry, I don't know how to say it.'

Margaret nodded, brushed at her thighs, watching her hands.

'No, I know, that's fine. When it gets put into words, it is a bit weird, we know, don't we Graham?' She did not look across at her husband who remained unmoving. 'We haven't

done much ... no, I don't mean that. We have but its nothing dramatic. We haven't done, you know, rituals or such like. We did try ... once. With Shona. But well ... that's not us is it Graham? We just sort of keep a look out. Just, when I go out and about, I notice people. I look at them. One of them might be him.'

Graham shifted in his chair, an arm moved, a repositioning of his back. Margaret glanced at him.

'I mean I've been to places. You know, places that he used to love, or go to regularly. Just to see. Sometimes they go back there, though I expect they aren't sure why, just sort of drawn to somewhere. Or perhaps they notice there's some sense of it when they're passing through.'

The sudden call of a gull, its sharpness hard and quick in the room and all three of them looked to the window though there was nothing to be seen.

'I've been back to his favourite beach. And round his school, and where he and his friends would cycle, you remember Graham? Those woods up near where the estate is now. Its beautiful up there, specially in the spring.'

She placed the mug on the coffee table and wiped gently at the back of her hand, looking once more to the window and to the sea.

'I've not been back to .. You know, where it happened'

The pause felt unacknowledged so Gregg made a noise that was meant to sound soothing, attentive, empathetic.

'I guess its too painful? That's understandable'. From the corner of his eye, Gregg noticed Graham shift again, rising slightly to resettle.

'No, no. Nothing like that. Its closed now. They demolished it. For houses.' Margaret placed both hands on the arms of the chair and smiled at him, her lips unconvincingly thin, 'I can't exactly loiter round people's homes can I? What would I say? That I'm looking for the soul of my son who drowned in the pool that was here once?' She laughed, a short, quiet snort and she raised a hand to rest her chin in it, looking at Graham.

'We've ...' she still watched Graham who was taking her in as she talked, 'I've begun to just accept that he may not be returning. That he's still out there but he's not coming here again. I think.' She looked up to the window again though all that could be seen was the mottling grey sky and there, darting out of frame, the thin white line of a gull. 'So best not to waste a life waiting eh? At least that's what we think. Now. Don't we Graham?'

'Yes' Graham said.

The push of the wind at his face was welcome, it rushed at him as he rounded the corner of Margaret and Graham's building, snapping his anorak and roughly tousling his hair. Crossing the road, towards the stones of the shore, Gregg was aware of that long, broad window on the first floor behind him and the room, probably no longer quiet, Margaret would be busy at tidying away or washing up the mugs. He had no doubt Graham would still be where he had last seen him, in the armchair, his feet neat and next to each other on the beige carpet. Perhaps he had picked up the paper, or a book. Perhaps he was watching the sky through the window, or Gregg's yellow anorak as he leaned his way into the wind, to cross the road and stand at the rusting barrier above the stones and, beyond, the tumult of the waves. Perhaps Margaret had turned on the stereo in the kitchen and there would be thin music now, weak and pale.

A narrow set of steps led to a sodden, wavering path of sand amongst the dark stones. Archie had disappeared along the cliff top path after they arrived, wanting to stretch his legs after the drive and leaving Gregg to meet Margaret and Graham. He might still be clambering over the rocks, might be nestled into a pub and so Gregg, feeling the empty afternoon hours ahead of him and that long blank window behind, headed down the path to the beach. The expanse and scale of the shore seemed to offer him the safety of insignificance.

Gregg felt the wind fully now, with nothing between him and the wide expanse of sea. He leaned further into it and grasped at his jacket. The sand at the bottom of the steps glistened with the recent tide, streaked with fibrous strands of the evergreen seaweed, though it was firm beneath his boot, giving little, pulling gently at his soles. Out there, where the stones wavered to a halt, a broad stretch of sand, curving away to the distant cliffs. The air felt thick, full of the waters it had crossed all day. He gulped at each breath. After the stillness of the flat this terrible force felt glorious and

uncontrolled, he was insubstantial and unimportant and so he let it buffet and bully him as he walked across the sands.

The rise of the hill behind him pushed him further out, each house buried backwards into the stone and earth, grey windows, holding the light of the sky steady, the blankness of them turned towards the horizon. At the top, near where the rising hill began its quick turn over and inwards, heading into the fields and lanes of the mainland, a road lay hidden between a low, wind-carved hedge. Along it a white van, moving at a hurried, bouncing pace. It disappeared behind the line of roofs that marked the outer houses of the nearest village, a straggling line of grey stone houses, one desolate pub.

A walker made their way along the haphazard path that cut backward and forward down the steep hill. The solid black of their coat, the bobbing, erratic steps, and the surety of their form marked them out against the merging greens, greys and browns of the hillside. Gregg watched them as they slowly descended towards the low line of earth and stone, where the last wave of the land broke open against the dark rocks of the beach. As the figure reached the bottom of the path, they paused. Here the path squeezed itself into a narrow, short cutting, a rocky descent onto the stones that edged the beach. They waited here, perhaps looking out across the beach, seeing the small yellow shape of Gregg.

Conscious that he was staring at the only other person on that stretch of the coast, Gregg turned away, looking out to the wavering horizon. The wind had brought a sleeting rain now, its cold brushing at his face. It was not yet rain but still it crept across him until his trousers were damp and the skin of his anorak beaded with it. He walked further on. A stronger gust of wind caused him to turn away from the sea and he looked again for the walker, expecting them to have disappeared, or to be on the beach behind him. Instead they still stood there, above the narrow little path. At this distance Gregg could only see the shape of them, no paleness marking a face, nothing to show where they might be looking,

the black outline so complete that Gregg assumed they had raised the hood of their jacket. He found himself suddenly taut, a shortness in his breath. In turning away he hunched, put his hands in his jacket pockets, walked further. The sand seemed to be heavy with water now, dragging at his boots. With each step he imagined he could feel the gaze of that other person on his shoulders, pushing at the spot between his shoulder blades. It became persistent and, unable to ignore it, he stopped, as if regarding the sea, and turned slowly back towards where the figure had stood. The person was on the beach, beyond the stones, nothing but the broad expanse of sand between them. They were not striding, but standing still, a slim silent form. The drizzle had thickened in an air already brimming with sea spray, nothing had certainty now, all details and lines were obscured and Gregg could see little but the dark shape of the figure behind him. Gregg turned sharply and began to stride away, towards the arcing, black stones that reached out into the sea and that curled around the edges of the sand.

The wind, in its persistence, had begun to creep beneath his skin, a slow chill crept from his fingers, across his shoulders until it threatened the warmth at the heart of his chest. He found himself wrapping his arms about his chest, hunching forward into them, watching his feet on the sands. Each step pushed moisture away, a quick broad circle of it until the seas thrumming tide washed it smooth. He looked back but the light was poor and the dark fingers of those tumbled rocks were dimmer, sea spray and evening swarming over them. If there was someone still there, they would be lost to the fading light.

Ahead the sands were narrowing, ending at the base of an outcropping of the rising cliffs. At lower tides it would be possible to scramble across the rocks, around into the next bay. Here rocks foamed with waves, the spray of their beating arrivals like fireworks glimpsed in the distance. He knew he would have to turn back soon, the waters were pushing more readily at his shoes. There was a narrow cutting in the

sharpening rise of the headland, over there on his right, where the cliffs had not yet erupted from the earth, where he could scramble up to the sloping side of the long, grass covered hill and so make a halting way back to the huddling houses.

All his days seemed to be full of this overwhelming fading of light, saturated with waters, neither day nor dusk nor night but the forgotten hours in between. Nothing seemed to reach him, nothing seemed to arrive or depart, just an endless drifting between states. He suddenly wanted certainty, definition, something that occupied space with a knowing confidence. Margaret watching at her window. Graham's neat slippered feet. Out here, all was indefinite, formless, merging. A deep thump shook through the sands beneath him and a tall spout of spray rushed above the rocks. Out there, in the deeper waters, there would be form, it could all be felt, it was not stuck nor febrile, it would be deep and solid. Gregg stood still. The sand ended and the first rocks slewed against the incoming waves. Water washed at his feet, soaking his shoes. He watched it pushing past, regardless of him, then retreating. He took a step towards the incoming sea, another wave, this time streaming across his ankles, the cold of it like a quick, sharp bite. A few more steps. The higher the water crept up his legs the warmer his skin seemed to feel, after the first shock all seemed to settle in, steady below the restless surface, down there was a slow certainty. Then a large wave rolled in, edging with frantic spray along the rocks until it washed over Gregg's waist, a single forceful hand pushed at the centre of his chest. He rocked on his feet, his arms quickly flailing to steady himself. As the water made its slow turn towards a returning rush back out to deeper waters Gregg seemed to waken to himself, turning awkwardly to the solidity of the nearby rocks, grasping at them, pulling himself from the waters until, with water running from the ends of his trousers, he clambered back to the thin and final strip of dry sand at the back of the bay. He followed the narrow cutting away from the beach as it twisted itself to a narrow plateau of

rock and sand that lay at the foot of the lumbering hill. Here he could walk unimpeded back along the curve of the bay, back to where the houses of the village stood steadily in the greying light.

The car slanted into the high hedge of a lane running along the backs of the last bungalows in the cove. The lane had been widened here, a turning point and a cross roads where other, narrower lanes began a perilous pitch down the hillside to the increasingly huddled houses nearer the shore. A single street light, stunted and short, stood across the lane, it had the old orange glow of neglect or forgetfulness and Gregg used the light of his phone for the last few yards. The wind had strengthened in his climb away from the sands and with it a whipping, stinging rain began to catch at his face as he rushed into the cover of the hedge and, finally, the dry interior of the car. He sat in the passenger seat, feeling his clothes clinging to his skin. The walk had rid them of the worst but they would be damp for hours. The car was empty, Archie had not returned and Gregg had a quick sharp image of Archie, out there in the dirty darkening evening, leaning against the wind, leaning into the land, away from the rocks and the sea below.

The street light wavered in the wind, rain drew lines across its light. Gregg began to feel a chill creeping across his thighs, down into his feet. They had not sorted accommodation for the night ahead, trusting in a thoughtless way to the inevitability of cheap roadside hotels. The thought of a drive in damp, clinging clothes through the narrow lanes and turning hedges of the empty farmland that crowded to the coast sat heavy on his thoughts. He took off his shoes, his socks, then his trousers and underpants, the cold lessening with each shedding. In the back seat there was a blanket, his heavier coat and so he clambered through to the rear of the car and wrapped himself in these, eventually removing the rest of his sodden clothes until he huddled naked across the back seat listening to the wind race through the hedge, feeling it curl over its shaking edge to prod at the car, rocking

it once, twice before it settled. He fell asleep to its constant thrumming through the overhead phone lines.

The wind woke him, racing in as the car door opened to quickly probe at the nape of his neck. A hurl of weather against the interior of the car and then, with a reassuring thump the car door was closed again and Archie sat in the driver's seat catching his breath and wiping rainwater from his forehead.

'I'll drive. You stay there, dry off. We'll find somewhere but let's see how far we get.'

The car, when it started, climbed awkwardly from the lane, leaning and rocking cautiously, then the larger roads brought a steadying. The car's warmth, the thrumming of its travel, wrapped around Gregg and as the light faded sleep secretly took away the minutes. Only the dimming shape of Archie left to see as they travelled inland.

Over the next few days the car occupied their hours. Daylight, made uniform by a constancy of clouds, merged with dusk too quickly so that they seemed to routinely travel at the fulcrum between afternoon and evening.

On this morning, however, the road took on the grey promise of a predawn light, pulling them from the sky and bare trees. The car held steady, softly leaned through the bends, made its quick and small way through the spreading flatness of the fens. The sun had not yet arrived, the light even, a uniform and dim brightening towards another day. The car's headlights, still needed, though their usual striking confidence absorbed quickly into the wider paleness. Inside, warm, steady, Gregg felt suspended and though he was driving, he felt unnecessary, the act of it habitual, minimal, his hands on the wheel gentle, nudging. It was not distraction but relaxed concentration, a quiet mindfulness, the road, the small adjustments of the wheel and speed, the slow creeping light all around. The drugs had not yet left him, though now he felt all the settling steadiness of their departure, some dim awareness of his body reckoning up after a night that now blurred across vivid, quick moments, the blooming of a tiredness not yet overwhelming.

Archie, next to him, head leaning against the cooling glass, watching the rising day from the passenger window. Glancing at him, Gregg could see he was awake though there too in the easing of his shoulders, the stillness of his hands in his lap, there was the settling release that eventually comes.

They had only the barest of instructions with which to find the place, given in a text from one of Archie's contacts. Nothing about distance, the few words neglecting to give any sense of the remoteness of the place and, after half an hour on narrow straight roads, an unsettled sense of frustration had crept through both of them.

'Do you think we should've gone right back there?'

'Where the hell is this place?'

'OK, keep going for a bit further then we'll see.'

And such. An easy exchange, no sense of argument, a shared exasperation with the unvarying flatness of the Norfolk landscape, giving no help or sign, leading them deeper in until each cluster of houses passed appeared like the last. The dark had long settled into night, which only exaggerated the similarities of the road, the low banks along its side. They stopped at one point, at a cross-roads where a signpost leaned away from the road, sinking slowly into the land. Their satnav showed them exactly where they were but, unsure of their destination, it only highlighted the immense flatness in which they could be lost. Eventually a sign flashed into the headlights announcing a village that was mentioned in the scant text directions and soon, down a narrowing lane into sparse trees, the dark outline of a building suggested itself from the shadows. Tucked amongst the trees, pulled up against ragged bushes, were a number of cars, enough to suggest an event. More could be seen around the corner, pushing up against each other.

Gregg felt a rising alertness in his chest. It had been some years since he had last been out this late, not ending but starting an evening as the hours pulled him into the long dark run to another dawn, lost hours in the usual day to day but here, with the promise of people and music and noise, here they were strangely alluring, like another country rarely visited and remembered only with a yearning to return.

The air was clean, the bitterness of the surrounding wetlands filling Gregg's nose, chasing down into his lungs. It had not rained for the past few days though the land held its waters close and the sense that this house, this clustering of buildings and trees, stood upon a low island, it surrounded them as they stood by the car, getting their bearings. A low muscular thump came from the darkness of the house and then a door must have opened somewhere as a spill of bright, loud dance music startled out across the dark before being muffled, contained once more.

'I think this must be the place' Archie said. He had taken his jacket from the back seat but now, looking up at the ink of the sky, he placed it back. 'C'mon, we'll be fine once we're inside'.

The house had once been a manor house, a low two storeys though what it lacked in height it gained in the sprawling wings and additions so that it crept out through the wooded rise of the land, holding itself to the drier rock above the unreliable waters. A light over an arching side door illuminated two figures, their hands crossed in front of them in the way suggestive of security. They let Archie and Gregg in without looking directly at them, ignoring Archie's 'good evening' as he hopped up the steps. Inside the music flooded down the narrow hallway, washed through them. Gregg could feel the heaviness of each beat in his stomach, the buzz of bass crawling down to his groin. Coloured lights had been strung everywhere, spotlights on the floor illuminating old stone and brick. A younger man stood in a doorway, talking to two women, one larger than the other, her boots reaching past her knees. The man looked across at Gregg and Archie as they passed.

'Coats?' he said, though the words pushed their way through the music to them. Archie smiled and gestured there was no need and the young man turned back to a shouted conversation going on between the women. The place seemed to unfold ahead of them, in each doorway a glimpse of people, lights. There were a number of rooms playing music, it clashed in the halls and side rooms, drove them towards a set of double doors ahead through which two men stumbled, laughing. One of them held the door open. Beyond a larger room, blaring and stuttering lights, the music bold, filling every space. Here a crowd of people dancing, filling the centre and others around the edges, draping themselves from the walls and arches. The room rushed at Gregg so exuberantly that he stopped in the space before the doors, stood to let it surround him. Archie halted next to him, though

he was grinning widely, nodding his head. He looked at Archie, an invitation and amazement.

Gregg had been to clubs, all nighters, even a couple of raves. They appeared regularly in the landscape that had been his early twenties. Dim nights pierced with flashes of colour and movement and laughter. Even dimmer days that followed as the drugs and late nights slowly drained away. After Helen and, particularly, after Tom the need to go out seemed to fade. His other friends, each taken up with their own lives, many with their own versions of family, they also faded, some completely, others into the background only to emerge a few times a year. Having assumed that clubbing and staying out late, let alone all night, had been quietly tucked away, Gregg was caught off guard by the sweeping rush of emotion tingling up his spine as he stood with Archie. It all seemed so achingly familiar, a yearning and urge to move and join, pulled by the music, pulling him into the hours ahead.

Archie grabbed Gregg's shoulder, pulled him towards the long side of the room, towards the brightness of a bar, set up in an adjoining room, tables of white cloth now strewn with bottles and cans. Here Archie indicated that he wanted two beers. The barman grabbed two bottles from a large cooler, snapped off the tops and soon they were standing near the doorway to the main room swigging and smiling. The music was too loud for conversation. All around people were shouting into each other's ears, their words a kind of blaring behind the beat, their faces wavering and flickering in the changing light.

Suddenly Gregg raised a hand, surprised delight and greeting at a group of people coming into the barroom. A man, his long hair grey before his years, his arm around a small woman, saw Archie gesturing. His face, already easy with humour, widened into a grin and he raised his own arms, scuffing the hair of the woman. He and Archie hugged, slapping backs, shouting greetings.

'Gregg, this is Ben. I told you about Ben' Archie leaned close to Gregg's ear, the breath of his words briefly on the nape of his neck. Before Gregg could do much else, Ben had embraced him, holding him close and full, shouting a hello. There were shouted introductions to the others, half mimed greetings and they lingered around the bar while Ben ordered bottles of water. Then back into the main room, out into the easy press of people along the edges. Ben and Archie huddled briefly near an alcove, then Archie, leaning close to Gregg, scrabbled for his hand, pushed a broken pink pill into it, smiling.

'Just a half. To get you started' and he offered Gregg a bottle of water.

In the past, his drug taking had been occasional, with friends and though it always coloured in the night with such emotions that only ever seemed to lurk around the edges of his days, it was never without a small vibrating sense of dread. The first hour after the first half seemed tense with a sort of fearful waiting, each sensation and twitch, each small sliding, came with its own barb of worry that this would end in sweaty, faint nausea or shivering watchfulness. It never happened and so the worry became part of the climb into whatever state that evening's substance was going to evoke. A sort of trial through which he could pass into a more expansive and lighter state of existing for a while. As they waited at the side of the room, Gregg felt the familiar nag of it, this time returning with more years of other experiences behind it. He turned from it, concentrated on watching people, avoided the regular frantic whirling of the lights. Next to him, Archie and Ben were carrying on a halting conversation, short sentences barked and laughing at each other, taking advantage of any break in the beat to get their point across. At one point Gregg heard Ben shout 'it was enormous of course' and they both laughed into the next swig of water. The music seemed to be getting louder now, the beat climbing through the muscles of his thighs to push at his stomach. Then, emerging from the insistence of its noise, a

familiar synth hook and as Gregg felt the first tickling climb of it along his backbone, Archie and Ben cheered loudly. They all moved towards the middle of the room, passing into the crowd with ease and Gregg was momentarily seized with a flighty panic that he had forgotten how to dance. It passed.

