

The Green Leaves

A novella

As of the green leaves on a thick tree, some fall, and some grow
Ecclesiasticus xiv, 18.



There he sat, waiting. He had got up even earlier than usual and was already shaved and dressed. The whole operation had taken two hours. As always, he had had to force his body from bed to wheelchair, from wheelchair to toilet, from toilet to wheelchair, from wheelchair to bathroom, and from bathroom to kitchen. And there he spent several hours getting his breakfast ready, clearing up, reading, and answering post. In the afternoons he wheeled himself to the sitting room and read, or watched something 'educational' on TV. The wheelchair was home, from the early morning when he threw his duvet to one side and lifted himself into place until the final lurch back to bed in the evening.

The morning fog showed no signs of lifting, and the condensation on the inside of the window-panes stayed frozen. What if they didn't come? Would he care that much, in fact would not he really prefer it? This dutiful family gathering was never his idea. He hated invasions.

It was black outside still. They think it's my last Christmas, that's the only reason they're coming. Why don't they just not come? I don't want their pity, just going through the motions when they'd rather be anywhere but here.

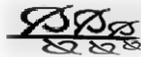
Arthur had had a bad year, in and out of hospital, one chest complaint after the other, rushed off in an ambulance and then whisked back again when his breathing improved. He lived in a bungalow, a solitary building on the outskirts of the village.

It would be several hours before they arrived. Although there had been lots of phone calls to agree the arrangements, he still wasn't sure how many of them were booked

into the hotel. Maybe they'll phone and say the fog is too thick. He turned off the lights and sat there in the darkness.

Of course, if they did phone, he would hate that too. This could be his last Christmas. Couldn't they have made just that bit of extra effort and found somewhere closer? As if it were a challenge to them, he switched on the lights of the small tree, put up by the district nurse last week, the same fake tree he had got out every year since his wife Grace had died, fourteen years ago.

From the outside, any early dog walker passing his window would see the flickering red and white lights reflected on the window and make out the haunted face deep in the darkness.



Charles looked out through the hotel window at the fog, wondering why he had suggested the whole thing in the first place. Thérèse had had been 'understanding', which he had taken to mean 'just don't ask me to come too', and besides some time with the boys on her own would not be so bad.

He phoned to wish her a Happy Christmas, and tell her that Kate and Louise were staying in the same hotel and that Rupert didn't want to come because he was scared Kate would say something and ruin the day, and that Emily was making her own way down. When he'd hung up he had a terrible sense of anxiety. These get-togethers felt forced, no one really wanting them.

When he got down for breakfast, his sister Kate and Louise, her oldest daughter, were already into their scrambled eggs. He nodded to Louise.

"What do you think?" enquired Kate, looking towards the window.

"It should clear."

For years he and Kate had barely known each other, he in his hi-tech world and big business deals and she in the rapid rise up the ladder in one of London's biggest publishing houses. There was a large age gap, they'd gone to different schools and mixed with different social groups, within the class of the ambitious and newly rich.

"We've got to get him out of that place," said Kate not looking up from her plate.

Louise got up, excused herself, and Charles followed her with his eyes.

"I wish he weren't there, but I wouldn't want to see him in a care home," he said.

“Worried about your inheritance?”

“That’s not the reason. It would kill him.”

Kate looked at him hard, uncertain of his sincerity.

“Where then?”

“Near us is fine.”

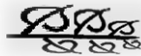
“And Thérèse?”

“She would accept it.”

“Despite what he thinks of her, a French Catholic. He'll soon need professional home care or a nursing home. Being near you is not enough.”

Kate was warming up for an argument, and he retreated into silence, leaving her frustrated.

So much for dying bringing families closer together.



Emily sat on her hotel bed, looking out of the window, fondling her long, blond curly hair. With the fog around her, she felt at peace. She got up and doodled on the condensation, knowing that when it lifted her unease about the day ahead would return. She was not sure what time she was expected but she would go when she was ready.

Despite the years of feeling frightened of her father, she was full of pity for him. She knew that in his divided self he probably loved her more than the others. She hadn’t been broken by his bullying, and had understood his frustration at not being able to bend her his way. Over the years his belief that there could be any other way but his had waned. These days there was only guilt at having destroyed so much youthful joy in his children, and a sense of emptiness and loss. Even now though, from time to time, the old self broke free and the thought of Emily would cause virulent, unforgiving anger.

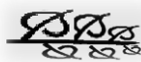
Emily was Arthur’s youngest daughter. Sensitive and easy with smiles, she resisted all his efforts to push her into the kind of life in which she would get a well-paid job and settle down. At school she had resisted attempts to get her to work harder, be sporty or arty or musical in the terms it was offered. From the beginning, she yearned

for something other than all that, and would sit 'in nature', in a field, under a tree, looking at the sky, wondering why, when she was with her family, she felt so outside everything.

All the same, Emily did do enough to scrape a formal education. In spite of Arthur's withering and deadly accusations, she was not lazy, at least when she worked on things she had chosen to do. For a few years after university, she had roamed the world with the remnants of the hippy generation, living off some legacy money from her mother, cooking, decorating, gardening, in exchange for goods. She had many deeply, passionate relationships but they never converted into anything lasting, usually because men seemed to want to smother and control her. So, in her late thirties, she'd settled down as a home help and sought to retain her independence of spirit. She believed that not only was she offering practical support to the lonely but happiness from the depths of herself, which should touch those poor souls without families, in vicious housing estates, in dreary suburban bungalows and all the other backwaters assigned to them by modern society. Surely, she was convinced, her happiness would become their happiness.

She tried hard to turn her back on nihilism and consumerism. Her beliefs centred on sharing and giving, and causing as little damage as possible to the precious earth we live on.

Never once did it occur to her that she might offer herself as home help to her father, nor would he have accepted it if she had.



Louise hugged the phone close to her ear and whispered into it, softly and caressingly, tightening her hold as though willing it to bring her closer to the warmth and smells of Mia's body.

"Mum's determined to get him into a home, and Uncle Charles' reluctance is freaking her out."

Louise was pacing round the hotel room and with her free hand filled the kettle.

"Uncle hates me because of you. And yet he was so sweet to me when I was child. I was the favourite of the three of us."

Careless and clumsy, she half filled her cup and spilt the rest over the tray, not that she cared very much, just mildly irritated.

“Yes, I think he’s told grandad. But I don’t care. They must take me as I am.”

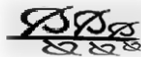
With her left hand she rolled a cigarette without interrupting the flow of words and felt their spirits were one.

“I love you, too.”

And the hotel phone rang.

“Shit. Oh, hi, mum. Nearly ready. Give me twenty minutes”

She was sure the others had never known the depth of love she felt for Mia and, in joy, slurped her tea and drew on her cigarette.



Once a proud policeman in a man’s world, Arthur would look at you hard and straight, with the old fierce bourgeois will to put you down if you didn’t earn an honest penny and save. Women were not in this world, they were something you owned in marriage or allowed yourself to flirt with or be flattered by. He would make cruel comments to any woman who asserted herself, although he admired some who survived his assault and gave him lip in return. Now, one leg lost through leg ulcers and poor circulation, white hair swept back, he made his family feel they ought to gather round him at this time of the year, not acknowledging how much his heavy daily presence had driven them away. With his will more relaxed, his body decaying, regret and sorrow engendered sentimental tears and the pitiful refrain that he had *meant* well.

As he sat there, expectant and fearful, an idea struck him. He manoeuvred his wheelchair across the kitchen and rummaged through a drawer bursting with scraps of paper, unused Christmas cards, old biros and rubber bands. He pulled out a photo of Grace, and Charles as a young boy. It must have been taken just after the War, and everything about it filled him with regret. They were standing by a fence next to a field. Charles was wearing a three-quarter-length coat over a shirt, cardigan and short trousers; holding on to the fence, half smiling at the camera and squinting against the light. Grace, very tall with hair swept back and parted in the middle, was wearing a tweed suit under an overcoat. She held the boy's other hand, firmly but without will.

Arthur very faintly remembered taking the photo, and knew that it was about then that things had started to change in their marriage. It was the beginnings of a new kind of happiness – he had *a family*, it was *his* family and that brought him joy. The War was over, he had just had promotion, and they were about to move into a new house. Domestic goods were beginning to appear on the market again, and building up a home, filling it with things, but not too many things, drove him to work harder. Charles would be a lawyer, a successful lawyer, get rich and keep them in old age. Grace he had begun to realise could be difficult but she loved the boy and was a good mother. Sometimes he would even say it was *their* family and that he provided the iron discipline when necessary.

But other things had started to change. Those days during the War, when his responsibility was only to her as a woman, were over, or so he thought. She knew he was decent, in that he wouldn't cheat on her with other women, gamble their money away, or drink himself into oblivion. But then sometimes the knowledge that he would never do these things became a burden to her. She began to tire of his morality, his duties, and wished he were more reckless. Why was it the rigid goodness in him sometimes seemed like a sin to her, that it would stifle and cause her to freeze inside, so much so that she could hardly bear him to touch her. Some part of her started to wish she were somewhere else, maybe with her sister, and that made her ashamed. But there was the boy, the boy she loved with a passion. For him she would stay. And besides Arthur was in the end a good man, and he would always provide for her. Arthur sensed these ambiguities inside her and they caused him frustration. How could she resent him? Did he not give her everything, provide a home for her, and weren't they bringing up a family together? The boy too felt the coldness of duty in his father and began to fear his morality, and turned to the warmth of his mother. He started to sense too that his mother wasn't happy, that the way they led their lives was the way that his father wanted them to lead their lives. But Arthur reasoned to himself that he was a good husband and father. Did he not do everything right? And so mother and son closed themselves down, in fear, and got on with the business of daily living. Grace just bickered with Arthur about the little things. Later there were the two other children, Kate and Emily.

Grace was long dead and although he mourned her sentimentally, he knew he had lost her many years before without understanding why.

Putting down the photo, he searched for others. They were so rigid, these pictures of wife, children, sister-in-law, mother and father. You could interpret them as images of a harmonious life. They never showed you the years of bitterness, the sarcasms and the couldn't-be-helped sniping, and the desire for any kind of life but this. Placing them in front of him he smiled complacently.

“I’ll show them to the children. Some of these they won’t have seen.”

And then he saw one of himself, relaxed and smiling, probably the same outing in 1947, sitting down with his arms in front of Charles, and Charles smiling back at the camera. How happy he was then!

But then there was one which froze him. It was taken probably a couple of years later. Charles, a little older, striding along, in shorts and sandals, with a comic in his hand. Arthur was marching ahead of him, holding a newspaper, and looking back disapprovingly at Charles. It was obvious that Charles hadn’t done something he should have done or had done something he shouldn’t have. What struck Arthur was the tight lip and frown on Charles’ face and his general determined air. Arthur’s first instinct was to put this photo back in the box. He was a little ashamed of his reproving look, but then – *oh, he was such a rascal, that boy* – he decided he would show it to Charles after all, as a joke.

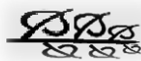
Kate had been a shy child. When Arthur and Grace bickered she would sit quietly in a corner reading or playing with dolls. In her early years she had the habit of keeping her eyes firmly down, giving off an intensity that unsettled those around her. When she did speak, her attitude was positive, rallying and light hearted, hauled out of an accumulation of depression and a merciless vision of everyone’s inadequacies, including her own. As she grew up, her eyes sparkled and she could put on a smile suddenly, very much there, and she moved with force and determination. But when the will was in abeyance, she would lapse into silence and unhappiness, causing those who got near to feel some pity mixed in with their love. In her teens, she’d studied hard and did well enough to get herself into a good university. She envied her brother’s untroubled ambition, while despising his lack of courage. Like all men, he was not really her equal even though he was so much older than her. She wanted and needed men partly because she knew they were no threat and she could take them simply by deciding that she would. Emily was more of a problem. She had a job to hide her disdain for Emily’s indifference at traditional ambitions, and her slobby domestic habits.