Then the hours seemed fluid, irrelevant. Only the flash of images, tableaux caught in the arc light, emerging from dry ice and breaks and here at the sides other people everyone seemed to smile except that one young woman whose face was full of tears as she pushed past him but there was probably nothing he should do and it would be ok for her then two men each topless next to him oblivious to anyone but themselves and they kissed did they kiss yes they kissed and anyway who cares no actually it was great fantastic to be amongst it all again all this life and over there a couple slow dancing even though the beat had dropped from that expanse of lifting noise that swept everyone's arm skywards before the shouted cheering jumping dance and there was that couple locked together still and it was as if a lifting and shedding had happened all his skins taken gently from him and here he was amongst everything again it was beautiful and this would be how it was and how it should be and then there was Helen not nearby but so strong in his head so here with him and with it joy and deep deep sadness and a yawning absence and an exhilarated memory and as that wall of deep and dark seemed to begin to gather here was Archie dancing in front of him beaming and then grabbing him hugging and then they danced each an arm around the other until until and now and now ... a quieter room though still full of the noise and fury of the large room but muted or sieved through the stone and Archie and Ben sitting on sofas their edges tatty and worn and the two women and another man this one with a cropped head his skull so gaunt and his mouth long and thin when it smiled and he was saying something to Archie his hand friendly on his shoulder the other offering up another pill broken in two on his palm and Archie took one of the halves while the man raised the other towards Gregg its chalky

grittiness briefly on his tongue before rinsing down with water and both Archie and this other man slapping him on the back and the music from the other room found him.

‘Yeah yeah that’s right yeah’

‘No really, its so right and I don’t know why people can’t see it’

‘Yeah yeah’

‘I mean its so fucking obvious, so fucking right under their noses and yet ...’

‘Yeah yeah .. no .. yeah’

‘I don’t know maybe we’re not meant to see it. I mean every day like. Not like now ... here’

‘Yeah, yeah’

Who knew what time it was, it was all dark and lights and movement now, only this and nothing beyond. Gregg was sitting on another sofa, another room, this one with its brickwork whitewashed, the rough edges of the brick pushing through the hasty whiteness, the lights stabbing across a low vaulting ceiling. He thought in other times the room would be scruffy, unfinished, functional, all these words fought now for his attention let it drop and god that tune there, that sounded good. Next to him the balding man, his legs skinny, long, tapering feet propped up on a low table in front of them, shaking the bottles over, he was nodding his head to the music, turning it to take in the room, sweeping his eyes back to Gregg and smiling.

Archie arrived back from wherever he’d been, still dancing, each step a slight smiling bob, pushing through the loose groups of people and erratic furniture. One of the woman was with with him, clutching his arm and laughing. She was wearing a top like a vest covered in sparkling purple threads. They both collapsed into the sofa opposite, still laughing.

‘You need to check out the techno room. Fuck me it’s banging.’ Archie said then, ‘Do we still say banging?’ The

woman laughed reached for a bottle of beer on the shelf next to them, it might have been hers.

'Oh man, I haven't done techno for a while' the balding man sitting next to Gregg leaned in, over his knees towards Archie and then smiled, turning his face to each of them. His tongue had slipped from the side of his mouth, exploring the dark moistness at the curve of his mouth and it turned the smile into a leer, inviting something more. 'Think I'd need a bit of a lifter before that, don't you think?' And he slid two fingers into the top pocket of his faded jacket, lifting out a small bag. 'What do you reckon then Greggie ... shall we?'

Gregg shook his head, held up a hand in polite refusal and took a swig of beer. The man fished out a pill and placing it between the two front teeth that slid narrowly from behind his pale upper lip, bit into it. He tongued at its crumbling edge and then proffered the remaining half to Gregg.

'C'mon Greggie, just another half. See the night off to a good end.'

He had never been good at refusals. Particularly when what was offered held both, side by side, the compulsion and the fear of the new, the potentially dangerous, the socially enhancing.

'Take more risks, Gregg. That's what life wants from you. To take more risks' the man said, it seemed as if whispered. The music retreated, the movement of dancers and shuffling passing of people slowed and here suspended seemed to be the man's face, softened now, smudged by a redness in the light, his hand hovering there between them 'Especially the ones your head says to avoid.'

Gregg took the crumbling pill. Everything seemed to start again. Archie raised both his arms above his head, his face lit with delight, mouthing 'yes!' And then lowered them, extending one out towards the balding man who tipped another pill into the cupped palm.

Techno. Once Gregg had been out with a group of friends on a stag do. It was Brighton. Some deeply dark club buried into its streets. One of the group had brought speed, another

coke. The night was about fury and sweat and isolation and then a long, silent train journey home in the harsh light. Techno. Here the fury but also the light and there was no loneliness, the people gathered into the smaller room, jostling one against the other, the freeze frame flash of each moment already like memories distantly recalled. The balding man grinning, his tongue fat to the corner of his mouth, nodding and jabbing and ducking. Here was someone like Archie, here was Ben, the silver of his hair wiping streaks briefly in the dark. No-one touched but each was with the other. Then, over there, to one side of the DJ booth set into the wall, a shape and a shadow, only noticeable in its stillness and gradually all of Gregg's attention gathered around it. Each flash of light teasing out some sense of its shape though never enough, only the stillness. And then, it seemed to raise an arm, a hand above a crowd that was bouncing like a restless sea and Gregg felt the floor tip enough for him to slide towards Archie, bump against him. He stilled himself and then, with a gesture of all is well, picked his way through the concentrated fury of the dancers, out into a narrow hall full of people now shabby with the last hours, easy in their slow conversations. Here was a soft armchair and into it Gregg sank, leaning his head on one hand, closing his eyes and letting the wash of noise flood through him, pushing away that single image that had hovered all night.

'You ok buddy?' A face, handsome, dark pushing with concern. Gregg smiled up at it and saw it break to match his, the teeth so perfect and then a hand on his shoulder briefly. 'You're Ok buddy. Having a good night?' But the person was already leaving. Then Archie, his hair now flat with heat and sweat, the shirt clinging close to him.

'Oh man, you OK? God that was fucking intense' he collapsed onto the arm of the chair then sliding with laughter he was draped across Gregg, leaning back his head, upside down, so he could take in the long hallway briefly 'Oh, maybe not.' And he sat upright. He was heavy but it was a welcome weight after all the hours of lightness and they seemed to fix

themselves to that point, coming down from some distant point together. Here, in this hallway, the music was held back, an accompaniment not a performance and they had no need to shout, sentences could be formed if needed.

But there seemed to be no sentences for a long time, only laughter, light, breaking from one or the other like soft acknowledgements. Archie's weight became enough for Gregg to shift and turn on the chair until they ended up sitting next to each other. They watched people come and go along the hall, regularly nodding, small, short exchanges, each smiling, confirming to each other that the evening was good.

'It must be getting light soon' Archie said. Though the music was still insistent, there was a loosening, an easing, more people now moving through the corridors with the casual ease of letting go, a performance done. More voices now, in flowing conversations, the late and early of the night removing any sense of usual routine.

'Yes. Dawn' Gregg nodded. He was watching a group of three or four women who had emerged from the main room, the burst of music clinging to them until their laughter had pushed it back. They gathered around two men sitting on a sofa in a large alcove, enveloped them with a conversation that had started back in the deeper hours. One of the woman was wearing angel wings, though they had not survived well, the left one crumpled, hanging like an injured bird.

'Enjoy yourself?' Archie tapped Gregg's shoulder, his hand's clumsiness giving away the body's tiredness. Gregg nodded.

'Do you miss her?' Archie asked, 'I know I tend to miss Steve more often when I'm out like this.' He did not seem to need a reply. 'I'll be out somewhere - I mean not necessarily, you know, at something like this, just out at a show or a gig. Dinner with friends. Something like that. And I'll suddenly get an image of him. As if he's just there, just on the edge of my vision. Or just gone out to get another drink. Or something.'

The women along the hall were hugging, each taking turns with another. Slowly Gregg realised they were saying

farewells, tired and content, taking their leave, though none of the group made any moves to leave, they each seemed content to stay at this point in-between.

‘It’s not painful. Not really. Sort of like pressing at a bruise. It’s ... er ... gratifying. I’m grateful that he’s still there but I miss him.’

Gregg nodded, turned to look at Archie, expecting sadness but instead he was smiling down at him, his eyes seemed wide and dark and surrounded by sleep gathering at their corners.

‘Yes. That’s it, that’s it. I do miss her’. There was a sudden push of sadness at his throat but either the warmth of the chair, the drugs or Archie’s arm across his shoulders pulled it away gently and he looked away at the group of women in their perpetual farewells. ‘Sometimes I think I see her. Or sense her still. Somewhere nearby.’ Archie’s hand squeezed his shoulder, then patted.

‘C’mon’ he said, and he heaved himself from the arm of the chair, standing his legs unsteadied after so long sitting, ‘One last dance? Finish the night off all proper like?’. He heaved Gregg from the chair and they pushed a gentle way through the crowd of women, briefly getting caught up in their farewells and, smiling, they went through the doors into the noise and the fury of the main room.

There were less cars amongst the trees. They spilled out of the dark manor and stood in the cold air, shoulders hunching, arms folding, jackets or shirts drawn closer, tighter. Ben and his group had found Archie and Gregg on the dance floor as the last few tunes were played out. The floor was full of spaces now, the room larger though those that were still dancing did so with a concentrated, frayed energy and when the music finally stopped, the DJ spinning down the last track, there were cheers and whoops and enough of a thrum of conversations starting up that the silence left by the music’s absence did not overwhelm.

Dawn was teasing at the edge of everything, night no longer, though the day still somewhere off behind the tangle of the trees. People were milling, moving easily and happily between small groups. Farewells, the clunking of car doors, the careful roll of tyres. It was not a skulking away but full of brief acts of companionship, tired celebrations of those who had made it to the end. Gregg stood amongst his group, hands in his pockets, feeling the coming dawn air creeping up his sleeves, into the small of his back.

‘That was full on!’

‘You got a light?’

‘I love you, weee!’

‘Where we going now? Yours? Back to mine?’

‘We need to do this more. Do it again, yes?’

‘C’mon Ben, I’m getting cold.’

A prolonged eddying of hugs and goodbyes made close to each other’s ears and then Ben had climbed into the dark shape of a car and its rear lights weaved off through the trees.

Now, here, their car on the flat straight of the fenland road, Gregg could feel the warmth of the heater climbing his legs, wrapping around him. They had not booked any accommodation that night, agreeing it would hopefully be a waste of money, that they would be out all night and, in it, the implicit contract that they would stay out.

‘I like this track’ Archie said, nodding at the stereo, ‘Reminds me of Ibiza. You ever been?’ Gregg shook his head.

‘Ah, we should go’ Archie contemplated the growing light along the horizon, ‘Although I expect it’s not the same now.’

‘Shall we stop somewhere?’ Gregg said. He could feel tiredness pulling at him, as if from a long distance.

‘You hungry?’

Nodding, then a shrug.

‘Maybe. Toast?’ Gregg said, ‘Oh and tea! God yes, a cup of tea!’

‘Ok, maybe there’s somewhere in near Hunstanton. Maybe along the coast road. You still OK driving?’

Nodding, then Gregg looked across at Archie, 'But also ... Tea.'

By the time they pulled into a small car park the sun had pushed the day ahead of it and cold, bright light claimed everything. Buildings and curbs, the sign that marked the ticket machine, the neat shrubs along the path back into the clustering of the town, they were etched carefully, each detail picked out. Gregg leaned against the car, squinting up at the light, then looking down at his feet. They changed shirts, the cold air becoming sharp against the skin as they stripped briefly, mock shivering while smiling.

Along the edge of the sea, the older buildings ragged and low against the sky, a shelving beach of stone and sand, then the vast flat North Sea, out and out to a horizon blushing with light. Here they found a cafe, just open, its owner busy with breakfast for the van drivers and construction workers who all knew each other. The tea was hot and sweet and the mug it came in filled Gregg's hands with a warmth and he sat, watching the flat sea beyond the window. Here the previous evening finally came to rest.

The cool air across his face woke him. Through a haze of clinging sleep Gregg saw familiar things, the car's seats, the gear shift, the greys of the doors, all familiar though now seen from a different perspective. He lifted his head and felt the cold air rush into the space where the warmth of his body lay under the tousled sleeping bag. He had not slept well, waking frequently, the usual curving embrace of the passenger seat constraining him, reminding him of the strangeness of his bed. The morning seemed grey, though there was strength to the light. Condensation made frosted glass of all the windows and, wiping at the side window, he felt the dampness on his skin. The rough car park seemed hardly used. A lane ran an erratic way to a few low houses, holiday lets, now laid up for the winter. Even in the muffled interior of the car Gregg could hear the steady thrumming of the sea upon the long beach below and though there was no sound to it, a steady, strong wind was pushing the straggling tops of the brambles over, reaching inland.

Loathe to move further into the cold, Gregg lay there, pulled the sleeping bag tighter around him while he blinked, rubbed at his eyes. His head felt full, stuffed with lack of sleep, the mouth dry and earthy. He needed a piss and there was a sickening sliding whenever he turned his head too quickly. He lay still, tempted to try a return to sleep but the brightening of the sky struck through to the dim lane and in it he felt the running of the day.

Archie was asleep, huddled along the back seat, his breathing slow under the covering jacket. There is a loosening in sleep, not merely of the body but of the person. The postures and mannerisms of waking put away and, in sleep, a return to something that remains throughout the years. Gregg had only ever watched Helen in this way, as she slept, taking in the person next to him, all that potential at rest. In the nearness of her, in her choosing to sleep next to him, there was a gentle confirmation. Tiredness and the

empty vacuum that inevitably followed the whispering away of the drugs set about Gregg a sort of comfortable inertia. He watched Archie sleep, another person close again. He rested his head against his seat and sleep washed from the dunes.

The car seemed to fill with the smell of the sea, not the stench of a dry beach at low tide but the strong, thrusting freshness of a turning tide. He looked about the car, expecting to see dampness, a piece of sea weed dragged in accidentally, a window not fully closed. There was nothing. It drove him towards movement and, thrusting the sleeping bag away from him he bent to replace the shoes he had pushed off the night before. His phone lay in the footwell and he saw two text messages, both from Tom, late last night.

‘Had a visit from some odd bloke yesterday - Bramley somebody? Know him??’ And then, a few minutes later ‘Was asking about mum. Told him to piss off. Hope you’re ok x’

As if the wind had found a gap there came a sudden rising stench of sea again. Gregg pushed open the door, leaned out, gasping for the larger movement of the air. The car felt as if the wind was hurling itself against its side, rocking it, urgently. Stepping from the car into the rushing wind was as a cleansing, the close fug of the car blown away and now the chill of deeper seas scrubbed away any remnant of sleep.

Gregg picked his way to a narrow path that burrowed towards the promise of a beach somewhere beyond the rushing air. He walked carefully, the sand growing deeper amongst the dunes, the rise of the path to the pale sky and the long night all now creeping into his limbs. It was as if a great rushing drama was now being put behind him, leaving him empty and relieved, content to hover here between life and sleep. He stopped to have a pee, turning away from the path, hoping no-one was coming off the beach towards him, not really caring if they did. The path in front of him, caught between two larger dunes, passed over a rise. Beyond the air seemed to be set free, the pulsing bending of the sea-grasses at the brow of the hill bending away from something larger beyond. Gregg felt the pull of what lay beyond. There

would be the sweep of the beach, flattening towards a dull sea, the sand darkening to clay where the waters broke and rushed, cold and impartial. He turned away, back to the car. He turned from that vast space, not ready to leave the hours spent in the company of others. He had had enough of the loneliness of the sea.

Gregg is walking down a lane. It heads away from the sea. The wind is strong and here, where he follows the curve of the lane through a stand of trees, they are restless with it. He looks up but keeps his hands in his jacket pockets. It is not raining but the air speaks of it. The light under the trees is less changeable, not like the slow fluid of the sky where heavy clouds grate against each other like stones caught in a rising tide. The edge of a village is near, there is the first street light, where a narrow path rises from roadside grasses, its surface glistening, drawing down the rain. The first few drops of it whip by Gregg's face. He looks again at the sky and his shoulders hunch closer together, his steps faster.

Behind him, gathering in the dark beneath the stand of trees there is a churning, the shadows unsteadied by it. Along the lane a slow wave of water comes, thick, moving as mud, the front wave grabbing at the road and the nettles clustered at the edges. A great dark river of water pushes along the lane, washing at the hedges, filling it with a ponderous weight. Gregg is still walking, he is crossing the road, angling for that first streetlight and the path beyond. He does not turn at the incoming water, does not show any sign of its presence.

The front of the water reaches him, wrapping itself around his feet, ankles, climbing his legs. Gregg is still walking, the embracing water does not slow him, he does not appear to react at all. The water is now too much, too full to be gentle with him and it rushes across his shoulders, turns and folds over his head and Gregg is lifted, born upwards and along the lane. The street light passes him, the water climbing to throw itself over its brightness, smothering it. From up here the water in the lane is not a river, it is not alone and there is a great, wide rush of dark waters crossing the fields, soaking into the playing fields behind the community hall. From here, the whole countryside is being covered in water. It is darker

than a night sky, heavier than the clouds, and the rain is now beating down on the churning of its surface.

Gregg has stopped walking, has been tilted onto his back, floating like a branch swept along a swollen river. He lies there and his face is turned to the skies and the rain while the water carries him down the main street of the village. As it passes each street light, the water rises to cover it, the light becoming smaller, a dim glimmer below the surface. There are houses being enveloped, cars, the bus stop. It is a slow flood, nothing seems to be damaged or moved, everything stands and is engulfed.

When Gregg reaches the crossroads at the middle of the village, the waters are swirling, their flow interrupted and here, in the choppiness, he comes to a stop, floats. The waters continue to rise until only the highest roofs and chimneys mark out the narrow village. Then they too are covered and all that is left is a broad sea, stretching out, its surface heaving, ponderous. The rain stops, the wind fades and with it there is a falling silence, only the heavy, gentle slap of a collapsing wave. Gregg floats there, facing the sky.

The return to the car felt like finding a cave on a stormy day, with the thumping shut of the door came a closeness, not silence, a muffling. The smell had gone. Archie was awake, sitting now in the driving seat, his jacket wrapped about him, blinking as if bewildered by the day, a sense of having done the unusual.

‘Now, you see, I need to go now, thanks.’ But he did not move, instead burrowing down into his seat, closing his eyes. Gregg watched him, studied him. The legs tucked up beneath the steering wheel, the long feet, shoes pushed off into the dimness of the footwell. He had a slimness that hid a frame that was more solid, more robust. Gregg had never studied another man closely, never been tempted to go beyond the usual quick comparisons and judgements that he assumed everyone made. In the lazy heaviness of the easy exhaustion that was now wrapping him, Gregg found the usual wariness of watching another too closely set aside and he took in Archie more deeply now. In Archie he sensed the impossibility of attraction and yet this was different, unusual. His friendships with other men had always been held to some mutually acknowledged distance, firm, friendly and yet carefully policed, the threat of attraction removed but replaced with the unremarked requirement to remain vigilant, to never over step. There had been good friends, best friends of course, particularly in his younger years - here the edges were less certain, and now, looking back, he might acknowledge there was indeed a kind of love there though, at the time, it was never expressed.

No matter how many times he washed his face, the skin remained stubbornly grimy, greasy to the touch. Sleep had collected in the corner of his eyes and, despite his efforts, it remained, sticky along the edges of his eyelids. Gregg felt again the urge for a long, hot shower rise like tears.

The motorway services were relatively new, built or refurbished within the last few years. After the even blankness of the day the lights in its main hall were hard, unglowing. The afternoon light should have washed through the tall glass windows that ran along two sides of the hall but it had weakened in the past hour and here the kiosks and the displays seemed to hold it away, keeping it behind the glass. There was a sense of perpetual evening here, this light would not change with the hours.

Gregg touched the table, ran his fingers across it. It had been wiped hastily, the thin lines of its drying arcing into the reflections of the Costa beyond. It felt gritty to his touch. Everything held a thin, grimy layer of use to it, the air, the floor, even the people. It was busy and the noise of conversations and movement filled the spaces like flocks of birds at feed. The faint squeak of shoes across the floor, sudden hiss of the coffee machine, a young boy refusing his drink noisily. If he allowed it, it would buffet against him. After the hours of even stillness of the car, to Gregg this had a violence to it and he hunched against it, leaning down, across the table, examined his fingers until Archie returned with two large cups of coffee and sandwiches.

'I didn't fancy egg or tuna. No. So hope cheese is ok?'

He presented the tray, adjusting it so it sat neatly on the table and then took off his jacket.

'We can get something decent in Whitby. I know a place, just pasta and Italian, but good, easy stuff' he said and he took his coffee, removing the lid to examine its contents before taking a sip. He nodded.

'You OK?' He asked, his cup paused between them. Archie had an evenness about him that, here amongst the tumult of the services, was faintly irritating. Gregg thought Archie should show some signs of their long night, the drugs, the roughness of snatched sleep but there was little beyond a sort of ruffling of his edges, a giving way to the hours and a paleness around his eyes.

'Uh-huh' Gregg said, shrugging. Immediately he saw himself as a teenager again, rebuffing the friendly attempts of his father to engage him in some conversation, sulky and hunched away from the world. He sat up, rolled his shoulders, reached for his coffee.

'Yeah. A bit, you know, ragged. It's been a while since I've done this. Getting old, eh, don't do it.' He smiled at Archie and took a sip of coffee, its warmth and bitterness suddenly welcome. Archie smiled, nodded.

'I got a text' Gregg said, 'while you were getting coffees. From Thea.' He tried to sound casual, make it conversational but instead it had the suggestion of an announcement and Archie, looking back from his casual taking in of the people around, raised his eyebrows in gentle enquiry.

'Yeah. She wants to call me. Says they're worried about where I am as they're not sure where I said I'd be.'

'Did you give them an itinerary then?'

'No. Did we have one?'

They both laughed. Their trip had been casually planned, a lazy route up country, a few fixed points with everything in between a hazy sketch of travel and finding somewhere to stop.

'Do you think they're worried I've converted you?' Archie smiled crookedly into his cup.

The day was darkening quickly, the large windows now inky, thick and, in response, the lights of the services seemed to harden around them. Detail became sharper. It was too much, and Gregg focused on his coffee cup.

'Have you heard from Tom again? Since his visit from the inscrutable Bramley?' A gentle enquiry.

'Well, yes. Had a message from him as well at almost the same time. No mention of Bramley but an almost identical question to Thea. Funny that. They must be co-ordinating.' Gregg tried to pass it off, shrug it away and he had a quick yearning to turn the conversation away, towards something large and bland, something with space.

'They're probably only concerned. Their dad, their brother, going off like that. With some strange bloke they've never met.'

At the table next to them, a toddler sitting in one of the sturdy services high chairs banged a plastic spoon, laughed at Gregg.

'Yes, I know. Maybe I'm just too tired to deal with them today.' Gregg found himself hunching back over the table, enfolding his drink in his hands. The toddler banged the spoon again and they both looked at her, automatically smiling at her wide eyes taking them in.

Arriving in Whitby at night could have been arriving in any town. The brightness of cars, the evenness of streetlights, the steady, broad luminescence that crept from the superstore, it was all the familiar arranged in a different way until they were deeper in, nearing where the land reared finally above the sea and the houses hesitated away from its tumbling edge.

They found a Bed & Breakfast, buried in a street that ran away from West Cliff, that had at some point made an attempt to become more as a hotel. A small, neat reception in inoffensive purples and greys, a scent of leather or an old aftershave though more likely from the many jars of scented sticks arranged on windowsills and in alcoves. They only had one room left, a twin if they didn't mind sharing and the woman who waited briefly for their confirmation swung into her routine quickly as if they no longer stood before her. The room was small, two single beds pushed into a space that might have once been part of a larger room. The sight of a bed, with a neat, clean duvet and white sheets pulled at Gregg but as he sat slowly sinking towards its pillows, Archie called to him from the small ensuite to stay awake and that they should go and find a decent meal. He said it with a suggestion of the familiar, a practiced routine and in it Gregg realised there was much he did not know about Archie.

'What time will Lorraine be arriving tomorrow?' Archie appeared from the bathroom, fresh shirt and jumper, jeans

and bare feet. He looked washed, his skin darker now from the shower. He sat on the other bed, began pulling on socks.

'Think she said around lunchtime. Said she'd text me when she arrived, something about lunch but she also said she had a meeting at the gallery so ...' Gregg did not move, his hands on his thighs. Sleep was pushing at him, the few hours snatched in the car not enough.

'Go on. Have a shower. It'll do wonders I promise. Then to dinner'.

Archie was correct, the shower was glorious.

By the time Gregg and Archie arrived, the party had settled into its active, restless hours. Muffled music came from behind the front door, its lime green standing different against the greys and the blues along the rest of the street. It had been left ajar and they pushed their way in with the caution of crossing someone else's threshold. The hallway kinked around staircases, one leading down and the other up. Large double doors, open, led into a long lounge diner, stretching the length of the house. Here people gathered around the furniture, music filled in the spaces. In the corner a gathering of bare branches in a pot, covered in sparkling lights. They splashed moving shadows up the walls, along the ceiling. Somewhere another light, flashing or turning, multicoloured pulses casting people's outlines again and again. Each chair, the settee, a beanbag, had someone arranged along it, others perched around. Everyone was involved in animated conversations, raising their voices above the music, exaggerating their movements to match.

'Archie! You made it, fantastic. And this must be Gregg, good to meet you, come in, come in, we're in here. There's glasses in the kitchen downstairs if there's none on the table. How are you Archie? I haven't seen you for it seems like ages! I've been busy at the gallery, we're really doing well on local women artists at the moment, finally. And I've even had a few of my own included. One in the main room as well.'

All this said in one fluid rush as the woman briefly wrapped her arms around each of them in turn, her drink guided ably between them.

'Gregg, this is Bertie. Of course' said Archie.

Bertie's smile travelled with her, fluid and moving. It's attention fully on each of them and lingering even as her shoulders turned to the busy room as she swung away, her bare feet in small steps across the rug towards the next clutch of people. 'Mitch! Hello!' And she was wrapping an arm around another, kissing his cheek.

House parties had always held an unsettling combination of curiosity, anticipation and disappointment for Gregg. He resisted them even as he was drawn towards them. They had become increasingly rare events since the shambolic, loud gatherings of college, maturing into more considered, restrained and less crowded affairs as he grew older, eventually replaced with dinner parties and summer barbecues and, then, as the children arrived in people's lives, they were events to be attended and observed. Here though there seemed to be a return to a loose disorganisation and, in it, a thin veil of anticipation over everything. They had spent the early part of the evening at the gallery, then dinner, pizza and wine in a restaurant filled with families and couples.

'We've just been to see it' said Archie and Bertie, with a sharpness that gave away her interest, turned back to him.

'What did you think? Did you see the Viola Merconti's? Aren't they fantastic? And what about my stuff? What did you think? I was worried that the positioning of my Collective series was a bit remote but maybe that's OK given what I'm trying to say?'

They were questions but Gregg realised they only needed one type of answer and that was to reassure and confirm and Archie delivered what was needed.

'Oh yes, I thought your 'Woman Resting I and II' were both deliciously provocative.'

This seemed to be enough for Bertie, whose grin broke across teeth that had once been straightened, and she flicked away again into the room. To Gregg many of the paintings they had looked at in the gallery had seemed unattainable, abstract swirls and lines on large canvases and it had only been through Archie's reading of the display cards that had offered them any meaning whatsoever. Bertie's works, though, had indeed stood out, their large, blocky portrayals of a naked woman in differing poses, the fleshy paleness of bare skin sweeping almost to the borders.

They opened the beer they had brought with them and Archie immediately inserted himself into a conversation about

the proposed regeneration of the old docks with the ease of habit. Gregg stood nearby, nodding, though his eyes wandered the room. Everyone seemed to be about the same age, too old for regular clubs, too young to set aside the need to go out, to be with others, to be quiet. In the warmth of the room faces glowed with their conversations. There was a quick, easy tumbling of talk, it was a constant chattering stream against the thump and shimmer of the music. There was ease in it and Gregg found himself settling into a sense of being both a part of it and yet also anonymous.

More people arrived, bustling in with cold air that briefly slid across the shoulders. It was not long after 1am and Gregg wondered where they had been prior to joining, they seemed buoyant, cheerful, the party a means of continuation. His legs were beginning to ache from the standing, the small of his back grumbling, and he found himself perched on the arm of the settee at one point listening to a conversation, led by a large man in shorts and a nose ring, about the dangers of streaming platforms to the art of movie making. All evening, Bertie seemed to have tripped lightly between them all, arriving, it seemed, moments after the conversation had turned to something she herself had done or was currently doing and, for a time, she would talk of herself, nodding and laughing, before away she would go, her smile below eyes that were already searching for the next topic.

'Come with me' Archie said, grasping Gregg's elbow lightly, steering him from the room and down the stairs. Briefly Gregg felt attended to, a thrill of being gifted a surprise. Down the stairs Archie guided him, his hands on Gregg's shoulders, they laughed. Gregg made a clumsy joke about being flattered but not in that way which briefly hovered unacknowledged between them before being disrupted by alcohol and the lights of the kitchen. A long narrow kitchen, black counters stretching to a set of double French doors to one side, out into the dark. A man and two women were gathered around a toaster and Gregg briefly wondered if Archie had brought him here to make him a snack. One of the

women bowed towards the counter and then he could see the two thin white lines, hear her snorting until they were gone.

'Fancy some?' The man asked. He was thin, a tuft of a beard on his chin, crooked teeth, wearing a suit that should have smartened him but only spoke of a previous day in an office. Archie slapped Gregg's shoulder, nodding and raising his eyebrows mischievously.

The next hour seemed full of quick, bright and intelligent conversation, humour lightly tossed between each other, the room sharp with it, the lights in a constant motion. Gregg felt more confident now moving between the various conversations and gatherings. The place was bubbling with people, in constant motion. No-one danced though the music wrapped itself around them all. Heads nodded, shoulders dipped. The occasional loud shriek of laughter, often from the same woman, pierced through and others would laugh in response. Archie was over near the door that led to a small balcony overlooking the rear garden. He was leaning on the doorpost, talking animatedly with a man who was shorter and broader, a tousled spray of tawny hair over a square face. The shorter man seemed engrossed in whatever Archie was saying, he concentrated on Archie's face, his eyes never floating across the room even briefly. At one point they both laughed, took a sip from their drinks and the shorter man reached forward a hand to touch Archie lightly at his elbow.

Although Gregg had simply acknowledged Archie's gayness, he realised in that moment it had only ever been in an abstract, almost theoretical way. It was a part of Archie just as his sense of humour or ability to talk to strangers - always potential and accepted though never pronounced. He had never seen Archie with another man, nor talked at any length about it. Their brief conversations about his husband bore only the weight of loss and not sexuality. The shorter man laughed again, stepped closer to Gregg, turning his head shyly and briefly away before returning to focus his bright attention on Archie. Gregg felt a vague pull of unease, confusing and irritating as an itch that returns. In the months

they had known each other, they had built up a reliance on each other's company. It felt singularly their own, not excluding others, yet preserved through their unacknowledged understanding that they had both been through darker times.

The woman sitting next to Gregg on the sofa stood, struggling against the cushions and giving whoops of delight while others offered hands which she waved away. Her foot caught the edge of a low table and it jumped, glasses and bottles and plates jittering briefly before settling. Gregg stayed sitting on the sofa arm, ignoring the empty seat next to him. From here he could see Archie still, the milling of people between them never enough to block the view. The shorter man seemed to have stepped even closer, they were both now almost touching, Archie's hips offered to the other man's belly. Archie reached up a hand, briefly stroked the man's cheek as they laughed and then the crowd moved again and they were blocked from Gregg's view. He found himself craning to see, found the sharp alarm in his chest unsettling, an old sensation yet familiar, like a book rediscovered on the shelf. He grasped at its meaning.

'Where's Archie got to? Are you two, you know, are you? I don't mind of course, of course not, I'm just being nosy. Archie said you had a wife, she died? I just wondered if you and he were exploring things. I know it can be fluid. I'm never sure what I am myself and I've come to accept that I just float from one way of being to another. Sometimes I'm into women, sometimes men, sometimes both, sometimes just myself.'

It was Bertie, who seemed to have risen from the cushions of the sofa like a returning messiah and immediately engaged him in her conversation. She had a large glass of something in her hand, an empty cocktail stick used to stir melting ice, and she smiled into the glass as she spoke.

'Oh er, no. We're just friends' Gregg was aware he sounded too hasty to deny, too rushed to push the innocent enquiry away. It was not that he was uneasy with other

people wondering about his sexuality. It was that Bertie had assumed of his friendship with Archie something entirely superficial.

'So? I've fucked friends' she turned towards others around the table who, by their natural inclination to pay attention to the host, quickly joined in her laughter, 'You know who you are!' More laughter and to Gregg, sitting above them, it seemed as if they all turned laughing, shiny faces towards him, nodding with a knowing to which he had no access.

'Well yeah, maybe. But not Archie, no. We're good friends'

He was protesting too much. Someone would trot out that old line soon. He wanted to leave but knew in the leaving would be a kind of confirmation so he tucked his hands under his legs and leaned forward in a laugh he did not feel.

'Oh well, Archie was never a slut anyway. I don't mean you are .. oh christ. You see! I'm safer sticking to talking about stuff I know about. Just because I ... Since my divorce in ancient history, I've been experimenting. More liberated, more me. I mean my ex, he had a Ford Sierra, a house and a huge cock but he didn't know what to do with any of them.' Bertie raised her hands in laughter and, bringing them down, she tapped Gregg's thigh gently twice. 'Just washed it every Sunday. And I don't mean ...'

'His cock!'

'His Sierra!'

And the group trembled with laughter again. Gregg looked across the room. The people there seemed to have lessened. Archie and the short man were no longer by the door to the back balcony. They were not in the room. Gregg felt a soft push of disappointment and then a sense of disconnection, he would be just himself now here in this room full of strangers. He turned back to the group around the sofa. Bertie was telling some tale about her first experience of sex with a woman.

'I mean proper sex with a proper woman. Not those teenage fumbblings, ugh. We all have those, don't we?' she looked at Gregg 'But even so, it was a disaster. I'd been out

all night and we were at some after hours party. It was dismal really. God knows what we'd all been taking but anyway, it all got a bit sloppy and ...'

In a sort of horrified way, Gregg listened to Bertie recounting her story. She revelled in the details, drew a sharp delight from the shock of them. The people around seemed to accept it all, as if this were some regular routine. The coke that had at first edged their senses to a sharpness now lay soggy on them, each person struggling to push the mix of laughter and mock horror through the tiredness. Occasionally Bertie would emphasise a point by tapping Gregg lightly on the thigh, always in the same place, closer to his hip than he would expect. He glanced at his watch. 3am and with it came a rush of tiredness, physical and bodily, his brain still turning and turning with pointless thoughts. He must have sagged a little because Bertie turned to him, tapped his thigh again and said 'How about a nice cup of tea? I do like a cup of something hot and sweet about this time, do you think? Come on, help me make it'. In getting up from the sofa, she teetered, reached out to grab Gregg, steadying herself until she stood straight again. Gregg noticed her face had slipped, each muscle no longer controlled by her smile, the skin under the chin wobbling, the mouth turned down. Brain and body became disconnected in the early hours. She pulled him by the hand and led him out, down the stairs, using her other hand to steady herself against the wall.

The kitchen was empty. They stood around the kettle watching it. Bertie had kept up a constant chatter though Gregg had realised that much of it was not for listening to. Much more important, for Bertie, that he attend and be present than comprehend. Mugs and milk and sugar were somehow found during a tale about her last party in the summer and the disgust of the neighbours over the activities in her garden revealed by the early dawn light. As the tea brewed, Bertie paused, stirring the teabag, as if contemplating the steam rising in lazy curls.

'Do you not get some urges then? If you and Archie aren't playing, then you must get urges. I know I certainly do. I don't mean for anything deep, not a relationship or anything. Although, sometimes ... Anyway, I mean for something purely physical.'

Questions and statements merged. In the brief pause Gregg said, 'No. Well, I mean, of course. But not really'

'What? Not even a wank? I don't believe you. Everyone wanks. No, I mean something with another person, physical contact.' She turned towards him, came in close, her body touching him lightly, a soft pressure against his chest, stomach and groin. 'You know, sweat and skin. Skin on skin. Just pure physicality.' She reached up, ran a finger along the edge of his ear, watched her own actions with eyes that seemed now unfocused, as if listening to an inner dialogue or watching herself projected on the inner screen of her imagination. Gregg could feel his body responding even as the strongest wave of revulsion flushed through him. He swallowed the impulse to shove her away, to scream 'No!' at her. With it came a realisation that a rejection of any kind would be taken deep within her, turned and tucked away. He became unsure of how to extract them both from the situation in any way that did no harm and, briefly, he considered whether giving in might be the smoothest route, ease himself from his jeans, allow her to climb across him as she pleased and so arrive quickly at the other side with all the options for their future connection open and easy.

There was a clatter on the stairs, someone trying not to trip, the laughter easy and then Archie's voice 'No I'll get them, you stay there'. He stumbled slightly as he reached the kitchen, taking in the sight of Bertie still pressed against Gregg, his hand already raising to an apology. There was probably something in Gregg's face, his wide eyes or the open mouthed plea, that stopped Archie in his turn back upstairs.

'Oh great, I see you two've already got the kettle on. I'm busting for a cuppa.' And he continued across the kitchen

towards them. To her credit, Bertie stepped easily away from Gregg, patting him on the chest, an acknowledgement that the moment had passed, that such was her varied life. She turned to the mugs and, pointing to the cupboard, said 'Archie! There's more mugs in there. Milk's in the fridge' and she waved towards it with the milk carton already in her hand.

Although it was not yet dawn, as they left the house the colder air held a freshness that announced the shifting towards the light. A blackbird called out cautiously from the trees that leaned over the street, too early to be joined by others. Archie and Gregg held their jackets tight, burrowed their hands into the pockets and walked quickly, lightly towards the huddling centre of the town, their backs to the bay that lay in the darkness below the sloping street. Their B&B was silent and they crept to the room with a childish excitement at coming home late.

'A couple of hours I think.'

'I hope.'

'Then a shower, brekkie. Back on the road.'

A pause, then Archie, his voice at the edge of sleep, said 'Don't take life too seriously Gregg. Be happier more.'