Emily, though, sensed that beneath it all Kate envied her spirit of indifference. The world might admire Kate more than it did Emily but Kate suspected the world might be wrong.

After university, Kate worked as a trainee copy editor in a publishing house in London and found promotion easy. She became materially successful and married a good looking, but rather weak accountant she'd met at a concert. She had decided that he'd make a steady husband, be capable of giving her some good-looking children, and he wouldn't cause her too much trouble. Everyone agreed he was a 'nice man' and the couple dutifully had three pretty daughters, Jessica, Louise and Samantha. Kate stayed true to him, and he was true to her, although he would busy himself, away from her, rebuilding old racing cars and playing golf.

Kate sat on the hotel bed looking out of the window and felt only anxiety. Never once had she wanted to come but never once doubted that she ought. Her hope was that everybody would do what they had to do, that there be no disasters, that everyone would go home and the day would end. She knew that Arthur would start accusing her of being bossy if she tried to assert herself – today wasn't the day to bring up the care home – and she must try and be festive, although nothing inside her felt remotely festive. What if Charles irritated her, which he probably will? Emily was so far beyond the pale that she thought of her as a licensed fool.

She got through to Rupert, and thought he sounded tired. 'We're going to have to get going soon.... I have no idea what time I'll get back. Give them my love. One of the last years they'll be at home probably. Have them to yourself for the day.' And she busied herself packing to ward off anxiety.



“Dad, we'll be leaving in the next half an hour so. We'll be a bit late. Don't worry too much.”

Arthur reassured him. Something in his voice calmed Charles. These days in the desolation of old age there was no underlying threat in his voice. Charles could laugh at his father and jolly him out of his wilful whims. With the sting taken out he could see Arthur for what he was – a proud, upright man reduced to physical impotence, doing battle with the world with anyone that cared to listen. He belonged to an

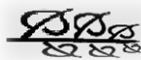
England that no longer existed, and was the only connection the family had with that time in the country's history.

Charles was a stocky dark-haired man with a designer stubble that would have passed no comment in a man half his age, but now in his early sixties it gave him a slightly shabby air. He kept his paunch at bay by daily visits to the gym. He had spent his whole life in advertising and fifteen years ago had set up his own agency and it had been a success. Although advertising was not quite a man's industry, Arthur had been pleased with his son overall. He'd had a flaky start after university when it seemed as if he was bent on 'dropping out', unwilling to look for a 'proper job', but then he'd 'buckled down', worked hard and was fairly well-off. He'd met his first wife when he first went to London, and they set up home there for a few years. From the start, though, that relationship was doomed – he wasn't very interested in her once the shine of a new relationship had worn off, neither of them really wanted children, and they both focused on their careers. Arthur wasn't happy at the split but because there were no children, he just about accepted it. Charles had met Thérèse while working for an agency in Paris. He'd fallen in love with her because of her Frenchness, the passion with which she talked about her family, and the sincerity with which she was determined to be a good Catholic. Thérèse too fell for something of the anglicized differentness of Charles, but refused a full relationship unless he was divorced, and without much fuss he set about freeing himself. Immediately afterwards they got married. Although Charles had never wanted to annul his previous marriage and convert, he was prepared to support Thérèse in her beliefs.

They spent two happy years in France, but Thérèse, desperate to start a family, realized that they would have to be in England if Charles was going to earn enough to provide for them all. They moved to London, bought a small terraced house on the outskirts and set up home together. From the start Thérèse hated her new country, particularly for its lack of spirituality, which she felt had made the people ugly. Every Sunday she would go to church and pray that one day they would go back to France and that she would be able to take care of her aging parents. She hoped that her family would come with her and that their children would bring forth happy children of their own, in France. She loved Charles, he was a good husband and father, and sensed in his heart a disaffection at his working life and the emptiness of much of the social world around him. He showed, though, no real desire to move to France and thought instead of moving well away from London if they could afford it.

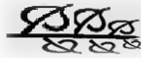
At the same time, he had an odd 'let things happen' trait that made him popular at work. Thérèse was fastidious about how things looked in the house, and whether things were properly clean. If she were out, she would leave written instructions for the cleaner, the gardener, and anybody else, whereas Charles would let them get on with whatever they thought they ought to be doing, which in truth, sometimes, wasn't very much, and they would leave early when no-one was around. For him, if he liked them, he didn't care. He knew that if he asked them to, they would put in over the odds just to please him. If he didn't like them, he'd get rid of them. At times this attitude would drive Thérèse mad. The cleaner would leave the kitchen floor swimming in water, and he'd say nothing. The gardener would leave the flower beds in front of the kitchen window un-weeded, and he wouldn't notice. As far as he was concerned, they were good people. Thérèse found it amazing that with this attitude he'd had a successful career.

"When did Pierre and David arrive?" Charles was making a last-minute call home. "Do you remember this time last year we were in France? The Christmas crib with the live geese and the donkeys, and the little children. I wish we were there this year. Anyway, this kind of thing won't be repeated, even if the old man survives. Enjoy your day. I'll be back first thing in the morning."



Arthur had a thing about time. Hanging from the kitchen shelves there were digital watches from China, analogue watches powered by daylight, and ladies watches that Grace had left behind. There were the two watches always on his wrist, day or night, one on the inside of his wrist which he looked at frequently, the other on the outside used as a backup because he didn't trust the one on the inside. And then there were the clocks – an outsized electric wall-clock, clocks on equipment, bedside alarm clocks, a fancy clock with roman numerals on a piece of glossed Californian redwood, and in pride of place on the living room mantelpiece a torsion pendulum clock, which Grace had believed was valuable. One of the first jobs of any visitor was to wind them up, put the time right or pop out and get a new battery. But what it all meant it was hard to say. Ask him why, and he would say you never know when one was going to break down. Ask him why the time mattered and he would say he had never been late in his life and he wasn't going to start now. Ask him if it was about mortality, counting the seconds he had left, and he became evasive and claimed his life was

over. Ask him if it was a secret desire to be a timepiece himself, and he'd look askance at you, suspecting an insult. So it was hard to say why.



“Teresa didn’t want to come, then.”

“Dad, how many times do I have to tell you? It's Thérèse.”

“Even though it could be my last Christmas. She’s never liked me.”

“You’ve never exactly been that friendly to her.”

Arthur took a deep breath and sat himself up in his wheelchair, as though a stiffened back and a haughty air would be riposte enough.

The old man relaxed and raised his hands weakly as if in an apology. Charles took off his coat and saw Kate looking at him from the hall. With his back to Arthur, he mouthed a ‘Grrr’ and clenched his fists.

“Come on. No arguments today,” said Kate getting cooked meats out of the cooler bags. “Louise, you peel some spuds, and Charles, just get the greens ready. You’ll find some in that bag over there.”

Arthur tensed visibly.

“You don’t have to go to any bother. There are plenty of tinned or frozen vegetables. Don't use that oven. It hasn’t been used for years.”

Charles joked about them being space invaders, and Kate wanted her father out of the kitchen. Arthur grumbled about Emily being late.

“Why did she never marry?”

“Dad, not now,” Charles replied testily.

“Is she...?” he said, narrowing his eyes in Louise’s direction.

“Right, that’s it. Everyone out of the kitchen, except the helpers. Out, out, out.” Feeling the excitement of her own power, Kate briskly grabbed the wheelchair, but Arthur insisted that Louise took him out. Louise shuddered but obeyed.

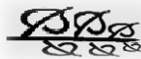
Charles, still annoyed about his father's feelings for Thérèse, busied himself in silence. Kate, nervous about what Arthur might be saying to Louise, was also silent.

Then, as if to no-one in particular, Charles said “One of these days he’ll just tumble out of that wheelchair, and no-one will know a thing until a health visitor turns up.” When Kate didn't reply he reflected to himself, ‘So what? He just dies in the place where he has lived for twenty years. Why be nursed with fussy bonhomie until it's all over. Better to die in his own house a spiky, sentimental old fool than drift out of a nursing home a faint wisp of a soul.’

But Arthur’s soul wouldn’t be given up that easily, wherever he was. He had a proud will which would refuse to accept death’s blandishments.

Kate in this mood couldn’t stand the senselessness of it all. If he wants constant attention and looking after, he should be in a home. He could spend the mornings poring over his bloody right-wing newspapers and spouting his prejudices to anyone who would listen. And when self-pity got the better of him, there would always be carers to jolly him along.

Yet at other times, like Charles, she knew that when he left this world horizons would close in for her. As soon as he started to dredge up stories from his memory, his grasp of detail, times, dates, made those times live again. His world seemed different and so much easier to understand than ours. Mischief and pride came together in his eyes and weaved a spell over her too, and made the children feel fondly of him.



When Emily arrives, everyone knows. You hear the hole in exhaust, the gear changes and the handbrake being put on.

She burst in, smiling, a bit flustered, and greeted *everyone*.

“Is that that Emily? Where have you been?” Arthur’s shouts could be heard from the living room, but there was softness and affection in them.

Louise emerged from the living-room, her face white and abstract, and there were hugs all round.

Kate caught Louise’s eye and froze.

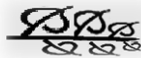
“Come in here, my daughter, and wheel me to the kitchen.”

The warmth in Arthur’s voice from the living room caused a jealous twinge in Kate but she gave Emily a kiss on the cheek and went back to slicing the meat.

“I’ve got you a little present, Dad,” said Emily, getting hold of the wheelchair and manoeuvring him out of the living room.

“Oh, you didn’t need to do that.”

In the family, there was often talk about Arthur’s sometimes obsessive attitude to his youngest daughter. She was an affront to the bourgeois ethic of his time, where a decent job and a decent home were primary aspirations, and he veered from righteous anger to basking in her softness. Arthur had prided himself on the stability of his marriage and his caring for the long-dead Grace, but long-dead Grace had been a victim of his ethic and had felt little love for him while in the grip of it. If he'd been more reckless, less controlling, as he was when they first met, she might have felt more warmth. Head held high in an heroic pose was all right for a decent copper, but not a husband. A bit of indecency, a bit more yielding to her in spirit, instead of setting his will against hers, would have made all the difference. The gentleness he could show to the grown-up Emily he would have felt as weakness with Grace. The young Emily though had only got through her childhood by disconnecting her real self from everything she said and did.



“I think we should have gone,” David was telling his mother.

“It seems odd without Dad here,” muttered Pierre.

Pierre was two years older than David and in the last year of his Philosophy degree. Tall, with long curly hair, faintly bohemian, but relaxed and polite, with a great deal of reserve, not compulsively gregarious. He seemed to be heading for a First, even though he hadn’t really worked for it. When he read, he read and thought hard, and when he wrote he wrote articulately and with ease. The religious philosophers, Thomas Aquinas and Kierkegaard, penetrated him the most deeply.

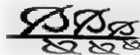
The rock-pop world didn’t really interest him. He preferred to listen to Prokofiev and Stravinsky, and play Rachmaninoff sonatas on the piano. Not a total misfit, he was good for getting drunk but it didn’t bother him if he didn’t. Women found him remote, and he took his love-making more seriously than they did. He didn’t mind going off on his own, camping, travelling around Europe on the cheap. His contemporaries had cruder tastes but they respected him.

David, as a half-joke would say to his university mates that, as he was half-French, his name should be pronounced in the French way, *Da'veed*. A big strong lad, polite in company and polite to his mother, he could be a bit surly and quietly sulky at times. Unlike Pierre, he loved hard rock and threw himself into drinking sessions, and believed his Frenchness gave him licence to behave like Baudelaire or Serge Gainsborough, louche and provocative.

Thérèse wondered why Charles hadn't phoned, at least to say they'd got there safely. Christmas Day seemed to have little point for the boys. During Midnight Mass, Pierre had meditated on the various symbols dotted around. Here were the candles which signify the light that Jesus brought to the world, there the small fir trees that suggest everlasting hope, there the wreathes which denote continuous love, and the holly berries which remind the faithful of the blood of Christ on the crown of thorns. He had thought of the old pagan symbols, when candles and fires were used to drive away the forces of darkness in midwinter, and the Druids believed mistletoe had miraculous powers. But the next morning the thrill of the religious mystery had gone, and Pierre would sound off about the economy, which depended on our readiness to spend vast sums of money on things we couldn't afford and give expensive presents to people who didn't really want them.