A halting sleep arrived, darting away as quickly as it crept over him. In the waking moments in between Gregg kept hearing 'skin on skin' until, finally, he slept.

He had one affair during the whole ten years of their marriage. For a while he didn't refer to it as an affair, didn't think of it as such. It was so brief, passing so lightly and quickly through his life that he convinced himself it didn't count. It started in those dull, darkening months before the end of the year. There seemed to be a lot of mist, hanging around the shallow folds of the land. He was driving deliveries, a part time job acquired at a time they needed the money just for the basics. Helen's career was going well, a new job in a different school. They had moved, bought a small house in Brighton, near enough to her school that she could walk each day. Gregg was driving late shifts, not finishing until past midnight, not quite working nights but the time of year saw the days shortened and the light gone as he made his first stops so it felt like he was working while the rest of the world settled out of their day, into those flat hours before sleep. He could no longer remember what he was delivering, probably an assortment of different things; the company he worked for taking anything, a general courier. It was mostly to businesses or local depots, to bland, functional industrial estates, one seemed much like the other. He never stayed long enough at any of them to become familiar with the people there, usually just dropping off, getting a signature and leaving. He drove all along the south coast and often into London, though never too deeply, usually within the outer edges before the roads became knotted with the city. Although he was given a satnav, it was fairly rudimentary, not the smooth, polite voiced satnavs he had on his phone. After a few weeks he stopped using it or rather only used it for the detailed location of the specific address. He got used to most of the routes and roads and even began experimenting with taking some of the smaller roads. The company kept a watch over how long its drivers took but it wasn't too strict, many of the deliveries just needed to get to their depot that evening so they had them for the next day. As long as he got them there

without doing excessive mileage they didn't seem to mind that he often took different routes.

Somewhere around midnight he would take a break from driving. Not only was it expected, it was also about the time he needed one. On some nights he would only have a couple of hours left of his shift but it was usually the time his body began to nag at him or his eyes felt a little too heavy. Especially in the earlier days of the job when he was getting used to being up later. If his route took him west of Brighton, there was an all night services near Chichester and it was here he would stop. It had a cafe that was actually more like a diner. An open plan place with booths along its broad windows. It had a counter that ran the length of it, opposite the windows and behind that was the kitchen. He could glimpse the chef through low, narrow hatches let into the back wall. The kitchen staff would shout orders through to the waiting staff and grab the next meal ticket at the same time. The waiting staff wore the sort of uniform that has now disappeared from the world - the women in a one piece dress that exaggerated their breasts, hugged their waists and ended half way up their thighs. There was one young man who worked occasionally; he wore trousers and a shirt. These uniforms were a mustard yellow with white trim and collars. None of them ever seemed to fit, the bodies in them all different and not at all as the original design had envisaged so the result was usually scruffy or more casual, like kids wearing a cheap costume, one size fits all.

Gregg would stop here and have a cheeseburger and a cup of coffee. Helen had not yet turned towards vegetarianism so they were still eating meat, though red meat had already disappeared from their regular meals. The cheeseburger here was thus a secret pleasure of Gregg's. It was usually flat, the cheese square vaguely melted, the bun a uniform white but he still enjoyed it. It came with fries or a salad, though he never had the salad. He would sit in a booth at one end of the diner, as far away from the entrance as possible so that he had to walk the length of the counter to

get there. He didn't know why he enjoyed that so much, possibly because it usually meant he could say hello to whoever was working that night. The view from the window was the parking lot and beyond it the dual carriage-way. To one side a petrol station, its hard light creeping across the concrete towards the diner. He always sat facing it so he could just see the pumps. At that time of night it was not busy but he liked to watch who came in for fuel. He would watch them and wonder about them, who they were, where they were going, or had been. Often it was obvious - a car of young men going on to some club, a man in a suit coming home late perhaps. Occasionally he couldn't guess easily, it was not obvious. That woman with a small baby who looked harassed or the elderly couple who ate sandwiches from a plastic box while parked at the edge of the forecourt. There was nothing about them that readily told him what they were up to so he had to make assumptions, make it up.

One night there was a woman sitting in one of the booths he usually took. He didn't have a specific booth that he wanted each time, he just liked to be as near to the other end of the diner as he could. She was sitting in the booth next to the final one, facing the door. No-one else was in the diner at that time. As he walked towards that end, out of habit, he became aware that it might seem creepy or odd, a man has the whole of the diner and chooses to come and sit next to a lone woman. However, it would have seemed just as odd if he had turned around and walked back to another table so he kept going, past her and to the last booth, just behind hers. He sat with his back to her, though this meant they were actually sitting quite close, just the back of the bunk seat between them. His shoulders tingled with the presence of her behind him, not in excitement, just the awareness of another person so close.

He couldn't be sure but he thought she shifted slightly so that she was not sitting immediately behind him. When he looked around to see whether anyone was coming to take his order, he could see the woman sitting now nearer the end of

her bench, by the aisle. Her hair was dark, long, gathered by a simple red band, a deep red that did not stand out too much against the darkness of her hair. He was very aware of his actions. It felt as if everything he did, looking around, sitting here, shifting in his seat, this was all obvious, deliberate, that it would tell the woman behind him that he was watching her. He tried to relax, look casual but this seemed to make it worse, as if everything he did was rehearsed, an action in a poor stage play. The server came over to his table, a younger man, stocky, he asked for his order without making eye contact. This seemed to break whatever awkwardness Gregg had created and he managed to settle, looking out the window at the petrol station. There were no cars there currently but he continued to watch, not really wanting to bring his attention inside the diner and risk any further discomfort.

They ate together, back to back, and then she got up, sliding out of her bench seat. He could feel the faint vibration of her leaving through his seat. She went over to the till to pay, not waiting for the young man to figure out that she had finished and wanted her bill. Her voice was light, subdued, unmarked by any strong accent or emphasis, her tone even which seemed right for an empty roadside diner in the middle of the night. Just as the payment was completing, the young man said something that amused her and she said a 'yes!' in a laughing way, more drawn out than usual, a higher tone that carried to where Gregg was sitting. There was clatter from the kitchen that cut off anything further and then she left, closing the door slowly. He wanted to turn around and see where she went, which car was hers but even then, he thought it might be too obvious so he half turned, looking out the window as if casually scanning the narrow strip of tarmac that was the car park. He didn't see her but then, after a few moments, a dark red car drove past. It was a Honda or a Toyota, something nondescript but still relatively new. It drove past the petrol station and on to the slip road, accelerating onto the dual

carriage-way and he watched its tail lights until the curve of the road took them.

If there was such a thing as fate or anything that moves lives in some unseen ways, independent of what people decide and do, then he supposed there was something about that first evening that stood out. It could be just the way he recalled it, now layering into it some other meaning, like a subtle bass line that is only noticed when it stops, leaving the melody and harmony lighter, emptier. There was nothing specific about it, just that he was aware of being awkward near her from the moment she stepped into the diner. He had eaten there many times before, in the presence of many others, though had never felt so self conscious as that evening. Even with this recollection, he did not think he would describe it as anything like attraction or, worse, love at first sight. That would be too obvious and, in truth, it was never that. Just a feeling of awkwardness.

With that first meeting, if it could be called that, it might be expected that the story would be that there would be further, similar meetings, that over a series of weeks or months they would come to acknowledge where their respective routines were coinciding, perhaps nodding to each other initially, eventually a conversation, a sharing of a table then, after a while, meeting somewhere else and then, the affair. It did not happen like that. They ended up fucking in the back of Gregg's van a few weeks later. It was hard, rough and it was good. They somehow managed to acknowledge their need for it quite quickly, only the third time they found themselves together in the diner. He had paid first this time and was walking to his truck when she caught up with him. Her car was parked next to the van. She said something about this being one of his regular routes or perhaps it was some comment about being allowed to have a break. He couldn't really remember because the sex that followed just obscured the detail of the story around it, a brighter light in the night.

They did this a few times over the next few months. They never ended up sharing a booth in the diner, or having a

conversation over a coffee. They always followed the same routine, eating alone though usually sitting near. Her car was usually parked next to his van. Then they fucked.

It was after the fourth or fifth time of this happening that Helen came back from the hospital and told him she had cancer.

‘He said the second passing place.’ Lorraine pointed to the narrow eclipse of gravel at the side of the lane, ‘That’s the first. The next one better be a bloody bit bigger.’

In the long strands of the afternoon sky only the deepening blue spoke of a sun that had long passed across the hills and sunk below them. The day was not ended, the light strong but here and there the shadows strengthened. Down the short, steep slope of bracken that ran alongside the narrow lane the dark line of a stream fraying towards the lowlands, knots of white water washing over rocks. A rough tree leaned out across it, its branches reaching downstream, flung there by the endless winds. The hill continued up the long line of its summit, a broad expanse of browns and greens, empty but for the ferns and bracken. As the lane had climbed out of the village, walls and hedges had fallen away, the moor came pressing in, rubbing at the grit and gravel. With the thinning of the trees, the sky became a solid sheet above them, the land another. Taken as one, the world seemed only of two broad swathes of colour brushed on a canvas in earnest haste. Then, as the car climbed by the side of the stream, twists and daubs of colour emerged, as a painting studied at length reveals each detail.

‘Amazing isn’t it?’ said Lorraine, the car nudged the edge of the road as she leaned forward to look out at the tops of the hills, ‘Bloody big as well. I don’t know why Archie wouldn’t have wanted to come, all these colours.’

Archie had politely refused to join Gregg, throwing out a light comment about having had enough of rough sleeping and bad food for now but it was unconvincing and Gregg suspected it was not the prospect of a night outdoors that concerned him but the potential threat of having to reconnect with something he seemed to have put behind him.

The second passing place was midpoint on a straight stretch of road and, next to it, a flattened circle of grass and gravel, room enough for a few cars. One vehicle was parked,

small, black, its sides muddied, only the registration plate at the rear standing out, kept clear by a wipe of a hand or cloth. A man stood leaning against the back of it, camo trousers and black boots, a heavy army coat and a tight fitting wool hat. He was smoking, a drift of pale smoke moving off across the moor. He stood up when their car pulled in beside his.

It had been a text conversation, as Gregg and Archie drove the coast road, turning inland to pick their way through the sprawl of Teeside. 'He's a bit odd' she had written, 'but harmless.' Adding moment later, 'I think' and adding a bright smiling, winking emoji. Gregg had asked, 'Why? Why this odd man?'

'Cos he found her. His daughter'. There had been an odd sensation of lifting then, a lightness that raised him.

The meeting seemed to take a while to arrange. Lorraine knew the man - his name was Thomas, he had come to the group for a few years, though his attendance was less regular in recent months. It was Thomas's suggestion, Lorraine said, that Gregg join him for one of his night walks on Middlehope Moor. Something in the way she kept her messages to Gregg brief, factual suggested there was a negotiation being conducted with Thomas and when Gregg casually asked if this were the case, her only response was that it was all sorted. And that he would be fine.

The air had grown cooler and Gregg found himself tugging at the zipper of his fleece as he walked around Lorraine's car. She had said a cheerful 'hello' even as she opened her door and was now talking to Thomas as Gregg joined them.

'Do you think you'll see much tonight?' she asked. Thomas was a thin man, his clothes giving the impression of someone larger, though the wrists were stiff with bone, the back of his hand as he lifted his cigarette etched with tendon.

'Aye, should be fine tonight. No moon, no rain expected. We'll be good.' His voice, though soft, carried well, a deepness to it that propelled it through the cold air so that it arrived clear and crisp. 'You'll be Gregg then' he said and extended a hand, the grip firm, cool and brief.

It had not taken the two of them long to reach the top of the hill, the climb gentle but steady. Lorraine had offered a 'Have fun boys!' as a farewell from her car's open window, the joy of leaving the wild places for more familiar comforts barely disguised, left to be blown away as her car faded down the lane. Gregg felt sweat begin to cool across the small of his back when they stopped. The hill crested and then began another steady fall away to meet another hill, the shadow of a beck etching its way down between them. Up here, the sky spread over them, the land falling into the evening beyond. All was above them. Thomas proved to be friendly, despite the taciturn drawing down of his brow, and though there was more silence than conversation, he was thoughtful in both question and response. They would hike along the burn to where there was a bivvy that Thomas had used before. Here would be a good vantage point for the night sky and here, Thomas added, they could talk freely.

It was not a hard walk, the path funnelling through the dry heather and gorse, the ground stony and firm. Thomas walked steadily and they came down the last slope of the path to a flat piece of ground, where three dry stone walls met. Built in their joining a low, long building, its roof of felted wood, a single door to one side. A beck cut through the hard rock nearby and in between it and the bivvy a flat space of rock and sheep-shorn grass. Further down the stream the gnarling curve of a tree holding to its edge. The day had not given in to evening yet and they stashed their gear, rolled out their sleeping bags on the two low cots and brewed coffee on Thomas's camping stove. Gregg sat on a natural ledge of rock, sipping his coffee, watching as Thomas set up his telescopes on the flat rocks above the stream. He tended to them with care and the swift firmness of custom, precise and sure. Nearby a low table and bulky case that, opened, contained a laptop.

'It's the software I find the most frustrating' Thomas said, leaning in to examine the screen, 'They keep changing it, can't seem to stop bloody messing with it. I could spend more

time staring at this screen than up there.' He pointed to the darkening sky. Something flickered on the screen and he nodded, sat back on his heels. Everything appeared to be as expected and, picking up his mug, he sat beside Gregg, his elbows on his knees.

'You ever do much star-gazing before?' he asked

'No, sadly really. Its always fascinated me but I never seemed to find the time to get into it'

Thomas grunted, 'Yeah. It takes a bit of learning. Although these days all that stuff,' he gestured to the dark shape of the telescope, 'there's so much tech'll do it for you, you don't even need to know some of the basics.' They both laughed, short, easy.

The evening eased in quietly. Only the sound of the stream, then the lingering notes of a curlew ran along the horizon where the last of the sun burned like embers. With the fading of the light came the colder air and they busied themselves briefly with cooking dinner, beans and sausages, rolls of granary bread, then more coffee with a broad, flat square of bready cake, claggy and sweet. They spoke occasionally, noting the changing light, pointing to the first stars. Thomas suggested it might be a few hours yet before the best conditions so he would understand if Gregg wanted to grab a nap but they both seemed content to stay there, sitting next to the stream, feeling the air grow chill and the night grow wider around them.

Somewhere in the dark Thomas shifted, stretching a leg, his voice seemed to arrive with the gentleness of the stream, 'Lorraine's told you about me then?' The ease of each word invited conversation, they were not edged with a wariness and Gregg found himself telling Thomas all that Lorraine had told him, aware that he was speaking too much, that Thomas was silent, only the stillness of his head and shoulders outlined against the thin, pale line of the horizon. Thomas had lost a daughter, a terrible accident, she was in a car with friends on their way back from a party, the early hours of a summer morning. A few years later Thomas started coming to

the group. He had thought he had seen his daughter, just briefly, on the edge of a group of other people. It had obviously made such an impression that he had begun to look into the possibility, had found the group or Shona and begun to attend.

Gregg stopped, aware he was telling the story of the person sitting next to him in the dark. Thomas had not moved, though now he took a last mouthful from his mug, 'Yes, that's about it. I was at an astronomy exhibition in Hexham, got talking to a couple of people there and Hal - you know Hal - she was one of them. She just happened to be up that way on a visit. Funny how it all seems to connect. Anyway something she said just caught my attention, something about the stars being more than science and we talked a bit more. We kept in touch through the online group and eventually I arranged to go south and meet the group.'

'I'm sorry about your daughter.'

It seemed such a small thing, here amongst the immensity and the wide open skies and the rolling of the hills. Thomas nodded.

'Aye. She were a bright girl.' A breeze found them and moved on. 'It were a fair few months after that I first saw her. I'd know that hair flick anywhere.' He scraped at a stone with his boot, slowly. 'She was with a group of friends, walking down the high street. Off out for the night. It wasn't her. I mean she didn't look like her at all. But something, that walk, and that hair flick. And then they laughed and I could hear her in there. So I knew.' He snorted, tipped the dregs from his mug. 'It's evenings like this a drop of something stronger would be good. So, sorry, I've none with me. I gave it up a few years back.'

The night had settled now, the cold air stilled, lying low against the earth.

'I was sure it was her, that day, I was sure' Thomas spoke as if to himself, looking up at the growing night above them both. Gregg saw the darkness was now less certain, there were stars, the milkiness of light.

'Let's have a look then. Should be dark enough now' Thomas said and he levered himself up, walked over to the dark shape of the laptop, jabbing at it until a dull red screen appeared.

A numbness had crept into his feet. He did not notice it until he stood, intending to go into the dark for a pee. The air found him in his movement, rushed to press the cold against his face. Thomas had put out all lights, turned the laptop's dull glow away and he stood near the gaunt lines of his telescope craning to look at the sky. His shape and all his detail now passed into the dark and only his solidity marked his presence. The noise of the beck filled everything, pushed aside the vast open space beyond them, its chuntering fall down the rocks flooding out all else.

Thomas had been pointing out constellations to him, raising a long finger to mark the patterns. Gregg struggled to see the shapes emerge, marking each bright point well enough but unable to fill in much in between. He did not attempt to commit to memory their names and felt a sort of desperation in knowing that these frail etchings moved continuously, that he could never know with any confidence how to trace them.

The night turned colder. Thomas did not seem to mind, though Gregg pulled another fleece from his rucksack, found his gloves and stamped his boots.

'These'll be the coldest hours. The next few' Thomas spoke in the dark, 'If it gets too much, get in your sleeping bag in the bivvy.' He paused, then 'But these are also the best hours. Not many people see these hours.'

'Did you see her again? Your daughter I mean. After that?' It felt wrong to ask, to fill the night air with the past. If Thomas was annoyed or uncomfortable the dark hid it, only the shape of him nearby. He took in a deep breath

'Yes.'

It was a silence that promised more.

'Well, look. I'll tell you but only because Lorraine and Hal helped me. And I think you're going through something

similar. But it's not something I'm proud of and .... Well anyway'

Thomas turned from his laptop, moved back towards the stones where they had been sitting earlier.

'I followed her. That girl. I mean Ellie .. that was my daughter's name. Eloise. The sun.' He looked up into the night sky, rubbed at his beard, the side of his face, 'At the time I was so sure it was her that I knew, I believed utterly that she only need see me and we'd both know. So I followed her. It was the school uniforms, her and her group, that made me realise they'd probably be there quite often, going down that road. I only meant to walk past her, casual, maybe get in front of her, get my face seen, maybe pretend not to notice her until we nearly walked into each other. But I only meant to move on then. I felt sure I'd know, see it in her face or something.'

He reached down for the thermos propped against his rock. A soft rattle of metal and plastic, a thin smell of coffee only seemed to announce the deepening chill around them.

'Anyway, I didn't do it the first day, just sort of froze, watched her and her group come down the road again. I couldn't bring myself to cross the road, walk that close to her. I told myself it was ok, it was probably safer that way. A man lurking around school kids, I wasn't stupid. But then I was back the next day, told myself I needed a few things from town but, you know, I was back at the same time and there they were again. But, again, I couldn't do it, just, er, lurked.' He laughed softly and Gregg saw the ducking of his head, the shake. Thomas seemed settled into his telling.