In the past they would retreat into the simple solidarity of the family round the table, playing games and singing, as though from an earlier generation. Charles would blot out that he, an advertiser, was a prime part of the whole system, Thérèse would blot out that her regret that she was not back among fellow-Catholic friends and relatives in France, and Pierre and David would blot out their more shameful experiences of the past year. They were, for one day at least, together.

This year the unity had been broken. Without Charles they were fragmented, and all three felt some guilt that they had not sacrificed anything of themselves to be with Arthur.



Lunch at Arthur's hadn't gone so badly. Everyone had eaten far too much and drunk just enough to be close to the legal limits when they drove home. Arthur had been grumpy – he didn't like it that his offer of tinned food and cheap wine from the larder had been rejected. He sat through it all wearing a silver hat, letting it all happen around him, tried not to drift off to sleep, and wished they would all go.

Louise had been cheery, laughing at the banter between the siblings, noting Arthur's occasional glacial smile in her direction and his way of pulling himself up and raising his head in an aloof distracted way. She saw Emily looking at Arthur with tears in her eyes when she said, "How long is it now since you came out of hospital? Three years? And you said you'd give yourself two here. All by yourself, you've done it all by yourself."

Kate stiffened slightly.

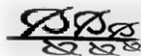
"And this is where I'm going to stay. This is my home. And I've still got my marbles."

"Don't let any of us tell you otherwise," laughed Emily.

Now she had done it. Kate was known within the family as the great finger-wagger. She would seize upon something you said, put it together with something you'd said years before, and give a damning characterization of your worrying tendencies, unforgiveable nature and your offensive characteristics. If you had offended Kate personally, often unintentionally during light-hearted banter, the venom would be made more poisonous by righteous hurt. In Kate's mind the offender needed to be put straight, even if it had to be later. Emily caught Kate's eye and saw her fists clench at the implied suggestion that she, the elder sister, was not to be taken any notice of. This put down must be returned to when the moment was right.

"Let's clear away, shall we, and get some coffee," said Kate jumping up and accidentally knocking over her own chair.

"Never mind about that, Kate. I've got some photographs to show you."



Kate's husband had all the attributes of a modern manager. Wherever he was, Rupert was never quite there. The space he occupied was not filled by anything that could be called 'character', and yet he knew exactly what was going on around him and manoeuvred the principal players into doing what he thought best. He was very much the modern organiser, admired for getting things done, quietly and subtly. Until two years' ago Rupert had never had a senior position, preferring to be an anonymous company accountant, but when, reluctantly, as an alternative to redundancy, he had accepted the role of Finance Director he turned out to be a good manager. The attributes he had to develop came in useful among friends and family, and more obviously the golf club, where he served on the committee. To all, he was quiet,

reserved and urbane, someone you would go to for advice on the best way to save money if you wanted to extend your house or arrange a wedding. But in the depths of himself all was not well. His life wasn't quite the great success it seemed. One part of him remained untouched, for in him there were the un-watered shoots of some deeper needs and a critical faculty that could judge the shallow social mechanism of which he was a prime mover. He was also intimidated by Kate, her ambition, her opinions and her headstrong moods. He rarely stood up to her directly, just subtly and tangentially. Why were they so remote from each other these days? He stayed in thrall to her, erotically, but without any real sexual desire. He wanted to be loved by her but affectionately. And she in her own detached way held tight to him as a supportive husband and father. He felt though the bonds loosening. All they seemed to have as a couple were the accumulated habits of their personal history.

He would ponder Louise and her genetic differences, and Jessica, who often seemed not to be there with you, even when she was. A shy child who hid in her room, reading fantasy novels and internet chatting. The quiet one. Kate worried that Jessica's young life was passing her by, and found it odd that in soft-abrasive tones she would tell her sisters what they should and shouldn't do, what they should have done and what they shouldn't have done. Louise let it all wash over her. Kate said with feeling that tellers-off were not popular. As a teenager she was regarded as a 'home bird', but once at university they hardly heard from her. She seemed to want nothing and asked for nothing.

Samantha was more like Kate but without her tendency to scold. Ambitious without wanting to do anyone down, lively and good-humoured. But in her too there was a quiet, dissatisfied self that looked askance at her fate and resented it. She was amused at Auntie Emily being 'out with the fairies', as Kate would put it, and admired the freedom she had made for herself but nevertheless thought it rather pitiful that the older woman did not have a family or serious career.

Rupert was worried that the whole family was becoming a fragmented collection of egos held together by shared memories and a sense of duty. Kate was wrong to push Arthur towards a home. Let the man be. If he wants to sit it out in his home, let him.

"It's funny without Mum and Louise," whispered Samantha affectionately, looking into Rupert's evasive eyes. The plan was that Kate would join them later and they would spend the New Year in France. Louise would go her own way with Mia.

Rupert pushed a small tuft of sandy-coloured hair away from his forehead with unexpected suddenness, a habit which he had acquired as a schoolboy and had never left him.

“Perhaps family events are over for us,” continued Samantha. “Time passes.”

“You're still young,” consoled Rupert, not quite to the point.

Samantha looked out of the window and did not feel young. As she looked at her father, she saw a mixture of complacency and edgy discontent and wondered what life was for, if anything. She felt for him, fondly remembering his tenderness to her when she was a child. Why does he hang out with those dreary golf club cronies when he never has a good word to say about them?

“Let's dig Jessica out of her room and call Grandad.”

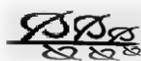
Jessica was watching TV, wishing this time of the year would pass. The years of genuine family conviviality had gone, and events were not much more than tokenism or a ghastly horror show. How she missed Marcus.

“Come on my lovely sister,” said Samantha. “Dooo come downstairs. We're going to phone Grandad.”

“Is that a good idea?” said Jessica wearily.

“Of course. Come on.” Samantha smiled broadly and put her arm around Jessica's reluctant shoulders.

Rupert was already on the phone to Kate, regretting her absence, worrying about Arthur and Louise, when Arthur was put on, and Samantha in her bouncy way asked if he'd enjoyed the day. Arthur lied. Jessica said enough of what was expected of her but each in their own way felt gloomy and wished that life would revert to its comforting routines.



Kate found Louise hiding away in Arthur's spare room, rolling cigarettes, on the verge of tears.

“What did he say?”

“Nothing directly. Just innuendo – ‘In my day women were women’,” Louise mocked his haughty manner.

Kate was indignant.

“And they spent their days looking wistfully out the kitchen window while the men were out doing pretty much what they wanted.”

“Oh, mum. Tell that to a factory worker.”

“Nevertheless.”

Kate said that her love for Mia should be enough, but Louise wanted children, didn't want to adopt, and, half-jokingly, added that it was a cruel joke of nature that she needed a man's seed. Kate knew that she had slept with men at university and the experience had made her realise that she was more attracted to women.

“The truth is she wants from me more than I can give. Her intensity frightens me. She would resent a child because it would come between us. Perhaps hers is the kind of schoolgirl crush which excludes friendship. I love her deeply but not totally.”

Louise was giving away more than she had intended.

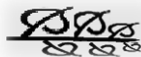
“Good, nor should you. You must keep your own self intact, for sanity's sake and your long-term preservation.”

Louise said she was not against total love, in principle.

“Let it rest today. Forget the Arthurs of this world. Their race is nearly run, and with it their prejudices.”

“Despite what he thinks about me, I think that losing Grandad would be like losing part of ourselves. I'll be sorry when he dies.”

Kate put her arm around her and they went back in to look at the photos.”



“What are you doing?” asked Jessica into her phone, half-attentively, curled up in her pyjamas, noticing the ridges that were beginning to appear in her nails.

“Reading. Everyone else is asleep.” Marcus, alone in the family living room, legs draped over the arm of the chair, put his book down.

“How was it?” asked Jessica, half interested.

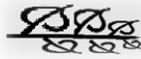
“Much the same as every other year,” said Marcus, picking up the book again. “You?”

“Weird. Everything’s not quite right.”

“The end of 2,000 years of Christian civilization,” he said mockingly.

“Oh, shut up.”

Marcus laughed, and Jessica regretted she’d phoned. They made their farewells without bitter words, or saying anything significant.



Tom was an easy-going fellow, who smiled a lot. He came from a large family and was never as much at home as when he was with a large group of friends. At the end of the year, it was quite natural for him to be at home with his family and he joined in their routines spontaneously and without disaffection. His parents had come to Britain from Hungary in 1956 as a young couple, had settled and integrated easily into the north, and started a family. Tom was the youngest.

In his relationship with Samantha, Tom was very much the easy one, Samantha the driving force. Samantha had the idea of going far away, somewhere beautiful, somewhere exotic, and starting a career there. Tom kind of went along with it. Of course, they would make new friends, and families could always visit each other.

“Hiiii... How are youuuu?” asked Samantha, and they exchanged season's greetings. “When are you leaving?” he asked.

“We can’t do anything till mum’s back,” she said. “She’s still down at grandad’s. What did you have for lunch? Tell me everything.”

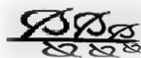
And Tom reeled off the whole menu.

“Myyyy. You Hungarians don’t ’arf eat a lot, ” said Samantha.

“You remember last year?”

“Of course I do. They made me feel really at home. It was luuuuvvly.”

The thought of their easy enthusiasms and lightness was a relief to Samantha, who was getting weighed down by family gloom. People don’t need to be so serious all the time.



“Look at her. Lovely girl. Such a pretty face.”

Arthur was showing the photographs around, and as Louise and Kate entered lingered deliberately on one of Louise taken when was about ten, with a round cherub face and a shy smile.

“Let me see,” said Emily and they all gathered round it.

“You’d never have guessed,” said Arthur.

Kate raised her eyes, Louise blushed and the temperature dropped in the room.

“Dad!” screamed Kate. “Please.”

“Don’t shout at me!” said Arthur turning to her, staring viciously, barely controlling his rage, then turning to Louise and forcing himself into a relaxed pose.

“Don’t mind me, I’m old.”

Louise looked down in torment.

“Dad, let it drop,” said Charles emolliently.

But Kate’s temper was up.

She reminded him that they had all come here to be with him. He said he was very grateful, and raised his hand weakly to shield himself from her anger.

“Come on, Kate,” said Charles.

“Don’t you start. Keep out of it,”

“Mum,” said Louise helplessly.

“Kate,” said Emily, hardly daring to say anything.

By which time, Arthur had recovered himself. He repeated his gratitude. He knew they came out of duty, but was still grateful.

“Funnily enough, young girl,” he said, turning to Louise, “I think you are the one person who actually wanted to come, and I’m very sorry I upset you. You see I have to speak my mind. I’ve always thought you were a lovely girl.”

“I understand,” Louise whispered. “I hope I still am,” she said trying not to sound sarcastic. Charles looked across at Kate and thought how drawn she looked.

"I can't cope with the world I find myself living," said Arthur self-pityingly. "I don't like it."

Charles was relieved. They could all cope with a general rant.

"Lies – fictions. Lurid soap operas. We see talentless nothings rise and fall. A wasteland of drugs and alcohol. Sex with anything and anyone. It sells newspapers."

"Distracted from distraction by distraction," said Charles, quoting T.S. Eliot in a mock-pompous voice.

Kate looked at him as though he were mad.

"Stupefied and made stupid," continued Charles. "The politicians cuddle up to the talentless nothings and pretend to like them because of the hold they have on our minds. They don't care whether they are druggies or debauched adulterers."

"You're right there, young man," said Arthur.

"You hypocrite, and you in advertising," blurted out Kate.

Charles laughed.

Arthur muttered his thoughts, forgetting his audience.

"Discipline and restraint have gone. We must have things *now*. For politicians the economy is all. Phrases like 'family values'. What they mean is family units as economic units. Children as children don't have a chance."

Arthur turned to Louise and said he was sorry, he wasn't having a go at her, but Louise said she was happy, personally.

"Is happiness everything to you?" He gave her a penetrating look. "When your grandmother and I were really together, bringing up your mum and the others, we weren't always happy, but we led decent lives."

"Were you religious, ever?" said Charles, and Kate raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"No. I was never brought up to believe, although I loved singing hymns."

"Do you think it's all over for us?" said Charles tamely.

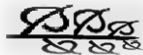
"Oh, for God's sake," snorted Kate.

"I don't know," said Arthur. "Whatever happens I won't be around to see it. I won't be sorry to go."

Arthur's eyes drained as though the mind that kept them alert were roaming elsewhere. Emily saw what she thought was a death mask and felt the horror of it, Louise wanted to hug him, and Kate and Charles were preoccupied with their own irritations.

Then it was as though a small charge had been put through him and restarted his will. His eyes showed life and she turned to Louise with a big smile. For a second she felt blessed. Emily felt an unreality which made her spirits sink. She looked around at the lunch debris, and remembered the times when Arthur and Grace would come to Kate's at this time of the year laden with presents, finding delight at being in the company of young children, just for a short time. Now the half-eaten meats, the undone washing up in a dirty sink, the silly hats made it seem like a grotesque dance of death.

Kate, rallying, forcing herself to sound jolly, suggested they went for a walk before clearing up. She offered to wrap him up warmly and they would take turns to push. He said he didn't want to go anywhere. "Don't bully me. You go if you want to."



Late afternoon. It was sunny and mild in the park. Nothing to buy, nothing to cook, nothing to plan. A pleasant amble. Pierre was asking his mother why his father wouldn't move to France.

"I don't know. He just doesn't want to leave here."

"But you do."

"I'm French and he's English. One of us has to lose."

"But why you?"

"Because you two grew up here. It's our family home."

"Can't you take it in turns, a few years here, a few years there, now we're growing up," suggested David. "Besides, Dad's close to retirement."

"It doesn't work like that. You can't rationalise yourself away from your roots. They're too strong. I will always want to be there. He will always want to be here. Perhaps we'll get a flat in Paris if we can afford it. I'll spend a few months a year there and he can join me whenever he wants to. You too, of course."

Thérèse still wore the look of a woman in her twenties, even though her skin betrayed her forty-seven years. It was in the studied casual way she wore her clothes, something in the quick movements of the body, the rapid smile that could disappear as quickly as it came.

“Are you and dad... can I use the word?... happy?” asked David.

“What sort of question is that?”

“Just wondered.”

“What are you saying? That you don’t think we are? Well, what is happiness when you’ve been together as long as we have? Our lives have meaning... our family life... which is happiness, isn’t it? Some other things begin to feel more pointless.”

“Like what?”

“Your father’s work. But it keeps us going financially, which is important. We always wanted a family. And he enjoyed it. Mostly. Now it’s a chore. He says he's not interested in that world any more. He’s even talked about converting.”

“Wow. Do you mind?” asked David.

“No, of course not. We Catholics always welcome sinners into the fold.”

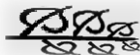
She smiled.

“Why do you say Dad is a sinner?” said Pierre.

“Because we’re all sinners, stupid,” snorted David. ‘

“Oh...,” said Pierre vaguely.

“Boys,” their mother pleaded.



The hotel lounge. Rupert was staring into the fire, ill at ease. In his thoughts, he had looked for comfort in the controllable world of work, and had remembered that his deputy was trying to make himself indispensable in the eyes of the CEO as redundancies loomed. He also remembered that the CEO had asked him to come up with some figures that would vindicate the Board’s determination to embark on a risky merger.

Jessica was nestled in a large old-fashioned armchair and was reading a fantasy novel.

Samantha, fidgeting, yawning, thinking that she just might go back to her room, suddenly held herself still.

“Daaaad,” she said, trying to sound casual. Rupert looked up slowly, unable to shake off disturbing thoughts. Jessica cast a glance in her direction. “Tom and I will probably go abroad in the autumn. We’ve started to look for jobs.”

“Why?” snapped Jessica more sharply than she intended.

“Just to do something new. It’s a good time. Not too young and not too old.”

Jessica went back to her book.

Rupert rather despised the current fashion for travel for travel’s sake, but he understood it. The need for adventure, to get away from home.

“It’s all a bit sudden.”

“We’ve already applied for temporary work visas. In New Zealand.”

Jessica looked up again. “You’ve not said anything.”

“Well, I wanted to be sure. And now I am.”

“What about your job here?”

“You know I hate the finance industry.”

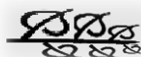
Rupert saw it so clearly. Nothing he could do, no lever he could pull, nothing would stop their family from falling apart.

“I thought you might be annoyed.”

“No,” and he shook his head feebly. “Have you spoken to your mother?”

“I think it’s a daft idea,” snorted Jessica.

In truth Jessica had once felt the same impulse, but lack of courage, inertia and a feeling of complacency at home had held her back. She pretended to carry on reading, looking at the same line over and over, determined not to show jealousy.



Mia couldn’t wait for Louise to escape the pulls of her past. Without her she felt desolate.

Hers was no ordinary love for it obliterated all else. Daily routines without Louise took place in a weird underworld of mist and half souls. Her love was luminous. It could look into the darkest corners of Louise's troubled soul and see the doubts that were rising up. She knew that her lover was holding something back and it made her desperate to please. If Louise wanted children, then so be it, whichever way she wanted it to happen.

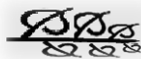
Mia had studied the history of art. One late autumn afternoon in a quiet corner of the University library, in semi-darkness, she had come across two Bellini Pietàs. In both, Mary was passionately and tenderly holding the body of her son. The paintings possessed her, and in the growing gloom she continued to see them in her mind's eye. She doubted whether that kind of mother's love would never be hers. But Mary's love was not just a mother's love for a son. Her love for Him was both human and divine. Divine love is surely without bigotry. It would bless her love of Louise and the children they had together.

Mia waited anxiously for Louise to return, and when the phone rang her excitement was mixed with relief. At least this was something.

"Hi." But Louise's casualness almost made her faint with disappointment.

Each said they missed the other and Mia was comforted. Louise told her what had happened, how she suspected that despite everything she felt her grandfather was fond of her. They reconfirmed their love for each other, and Mia expressed her worry that Louise's love was less absolute than hers, and was frightened.

"We must talk," said Louise before hanging up, leaving Mia full of foreboding. Why was she so keen to go?



The light was fading and wisps of fog had started to gather over the river. None of them wanted to be trapped there, none had booked a second night in the hotel, everyone needed to get back. None of them spoke from their deeper selves. It was as though they were acquaintances, exchanging social information. Just the odd look, the odd tone, the odd phrase, gave away another self.

Arthur sat waiting for them, depressed and irritated. Now I can't hear them, they're all having a go at me. Let them. What do I care?

"Hello, Dad," said Emily cheerily, the first in. "It's starting to get foggy again."

Arthur just smiled at her weakly.

“Oh, it’s cold out there,” said Kate.

Arthur just looked at them.

“I think we must go,” said Kate. “We’ve a long drive. Can I get you something, a cup of tea or something?”

Arthur just shook his head. He was used to coping on his own. Everything he wanted was at eye level, nothing out of reach.

“I’ll get the coats,” said Charles. And there was eager movement all around to get going.

But Arthur wasn’t having it.

“Why did you marry a Catholic?” he muttered to Charles, half-afraid, but willing himself to be heard. “And why did you marry that wet of a man?” he said turning to Kate.

All busying stopped. They couldn't move.

“Sorry?” said Charles, distractedly, thinking he must have imagined it.

“What! Why do you say these things?” said Kate, anger rising within her.

“Dad,” said Emily weakly. Louise just looked on, afraid.

“Because I haven’t long to live, and I don’t care anymore. I just want to tell the truth.”

The party hat on his head slipped a fraction.

“I’ve nothing against her as a person. I just wanted you to marry an Englishwoman. Somebody who wouldn’t take you from yourself.”

“You can’t dictate to people like that. It’s nothing to do with you. What do you know about taking me from myself?”

Arthur stared at him, beginning to sense the ridiculous. “You mustn’t take any notice of me,” he said weakly.

Charles accepted Arthur’s retreat immediately, but not Kate.

“You can’t say those things and then back away from them.”

“Are you saying I’m a coward?” Arthur pulled himself up in his wheelchair with all the attempt at dignity he could muster. The hat fell to the ground. He starred viciously at Kate, and even she was intimidated.

"I just don't think it's fair. We don't attack *you* for things we don't approve of."

"Oh, yes you do. And you want to get me into a home. Well, let me tell you, and read my lips, I'm... not... going... into... a... home."

"All right, all right. Let's forget it," said Kate.

"What things don't you approve of in me, young lady?"

"Oh, Dad," pleaded Emily, afraid. How she hated fights, and today of all days. "Please let it drop. We really must go. The fog's closing in."

Kate bit her lip, torn as to whether to take up the challenge or not.

"Nothing you don't know," she said in a spirit of compromise. Maybe she had lost this battle, but it wouldn't go away, she knew it wouldn't.

"Go on," said Arthur, his eyes fixed on her.

"I don't really want to bring it up now. Another day."

"There might not be another day. Go on."

"Dad, are you trying to keep us here. Is that why you're trying to pick a quarrel?" interjected Charles.

"I'm not trying to pick a quarrel. Sometimes I just want to tell the truth. It's like that when you know you're going to die soon. Go on, young lady."

"You know the things that used to upset us," Kate responded, looking down, almost inaudible.

"Kate...", pleaded Emily. Louise had plonked herself in an armchair her eyes fixed on the carpet, desperately wanting to get out of there.

"Go on," Arthur persisted.

"About how you used to treat Mum," said Kate still almost inaudible.

The pause, the silence, crackled, until the inevitable explosion came.

"What!... What!" but Arthur couldn't at first get the touch-paper to light.

"It's nothing, Dad. Come on, Kate, let's go," ventured Charles.

"What did you say?!" Arthur persisted.

"Nothing, Dad, nothing. Come on, let's go," said Kate to no-one in particular.

"I want you to explain what you said."

“No, let it go, Dad,” pleaded Charles.

But Kate had started to regain her courage.

“You talk about telling the truth, but there’s also the truth that you denied Mum many of the things she wanted when she was alive, and that when she died you got them for yourself, material things like getting a decent car.”

“Kate...” pleaded Emily again.

“And you denied Mum her long-held desire to move closer to her sister. I’ve told you that before. It’s nothing new.”

At first it looked as though Arthur were going to lift himself out of his wheelchair and, on his remaining leg, strike out at her. But then some light came into him, a remembered guilt, a grudging acknowledgment that something of what Kate said was true. Besides, if he had lifted himself out, he would have collapsed on the floor in a humiliated and humiliating heap. He slumped back in his chair defeated.

“We had our bad times like everyone else,” he muttered dejectedly. “I wasn’t an easy man, but then your mother wasn’t an easy woman.”

Everyone was relieved – even Kate. The wall of sentimentality around him was being rebuilt and they’d be able to get out of here. The thought of having to stay the night was making the situation desperate.

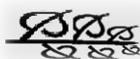
“Go on, get along with you. Thank you for coming,” he said, exhausted.

They all shuffled their way, awkwardly, towards the door, looking down, hoping that was it.

Charles went out and held the door open for others, no-one looking back, the strained sounds of ‘Bye, Dad’ and ‘Bye, Grandad’. Suddenly the strangest gurgling sound, a muffled cry and the slump of a body falling to the ground.

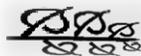
“Dad!” screamed Kate, “Oh, Dad, no!” and rushed to the heap on the floor. Louise and Emily were paralysed. Charles rushed to help.

“Phone for an ambulance, Charles... quick, quick!”



Thérèse had left the boys at home and made her way to her church, even though there was no Mass on Christmas evening. Making her way through the cemetery, she felt a shudder of fear, not because of what she might find in the dark and cold of the churchyard, but because of some premonition of disturbance to their settled family life. The old gravestones, blanketed with the eerie sulphur light of the street, reminded her that we all perish in time. How hard it is to believe that we might one day gain the happiness of Heaven.