'Well, it just went on like that. I don't know how many days, probably only a few or so it seemed but maybe longer. I knew the school they were from, it was Ellie's school of course. The same uniform, even the same walk to school. Each day there she was, the hair, the laugh. And the more I watched her, the more I saw her. The way she would turn as she walked to listen to someone. Or the way she carried her bag on the same shoulder.'

Everything seemed to fall away softly around them, the cold air, the constant tumbling of the stream, it all retreated to a distance, muted and watchful.

‘So, er, I was drinking then. I mean really drinking. As I’ve said many times since, I’m an alcoholic. Two years sober now. But then, no, I was deep in the drink. I could say it was the drink but you know, it never is. Drink just brings it all out, to the fore like. I went to the school gates one afternoon. I think I thought appearing there, amongst other parents, or in the general routine of the school day’s end, it would seem more natural.’

Thomas sighed and there was a raggedness to it, as if it were a story told only a few times before, still sodden with the occurrence, not yet complete.

‘She came out of course and I was there and I tried to act normal, tried to be respectful but she was too much like Ellie, it was Ellie and I guess I talked to her too much like we used to talk to each other. I don’t really remember it all now. But I do remember the look of her face when she told me to ‘fuck off’ and called me a ‘fucking perv’ and the sudden gathering of other people, kids and parents and ...’

He raised the cup and it hovered halfway to his mouth.

‘It was her mouth, the twist of it. Hate and fear. Ellie was never like that. She hadn’t a hateful bone in her body. Wouldn’t have spoken to anyone like that. Wouldn’t have spoken to me like that. I knew with a horrible certainty then that if it was her, she was different. And just for a moment it was as if I was watching the whole thing from somewhere up above, the crowding of people around this girl and there, grabbing at her arm, some horrible, shabby old drunk with a beard.’

Thomas sat up, the curve of his back straightening, the suggestion of the sigh already in the rise and fall of his shoulders.

‘Be present for your children when they need you most’ Thomas said quietly, out into the silence that had settled

around them, 'You know? Be there because they might not be, sooner than you think.'

If the moor had been waiting, listening to the small voice at its centre, then a wind, so quick and sudden it could not have been anything other than the land responding, pushed itself between them. It had swept along the tousled bracken, leaping over the beck and stones to find them there hunched in the dark and its sudden cold caused Gregg to catch his breath, to hold it, keeping the warmth of it inside. The gnarling tree that leaned over the stream roused itself, dry, old wood flexing against the firming of its years and giving a faint complaining shriek as it was bent towards the water. In its rush the wind had gathered with it the many soft sighs of empty night, picking them from the dark places and burrows of the earth and now it drew them out around the two men, a long rising moan of arrival and passing, the stones of the wall chorusing, off key and in time, until it seemed to Gregg that all about them there was a shout, a warning. And the cold wind pushed at his face until he looked down, lowering his shoulders, hunching towards the stones upon which he sat. Thomas, however, seemed to be lifted, the dark shadow of him raising up until he stood over Gregg, though he faced away, looking into the wind and across the stone wall into the night beyond. The wind died, the end of it curling into a final note that whispered to its end and then the moor was silent once again. The clattering of the stream rushed to surround them. Above, suddenly present, the sky was vibrant with the infinite universe, the small and fierce stars in their vast numbers and there, as a hazy incomprehensible path the Milky Way. Thomas had opened his arms wide, stood facing the moor, his face upturned, gathering in all above and before him.

'Ellie!'

His cry was violent in the night, sharply defined. Against the ponderous space of the moor and the sky, it was explosive. It hit Gregg harshly and he blinked, recoiled.

'Ellie?'

This time the note of it trailing, fraying towards its end and in it a remembrance of the long call of that wind. Thomas took a few shuffling steps towards the stream in its dark gully, his arms raising higher, imploring the distant cold stars beyond them. Again he called her name, this time the cry dissolving into a gulping sob and he folded, crouched into the shadows, his silhouette swallowed by the earth, only his sobbing now rising above the flowing waters beyond. Gregg felt a pull, the shock of Thomas's cries passing and he stood, moved towards where the folded figure crouched, laid a hand on Thomas's shoulder. He did not know what to say, only stood there.

'Leave me alone.' Thomas said, his voice husky and swollen, 'Leave me alone!' He stood quickly, rushed away into the dark and Gregg heard the stoney clatter of his crossing the stream, then a brief shadow over the wall beyond and Gregg was alone.

In all his years Gregg had only ever experienced raw emotion in others on a few occasions, true unfiltered emotion. His mother coming out of his father's hospital room. A friend at college suddenly drunk and angry at the world. Helen when their son Tom had been ill. Even so, it had been constrained, the usual world pushing at it to conform and return, others and Gregg conspiring to calm and set it right. Abandoned here in such wildness Gregg felt suddenly thin, transparent, insignificant. There was nothing to do, nothing that could be done. The moor and the night were impassive and above him the constant swathes of stars moving imperceptibly did not notice, were unconcerned. Perhaps he heard another cry, thin and pale out there in the dark, though perhaps it was just a turning of the beck over its stoney bed. The air was now still, the dead hours of night and so he sat down, thinking that he should wait and let the world be for a time.

Left alone, the night seemed to rush in around him. What had previously been an intriguing mix of shadow and shades now appeared more solid, less forgiving of the clumsy eye. At the edges, always at the edges, a thread of some movement, stilled by the act of looking. The air turned cold, pressing where his skin was exposed, testing at the edges. He pulled the collar of his fleece up, tighter, and tucked his arms around himself. The stream drummed against its tiny bed, he could hear now the thrumming of it against the deeper stones, buried beneath the oily peat. In all that dark so much space, above and below and he, sitting hunched against it. He had the sudden urge to stand, to unfold and, despite that sharp voice of fear hungrily pleading at him to stay small, stay close and unseen against the dark earth, he stood. The cold air nosed at him, examined him. A quick push of fear, a sense of being now noticed by what lay in the darkness around him. He moved, his boots striking dully against the stone. To the stream, where a broad stone gave a natural fording. The noise of the stream's falling around it seemed to break against the night, then into the enveloping bracken on the other side, the unseen leaves stroking at his thighs. A low, neglected wall became a careful scramble and the path buried itself off into the dark sweep of the moor beyond. Here the land dipped, the noise of the stream now swallowed back into the earth. He stopped. In such uninhabited places, above the farm-steads, villages and cities, he expected there to be constant, restless movement, an eternal wind rushing through the bracken, the slow folding of low and heavy clouds brushing at the broad rising backs of the hills. Instead there was stillness. All movement seemed to occupy a different sense of time, crossing vast space and distance. Here was the turning of the earth, the implausible forces of the stars and, beneath, the grinding push of stone. All other movement was inconsequential, so briefly temporary that it need not exist. He stood, holding back a breath, and, for the briefest

moment, Gregg sensed it all, the gears of the universe beyond the night and moors, beyond him.

The sensation vanished, as if he had been noticed peering round the thin curtain, and quickly the small noises returned, even the constant muffling fall of the stream behind him. He turned, meaning to pick a careful way back to the tumbled wall. Above him, where the dark line of the land ran uncertainly along the edge of the sky, was a solid shape, there where he had scrambled over the wall, its solidity shocking against the subtler night. He thought it must be Thomas, returned, waiting for him, though even with the thought, Gregg dismissed it. The thumping of this heart filled his head. The shape did not move. Gregg was struck with a sense of it waiting, regarding him. He dare not call Thomas's name, fearing it would be met with silence. Instead, rising unbidden, he heard himself shout, 'What do you want?', the hoarseness of his voice striking alarmingly out across the moor, then quickly muffled by the mute moor. Then the shape seemed to sink into the land, slowly and unsteadily, until its outline disappeared entirely and, with a hot spurt of horror, Gregg had a cloying image that it was not disappearing but approaching, coming down the path in the darkness towards him. A sudden urge to run gripped him, to turn around and begin a scrambling, chaotic flight onto the hill. Even as his legs began to tense, he sensed the unknowable landscape around him and he held himself still on the path. There was no sound of approach, only the drumming of his heartbeat in his ears and the urgent, short breaths. Nothing came along the path. He stood, letting time pass, until he judged that anything approaching would have made its presence known. With a shaking horror still clutching at his breath, he began to hesitantly and carefully pick his way back to the wall. Nothing met him and here at the wall's ragged line, the sound of the stream rushed to meet him and the airs opened around him and there was the dim shapes of the bivvy and Thomas's telescope. Nervous of the vast, open spaces around him, Gregg climbed into the bivvy, keeping his head towards its

entrance, looking out into the night, unable to shake the unsettling sense that something was approaching down overgrown tracks.

He slept. It was a fitful, tossing sleep, broken moments. The bivvy floor solid and smooth enough but unrelenting against his bones. He had pulled his sleeping bag around him and the warmth of it, welcome and reassuring, pushed him into sleep but the strangeness of everything kept pulling him back awake. He kept his boots on, knowing they would be flaking mud into the bag but somehow this small act felt like a kind of action, a readiness to respond if Thomas reappeared.

Waking from his dozing, Gregg felt a thump in the earth beneath and a rattle of stone, boots jarring against the ground nearby. He opened his eyes, peered out. The sky had softened, the dark line of the wall and the tracing of the tree marking the nearness of dawn. Thomas, clambering across the stream, crossed to where his telescope stood considering the skies. He started to dismantle it, quick, assured, familiar actions. Gregg pulled himself from the sleeping bag, his boots snagging and wrapping themselves in the lining until he awkwardly emerged, stood in the dim light at the bivvy door.

‘Morning’ Thomas’s voice was hoarse, unconcerned, returned to its gruff bluntness, ‘Sleep OK?’

In it was a warning off, a cautioning. The night was passing over the edge of the world and with it all the hours of dark. Here now would be a different day, the present would reassert itself and the past had been dispersed to the heavens.

‘Sort of. A bit’ Gregg said and in it their unspoken consent to each other that everything would be as if the coming sun washed from them that temporary darkness.

Lorraine called. There had been a rescheduling and she now had a gap, a day and not so many miles, between her meetings. She was staying in Newcastle.

'I don't want to hang around the city any longer than I need to,' she said, adding, as if she were in earshot of all who lived there, 'Not that its a bad place to be, I just haven't seen trees for a while.'

The advantage of travelling without a fixed plan, free of bookings and checking in times, of the need to satisfy someone else's arrangements, was that Gregg and Archie had nothing to decide other than where to meet Lorraine. Sitting in the quietly overbearing and small dining room of the latest bed & breakfast, with the equally quietly overbearing woman who ran the place, Archie chewed his toast and watched through the tall bay window a bus patiently wait as an older man picked his way on board.

'Have you ever been to the Holy Isle?' he said.

'Er, no.'

'OK. I went once, as a kid. I can only remember the ice cream' Archie's hand hovered near his coffee cup, 'I wouldn't have guessed it would be somewhere Lorraine wanted to go. Seems all a bit too ... outside ... for Lorraine.'

The owner seemed to glide about the room with practiced haste. More tea and coffee, more toast, all offered with a grace that seemed somehow insincere, her nimble clearing of their plates more honestly urging them towards the rest of the day.

If Gregg felt any disquiet, the night on the moors, the howling that seemed to keep coming from a remembered darkness, it was pushed away to the edges of the morning by the routines of dressing, breakfast, packing. Any awkwardness about the sharing of a room had passed into a polite acceptance of each other's presence. Watching Archie as he emerged from the bathroom half dressed, smiling briefly at Gregg before picking through clothes half folded in

his bag, it seemed to Gregg that he was viewing acts of isolation, small gestures and routines only ever carried out when alone. In it he became aware of his own private routines, the way he might examine his face in the mirror as he finished dressing or how he might pick at his toes before pulling on a sock. Each to their own, he thought, our lives full of such routines filling the small minutes.

The car smelled of sea, the upholstery sodden with the sharpness of it in the cold morning air, though it retreated as they drove from the village, heading north along the sinuous road that echoed the wavering coastline.

They arrived too early for Lorraine's train, though with little time to do anything else and so they sat in the car amongst the blandness of the station carpark. It was full, commuters no doubt, Archie remarked, and they had to position the car at its edge, hovering near a solid metal barricade with large signs in red directing them not to park there.

'We're out front x' Gregg messaged Lorraine and got a thumbs up in reply. The day was bright, the constant folding of clouds moving with the steady wind, off across the rising hills to the west. Though the car was warm, there was a teasing of colder air now, creeping across the skin at the ankles, the wrists, the brow.

'So, a bit of a wild night then?' Archie asked. He was watching the station entrance, one hand at his chin, a thumb stroking his lip gently. Gregg grunted, nodded.

'You could say that' he replied. In it was the urge to speak, to tell more and certainly in the small smile and half turning of Archie's head towards him there was the invitation to do so. A vacant sense opened before Gregg, the night sky above the impassive moors, and amongst it would be the starting but at this moment he could not grasp it. He made a small noise, exasperated, unsure, shrugged his shoulders and then smiled.

'I wouldn't know how to begin' he said eventually. Archie nodded.

'From the little Lorraine told me, they guy's got problems. Must admit I was a bit unsure about you going off into the night, onto the moors with him. It had all the hallmarks of a good murder case.' Archie laughed, then he reached across and patted Gregg on the thigh, just above the knee, 'So I'm glad you survived. Ah, here's Lorraine.'

Even though the sun was not yet high enough, Lorraine raised a hand above her eyes, slowly scanning the car park, her gesture vaguely theatrical, an announcement of arrival. Archie started the car, lowered the window and waved at her even as he pulled the car out.

'It stinks of boys in here' Lorraine said, 'What the hell have you two been up to? Actually, I don't want to know.' She said it lightly, off hand, a casual humour to fill the space of their settling into the journey but Gregg felt a flush of guilt at his face. He saw Archie glance back at him in the rear view mirror, smiling.

'Ah, well Lorraine, what goes on tour, stays on tour' Gregg said. He intended it to break his own unwarranted awkwardness, wanted to convey a joking sense that everything was still as expected, but it felt overly suggestive in the way he said it, his smile, intended as broad and open, comfortable at her suggestion, instead seemed secretive and triumphant. He felt the blush deepen and felt quickly grateful that he was sitting in the back of the car, behind Lorraine. In her laugh there was little to suggest that she had thought anything of her comment and soon she was asking where they might stop for brunch.

It should have been a summer's day. The flat shine of sunlight on sands, the restlessness of small ripples in the shallow waters, the bright light of blue between clouds, it all told of warmer days. Only the deepening grey of waters further out and the foaming cut of waves caught by a slicing wind brought everything back into its proper season. The road turned slowly toward the island and with it came a disquieting sense of leaving behind and of arriving elsewhere. In the

landscape and the low, quiet dunes there held a stillness, time passing slowly, a carefully curated landscape, conscious that it would be seen - has been seen - further afield as the centuries passed. Lorraine opened a window and into its narrow gap raced a wind full of the sharp metal of the sea, a thin roar and, with it, the still air of the car resonated, small stirrings all around Gregg. In the smell of the sea there was the reminder of the land and the moors and in that, the wind became as of a man howling in his pain. Gregg shifted, sat up, leaned forward to look elsewhere, shaking his head.

But the darkness would not leave him. The car park was busy. Lorraine asked where everyone had come from, given they themselves had crossed relatively soon after the tide had crept below the road, its surfaces still wet with its passing. They walked the functional path to the low clustering of buildings, found the tearoom, a table in the corner of a courtyard. They huddled over their coffees. Here, protected by the stone walls around them, the wind was elsewhere, only the bright light of a cooling sun which weakly warmed at their hands when clouds parted. Lorraine and Archie ordered food, something with eggs. Gregg ordered toast, not feeling hungry, not wanting to draw attention to it. He sat quietly while Lorraine and Archie chatted, attentive enough to nod, laugh while they ate. Here in the courtyard he felt somehow temporarily held, hidden away from the wildness that surrounded. Everything up here in the north held a wildness, the land, the sky and the sea all pressing in on everything, never held far from where people gathered. Out there was everything, in here a small nothingness.

Archie wanted to see the ruins, Lorraine, patting her stomach said that a walk would be good and they left, ambling away from the protection of the small houses, towards the rearing shape of the remains of the castle. In the rushing of the wind there was little room for conversation. Snatches of it flung between them, all easy and simple. Near where the broad path began a gentle rise up to the ruins they paused. All round them the bay tussled against the rising

wind and the ebbing tides. Large clouds came in off the sea, making a steadfast and resolute way over the land. In the thinning gaps between them, blades of light briefly arced and faded. Taking a breath was like filling the chest with so much life that it would never leave.

'I'm going to have a look along the shore' Gregg shouted at Archie and Lorraine, pointing out to where a slight rise in the grassland marked the edge of the island. Archie nodded, gave a thumbs up and he and Lorraine turned up the last of the path, leaning into the wind.

A ragged path cut across the grass eventually fading into a scrubby border of stones. Here, at the last rise before the beach, people had built cairns, rocks placed upon each other, small towers along the ridge. He stopped to examine them. The urge to knock them over pulsed through him, to flatten the land once again, to remove any sense of others. He walked past them, down the awkward slope to the narrow stretch of pebbles along the shore. Here, the island behind was hidden and he was, once again, alone on a narrow strip of shore against the immense turmoil of the waters.

He had never truly been the type of person who self reflects. It had all been an elusive pursuit, conducted by friends, family, Helen and, as the first deep roots of adulthood formed, even Tom. For Gregg, even as a child, the world seemed to simply exist and he in it. Whilst everyone else seemed to have arrived in their life with an inner landscape that would require a constant exploration, Gregg seemed to have no urge, or need, to question the broad and plain set of emotions he was equipped with, going through his life only ever looking outward into the world.

This was not true, as an earlier girlfriend had pointed out to him, her rage barely constrained beneath her obvious attempts to appear understanding or compassionate. It simply could not be true and in fact might even indicate Gregg's immaturity, that his life had never called upon him to go beyond much more than the daily emotional dips and rises, simply confirmed the privileged status of his life. Not privileged as in wealthy, she pointed out, but protected from much of the world's hardship. Not abundant with opportunities, perhaps, but certainly cosy. At the time, Gregg recalled, he had assumed her speech had been a preliminary to an ending, or forging, of their relationship, a testing before setting out on one path or the other. It turned out to be an ending.

She had of course been correct. Even at the time he knew this to be true. The story that he had no need to delve into his innermost thoughts had been just that, a story, one that he told himself so repeatedly that it obscured what lay beyond. Instead it was projected outward and he felt compelled to carry on through his life in a blank, unquestioning manner. There had been, of course, the regular tipping away from the usual, those moments that any life will hold and, with them, the soaring or swooping shift in his inner state - the birth of his son, that first awkward fuck, the death of his father, his last redundancy. He had assumed, in all instances, the role of

the observer, watching himself go through each moment if not with calm acceptance at least with a small, quiet, childish awe of these occasional swells and upheavals. They rose within him as one might feel the tilting of a ship or the lifting of a plane, forces at work beyond any complete understanding, sharply ignored in case the monstrous nature of them overtook him.

The day was full of tilting. The far horizon restless with sea and clouds, the waves along the beach broad and constant, the swell throwing them hard against the shingle. The sharp shriek of a gull drew him back into the landscape. In his hand, still, was the stone he had chosen to add to the nearest cairn. The cold of the earth had seeped into his backside and he shifted, feeling the stones beneath his feet unsettled.

‘Any deep revelations coming then?’ she said, her voice pushing against the rushing coast.