To her surprise, the latch gave way and the heavy door opened. So dark, she could just make out the pews from a few small lights on the crib. Kneeling there in the darkest part of the church, she asked for forgiveness for any resentments she had harboured towards her father-in-law and thanked the Eternal Father for His gracious protection. She opened herself to her sins and weaknesses, and resolved to confront them. The small amount of light from the street faded. How we delude ourselves with the things of this world, which are nothing. And yet our lives here are the first step to eternity. How is that we are dead to this glory? In the eyes of those that people our streets she saw only dead souls, not lives preparing for eternity. She must struggle, through love, to keep that kind of death out of her family. A cloud in front of the moon parted and she was illuminated there on her knees. The vague feeling of some future upheaval had not left her but she no longer dreaded it.



A blankness had settled over them around the bedside. Arthur was in a deep sleep. The doctors had said there was nothing more that could be done, just hope. Kate was looking agitated, but fixed, unable to move, Charles looked heavy-eyed, drained of feeling, Emily sat on a chair in the corner looking out of the window, and Louise looked down at the floor, rigid as if in a school assembly. They all wore coats, with scarves, hats and gloves stuffed into their pockets, and Kate fiddled with her car keys. Along the corridor the sound of carols being sung to a large ward, jovial bantering. The nurses were passing through the wards, washing the patients, changing the sheets. Occasionally a mad-sounding scream from one of the patients, a defiant willed ejaculation against the regime they were being forced into, jolly tones to try and calm them down: *Now, now, we have to give you a nice wash – we don't want you to be smelling for your sister when she come, do we?* Arthur's few things that Charles had

got together before they rushed off, following the ambulance, piled on the little bedside cabinet, and Charles, glad of something to do, started putting them away.

Kate said there was nothing more *she* could do, and had to go. "I'll phone in the morning. I'll get Louise back to London. This is no place for her."

Charles said he'd stay on another night and sleep at the bungalow. Emily said she'd stay for when their father woke up. Charles said he'd take over in the morning.

Emily noticed the decorations coming away from the ceiling, and smiled. There's nothing you can do about time. But the thought of our lives growing and fading away also gave her a curious pleasure.

After they'd left, she sat on the bed looking at her father. Was this the man that so terrified her as a child? Where are those eyes that once had drilled through her, murderously, when she said what she really felt? Now shut tight, the face of death. Arthur breathed softly. An occasional faint cough to clear his throat. Her fear of him gone, the hand of death passing over.

He was a different generation, matured between two world wars, hardened by the second. The privations of the '40s and '50s had made him severe and mean. He too was trapped. Now she pitied him, and with it came love, of sorts. She recalled the silly gifts he used to buy her, cheap worthless objects, bought from a catalogue, as though that was all he could afford. And when Grace died, the things he tried to hand down to her – a string of fake pearls, a cashmere coat many sizes too big. Her pity then mixed with irritation. How inadequate it made her feel. It had taken her years to accept her own imperfections and weaknesses, and find the strength to seek his friendship. Would he now be able to love her properly, without sentimentality, without ego? Not just her fey charms but her wayward life. Was he open enough, free enough? Was she?

"How is he?"

It was just before dawn. The sister's head had popped round the door. Emily just smiled. "Has he woken up?"

Emily shook her head.

"I remember him. He was here earlier in the year, terrible chest problems. We thought it was pneumonia."

She felt his pulse, checked some figures on the drip, and looked to see whether he had soiled himself.

“Difficult man. He talked badly to some of my nurses. I got him to apologise. He had a twinkle in his eye. The things he told me about his life in the force. You’d never credit that sort of thing went on. Have the others gone?”

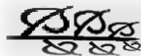
“What will he be like if he gets out of this? Will he be paralysed?” she asked.

“You never know with strokes. Maybe partially. And he may have difficulty speaking.”

Emily thought to herself it might be kinder if he just died. His time is up. What good would it be to him or to anyone else if he were mentally dead? Pointless trying to keep the body going at all costs.

Kate was on the phone. “Hang on, I’ll go out into the corridor... No, there’s no change, but the signs aren’t good. Best not come till there’s something definite.”

Then Charles rang. “Couldn’t you get a room at the hotel?” she said. “All those medical smells, and our rubbish. Come up here after breakfast. I’ll go back and tidy up when you arrive.”



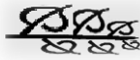
Charles had thrown himself onto the sofa in the dark, half afraid to turn on the light, not wanting to see all the things that made the room familiar. He knew where everything was – the dusty oak dresser, the display of willow-pattern plates, the long bookshelves cluttered with history books, the family photos, the unopened mail, the parcels stacked up. With no living presence there, he couldn’t bear to look. Was it really only a few hours ago that they were all here for their dutiful celebrations? The younger spirits had fled, leaving behind the shadows of two strangers. The two strangers who had brought him into this world.

Reluctantly, heavily, he pulled himself up and groped his way to the only room with a bed. Turning on the light, there it all was – the raised bed, the cushions for the wheelchair, the night vests, the creams and bandages, the smell of iodine, the smell of mothballs, a grip for picking things up from the floor. In the cupboards, the clothes hanging, piled up, most never worn, the sheer excess, bought and hoarded not out of greed, but out of fear – just in case, everything was just in case, the great bourgeois imperative in case of material ruin. Why would he want to hang on to a life like this, a proud man with a suffocating sense of his own dignity, why not just give up.

He knew why not, because he had the same will inside himself, the will to keep going. To go to work every day on time, never miss a day, save and move to a better

house, keep the family together, stay married to the same woman. Arthur as the family patriarch, giving little drops of money to grandchildren in return for attention, sending birthday cards, routine phone calls.

Charles was exhausted. He went back to the sofa and, with a deep sigh, found sleep.



When he got back to the hospital, he saw Emily curled up asleep in a chair and Arthur sitting up eating breakfast.

“What’s so funny?” asked Arthur.

“Nothing. It’s just typical,” he said lightly. “You never miss breakfast.”

All the same, he felt uneasy. This could go on and on.

“Sit down,” ordered Arthur. “Look at her. Still fast asleep. Where are the others?”

“They had to get back. They stayed for a while. They’ll be amazed. Look at you. How are you feeling?”

“Not too bad. Terrible pain first thing. No, no, don’t sit there. Already pressed this button. They didn’t take any notice. Bring that tray forward. And pass my glasses. Oh, and go back home and get me some more pants and vests, and another watch.”

“Another watch!”

“The battery might go on this one. Why did the others go? When will they be back?”

“I don’t know. Do you want a drink?”

“In a minute. Don’t rush me. Move that tray forward. There’s a terrible pain just here. An Indian-looking chappie popped his head in and disappeared. I must have fallen asleep. Make sure it’s the watch with the big clock face. In case I lose my glasses...”

“How come you’re still in a single room?”

“MRSA. I wonder what’s for lunch.”

“I didn’t know you had that!”

Arthur explained he’d had it for years. They can’t cure it. It was probably the reason they ignored him this morning. “When I woke up there was this huge Caribbean-

looking woman standing over me – gave me quite a fright – couldn't understand a word she was saying..."

"Dad..."

"Then another nurse came in and they started to wash me and change the sheets. But they didn't ask me the obvious. As soon as I was cleaned up, nature called and they had to get a hoist. They weren't best pleased but why didn't they ask me?"

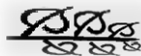
"Do I need to know all this?"

"They just treat you like a thing here. You never see the same person twice. There's a sister on in the mornings, thinks a lot of herself. We'll end up having an argument. You're a good lad, a bit of a rascal in your younger days but you're all right, and Emily here's all right too – a bit flaky – but she's kind. But that Kate. All she wants to do is to get me into a home. Well, I'm not going into a home. When the doctor comes round, I'll tell him to get me some physio. I want to get my strength back. I'm going home."

"Has anybody actually said what happened to you?"

"You can't get any information around here."

Arthur no longer talked of not having long to live, the talk was all of action, the mission to get back home. Not even a battle with Kate would deflect him from the war with his health and the looming war with the hospital, all of which excited him. When Emily woke, and got over her astonishment, she beamed at her father. And loved him.



Mia held Louise tightly in her arms, not able to let go. Louise stared at the ceiling, trying to summon up the will to get out of bed and roll herself a cigarette.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Mia, distractedly, looking at the early morning sun settle on Louise's shoulders. She was fantasizing that she had thrown back the bedclothes and was standing at an easel painting her exposed nakedness.

"Nothing much. I hope he's still alive."

"Do I detect a new note of sympathy for your less-than-friendly grandfather?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

“I thought he was a boring old homophobic middle-class racist bully who only loved money.”

Mia’s tone irritated her.

“Maybe, but he’s still my grandfather. I’ve sensed of late he’s trying to see more in us than he did before.”

“Oh, just love me, and hold me tight.”

Louise turned and kissed her passionately on the lips.

“I do love you. But we need more than just ourselves, you know we do.”

“But I need you... you...”

Louise tore herself away and went in search of her tobacco.

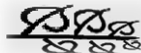
“I’ll never be enough for you, will I?” said Mia, self-pityingly.

Louise stood at the window rolling herself a cigarette, the light playing on her body as she moved.

“Come back to bed,” pleaded Mia.

“I think...,” began Louise.

“Don’t say it, don’t say it. Just come back to bed. Please.” And with a weary slump of the shoulders Louise looked down away from Mia’s gaze and obeyed.



Kate sat over a late breakfast, looking drawn. Samantha suggested they cancel their holiday. Kate told her to wait until she’d spoken to Emily. Jessica felt so low she could hardly speak.

“I don’t think we can go,” said Rupert.

“Wait till I phone the hospital,” snapped Kate, not meaning to snap.

Silence. Kate finished her coffee. When her phone rang, she went into the hall to answer it.

Returning, she had a defeated look, but willed a smile.

“He’s recovered and is eating breakfast. I can’t believe it. He was at death’s door.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” enthused Samantha.

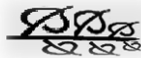
“Really? Wow!” said Jessica.

Rupert guessed Kate's mixed feelings. Relieved that she could escape the post-death routines, relieved that her father hadn't died but irritated that he hadn't just got on with it, and guilty that she felt like that.

“Dad tells me you're thinking of working abroad, and a long way away,” she said, turning to Samantha. “Do it now while you can. We can always come and visit.”

“I think you should go back and see him,” said Rupert. “Either we cancel the trip, or we go and *you* fly out later.”

Kate thought about this and knew Rupert was right, damn him.



The nurses had all gone, the washing and changing and doctors' rounds all finished. Emily sat with him alone.

“A lot of pain in the night, my dear. They thought I'd had a stroke and gave me oxygen. But I'm not paralysed. Look, I can move my arms.”

“So what is it, then?”

“They don't know. A heart attack of some sort, I suppose.” Then he whispered, “Get me out of here. I want to go home. If I'm going to die, I want to die at home.”

“I can't, Dad. You know that. This is the best place for you.”

Emily walked to the window and looked out at the half-light of the morning. She imagined all those bodies waking up, oblivious to their own ebbing away, not preparing themselves for the final moment. She heard him breathing heavily and knew he was looking at her.

“Do you still hate me?” she heard him whisper. “I'm sorry. Very sorry.”

Emily turned and saw him lying back very pale, crying.

“Please go away.”

“Dad...”

“I know I wasn't always a good father.”

“Dad.”

Emily turned away again and watched a redwing pecking in some rough grass, keeping itself alive. Nearby, a few silver birches and shrubs, beautiful, in stillness, in harmony. Then she caught her reflection in the window and saw the sorrow in her face. Where was that smile that she could offer as love to her father? Why did everything suddenly feel so wrong?

“Dad, you want to die or do you want to live?”

Arthur stared at her searchingly, almost aggressively, like the old Arthur. Then the face relaxed knowing he could pretend nothing in front of her.

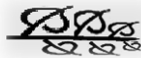
“I don’t know,” he said truthfully. “I want to go home.”

“Why don’t you rest?” she said caressingly, putting her hand on his.

“What about the others if I am to die here?”

“Don’t think of anything, Dad. Just rest.”

And suddenly she found a smile and he shut his eyes, and she saw a shadow pass over his face. Take his soul gently, she thought.

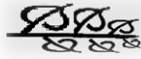


The funeral seemed to come and go so quickly. Charles and Kate had rushed around organizing everything. Kate, her faced set hard, got everything sorted for the wake, made sure the very few friends still alive knew, made sure the distant relatives knew. Rupert and the girls had flown back but she hardly noticed. She wanted to get on with sorting and arranging, without worrying about them. Charles, distracted and preoccupied, dealt with the undertakers, the crematorium, the notices, and the obituaries. Only Emily allowed herself to pause, and nobody minded.

She thought back to the fear in his eyes as he realized he was dying, and her worries about it not being quite right, dying there in that place without the rest of the family. Wondering about his soul’s final images. Oh, father, rest in peace.

Kate, however, was relieved. Relieved that the battle of wills between them was over. She knew it could never have been resolved without the complete capitulation of one or the other. Perhaps at the last he could have surrendered his will, if she had been there.

This thought troubled her, but it never quite took hold. All she wanted was to get the funeral over with, restart life, and become cheerful. Go back to work. Or at least something.

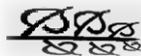


Charles was troubled by the lack of resolution, and release, in their relationship. In those final days Charles had sensed that Arthur's unease mirrored his own. Early in life both had a decisiveness, and a way of getting things done, quietly and efficiently. Arthur never doubted that everything he did, thought and said was right, until he retired. Charles getting close to retirement had come to regard his own workplace energy with suspicion, but he still needed to provide material support for his family, which meant that the quest for a meaningful inner life could only happen after work. His father may have regretted his life-long dedication to material sufficiency but had little idea how he could have lived differently-. Charles wished he'd made time to talk to him about these divisions of self, for both their sakes.

His father had been the last in the family to have been born in the early years of the twentieth century, survive the Great Slump and the Second World War, crawl himself up the social scale, and put aside a good sum for later. He had seen his country's power in the world drain away, and its moral standards decline. He hated the media, its chewing up the weak and helpless, the obsession with fame, the lack of common decency.

What he didn't see, Charles thought, was that social decay and an emptiness within were one and the same thing. Politeness and honour, Arthur's common touchstones, had traditional beliefs behind them.

With that generation gone, Charles felt some responsibility for his own, and powerless.



The funeral. The functional chapel in the crematorium. The families lined up near the front, a few old work colleagues at the back. The work tributes - *Much of his life given over to duty....* The personal memories - *Could be trying and difficult... Loved his grandchildren...* The psalm from the vicar - *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.* The reading - *Believest thou not that I am the Father, and the Father in me?* The committal - *In sure and certain hope of the resurrection into eternal life...*

And it was all over. No more Arthur, except as a memory. The curtain came round.

Nobody wanted to imagine the rest. Everyone thanked the vicar, then sidled off to look at the 'floral tributes'. The catch-up chatter, arrangements for the wake. The next funeral congregation trooping into the chapel, the two sets of undertakers trying not to be too pally with each other, for form's sake.

"Where's Emily?" asked Kate.

Louise found her sitting on bank in the cold winter sunshine holding some snowdrops. She asked what the matter was.

"It's awful, the way the whole thing is just like... I don't know... mechanical."

Louise rolled herself a cigarette.

"Those last days... my brother and sister bickering around him."

Emily put her hand on hers.

"I used to hate him. He frightened me. He had to be invulnerable. But when he started to express his feelings, I stopped hating him."

The sun went behind a cloud and the short winter day started to fade.

"What a farewell. All the sincerity of a police force parade, only quicker. Perhaps he would have approved. After all, form was preserved."

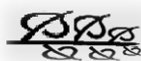
"Now, now," said Louise.

Emily smiled.

"In the end my love was unconditional, which I'm glad about."

Louise drew hard on her cigarette and only half-heard Emily. Emily thought about the need to give as well as to take. Louise stood up and watched the day darken.

"Oh, there you are," said Kate running across to them. "Everybody's off to the pub. Come on, it's getting late."



An old police colleague, pint in hand, half blind, one eye askew, limped from sandwiches to chicken bits.

"What's this stuff?" he asked Charles.

"Satay sauce. It's got peanuts in it."

"Ugh. It's sweet!" he said, licking his finger. "Not sausage sauce at all."

“Satay sauce!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Arthur’s cleaner was trying to balance a full glass of wine and hold on to a plate of soused herrings, avocado dips, rabbit patés, and runny cheeses.

“He was such a lovely man. Difficult. Liked to wind me up. I wouldn’t put up with it.”

Emily smiled.

“Careful with that wine. Here, let me take it.”

A lump of paté fell onto the carpet.

“Jessica, go and separate Sam from the wine bottle. I can hear her from here.”

Jessica returned, saying she’d been told to mind her own business. Kate stiffened.

“Where’s Dad?” asked Jessica. “I thought he was a bit distant this morning. Problems at work?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t told me if he has.” Rupert wasn’t as open with her as he used to be. The other day, when he saw her, he quickly put an end to a phone call. She didn’t quiz him. He was afraid of her, and she didn’t want to hear lies. Was there someone else? Most unlikely, but nevertheless things weren’t right, and she was anxious.

There were clusters of drinkers near the bar and a huddle of smokers outside, neither group worrying much about food. Kate went and sat with the drinkers and forgot about her husband.

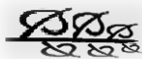
Thérèse was making conversation with the wife of an old friend of Arthur’s.

“Where’s Dad?” interrupted David.

Since his father’s death Charles had started drifting off, physically and mentally. These days she was never quite sure where he was.

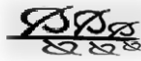
“I don’t know. Ask Pierre if he’s seen him.”

In fact, Pierre had seen him, from the window, ambling across the grass, uncertainly. And he had seen Rupert, sitting on a wall at the end of the lawn. Neither man seemed aware of the other.



Thérèse and the boys were in the car waiting, looking out of the window, in silence. Where was he? Why had he disappeared? Thérèse felt that she was losing the security

of expected behaviour. Her husband was separating himself, and the boys noticed it. Not that there was any 'unpleasantness' (a Grace term)... no rows or infidelity... just a sense that he was retreating from his family self into his self self. Thérèse was irritated with him, and feared destruction, but blamed herself for her deficiencies. Pierre's eyes were blank but intense. David drifted off into sleep, luxuriating in the warmth of just the right amount of alcohol.



"Let's go."

"Where were you, Dad?"

"Oh..." and Charles drove them off into a dark country lane.

The road ahead opened out. He found himself behind a car and two lorries. Waited patiently for an opportunity to overtake. A stretch of straight road ahead. Veering to the left. Was it clear? No lights coming. Moving to the right. No lights. He started to overtake, went past the car, then halfway past the first lorry when there were two lights in his eyes, flashing. 'Where the fuck...?' 'Dad!' and Thérèse screaming. He rammed his foot down, just past the first lorry, tucked in behind the second. A car sped past, hooting and flashing, and the lorry behind flashed in his rear-view mirror. God, what was going on?

"You're drunk!" shouted Thérèse.

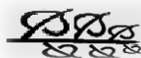
"I'm not. There must have been a side-road, and he came in." Charles shaking, trying to hold himself together, dreading the driver behind. What if he started something? He would have to say it was his fault – to everyone, the lorries, the oncoming car. Ah, a roundabout and took a narrow turning. The lorries went on. The second driver sat on the hooter. Charles stopped in a lay-by.

"I'm sorry. It was my fault, my mistake."

"We were nearly all killed. What's the matter with you?"

The boys still terrified said nothing.

"I don't know," he said stifling a sob. Only two glasses of wine, the emotion of the day, not eating enough, or perhaps just everything.



A few weeks before.

It was the quality of stillness that Rupert had first noticed as she was lining up the ophthalmoscope. She gave off a rare quietness that bewitched him. Everything about her suggested a superior wisdom to his own, and for a moment he fancied that the thing she was looking through could see behind his eyes, even perhaps into his misery.

“And the other one,” she said in a matter-of-fact way.

The joy of no idle chatter, the sense of absolute passivity. She is so beautiful. The skin has the look of burnt honey, the eyes are so dark and steady and clear.

“Don’t blink. Keep still.”

For you I will, he thought.

“That’s fine. Let me just make a few notes.”

He stared at her neck, which made him weak.

“Right. Go to the reception and make an appointment for six weeks’ time. That’ll be the final check.”

“I’d like treatment on the right eye sometime.”

“You can discuss that with the doctor when things have settled down.”

And then she smiled at him, fatally. The rest was a kind of dream. He made the appointment but for when?

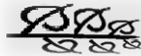
By the time he went back for the next appointment he had hatched a plan – a fictitious story about research into community attitudes, for his Rotary Club. In the waiting room, a moment of panic. What if it was a different optometrist? That would be it. And such relief.

No need for deception, no need to dread the consequences. But it was *her*, it was *her*, and his head started to spin.

“Come in.”

He let her go through the routine, looking into this eye, then the other, getting him to read the letters. But today she seemed a stranger. She was colder and more remote, and her beauty frightened him. It was just plain silly, he thought, to expect a boring, ageing family man to be of interest to a younger woman, and an Asian. But as he was leaving an uncontrolled will took over and he started to shake.

“By the way, I wonder if you could help. I’m a Rotarian.....” She looked at him quizzically but she smiled and he relaxed. She agreed to an interview at the end of the day.



Sam had had too much to drink during the wake and was feeling ill. Jessica sat looking out of the car window, angry that someone so flighty and loose-tongued as her sister could talk of upping sticks and disappearing without a job to go to. She was also angry that neither her parents had condemned her for it.

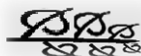
“How is Louise getting back to London?” she asked to no-one in particular.

Kate was driving slowly, keeping her eyes firmly on the road while Rupert pretended to sleep. The intensity of Louise’s relationship with Mia no longer bothered him. He was more concerned with his own duplicity.

What duplicity? Nothing had ‘happened’ with Shobha. All he had done was meet her a couple of times over coffee. And yet he knew the track he was on, and the consequences. Even if he took it no further and managed to keep it all within himself, the excitement had stirred something in his cautious accountant’s mind that had disturbed his comforts. It would never have happened twenty years ago. He had been too much under Kate’s spell. Perhaps it was just an age thing. If not Shoba, then someone else.

Or perhaps the changing family situation and his changing nature. He knew there were moral choices to be made, and yet he was in the grip of inevitability, which seemed to make choice impossible. Kate was already suspicious and would find out something, and would assume that it was even more than she’d found out.

“It’s weird he’s not around anymore,” said Jessica, thinking about her grandfather.



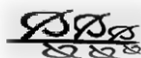
Emily switched off the engine and sat calmly, waiting. Irritated drivers had accepted the inevitable. This traffic was going nowhere. A crash probably. A woman on her right screaming into her phone, a man in front getting out to see what was going on, a family on her left squabbling. Very eerie. Emily, the ‘flake-head’, one of Arthur’s pet names for her, tried to meditate but couldn’t find the peace she was after. She thought of her sister, who had come to ‘accept’ her, but was sometimes jealous. And

Charles, too, who, as their father had got closer to death, had become dislocated from the form of life he had chosen. What did it all mean? She saw other dissatisfactions around her – Rupert wasn't as content as he used to be, and his daughters seemed unsure of themselves, allowing drift to move them more than belief. Even Louise saw no form of a life for herself beyond her love for Mia. And what about her own insecurities? Was she being self-indulgent, as Kate thought?

Emily lived in a top floor flat on the south coast, which she bought when she was a primary school teacher. For some time now she had been working as a freelance care worker, renting out a room in a flat, and giving yoga classes in a local health club. She had given up any idea of having children. Her last relationship was with a teacher, who spent most of the school holidays in silent retreat. In the main, she was content to be on her own and spend time, when she chose to, with like-minded friends and acquaintances. Mocked sometimes for her 'alternative' lifestyle, she saw it as fairly conventional.