Lorraine stood on the small rise of the dune, her hands deep in the pockets of her parka. The wind had hidden her approach and she had come by the thin, worn path that meandered through the tough grass of the headland, pausing where it gave way to the rocks and pebbles of the beach. The wind blew her hair constantly across her face and the tilts and turns of her head to keep it from her eyes made her as if a wading bird, searching the waters before her with a furious concentration. She climbed carefully towards Gregg and, with an awkwardness on the sliding stones, she sat next to him and smiled.

‘Beautiful here. You can see why it’s got its history’ she looked up the coast, one hand picking at a large pebble between them, ‘Archie’s having a look at the walled garden.’

Gregg glanced over his shoulder.

‘So, how’re you doing?’ she said, with a casualness that promised more, ‘I mean with all this. Have you had any insights? Thoughts? From meeting some of these people.’

He did not want to answer, the doldrums of the day enfolding and dragging back any thought. He picked a small, broken shell lying near his shoe and, after a brief examination

of its ragged swirl, cast it away to the sea's edge. Lorraine kept fussing at her hair, hooking it away from her face as the wind caught it. It was an odd movement, ill at ease in someone usually so gathered. Gregg began to watch her from the edge of his vision.

'Well, er, yes, well ... they are certainly, they certainly have stories. Interesting' he began, carefully enough, though quickly realised he was saying little and stopped, looked down, plucked at a single blade of grass struggling between rocks, 'I mean, sorry, I guess I'm still thinking, taking it in, really.'

'Sure. I can imagine. It's a lot. And sorry if I've over-loaded you with it, with them, their stories I mean'

A pause.

'Archie mentioned something to me, just now. That you've been seeing things? Or think you might be? Some kind of shape or shadow. Just now and then.'

A tilting, sudden and forceful. Gregg almost swayed with it, tipping to one side. He disguised it by leaning out on one arm, looking out to sea, away from Lorraine. He had a swirling sense of doubt. He did not recall saying anything to Archie. That he himself doubted what he had been seeing was in itself a prohibition from telling another but perhaps, in one of their long nights, the drink, the drugs, perhaps in some of their hazy, softening conversations, perhaps he had mentioned it.

'Er, well, yes' and with that outward confirmation he felt an inner panic, a surging urgency of a mistake about to happen and yet unavoidable.

Lorraine nodded.

'I knew it ... I mean I thought so, that something was going on' she said, 'Tell me about it. What are you are seeing? And when?'

She seemed to lean closer now, the sea, the beach, the wilding skies all forgotten. Gregg took in her face and there he saw, with an increasing alarm, an opening hunger, the

eyes, the touch of a tongue at the side of her lips, the upturned chin.

‘Nothing. No, nothing really.’ Stammering.

‘No, Gregg, it’s something. Something you need to acknowledge, need to deal with. If it’s what Shona said it is, then this is huge. Something we’ve been ...’ she broke off, catching herself.

‘Shona?’

‘Yes, I was there, remember? At the group session when she talked to you, to us. She’s a bit weird I know, but she’s been accurate before.’

She leaned toward Gregg and reached out a hand to lie lightly on his shoulder.

‘This is huge Gregg. You’re the first person to actually see something. You’ll need help. Shona was right. It’s not something someone with no experience can deal with. She can help, the group can help.’

A chill in the small of his back, where his fleece had ridden up, the bare skin exposed to the rushing wind around them. It crawled up his spine, burrowing between his shoulder blades, wrapping around his chest until he realised it had caught his throat in a tight embrace like a fist held under his chin. Lorraine’s face wide now, the eyes intent upon him, her hand at his shoulder seeming to tighten. From the tangle of thoughts that now swung like a sudden gale through him, that name, standing out like a thin smile on pale lips.

‘Has Shona sent you?’ he said, barely rising above the wind. Lorraine did not move, only her hand on his shoulder, the questioning look almost pleading, ‘Is that why you’ve been ...’ but before he could finish the words held tight against his tongue.

Lorraine shook her head, ‘No, not entirely. I’ve been ... its more a standing by, trying to be here for when you work it out. Shona said ...’

‘Shona!’ his shout interrupting her, ‘Why do you keep mentioning her?’ He didn’t need an answer, Lorraine’s face was enough. He stood, the stones skittering away and as he

turned away his foot caught at the nearest cairn, sending it crumbling down the slope.

'Gregg' she said 'Come on, be sensible. Don't you see? Sylvie, Margaret & Graham, Thomas. Even Archie. Don't you see what happens if you try and do this by yourself? There is nothing but ... pain.' The last word faded, just her face, too close, pressing in, needing something from him.

He walked away, into the land, his back to sea and the line of stones and Lorraine's face still pale amongst it all.

The wind pushed him inland, two firm and large hands held against his back driving him away from the restless sea. He heard Lorraine call his name, just once, faint, the wind smothering it. If she called again he did not hear, the constant rushing filled his head. The world suddenly seemed violent, full of an urgency. The path was exposed, nothing between it and the sky and sea except the flattening sea grasses where dunes had been scoured away by the decades of wind and tide.

That people could be unpredictable, their moods and behaviours shifting with the days, influenced by the tenuous threads connecting each other, running into the past and cast into the future, that the whole difficult diversity of life must be engaged or endured, this had not escaped Gregg. He had progressed through his life, not ignorant, not excluded, but - he knew - spared the vicious extremes of other people's struggles and, so, he had developed a steady, wary assumption that, on the whole, people should be trusted, if only because most people, like him, were just getting on with their acts of living and were not interested in having to deal with anything beyond. There had been betrayals, of course, though now they appeared more as small acts of pettiness made pale and thin by the confinement of the years.

A low wall cut across his path, the grasses had swarmed over it, the sands rubbing away its edges until it had become a low mound running across the island. Years of visitors had clambered across it, here, where the stones had tumbled or been kicked and worn away, and on the other side a rough lane that hurriedly headed back into the huddle of buildings around the flat village. He followed it. Though the wind, interrupted by the rising walls each side of the lane, loosened its suffocating hold on him, there was still a constant roaring in his ears. Shaking his head, hoping to loosen it, he felt the surge of an anger usually held away. Lorraine standing quietly on the shoreline or laughing at him over her drink. Lorraine

arriving in a cafe or leaning forward over her steering wheel looking for a turning. All of it now seemed to drop into a hollow, deep well and, such was the sense of the danger of falling, that Gregg halted, tipping back onto his heels, a hand reaching out as if to catch at the solid stones of the wall. In every act there had always been a lie. The injustice of it was shrill and sharp but there, like the water sensed still and silent at the bottom of a well, there too a sadness. He turned to look back at the shoreline but it was hidden now by the rising wall. He walked amongst the first buildings on the edge of the village. Here the wind was kept at bay, here people now filled the narrow street and all the familiar routine of the world rushed in.

The car park was full now, a constant restlessness of people exiting from crowded cars and vans, stretching and picking at bags and coats from boots and back seats. Kids and dogs wide eyed with the excitement of new places were released. Gregg seemed to be going against a tide, pushing through them all, back to Archie's car. In the narrowing entrance to the car park, he stood to one side, waiting for the large family who had sprawled across the opening. A large wolfhound on a long lead nuzzled at his hand and he smiled down at the brown eyes. Nearby a rough wooden shelter with the ticket machines and here a crowd snagged around it, people politely jostling to read, to check. It was a natural gathering point and many appeared to be waiting for others, coming from the cars beyond. Gregg pushed through them. As he reached the edge of the crowd he became aware of the man, standing alone. His stillness marked him out from the shifting of people. The broadness of his shoulders, the solidity of him, the large brow obscuring any clear sense of his eyes.

Bramley saw Gregg and, eyes widening on a face unused to such expression, he turned away, striding off deeper into the carpark, walking with pace and a forced casualness until he disappeared around the side of a coach.

For a moment Gregg thought the rushing wind of the coast had found him there, standing in the shifting crowd, but it was

the surge of blood in his ears. The ground tilted, threatening to drop away and, while there was suddenly a clamour of alarmed questions crowding in his mind, there was also a sharp, clear call to move. Gregg walked quickly to the car and, without any sense of the implications, climbed hurriedly into the driver's seat. The road back to the mainland was clear and dry now, the sea retreated beyond the mud and sand. It was with an odd sense of relief that Gregg imagined the solid bedrock of the mainland once again beneath him as he left the island.

The call from the ward had come on an afternoon dogged by an insistent sense of a rain that did not arrive, only thickened the air. The calm, slightly bored voice of the nurse telling him to come now, that his wife was close now, the voice not waiting to hear beyond his short 'OK'.

He had thrown his phone onto the back seat of the car, amongst the old fleeces that were piled there. Or perhaps he had in some way hidden it, buried it under the seat, or in the glove compartment. Anywhere out of reach as he drove. The traffic, the endless restlessness of it had been almost soothing in its call for his attention. At the large roundabout, waiting for the lights to change, with the cars and vans around him briefly stilled, there had come a monstrous swell of something, pushing and pulsating through his ribs, stretching the intricate web of his tissue and bone. The light dimmed around him and then, a release and the traffic had moved. There was the turning for the hospital but he had kept moving, past it, on to the next one and there, just beyond and hardly obscured by a line of straggling trees, a flat, low hotel.

The car park had been empty, only a few cars. Over near the hotel's main entrance a taxi drew away. A woman pulled a small suitcase on its wheels up into the wide doors of the hotel. They had slid back smoothly and she disappeared from sight. No-one else could be seen. The day had been bright, hot and when Gregg had opened the window the heat spilled into the air conditioned interior. He had not moved for several minutes. There was a great persistent tearing force that had caught at his chest, shoulder, the pit of his stomach. It was unimaginable, undefinable and he kept watching the car park, its stillness and dullness, the flat of the tarmac, the even painted lines, the spill of wood clippings from the bedding over the kerbs. He had watched it all, while that tearing force loomed behind him. If the car park stayed like this, the force would never reach him, it could not break in. Gregg had noticed where the grass had been cut along the front of the

hotel, the swirls of clippings left untied near the verge. Stay like this, stay still and here.

Then, from the backseat or the glove compartment or under the passenger's seat the buzzing of his phone, rude and unfeeling. With a quick violence, Gregg had turned, wrenched, scabbled until the thing was in his hands and he had unfocused his eyes, did not look at the screen, had only pressed and jabbed until it went silent and blank and off. A car drove slowly into the car park. Everything seemed in motion again. The grass clippings were blowing onto the tarmac. The hotel doors were sliding open. There was a pressing urge in his bladder. If he moved that moment of nothing would be gone and this would be him doing something hideous, each step, every movement thick with a wrongness and a horror. The bag in the boot already packed. The sliding doors of the hotel. The bland eyed receptionist. The moment waiting for the lift, and then there had been a room, small and blank and silent. He had sat on the bed and realised, there in that silent moment, that he had not thought of anything beyond it. Not thought much at all.

He walks along the shore, just where the reach of the flat waves touch at his boots. The tide is out now and there is sand as slick as seal skin, bright as a fishing lure against the flat, even sky. He does not stop, keeps walking along the coast. The sands eventually curve to a stop and there are black rocks scrambling out of the sea, scrabbling up onto the land. He is not there yet, lengths of flat sand are between him and those rocks. The tide is going out and it seems as if it does so more and more quickly as he walks. To stay on the sea's edge, to see the thin edge of its waters keep pushing at his boots Gregg has to curve towards it. Gradually it takes him away from the land, out and out again, pulling at him now, each ripple a teasing tug. The gulls circling nearer the thin line of the bay turn and wheel away, they are lost against the flattened arc of the sky and their cries have been taken inland by a wind thrown across the distance of dark waters.

Gregg slows, something is not right. He looks up and back to the land, the hunch of it over sands. It seems thinner, giving way between the sky above and the sea before it, as if pushed away. The waves have stopped brushing at his feet, they have moved further out yet. Gregg follows them. The sand beneath him seems to have veins, dark clay, mud like an inky line on paper laying in water. Then there's a fish. It is quite small and lies on its side in a circle of mud, its mouth is working open and closed, open and closed. It surprises Gregg and he stops again, looking at it. He looks at the retreating waters, judging whether to carry the fish to where it can swim away. He walks on, following the lowering tide. Rocks appear, as if breaching from the sands, small at first but then here's a larger group, raising their backs above him. He walks between them. Small pools of water cling to their base, where the sand has dipped and eroded by the falling water. The way ahead is obscured by more rocks, each seeming to rise higher so that even the sea is no longer visible. Gregg stops near a slanting slab, looks around and

then clambers onto it, climbing up its broad back to where it tips out over sand. Here he sits. There is no sea, no waves, nothing but sand and rock all around him. The beating noise of the sea has gone, only the rush of the breeze brings the scent of it, picking it up from the pools and puddles, from where it huddles in crevices. There is nothing and Gregg does not seem to mind. He just sits and looks out over it, his boots rimed with sand, his hands around his knees red with the cold.

# PART THREE

The journey north was under grey skies, the rain never far away though it did not fall. Even so, the road, the landscape, it all seemed saturated, heavy with previous storms, the water just under the surface of everything. The car was warm and though the lanes out from the town twisted to the larger roads, Gregg felt lulled, the early hour, the journey ahead, as if slipping back into bed before the day began. The light had changed, a weak wash of grey now above, the land around emerging in the blue and the black of its shapes. They talked easily, occasionally, practicalities of their morning, commenting on the hours ahead. Nothing more while the light outside strengthened.

Yesterday, when Archie had eventually appeared amongst the last flat sands of the Holy Isle, the late sun bright enough to cast the shallow pools as if from lead, he was walking with a steady confidence around the wavering edges of the merging land and sea. He had crossed the lingering bridge back to the mainland and climbed into the passenger seat of the car with a natural 'hullo!' to Gregg. They had not spoken until the coast was tucked behind them, swallowed by the land slowly rolling towards the harder expanses of moor and hills. Even then, Archie had managed to let Gregg explain without much need to question, listening as he watched the road ahead and, although he offered little of his own thoughts, in his nodding, the small affirming noises there was a reassurance that, in Archie, here was another who sensed the release that Gregg had secured when he walked away to leave Lorraine standing against that shore.

'I'm sorry I took the car without telling you' Gregg had offered, as a way of drawing it to an end.

'At least you came back for me. I'll take that as a compliment.' They had both turned to settle on the journey into the north where, eventually, as the evening purpled into night, a ragged house offered bed in a cold room and a meagre breakfast. In the morning, they drove to Hexham for a

better breakfast, the place quiet though the queue busy with builders, van drivers and early commutes getting coffee.

Archie drove them further north and Gregg watched the steady stream of fields, warehouses, the passing build up and then fall away of housing. Something shifted, imperceptible though enough to draw him out and look about. The long curve of the road ahead was emptier, long gaps between vehicles. It curved down, around the long rise and fall of a hill. Beyond, another hill. There was a sense of space, an emptying or a leaving. Or a dilution. The same people, cars, lorries, the same houses and factories, with more space between them. With it came a lifting in his chest, a long inhale, the sighing out and Archie looked across at him.

‘Odd isn’t it? More space. Or it feels like there is’ he said, ‘Its how I know I’m up north. Truly up north.’

The day was darkening, the sky had held its clouds all morning, the length of the country not enough to reach the edge of them, and so, with the passing hours, the light merely faded slowly until there was dark welling up from the shallow valleys and narrow borders. They stopped for dinner, this time coming off the main roads, into a small town where there was a pub Archie had been to before.

The dark is never complete, the headlights of the car struck at hedgerows, stretched colour into a thin glare. Out beyond, here and there the dim light of houses, but beyond that the deep night and, as the hour grew late, the sense of a landscape rearing up around them, its presence given away in the roughening of the stone walls that now lined the road, the sudden glimpse of a rushing stream below a bridge. Although Gregg had not been this far north, he felt a sense of familiarity, he did not need the light to understand that beyond him was something immense and old and impassive.

'Ah, it's just here' Archie said.

A forest had risen from the valley to their left, surrounding the road, their branches silvering in the headlights. Then a narrow lane leading off and down, the middle crumbling to short grass, the tyres crunching. The cottage was a dark shape amongst the trees, only discernible by the hard lines of its roof, the narrow wooden gate at the lane's side. Stepping from the car to open the side gate, Gregg instinctively took a deep breath, here was the sharpness of resinous trees and the heaviness of water, earth and leaf and, most notable of all, the ease of air unrestricted.

The cottage had the silence of a house unvisited, the rooms cool, a faint smell of polish and floor cleaner. The lights in the kitchen were harsh, too bright after the hours of the evening drive, the colder air from the open back door nosing through. There was a large Arga in the fireplace, though next to it a smaller, modern oven. Archie opened a cupboard in one corner, jabbed at a boiler and declared the heating on. Soon enough the bags were in, the doors closed and the first welcome warmth began to creep into each room. In the long lounge, a log burner flanked by two sofas and here Archie now hovered, one hand at this chin. They agreed lighting a fire this late was probably too much hassle and instead let the heating slowly warm the room. Gregg opened a bottle of whisky that had been tucked between their bags and each settled on a separate couch with a sense of a journey done.

Sleep came slowly. The bedroom was small, filled with the double bed, the door knocking against the thin bedside table. The room was at the side of the house, where it tucked into the rising hillside behind. Above the smell of warming air, another, faint, of dampness kept away only through regular use. The bed had been cool to the touch though soon to warm to Gregg's body and he curled his legs up, lay on his side both content to be at rest and agitated to be somewhere unknown. At the foot of the bed, a few feet of bare boards, a

small rug and then a set of doors opening to the garden. All had been dark beyond them so he drew the heavy curtains. The room became small and snug. Archie had disappeared off to his usual room, up the next turn of the stairs, wishing Gregg a good night's sleep. The house continued in a long, accustomed silence. The heating went off and there was a slow, soft ticking from the radiator. Gregg drifted, not asleep, not awake and it seemed as if the hours passed him, his eyes occasionally opening slowly to see nothing, just the dark.

That sleep had not only arrived but also remained unbroken until long after dawn surprised Gregg and he turned on to his back, momentarily confused by the unevenness of the plaster on the ceiling above him. Light edged around the curtains at the end of the room. Then, tenuous and teasing, the smell of bacon and coffee. There was a light tap at the door.

'Are you decent?' Archie pushed the door slightly open and waited, 'Decent enough for a coffee?' and he came into the room, a mug in one hand, offering it to Gregg as he sat up, 'Don't worry you won't get this service every day, just thought you'd like one this morning.'

Archie tugged the curtains open, the light seemed rudely bright though it was dull and in it cloud and rain.

'I'm doing some bacon and eggs if you want some?'

'God, marry me' and after it a brief pause, the sudden counting of the ways for misinterpretation, 'I mean, thank you. Yes, that would be great.'

'About five minutes then' and Archie left, pulling the door closed.

Even in the light of an overcast day, the cottage seemed to have an easiness of its own. The silent, still rooms of the night before had been only that, nothing more, empty. Filled with their activity, they were once again warm and comforting. Here a bookcase, all paperbacks, all thumbed. In the corner a large wooden trunk, two tartan blankets neatly folded on its lid. Low windows along the front of the house overlooked a narrow strip of gravel and plant pots before a fence strewn

with honeysuckle and a gate to the lane. Leaning into the recess of one of the windows, Gregg looked out across an empty, desolate stretch of uneven moor, tufting grasses yellow with the lateness of the year. In the distance the line of the forest, the silver bareness of the tree trunks exposed, leaning away from the lower ground, away from the bareness of the moor. He saw that many of the humps and mounds that littered the moor were stumps, the clasping roots of trees felled, burying into the peat.