Her mind drifted back to her father, who as he was dying had started to judge his own life harshly, with less sentimentality, regretting his own hardness and lack of warmth. He came to realise that in so many ways he'd got it wrong. And her mother too, Grace, who had died a lingering death from cancer, came to regret the resentment she had for her husband. In those terrible final moments, did she ever regret the unconditional love she gave her children, in opposition to him? Oh, the pity of it all.

The car in front started up, and the traffic jerked forward, slowly. Emily stopped thinking and put on some music.



During the fake interview Rupert had kept to the proprieties. His plan was to 'accidentally' bump into her in the street afterwards, say he really liked her and ask her if they could meet again. All of which he did. But she was suspicious, not believing that the meeting was accidental. He was old, and white, and from a different world. Probably married. The whole thing was silly, and dangerous.

"Please leave me alone. I gave you your interview. We must leave it at that."

But there was something in his eyes, in the disappointment, his shyness, that held her for a second.

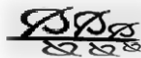
"Well, maybe a cup of coffee, but not around here. In the town centre."

They agreed a time for the next day, and she walked off briskly. Rupert looked around. This was her world, he thought. The wind was cold and blew bits of rubbish in his face. He sauntered through the Bus Station, past the boarded up pub, down the narrow road of terraced houses, past the shops.

Arabian Perfume, News 'N' Booze, Asian Looks, Jewellery, Used Fabrics, Vehicle Graphics, Wholesale Bargain Centre, Indian Spices, Pay All Your Household Bills Here, Claims4U Accident Management Specialists, Mr Clutch Auto Centre, the minarets of the mosque sticking out above the shops, the Ariana Business Centre, men with keffiyehs round their necks and old women in saris. This was Shohba's world, so much more varied and colourful than his, a community, and yet to him, an outsider, it felt desolate. A consequence of colonialism and his forefathers' drive for wealth. What was he doing here?

And then he remembered that clear, dark look in her eyes, the chariness and the intelligence.

He had initiated a chain of events. He had to go on, whatever the cost.



After the funeral Louise had gone back to London. She had forced herself to face up to the growing strains in her relationship. Of late, some awkward truths were coming out and she, in particular, was not prepared to paper over the cracks. When they talked openly, the intimacy was intense and magical, the frictions disappeared, but when the moment passed the chinks became obvious, and they felt themselves drawn towards a final descent. The passions they had for each other were volatile and exciting but they were unable to bring them together into a form of love which would survive a lessening of intensity. Both rejected civil partnership and marriage as something for older people and decidedly unromantic.

Mia was looking at her longingly. She wanted her, wanted her in her entirety, body and soul, and yet Louise was holding back. She sensed her lover's coldness and her heart sank.

"They dispatched him very quickly. It was so mechanical," said Louise.

A long, long silence.

Mia sensed her thoughts, the threat they contained, and tried to rally her.

“Don’t you realise that without you I am incomplete, unable to function?”

“Yes, I do. And it frightens me.”

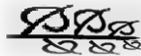
More and more, Louise wanted to be alone. Why couldn’t she live like Emily, give herself up to passing passions, and then go back and be alone.

“Frightens you! Why? Are you scared of love?” she mocked.

“No, but we are losing something. Balance, I think,” Louise replied.

“Balance!” sneered Mia. “But it’s you. Simply that. You. You’ve changed. You’ve forgotten how to give yourself, that’s all.”

And Louise wondered whether there wasn’t some truth in that.



The cold wind hurled itself against all those on the street, tearing through Rupert’s winter coat. His scarf waved and tickled his frozen cheeks – how could such a silly thing keep your neck warm! – and he had to hold on to his cap to stop it taking off into the traffic.

The sky was an ambiguous grey. Indifferent.

Ah! There she is. He opened the door of the café, was met by a luxurious blast of warm air and nearly fainted.

Their first meeting was awkward and decorous. Both had been nervous of the arrangement and were shy. Rupert had kept telling himself he was a fool, and at his age after years of conformity and constancy, wondered what was he doing. Shobha kicked herself for agreeing to meet a non-Asian in this kind of way. Perhaps because he was so much older and felt sorry for him. All the same, why do it? In every way it could be dangerous. But because she'd said she would, she did.

“Why did you want to meet?” she asked, staring into her coffee.

“Because... I don’t know. I like you,” he said.

“Are you married?”

He gave a short laugh, and felt himself reddening. “No. No. No, I was once. Until recently. I got divorced last year.” He felt the fool. Something was corroding inside.

“Children?”

“Yes, three, but they’re grown up and left home.”

Silence. His stomach tightened. The wire was high and he had no head for heights.

“I still don’t see...”

“I just wanted a chat, that’s all,” he interrupted, relieved. “That’s all. Nothing more. I thought you were a nice person. Don’t worry. We can finish our coffee and leave it at that. I’m sorry.” Somewhere at the back of him was the fear of Kate – what if she walked in, what if someone who knew him walked in, what if... And he saw angry eyes tearing through him.

“OK.”

They talked. He asked her about her life, her family, her job.

“Why the Rotarians? Didn’t you say you were with the Rotarians?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, yes... we meet regularly. We believe in world understanding.”

She looked at him quizzically.

“Are you having me on? You *are* with the Rotarians, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes, yes. Sorry. No, I was thinking about what you said about your father.”

“My father?”

“How is always cleaning around the house, and making your mother laugh.”

She looked at her coffee and stirred it a few times.

“You said you were an accountant. Tell me about your children.”

And he gave her an edited, reshaped account of his family. Louise had been going out with an older man, Jessica was married to a Frenchman, Samantha was living in Australia, and Kate and he had fought so much that they split up two years ago and got divorced. His pulse raced, hoping desperately to hold on to the details of this account. He had stepped further along the wire and there was no going back.

“The truth is,” he said truthfully, “I’m tired of being an accountant. You try reconciling balance sheets for twenty years and you’d be tired of it too.” He laughed nervously. It was a long time since he’d been that sort of accountant.

“Only twenty years. What did you do before that?”

“Oh, no it’s more than twenty years. I can’t count!” he said, and laughed.

“I’m glad you don’t do my tax returns!”

Throughout the exchange he just about managed to hang on to the stories he'd told her. Only when Kate was mentioned did he realize he must say very little, frightened of his own fear and near to panic with guilt.

"You say you had an unhappy marriage."

"Well, there were good times, of course but oh... I don't really want to talk about it. Can I say... no, I'd better not..."

"What?"

"Well, you're a very nice person."

"Meaning?"

"You're different from other people I know."

"In what way?"

"I'm too embarrassed to say."

What he wanted to say was romantic gush, that she had the softest skin he'd ever seen, that her eyes shone with life and beauty, that her directness had a simplicity and truthfulness he had never known before. True and not true. His presence there was founded on lies. Even his bodily movements were self-conscious and false.

"Are you sure it's not simply because I'm Asian and something exotic for you? Is something wrong? Why are your eyes so wide?"

"Oh, I'm fine." And he tried to relax his strained body poses into something more natural.

"Are you sure? How are you going to spend Christmas?" she asked, and he almost blurted out that his wife was going to spend Christmas with her father, who probably hadn't got long to live, and he was going to a hotel with the children.

"Oh, eh, I'll probably spend it with my mother. She's very sick."

"How old is she?"

"Ninety-seven... You don't celebrate Christmas, do you?"

"No, no... Ninety-seven. That's extraordinary. Is she still at home?"

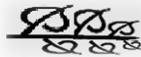
"No, she's in hospital."

"So you're going to be by her bedside. That's very kind of you. A lot of men wouldn't do that."

“Does that make me a bit of a freak?”

“No, no, not at all.”

She looked into his eyes and what she saw was a rather dull late middle-aged, middle-class man, terribly insecure, somebody who seemed completely adrift from himself. Why had she come? It is so silly. It doesn't feel right. And yet when she looked at this very awkward creature across the table, old and laughable, and he asked her whether he could meet again the following week, she surprised herself by agreeing.



It was as if Arthur's death had drained Charles' life of meaning, and caused a backward rush. There was no longer any future, just the past. The past had a stability that was missing in the present. Even those memories which were a mix of truth and wish-fulfilment had some illusory solidity about them. The loving look on Thérèse's face as they bathed their babies, the irresistible seduction of an early girlfriend, the praise he received from work colleagues. Self-delusion, yes, but the memories were comforting, and he had no wish to abandon them.

Recent memories such as his father's last days were less susceptible to fantasy. And other family memories too. The warmth and passivity of his mother. Only towards the end did she confess her dissatisfactions. With the man, not the material comfort he had brought.

Charles could so easily have killed his whole family the other day, and others too. Today was a strain at work and he was glad when it was over. On the train, there was the usual rush to grab a seat, open a laptop, fiddle with a phone, plug in earphones, protect seating space with a bag. As the compartment got stuffier, the under-seat heaters blew out yet more stale, scalding air. He shut his eyes and blanked out what he could.

It all came back to him, the fear in the shelter towards the end of the War, the silence when the Doodlebugs stopped buzzing, his aunt counting out in slow whispers the terrible 15 seconds, finishing the seeming eternity with 'Please, God', and the relief that at least this time it was not to be. Then the early after-war years, shopping with rationing coupons, the morning spoonful of cod-liver oil, the sense finally of security and optimism, the slow accumulation of material possessions, a new conformity, and the growing fears of a nuclear holocaust. It was a stifled stifling world.

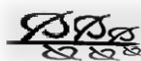
Then teenagers were discovered by the markets, and Elvis, Sartre, and Buñuel gave a liberation of sorts, and the old dying world reacted as though threatened, which it was. His grandmother, arthritic, willing the energy she'd always had, finding it harder to cope, his grandfather, crippled post-gangrene, always calm and strong, a man of few words, holding on to the real, at the edges, surrounded and assaulted by what he called 'women's twitter', and the restless activity of his young grandchildren. Above all, Charles remembered his mother, the sense of suffering, before Kate and Emily were born, and how he'd felt her feelings *with* her.

In the fifties, the memory of the War was pervasive. War films were popular and glamourised reality in favour of the victors. Now in a new century, the War counted for very little, just routine obsessive boasts through the media, largely sentimental, distortions, and its expropriation by white nationalists. Charles was torn between wanting to relive those days in his imagination and wanting to drive them into oblivion.

From far off, the sound of the doors closing, and relief as the train jerked out of the station.

The techie-type sitting next to him was flicking through *The Metro* and Charles caught sight of a photo collage of old-time music hall comedians in an article about some east-end theatre closing. There they were: the cheeky chappie 'It's Mary from the Dairy' Max Millar (squeals from the audience), Cheerful Charlie Chester – 'This is Cheerful Charlie your Chin-up Boy Chester!', Arthur 'Busy, Busy Bee' Askey – 'Hello Playmates' – and Max Wall, the 'talent to amuse', soaked in sadness, whose parodies of our pretensions he remembered seeing in the '70s, that lonely, enduring old man.

The glamour of the past, all things good and nourishing. No, they weren't – and he felt the pains and passions of then as if they were real now. The confused longings, the unfocused anger, the shallow intellectual conceits, the failed loves and jealousies. Catching sight of his reflection in the window, this was the face of his past made now. Faint, disconsolate, drained of animation, a look into his soul. At that point the train plunged explosively into a tunnel, phone users lost connection, and Charles floated into sleep.



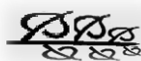
A few days after the funeral Samantha was looking out of the office window trying to imagine a time when Covent Garden had been London's great flower, fruit and veg

market. On the surface, her job in the company wasn't boring – each day there was something different, something to learn. Organising the intranet, preparing internal newsletters on company policies, keeping at bay the warring factions in the company – all these she did with energy and humour. Challenging, and absorbing in their own way, but not fulfilling. At the end of the day, she would ask herself, what have I done for life on earth, and the answer came back, 'well, nothing really', other than help make her company richer, give her a good income, a nice little flat, good food to eat, and make possible some fun times with her boyfriend, Tom.