They talked about their plans for the day over breakfast, though it was vaguely pointless. The place seemed to impose on them the absence of anything to do. Here instead was the business of space and life with no necessity for distraction. Archie would go to his studio perhaps, see what needed setting up, spend some time there sketching or daubing. Archie commented that the cottage was as good a place to do nothing in that he had ever experienced, and with it came their acknowledgement that Gregg would be left to his own company for much of the time.

The next few days became washed in the colours of moor and stone, earth and sky. The two men fell into a routine, unplanned and unremarked, each in their own way. Gregg, mindful that, for Archie, this was a place of retreat, of drawing and painting, did nothing to impose himself on his host. He spent the daylight hours walking the landscape around the cottage. It was not desolate, here and there were the furtive activities of farming and foresting. Nearer the river that tumbled down the valley there was a campsite and, here, a few buildings, barns converted to an office, a small shop. The road, tucked into the hillside to the east, would often see vehicles, cars and vans, motorbikes. Though there was no lack of human activity, it was made small and insignificant by the rising of the hills, the crooked escarpments, the huge shouldering turn of the land against the sky. He wandered, staying along the valley floor, not venturing far up the slopes until days later when the clouds withdrew to leave the uneven ledges of the hilltops clear. He felt secure, safe enough, near

to the wildness without the risk of being lost amongst it. An app on his phone could always tell him exactly where he was and, in reality, there were few places along the valley where the cottage was not visible. The woodland that had once filled the valley floor had been worked in recent years, the large spaces where trees once stood left rough along the river's edge. Just beyond the cottage, the trees had been left untouched and a spread of woods weaved itself out to the valley's fading mouth. A narrow line of trees, no more than several trees deep, curled out from its edge, following the road until it curved around the cottage.

He might return for lunch, often later, at the first noticing of the fading light or cooler airs. It rained most days, heavy showers, short and determined, pummelling at the soaked earth and he took shelter under a tree, in a tumbled barn, under an outcropping of stone. He rarely saw anyone and did not feel the urge to do so. Here there seemed to be an emptiness that was older and larger, beyond himself. The past weeks, perhaps even months, became as small as the ragged stones, their fiercely stubborn grip on the earth becoming insignificant against the spreading sky, the covering webs of the bracken and thrust of the hawthorns. With each day, he felt a sort of compression, as if against all this, anything he was, anything that shadowed him, it was all as nothing.

The door of the hut was ajar when Gregg came around the corner of the house. A warm light showed along its edges. As he reached the back door, Archie appeared, an empty glass jar in one hand.

'Hello you' Archie said and hovered in the doorway, one hand on the door, 'Good walk?' and then began to crunch down the path to his studio. He stopped and turned, just where the path went up a few steps towards the line of trees, and turned back.

'Do you want to come and see? There's a kettle and everything if you want a cuppa?'

In the days they had been at the cottage, there had been no such invite, Archie disappearing most mornings after breakfast to paint or sketch. Gregg did not feel snubbed, it was never stated that he was not to disturb Archie, they both seemed to slip into the arrangement through easy routine.

The air had turned somewhat colder than previous afternoons. Whilst following the river upstream, Gregg had been caught in one of the sweeping rain showers that tumbled down the valley. A lone willow, caught on the banks, proved faint shelter and he had walked for the next hour feeling the cold heaviness of his wet trousers against his thighs. Now they were dry enough but somehow the chill of the afternoon had not left him and the promise of a hot drink, company and the warm light of the studio up amongst the trees turned him towards Archie.

The way in which brushes, paints, jars were neatly arranged, the tidy brightness of the place caught Gregg by surprise and he realised he had expected the mess of an artist in full flow. The inside of the wooden studio was painted white and the large windows in three of the walls let in as much light as the valley could give. Near the far wall, a log burner, a small settee covered in a dusty blue throw, a small table and lamp. In the corner a sink, neat kitchen unit and kettle. Over by the window a large canvas on an easel,

angled toward the natural light, its content turned away from Gregg.

Archie was already at the kettle, pulling mugs from the cupboard, milk from a small fridge underneath.

‘You can have a look if you want,’ he said, over his shoulder, ‘it’s not finished yet but I think I’ve got the main elements sorted now.’

Moving around the canvas, Gregg could not at first understand what he was looking at. A smear of dark greens, here a streak of blue, a rough square of deep greys near the centre and, above it, or on it, a figure, unmistakably human and, amongst all the other shapes, oddly neat and precise. It seemed to be peering over the edge of the grey, looking down the canvas to where a dark oval the colour of wet slate spread along the lowest border. The shock of recognition was unexpected. It was a vague, nagging sense of having seen, having been near, that agonising urge of a memory just lingering on the edges, unreachable. Then he saw the way the figure stood, one arm upraised, and it swept away all else, the valley, the warmth of the studio, Archie asking him about his tea, it all disappeared in an instant. There was only this figure gesturing to him from the canvas. A nudge at his elbow, Archie handing him a mug of tea so strong it was almost red and apologising for the lack of milk.

‘It’s coming along. I was worried at first, I’m usually more abstract and the sketches seemed a bit drab if I’m honest.’ Archie stood at his side, contemplating his work, sipping his tea, ‘I’m still not sure about it though.’ If his comment was aiming to provoke a response from Gregg, it did little more than draw Gregg back into the studio. He blinked, tucked his chin slightly, just once and looked at Archie.

Gregg had never attempted any description of art. When Helen had found a picture she liked in her scrolling through social media, she would show him, suggesting they order a print. He always felt inadequate in his response - it was either nice or interesting or he would simply agree that a print would be good. Helen never seemed to mind, the acknowledgement

enough for her to return to searching for it online. Now, with the artist standing next to him and the artwork as yet unfinished, Gregg knew his usual responses would not be enough and so he launched out into the unknown of more descriptive words aiming for an honesty without empty flattery.

'Its ... Its quite arresting? A bit wild?' He hesitated, the words that threatened to come next, the questions, they beckoned down a path as yet unseen, avoided. Instead he asked, 'Is it too crass to ask what it is?' He tried to make light of it, smiling, nudging Archie's elbow with his own.

'Hmm now, well, yes it is. Crass that is. But I'll let you off cos there's no-one else around to hear it.' Archie said, 'Though my response would have been both intelligent and witty, just so you know.'

Archie took a sip from his mug then looked at its contents.

'You know, it's a drear afternoon, practically evening. How about something a little warmer? I've a bottle of whiskey in here if you fancy it?' He moved to the back of the studio, tipping the remains of his tea into the sink, opening the cupboard where, amongst jars and bottles, there was the burnt amber of a whiskey.

Gregg did not notice when the light had gone from the day, the studio lights were so constant that it seemed as if they had been suspended in it, away from the shifting hours of the late afternoon. They sat side by side on the small sofa. The warmth from the log burner was steady and combined with the whisky, Gregg felt a looseness creeping up his legs, wrap around his body and settle across his shoulders. A wind had begun to flow down the valley, gathering speed from the higher slopes, pouring purposefully across the open spaces where once trees would have snagged and slowed it. The studio shifted with the stronger gusts, restless and at the windows rose a constant breathless rushing.

'Another?' Archie asked, tipping his empty glass towards Gregg. With the next whisky came a deepening sense of

letting go, each muscle, knotted by the day's walking, lengthening. Archie, with a comment about their brightness, turned off the studio spotlights, leaving only the light from the table lamp and the glow of the log burner.

'Very cosy' said Gregg.

They had talked, of course, over the days, over meals and in the evening. It had been easy conversation. Though they talked about music, art, politics, shared a little of their histories, in each pause there was often a quietly accepted sense that other stories would not be told, as if both acknowledged that to speak them would be to end the peaceful isolation that settled in the valley. It was easy, to avoid talking, each playing their part and so there was no hanging weight between them. Here in the warmth of the studio, small amongst the restless wilderness, in the dim light and with the creeping dullness of the whiskey, there came a sense of release, a gentle unbinding.

The painting, now lit only by the lamp, was full of shadows, the distinction between brushstrokes becoming difficult as the natural light from the windows inked into evening. Now, the figure was unseen, it had faded back into the canvas. Only the blue-grey of the pool, a stripe of green the colour wet moss, in the top corner the indistinct shape of a sky or unpainted canvas.

'So, indulge me,' Gregg said, into an easy silence, 'Tell me about the painting?'

Archie shifted, sitting forward, holding his glass in both hands, elbows on his thighs.

'Is that another way of asking what it is? Better, you're getting better' he laughed and swirled the remaining mouthful of his drink, 'Well now, here's a thing ...' He paused then, watching his drink settle, 'I don't usually do landscapes and, to be honest, this started as an abstract. Just simply drawing from what I saw around me in this valley. But then ... well, I was out walking a couple of days ago, up under Domhain crag. Have you been up there yet?'

Gregg knew it. It was a ragged, lonely little path cutting a straight line across the slope of the hill, worn now more by sheep than walkers. There was a point halfway where, if you stopped to look around, you suddenly felt exposed, just the sliding slopes of the hill all around, scree barely restrained by the tough grass. The path eventually tipped over the top of a ridge of ragged stone that arced between two hills and there, below, was the dark, still waters of a tarn.

He nodded.

'I went over the ridge, down to the water. If you look back up the slope there's that striking piece of outcrop, where the stone seems to have broken through. It's almost like a cliff and it looms over one end of the lake.'

Archie looked at Gregg, then past him at the canvas.

'I was just sketching, not really sure what I was trying to do, but better to keep drawing than do nothing. The day was quite bright. I mean for here, so the rain had stopped. It was still a day of clouds but they weren't so heavy as they had been so there was more light. And, if you've been down there, you'll know its quite sheltered so the wind just seems to stay out. It's pretty quiet.'

A gust of wind pushed at the walls and then veered off down the slope, towards the house and the dark beyond.

'Anyway, I was sketching and obviously was looking up, across the lake, towards that outcropping. I saw someone up there, not moving, but definitely a person, just standing there. I assumed it was a walker, which was a bit of a shock given I haven't seen many people out and about. To be honest I was bit annoyed at first, it changed the scene, I'd been in a flow and they'd interrupted that.'

Archie took a deep breath, it turned into a gentle laugh.

'So I waited and waited. But they didn't move off, just stood there. I couldn't see much about them, too far away. They were wearing dark clothes, which seemed a little odd. So many walkers usually wear something glaring. Anyway, just as I was deciding to give up for the day, the figure moved. It waved at me, I think. Just seemed to raise an arm and

gesture at me. I'm not sure why, it just seemed a little off. I wasn't sure at first and so I didn't do anything. Instead I just busied myself putting things back in my bag, hoping it would look to them like I hadn't seen them. When I did look back up, they were gone.'

'Did you see them again? I mean on the path or coming round the lake?'

'No. Nothing.'

Across the back of Gregg's neck it seemed as if a tendril of the wind outside had found its way through the walls and was now tracing its way under his collar. The haze of the whisky retreated and Archie's face and hands were in focus, the room did not feel as warm and he looked at the log burner, checking it was still alight. A warm glow, a single wavering flame near the back.

'So that's it really,' continued Archie, leaning back into the seat, draining his glass, 'When I started on the canvas I just couldn't see the scene without that figure. And the more I created it, the more it seemed to come into focus, the rest, the rocks and the hillside, the tarn, they all seemed to retreat, blur. Only that figure. Waving'

He looked at Gregg, smiling weakly, helpless.

'A bit spooky eh?' Then he moved, stood up, holding out a hand to take Gregg's glass, 'Not sure about you but I think I want some dinner before I tuck into anymore whisky. Else I'll be off my feet before you know it.'

As they left the studio, Gregg paused by the canvas.

'It's good. Something about it' he said.

'Yes, something. It's not a likeable piece but I'm hoping there's something that draws the attention.'

They stepped outside and the full force of the wind found them, pushed and rushed at them as they made an uneasy way down the path back to the cottage. Behind them the trees were furious with it and their constant noise chased them into the steadiness of the house.

There was wine with dinner and this, with the comfort of food, drew each into a formless sense of doing little else than

sitting before the fire. With his feet tucked up under him, Archie picked up a book and read. Gregg watched the flames. The wine bottle was between them on the table. The hours did not matter. It was only when Gregg poured himself another glass of wine, offering the bottle to Archie, that he noticed an absence, a settling in the room that had come on gradually.

'The wind has died' he said, looking at the nearest window. They both looked up, at the ceiling, at the windows, taking in the silent arrival of the night. 'It's been a while since I've had such a chilled night. Helen and I ...' He stopped, cutting off the words too quickly and drained his glass.

Archie placed his book on the floor, 'It might be a clear night out there now, if it's all blown through. We should go and have a look.'

None of the turbulence of the day's storm remained. The night was full of stillness, a holding together after a brutish outburst. There was light, subtle, caught in the corner of the eye. The clouds had gone and above the stars. In the open air, a bitter cold, the bite of it in his face, in each breath. Archie turned at the doorstep, 'Better get another layer' and they found warmer jackets and a hoody then walked up the path to the studio, pausing half way, looking up.

As his eyes adjusted, the sky became full of shades and stars, each emerging slowly until all around there was a brightness from the dark. He could see Archie's dark form next to him, feel a warmth coming from him. There was nothing to do or say, they stood craning their necks at the sky. Before too long the broad dusty path of the Milky Way stretched over them. Only above them was there light, below all was shape and dark, a resting quietness.

With an intake of breath, Archie spoke rather softly, 'If it helps, it gets more bearable. With time.'

Into the night came a gentle wash of sadness, surrounding Gregg, pushing at his throat. Archie put his arm around Gregg's shoulders, pulling gently once, twice then resting it

there lightly, gripping the roundness of Gregg's shoulder briefly before taking it away again.

'Thank you' Gregg said. They each looked at the lightness that was now above them and then Gregg stepped towards Archie, turning to put his arms around him, embracing him awkwardly at first, the slope of the path unbalancing them both. He stepped in closer, Archie's arms were around him the roughness of his cheek against his own.

'I know. Thank you' Gregg said, muffling into the thickness of Archie's jacket.

And then ... and then ... there seemed to be a sudden rush of images, flushing through his head and amongst them all, Helen, standing at the kitchen counter, sitting in the car, dancing at a wedding, holding their son. And then ... and then ... he was kissing Archie, the lips warm, the heat of his face at his closed eyelids. For a moment Archie responded, his body pressing fully against Gregg's, the arms tightening, then, he stepped away, holding Gregg by the arms, gently, pushing him yet holding him.

'No. Gregg, no. I can't, I ...' he trailed off and, releasing his grip, he turned to look again at the sky above them.

'Sorry ..' Gregg whispered. He turned away, stood on the path, looking up at the sweep of stars and saw how the branches of the trees clutched at them. Archie reached out one hand and placed it on Gregg's shoulder, squeezing.

'I don't know about you but I'm starting to get a little cold' he said, shifting his weight, turning towards the house, 'Shall we go in?'

The night grew colder. The air in his room was heavy with it, unmoving and when he turned over it grabbed at his shoulder, the back of his neck until he drew the duvet up and over his head. He could not sleep. There was a solid lump below his ribcage, just above his stomach, as if the muscles there had been drawn into a knot, tightening each time he turned and turned again.

It could not be, it could not be, it could not be. Repeated again and again, only those words running across the blank space, pushing away all other thought, each word pronounced precisely. He did not know what time it was when those words seemed to surge and he sat up, throwing back the covers, pressing his hands to his face. He wanted to move, be in motion.

The cold air settled around him, across the exposed sheets, teasing at the skin of his thighs. The bedside light briefly seemed to warm the room, he pulled on his clothes, picked up the fleece discarded on the floor. Standing at the turn of the stairs the rest of the house dark, steadily waiting the light. The boards of the narrow hallway had soaked in the cold, his toes shrank away from it. Here was the door to Archie's room, it had not been closed fully, a faint light lining the frame. Gregg stood at the door, one hand resting finger tips against the wood, quieting his breathing. The light came from a lamp, near the window. It cast an even muslin light across the bed. Archie was lying facing away from the door, huddled under the duvet, just the top of his head against the pillow, his hair dark, loose against the fabric. His stillness was neither sleep nor wakefulness.

Gregg went back to his room, stepping carefully, more so, the awareness of Archie's open door pressing between his shoulder blades. He sat on the end of the bed, put on his trainers and zipped his fleece. His jacket was there, hooked on the back of the door. The double doors opened easily, little

resistance and then he was out, into the open air, its rawness snatching at him.

They had left the small lamp on in Archie's studio, its light faintly outlining the windows, drawing a thin brush stroke under the door. In the dim light the painting appeared huge, a monstrous hard-edged blackness into which the evening had disappeared. Gregg approached it slowly, the heavy nausea of whisky and wine now pushing against the back of his throat. The figure, the dark outcropping of those rocks, the extended arm, reaching towards him and, suddenly, there was the accusation that he had expected, had lay buried in the knot beneath his ribcage and quickly, a rapid succession of images came roaring upwards. The hospital bed, a voice telling him to come now, the brightness of a hotel car park, the silence of a room. The figure jabbed its thin arm towards him and there at last was Helen, pointing, accusing, defining the lines of his guilt. He covered his mouth with his hand, held his breath until he had scrambled outside and around the side of the studio. Being sick was no release from the sickness, the air of the valley suddenly pressing down upon him. He found the gate, the lane and began walking up, away, up.

The valley seemed to have filled during the dark hours with jagged shadows. Stone had pushed its way through the crumbling soil to create looming cliffs. Trees had clustered closer together, rearing into the sky to peer across the valley floor. All was difference. In the freezing air, the river seemed to be roaring at its banks. There was light, the sky still luminescent with it, enough to light the lane, enough to find the dismal path that crossed the tumbled wall, edged round the stand of trees and began to climb up the side of the hills behind the cottage. At night the path was as a black ribbon laid across the heavy shadow of the hillside. The moon had now appeared, the sliver of it low in the sky, its light not enough, not enough.

Here was the turning of the path around a dark stone and here where it faded into scree, rubble pressing at its edges. Gregg walked hard, his breathing heavy. The effort felt good,

the work a distraction and soon he felt the sweat standing along his spine. Then the ridge, the rocks broken and wind-worn. He paused, leaning against a jutting slab, letting his breath heave. Down there the cottage, lost now in the dark. Down there, Archie. Down there, the painting.

The path split into two, one following along the ridge towards the next hill, the other descending sharply down the other side, down to the tarn. He expected more, expected a grand view of the dark pool, the climbing sides of the hill lit by the moon but there were only suggestions, shadows and shapes at the corner of the eye, the downward path smudging into the night metres from where he now stood.

The climb down grew hastier, clumsier the more he descended. Ahead of him he knew would be the tarn, to the right the escarpment rearing above it. He could see neither. As he descended the pressure in his chest, which he first took to be physical effort, moved to his throat, pulled his face and jaw tight until he was sobbing through clenched teeth. Then the path curved and there to the right, the dark line of the tarn's edge, grass and rock. The water was still, flat and from it seemed to come the night sky, distant stars marked out in its blackness. He left the path and stumbled across the uneven ground, along the shoreline. Here, near the water's edge, his jaw unclenched and at last the sobs came free, each raw and retching. Only the rocks at his feet could be seen, he held his hands to his face and then, here where a larger stone extended out into the pool, he sank to his knees, curling his head to the ground and began to let out hoarse, sucking cries.

Stop.

Gregg. Stop.

The plainness, the clarity of the words were enough to disrupt the heaving and he held his breath. Against his forehead the stone had not warmed, its coolness spreading and numbing. Gregg raised himself, sat back on his knees. It had seemed all around him. Or flowing out of the darkness across the water to him. Or rushing down the steep rocks to

fall around him. And yet he was not sure they were spoken words, though he had heard them, cutting through the mess of his sobs.

The night did not move. Only the half heard sigh of open spaces. He placed his hands flat against the rock, another heaving sob and there again those words ...

Stop. Gregg. Stop.

He turned his head, as if to listen, noticing the curve of the shore, away towards the hill, where the water lay under the escarpment. The cold had crept beneath his skin, the muscles of his legs, in between his shoulders, taut with it, holding close. It was creeping closer to the bone. A low trembling briefly fluttered through his chest. He stood, wiping his mouth and nose on the back of his hand and began an unsteady walk along the shore.

In all the days since Helen had left ... he began.

No.

In all the days since Helen departed ...

No.

At the base of the escarpment the stones were replaced by boulders, some seeming to have come down to the water's edge over the years, others deeply rooted into the earth. He began to climb, scrambling over the lower ones but as he gained height, so too did each rock until he found himself against a flat, cold stone disappearing vertically into the dark, leaning over him and here he turned, placed his back against it and looked out into the dark.

For long moments the silence pressed in, rising from the water below, folding and probing over the ridges above to find him there and only his breathing seemed to push it away. Then, somewhere above him, a small noise, the dry noise of stone over stone, a trickle and rattle. He shallowed his breath and felt it, just above him, trying to hold still. No further noises but Gregg knew someone was there, could sense its watchfulness. That he was not alone washed over him. The earlier tremors returned, breaking through the tightness of muscle, first a shiver that twisted his hips against the rock,

then another until he was trembling uncontrollably. Above him, a movement and then the slide of a rock, as if stepped on, shifting. A faint sighing breath and it was moving, to his left, to where the rocks disappeared back under the grasses.

Below him, the stillness of the water, sensed rather than seen, as if there were empty sky above and below him. He imagined the warmth of it, closing in over his head, the silence thick, enveloping him. He took a step towards the rock's edge. There were stars down there, fainter, distant but each one steady and sure. The water would bear his weight, wash at him, hold him there amongst the stars. He could hear in the darkness to his left a scuffling, sliding movement, close now to where he stood on this edge. He felt his knees give gently, the sagging of his shoulders and his chest tilt towards the open air.

The hands that grabbed him were firm, the suddenness with which they snatched at his jacket, grabbed at his collar, was a short violence before he was dragged backwards. An arm circled his chest then he was held, steadied.

'No, no, no. Not this. Not this. For fucks sake not this.'

Sometimes, after a rough night, Gregg would wake and, stretching out a leg into the colder spaces of the bed, he would briefly sense an unknitting in his stomach. In such moments, all would be held away, pushed out before, slowly, turning back towards him. Then, each arriving, one after the other, he would feel his stomach pull in and a stretch would ache across his shoulders until he would raise both hands above his head with a wide yawn.

On this particular morning, sleep had closed over him suddenly and then snapped back like an opening lid. In front of him, Archie, sitting on a sofa opposite, duvet bundled around his shoulders. Gregg did not move, unsure, disorientated. In his legs an aching soreness, in his throat a rawness. Before sleep, before sleep there was, there had been ... He sat up, looked at his hands, then across at Archie.

'Morning' said Archie. He did not smile, there was a hoarseness in his voice. He waited, watching Gregg.

Their walk back to the cottage was now faded, distant, as if unimportant. Gregg recalled the jittery light of a torch, his feet on loose rock. Bitter cold. Behind him, Archie, close. They did not talk. Then warmth, a mug of something hot, Archie at the log burner and, after a while, that closing lid of sleep.

'I must have fallen' Gregg said. He ran a hand under his ribs, rubbing gently.

'You did not.'

'Well, I feel like shit.'

Archie had not moved. He nodded slowly, three times. Gregg sat, looking at his hands.

'I'm going to get some coffee. Want some?' said Archie, standing, the duvet shrugged from his shoulders. He was dressed, a t shirt, trousers, socks.

Gregg noticed he was in just a t shirt and his underpants. On the chair near the door through to the kitchen, the rest of his clothes, folded. The room was dim, the curtain still drawn,

only one of the lamps on. Light, cold, grey edged the curtains and from the kitchen door more of it, overflowing into the room. Gregg eased himself from the couch. His legs ached, though it was the pull of muscles that had overworked, and his back felt much the same. Only in his hands was there a rougher pulse of pain as he flexed them, the sides bruised, the tips of the fingers raw. The sudden daylight as he drew the curtains narrowed his eyes. The room shed away the thickness of night and there was a fresher edge to the air. Outside he expected snow, something about the quality of the light, there was a hardness to it, but the valley stood still in the colours of the earth under a sky that was restless with clouds edging and folding at each other.

'Here you go. Might be a bit hot, I over heated the milk I think.'

Though the room was comfortable, his skin had begun to chill and he climbed back into the duvet, sitting up, holding the mug Archie handed to him. Against the pads of his fingers, the base of his thumbs its heat seemed to spread into the ache in his hands, easing it apart. A warmth spread up his arms, across his shoulders. He shuddered.

'Thank you' he said and looked across to where Archie sat blowing on his coffee.

'It is a bit hot though, sorry.'

'No. Thank you. For last night.'

Archie drank his coffee, nodded. There was silence then and they sat drinking coffee. The room cooled and Gregg found himself plucking at the edges of the duvet, pulling it across his shoulders.

'How are you feeling? I mean now, this morning?' Archie asked.

'Hungover' Gregg smiled, his lips thinned into the beginnings of a smile, he looked down then back to Archie.

'Yes, same. But you know what I meant' Archie lowered his head, his shoulders leaning slightly towards where Gregg sat, now still, watching.

'Empty. Drained. I don't know. I'm sorry ...' and suddenly there was a halting coarseness in his voice, and his eyes lined with tears, 'I don't know what to say. I'm just sorry.' He placed one hand on his lowered forehead and held the long strands of his hair, grimacing.

Archie stood, came to sit on the arm of Gregg's sofa and placed a hand on his back.

'Its OK. Its OK.' They sat together and the light began to shift and wield between the endless clouds.

It was in the shower, the hot water welcome on his back, that Gregg decided he would go home. There would be a train, a coach, perhaps even a flight. Archie, he felt sure, could be convinced to drive him to a station and he could work it out from there. The urge to be under way, to be travelling home, the need to be occupied with all the details of travel, it felt like hope. Here, he thought, there would only be last night, it would fill all the pauses and silences. Where once there had been ease, a mutual reassurance in each other's company, now there would be this. As he dressed in his room, looking out of the double doors, the valley seemed desolate now, butchered, the long broad swathe of the bare moorland full of dead tree trunks, shell-holes. With this, Gregg sensed a deeper emptiness. Archie was not Helen, she was not here, she had gone.

He tries to get out of the front door of the flat but the water on the other side is pushing at its hinges. The handle is moist to the touch, water is seeping in through the many gaps and holes. The flat has been submerged for three days now, and Gregg is in it. He lies on the couch and stares at the window. It is dark with depth, green with the shifting waters beyond, and he lies and stares at it. The world is divided between out there and in here. In this flat Gregg hears only the noises he himself makes, there is nothing else. One arm is extended out, the tips of his fingers curling towards the carpet. The TV is off. On the coffee table, an empty glass next to a bottle, its golden dark liquid gathered only near the bottom. Gregg moves, his legs first, slowly kicking the blanket from them. He sits up, looks around the flat, a sleeper awakening to the usual room. He sits for a moment then levers himself up from the couch. He is wearing only a t shirt. It is the one that has shrunk from washing and his pale buttocks are emphasised by its uneven hem. There is no-one else here to see though. He stretches, arms above his head, a yawn, and then his body returns to the slumped curve of its spine, a giving in to the day. He looks at the window, there is only a shifting of dim light, as if the surface of this vast lake or ocean is pushing at a distant sun. Gregg turns and walks to the front door, places one hand flat against its wood, stands as if listening, his head lowered. Nothing happens and he moves towards the bathroom. He pisses for a long time, the pungence of it creeping into the short hall. He flushes and then stands in front of the toilet, staring at the wall, one hand still hefting his cock.

When he returns to the settee, he briefly shuffles through a pile of clothes on the armchair, finds his briefs but then stops, places them back on the pile and returns to the settee where he sits down, half pulling the blanket over his legs.

The morning is passing into the uncertain hours of midday when Gregg moves again. He stands, walks to the window

and looks out into the murk. There is the constant faintness of light, somewhere up above, though it is diffuse, seeping into the depths and he sees nothing when he looks up, leaning the side of his head against the glass. He turns, regards the flat. What little colour there was has drained away in this half light, it is greys and shadows.

Time is pointless. It is not something that need concern this. There is just here and this and that and him. To recall, recount or tell, this would acknowledge there had been an arrival, a journey to this place and, in doing that ... it would create expectation, anticipation and, most confusingly of all, a sense of what comes after. There is only this and that and here and him.

Gregg reaches for the bottle on the table, picks it up, moves it towards last night's glass and stops. He seems to focus on the bottle, as if reading the label for the first time, realising what it is. He puts the bottle down. It taps against the table and the sound is quickly stifled in the stillness. Gregg puts his head in his hands and then his shoulders begin to move, up and down, slowly. He is crying. The sound is reduced to a breathless, constrained gasping. His bare feet curl against the carpet, the toes burying themselves, turning under each other. He suddenly slaps a hand down, hitting the seat of the couch next to him. A flat, empty and brief sound that seems more violent than it is. His shoulders settled, the crying stops, he sits back against the settee and wipes his hands down his face, clearing his eyes with his fingers, sniffing.

'Oh god, this has to stop.'

The words are soft but in the stillness they are each pronounced carefully, each has its own moment. He gets up from the settee and begins to put on the clothes from the chair. He is sniffing a lot and he wipes his nose on the back of his hand. The beard under his nose glistens with moisture. When he has tied his trainers, he stands with his back to the window and watches the door. Then, he goes to it, places a

hand on its handle and, with an intake of breath, he heaves the door open.

Such sudden violence, such demanding and brutal rushing force and the water pours in, tumbles and crashes down and around. Gregg is lifted, swept away, back across the flat as the water pours, curls and smashes off the walls. The settee is lifted, the tv tumbled over, the glass, the table, the bottle all thrown across the tearing surface of the rising water. Gregg is thrown against the window it judders but does not break. He manages to hold onto the frame, jams himself into it but the waters rise with a sudden and determined rate until it is just his head above the water. Then that too is immersed and as the heaving of the waters begin to slow into the full immersion of the room, Gregg is fumbling at the window, opening its latches, pushing it ponderously open. He can fit through the opening, he pulls himself through and then he is out, out into that dark green depth, kicking his feet, climbing upwards to where there is the promise of light.

In the days that followed Gregg found himself increasingly drawn to places where other people went about their usual days, the presence of their routines soothing after the silence and darkness. The weather had not improved, the rain pouring from a leaden sky for hours then stopping suddenly, the air still soaked, the pavements and roads greasy with runoff. Here, though, sitting here in this cafe, he was dry and there was a warm fug of people's conversations and the gentle, constant of activity. It surrounded him and settled across his back until a shiver bubbled from deep within his chest, rippling over his shoulders. Warmth, coffee, people, light, dry when all the outside world was not. It counted towards the re-starting of time, his time and marked the progress of the day.

The cafe door opened and through it came Thea, shaking an umbrella across the threshold behind her. She was in a camel coloured trenchcoat with a wide belt at her waist. It made her look neat, gathered. Purposeful. Indeed she saw him and began to sidestep between tables to reach him in the corner seat, managing to smile and frown with concentration at the same time.

They ordered coffee, said the little starting words that settle and prepare and then she asked him how he was doing. To emphasise that these words were no longer part of the casual etiquette of beginnings, Thea looked at him steadily as she spoke. He told her then. Told her about it all. Lorraine, Shona, the Group. Then Archie and the trip. The days in the rain-soaked valley. The night at those rocks. He did not tell her about the kiss or of Archie holding him while he sobbed. When he talked about the figure, the shadow, Thea sat carefully still, hands clasped around her mug, her face was wide with listening. He could not avoid his own embarrassment in the telling, hearing such ideas set into the world was as if regarding them for the first time in the light of Thea's own inspection.

He finished with a long pause into which Thea, unusually, did not feel the need to insert anything of herself. He breathed deep, looked down at his cup, shrugged and told her, as plainly as he could, that he had not been at Helen's bedside as she died due to traffic but because he had been too afraid, had stayed away, had hidden. His voice, though even, faded and the sounds of the cafe swirled in between them.

Thea watched him, her eyes wide. For the briefest of moments, they narrowed, her lips thinned but, as if something had then broken, turned over, her eyebrows rose softly and her hand moved towards Gregg, across the table, the fingers resting alone against the wood.

'I wondered' she said, 'I wish I could have ...' but she seemed to realise the ending had already settled between them.

The cafe door swung open and the sound of the rain briefly gusted in before it was pushed away by the bulk of a large man lumbering through the door, plucking at his anorak hood, calling out a cheerful hello across the room to the person behind the counter. Then the door was closed and the rain was shut out and Thea and Gregg sat and talked.

Her absence loitered still in the house - their house, his house - though it was as a house seems the morning after an evening spent with friends, the bittersweet satisfaction of pleasure now passed. It was an easy, comforting backdrop to his homecoming, the house feeling both familiar and new, the mornings full of the ache of regret and promise. The world was possibly wrong in its assumption that with great grieving came a moment of release, instead this was an easing, like the tide in the hour before it turns away.

When the doorbell chimed Gregg was pretending to tidy the kitchen, though it was to keep the body in motion and push away the anxiety of her visit.

'Hello.'

The voice had formed the image of her even before Gregg had taken in Lorraine's pale face. She stood, her arms wrapped about her waist to hold her jacket close and watched him with a hesitant smile.

'Where shall we go?'

In it the familiar Lorraine, the natural urge to action, her face already turned down the street, looking off towards a path they both might follow.

The day had barely begun, the light in the east confident though confined by a paling darkness above. There was a path across stony ground where once the army had built temporary huts and sheds, now long ago dismantled. Against it a rising ridge of pebble, earth and sand that marked the river's edge. They walked along its top, silhouetted against the growing morning, until the dune faded and lowered them to the river's edge. They had said little, walking next to each other as if in unspoken agreement of their destination and here, where the path and the trees settled alongside the banks, there grew the sense of what lay between them.

'Look, I know, I do. ... I just didn't want things left like that. It was ...' Lorraine looked up briefly, cautiously assessing him, 'Wrong. I was wrong.' She stopped, and they stood at

the water's edge, this time in growing light, the certainty of the day opening around them.

There had been texts, a few unanswered calls. He had dismissed them as swiftly as possible, hoping that, eventually, his silence would see her disappear entirely. He would wake from a hazy, ill defined dream of pebble beaches beside a restless grey sea turgid with cold and find himself wondering what she would say to him.

Perhaps it was in this recollection that he had sent a hesitant message back to her 'OK then'. It may have been in his hesitation that Lorraine saw something of an acceptance, enough to respond with his own words to get them started. 'OK then'. A few days later, here they stood, once more at the water's edge.

'If you think I'm coming back to that group of .... Well, that group. Shona. No. That's not happening.' He watched the lazy turn of the river, his chin jutting out slightly, a defiant, child-like gesture.

'No. No Gregg, look that's not ...' she sighed then and flapped her hands against her sides once, 'No Gregg. It's not about that. It shouldn't have been about that. I just thought you needed ...' then she stopped. Her face, shadowed by the strengthening light, seemed suddenly young and clear, the eyes larger than he recalled, the mouth somehow less fixed, more uncertain. He realised then that she was holding back tears.

'Anyway, I've left that group. I haven't seen them since ... I mean I won't be going back. It wasn't about them, or you. It was about me. Of course it was about me ...' she took a deep breath, and the Lorraine who organised and travelled, critiqued and talked to anyone seemed to slide away. Her shoulders softened and in her face there was bewilderment.

'I still miss him Gregg. Still, after all this time. He should have come home. My brother should be here. Now. They told me time is the best cure for grief but it's all just shit lies, just what people think they have to say. Its shit. There's not been a day since when I don't expect him to appear, be in touch,

make some noise in another room. I will still .... Still! ... think of something or see something and want to tell him about it. Still! I'm a fucking adult now Gregg. It's been fucking years!

In the face of such anger Gregg remained still. Seeing someone reveal themselves was as if slipping beneath a torrent. Lorraine, raised a hand, wiped at the corner of an eye with one curled finger.

'I'm sorry. I wanted what you had. Something that might possibly... some sort of hope.'

'Hope?'

She paused, held still by his single, harsh word, then wiped at her eye again 'I'm sorry Gregg. I didn't think. And Shona, well, you can guess how she was, all concerned and helpful but unrelenting in it, sending me Bramley to check-in but really it wasn't about me. Fucking woman. Like a fucking cat that purrs at you while it's readying a claw.' She laughed, though it was lost and ragged. 'I'll go. I shouldn't have come. I just wanted to ... anyway. Take care Gregg. I mean that.' She turned. The morning was confident in its hold on the day ahead.

'Lorraine. Wait' Gregg said, 'I could murder a coffee and a bacon butty that's just about seen the pan ...'

The attempt at humour, at a return, fell into a silence and they watched each other briefly. Then the river gently turned against its border and Lorraine nodded.

There is sun. Light is everywhere. Of course. There is water, spreading out, flat and only uneven where the air or coastal currents ruffle at its surface. There is always water. A furious splashing, the froth and spumes of sudden, quick explosions of water with light and air. Laughter, full of breath. Then these sharp, insubstantial noises stop and the constancy of the sea and sky is all that is left. Gregg is sitting in a small, slim canoe. He leans forward, a paddle across his lap, catching a breath through a wide smile. He is looking back over his shoulder and there is another small canoe, the sharp, bright pattern of its approach growing louder until it stops, floating near Gregg. A young man, bright face, smiling and it is Tom. His hair is longer but it is him. Tom. The swell of the water lifts them both, an upsurge from the depth below, a bruise easing, a deep breath. Tom. Gregg. There is so much light. It crackles and shimmers on every edge of every wave. The waters below are steady, still and lost, unmoved by anything and everything here where Gregg and Tom float, the breeze and tide pushing them together. Below. To sink into those dark, unmoving waters would be as if to solidify, the water stiffening, unpliant, sucking. But the sunlight is pushing through the surface, turning the water into greens and jades. Tom and Gregg, resting mere feet away from all that depth, the thin, smallness of their kayaks holding them there. The light intensifies, it is everywhere. Gregg puts out his hand, rests it on Tom's shoulder. Tom nods then, that mischievous smile, caught at the corner of his mouth, and he nods ahead. There may be land there. Gregg laughs and is about to say something but is cut off by Tom's sudden, explosive paddling, the water frothing over Gregg until they are both shouting with laughter. Gregg picks up his own paddle and plunges it into the light caught under the waves and they are both moving now, away. The light is so bright, so very bright.

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