So what was it? Why wasn't she satisfied? She enjoyed the buzzy social life of the capital with its air of risk, and even its grubby, chaotic public life – everyone preoccupied, in a hurry, blank, a bit mad, rude, indifferent, not really there. But her days seemed to be closing in, every time more of the same. She had always been someone in a hurry, wanting to go to one more step, to go further, but now she asked herself, to where, to do what?

And then there was her family. Things seemed to be unravelling. Mum and Dad were tense and rarely spoke to each other, directly. They weren't the same couple she remembered as a child. Mum, determined to bring up the children as best she could, with energy and direction, and at the same time further her career. Dad, much duller, but kind, and thoroughly dependable, with a slight romantic streak that she loved. There was happiness in those days, and she remembered her childhood with affection. As for Jessica, they were growing further apart, Jessica growing more into herself, and more resentful. If the family was breaking up, she didn't want to be there, she didn't want to witness it, she didn't want to be part of it.

Looking out across the piazza and the glass roofs and beyond, Samantha made the decision that she must break the mould and leave London, leave the country even, not just for its own sake but to be part of somewhere else, somewhere far away. She wasn't sure that it would be that different but it would be different enough for now. She would look for work with a higher purpose, to help save the natural world perhaps. In the evening she would break the news to Tom, and trusting in his compliant nature, they would go.



Meanwhile, Pierre had gone back to university, but instead of his usual quiet nonchalance, punctuated by flashes of high spiritedness, he had become unsettled

and gloomy. Charles had seemed completely unhinged by Arthur's death, even though they had never been that close. In fact, hadn't Charles spent most of his life resenting his father? Pierre had tried to speak to his mother about it but she seemed as confused as he was.

Pierre loved having a French mother – it made him different from the others. It gave him a sense of superiority and the liberty to be critical of the English, their crude behaviour and their anti-intellectualism. But with difference came alienation, and he persuaded himself he only ever really felt at home in France, even though he'd probably never spent more than nine months there in total. At the same time, he had an English father, had lived all his life in England, and was in many ways so very English, asserting the joys of a 'full-English' over the dubious pleasures of sweetbreads, brains and horsemeat. He loved the idea of passionate debate and intense romantic passions, yet he was as buttoned up as an old-style Englishman. He loved their love of culture, hated the trivial 'arts' of the English, but spent hours staring at vacuous TV game-shows claiming them to be, with self-conscious irony, the soul of the nation.

"How's Dad?" he asked his mother as he raced along Clifton Boulevard, one hand on the handlebars, the other on his phone. "Sorry, I didn't catch that."

"It's nothing. Look, can we talk about that later," he heard his mother say.

"OK. I've got a lecture in five minutes," and hung up.

"Locke's belief in the consciousness..." He'd done all this in his first year and at 'AS-Level'. Why do they treat us as useless numbskulls?

That note in his mother's voice came back to him. He felt trapped in the stuffy hall with the droning voice sucking the life out of him. He had to get out, but all he could do was wait until it was over, in agony.

"What's up, mum?" he said, finding a quiet corner in a corridor.

And she told him that she hadn't seen his father for two days, and he hasn't phoned. She wanted to know if he'd been in touch.

"No. Listen. I'm coming home."

"No, no, no, you mustn't. It'll sort itself out."

"What if there's 'someone else'?" Thérèse laughed and thought not, how dramatic of the boy – she would have sensed it if there was. Pierre was relieved and, even

though he would have been furious with his father, self-righteously, he was at the same time just a little disappointed.

“Have you phoned the police?”

“No, no, I’m sure...”

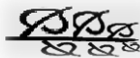
“I’m coming home.”

“No, please, no. He’ll turn up.”

“What if he’s in a ditch, given the way he drives.”

“No, the car’s here. Don’t do anything until I call work. Please. After all, they would phone here if they were worried. So either he’s there or he phoned through an apology. He must be OK...”

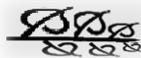
“Some OK,” Pierre muttered sardonically.



Kate was suggesting to the marketing director that they try out the idea on secondary schools in the Polish market, and the two authors were waiting for a response. The brief they’d been given was skimpy and confused and they’d come up with a new idea Kate thought was ‘off the wall’, but they were experienced authors and sometimes breaking the mould can work spectacularly. Kate’s drive had pushed her close to the top, but today Kate wasn’t quite her usual controlled and focused self. She had noticed the MD’s five-month pregnancy bump and was drifting off into memories of her own pregnancy with Louise. She and Rupert had been fairly happy then, though they’d had next to no money. Or even because. Rupert had found it difficult to get a good job. She was copy editing for a small publisher on a part-time, short-term basis, and they had taken on a huge mortgage.

But they hadn’t been *that* happy as a couple and Kate was never just the career-obsessed woman her brother and sister seemed to think she was. The desire to have and bring up children was stronger. If anything had threatened her childrearing, she would have been prepared to give up her job. Rupert played his part, earning money here and there, helping out around the house. Later their careers took over, the children learnt to look after themselves, and Rupert spent more time on the golf course. She craved extra power and responsibility and was duly rewarded with regular promotion, regardless of the cost to her marriage. Rupert was a working husband and

she supported him because it was the right thing to do, and she would expect him to support her, as a working wife and mother, because it was the right thing for him to do. Off-duty they did do things together – concerts, weekends abroad – but they were only important to her as relaxation. Rupert was part of a unit that made it possible for her to fulfil her working and maternal selves but she rarely felt she loved him for himself. Nevertheless, she was intensely protective of their stability. If there was any hint that Rupert might threaten it, she would become fierce. And thus her anxiety now, as the Marketing Manager droned on, and she remembered Rupert’s behaviour at the wake.

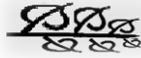


Charles had woken at his station as the train jolted to a halt and he felt movement all around him. He watched a blur of bodies passing the window. Then ones and twos trying to get on – an old Japanese lady trying very hard to pull her suitcase through the door, a City-type balancing precariously a coffee and a briefcase while jabbering into a phone – when there, a face, at the end of the platform, looking vacantly, he knew it instantly, it was her, it was Jane... Jane Parks, the girl at school, no it couldn’t be, it was over fifty years ago, but it was, it was her, someone who had haunted his early years, it was something about her naturally suntanned skin, her sensuality, the sensuous curves, no, it can’t be, she’d be old and fat, and nothing like that, but it is, I know it is. She had gone off with a bohemian who rode a Vespa, read Sartre and played jazz piano, and how he’d envied him. Without thinking he threw himself off the train just as the doors were closing. Oh no, I’ve forgotten my briefcase and laptop, what have I done. Frantically, he waved at the driver who thought he’d just missed his train and in a moment of relenting kindness opened the doors, only to shut them behind him, the train starting to pull out, and yes they passed by the face, it is her, the palpitations made him sweat, and he threw himself back in his seat, causing a man in the next seat to look up in embarrassment and look down again just as quickly.

What was he doing? Of course, it couldn’t be her. How stupid! She would be nothing like that now. And even if it was, but it wasn’t, what would it matter? I’ve gone mad. Fifty years or more is a lifetime away. Why had he even thought of her? And then he remembered that before he’d woken up that morning, he’d been dreaming of his schooldays, of the other boys, the fifties coffee bar conversations, of the older intellectuals, philosophy, the jazz clubs and the girls he desired shyly, gauchely,

discovering the sex within himself. All were unattainable, everyone else was so experienced. So that was it – another pull back to the past.

At the next station, in a dream, he got off, went over the bridge and stood waiting for a train to take him back.



They had met on Saturday morning in the same café. They shook hands and sat down.

The sky outside was robin-egg blue. Shoba asked about his mother and he said she probably wouldn't live much longer.

"I'm sorry. You must be very worried."

Rupert gave a slight all-in-a-day's work smile, and said nothing. This time he had worked out how the conversation would go. To draw out her sympathy, he said rather too confidently he'd see his mother at Christmas if she were still alive. But he got the tone all wrong and it jarred on Shoba. The callousness wasn't him and he became nervous.

"You must look after your mother," she said coldly and mechanically.

"Oh, I do, all the time."

She looked into his eyes and fancied she saw some clouding over. This wasn't the same person she had met last week. Everything felt unreal. A long silence, until the phone went off in his pocket. Fumbling, he pulled at it and saw Kate's name on the screen and quickly turned it off.

"It's OK, you can answer it. What if it's about your mother?"

"No, no, it's from a friend. He can wait. It won't be urgent."

Shobha began to feel depressed. Whatever was going on, it wasn't right. She made a strained apology and went to the toilet. Rupert took the opportunity to check his voicemail.

What's the matter, Rupert? Where are you? Why did you turn off the phone? Phone me back. I've got to sort out Christmas arrangements with Dad.

He snapped the phone shut as Shobha re-joined him.

"Listen, I've decided," Shobha said resolutely, "I think it's best if we don't meet again."

She restated the obvious, about the age gap, the culture gap. She liked him and felt sorry for him but that was it.

“No, no, you can’t... Why? No, no. It’s stifling in here. Let’s go for a walk. I want to talk. Just for a few minutes, that’s all.”

And busily, fussily he led her out to a little green space opposite, feeling some relief that she was trying to free him from a very dangerous course which he was locked into. She resisted his will but didn’t quite break away from him.

The good weather had brought out whole families, mothers with push chairs, young men in beards and turbans, old coatless women in sarees, all of whom seem to be wearing glasses, and young boys in sweat shirts and trainers. Shobha was tense. She didn’t want to be seen. In silence he guided her aimlessly until he found a quiet bench, surrounded on two sides by a hedge, an overflowing rubbish bin and bottles and cans lying around. The combination of nature’s sunshine and man’s detritus felt about right.

“Shobha, I want to tell you the truth, the whole truth...”

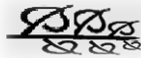
“And nothing but the truth.”

“Nothing but.”

“I haven’t been truthful...” and Shobha felt her spirit sink. She knew, deep inside she knew. He told her everything again, the whole story, this time with everything left in, as it really was, his eyes bright, his spirit flowing in relief and exultation, putting Shoba in a spin, her compassionate nature assaulted by rushes of anger. This middle-class family man, used to measuring and controlling, overwhelmed by frustration and longing, trapped in a marriage with a strong, career-minded woman he was frightened of, and now his children growing away from him. He must have repressed his deeper self for years but he needed to stand up to his wife, not break away from her. It was cowardly. She noted that he never said a word against Kate but made it clear that what love remained flowed more from him to her than her to him. So she, Shoba, represented something different but she had no intention of being the catalyst for a marriage breakup.

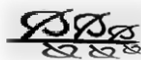
She told him she understood why he had come on to her, and even the need to lie but she wanted nothing to do with a married man, a man who was so much older than her, and a man who comes from such a different background. With that she got up and left. He moved to follow but stopped himself. It was all over.

A young Asian man with a shaved head looked at him suspiciously. Rupert plopped back on to the bench and slumped.



The commuting crowds had thinned, it was darker and colder and there was fog in the air. The face that had stirred his memories was nowhere to be seen. It could only have been someone who looked like her. It couldn't have really been her. It was all in his head. And yet the face that had looked at him all those years ago from the back of the Vespa driven by the Devil himself had had a smile that branded itself on his sensitive nature. Not the deliberate smile of La Gioconda, or the dreamy hippy smile of our modern Botticellis, but a patronizing, mocking smile, malevolent, terrifyingly beautiful, capable of severing its victim from common sense.

Charles resolved to get the next train but the fog was getting thicker, dew was settling on his face, sounds were becoming muffled, and there were no trains going in his direction. The information boards told him nothing. He knew there would be worried messages on his voice mail and he left the phone off. At the moment he couldn't face the consequences of making contact. A short suburban train limped into the platform opposite and he rushed to catch it without knowing where it was going, or caring.



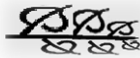
Kate was looking into the dark, her back rigid against Rupert's presence, while Rupert slept fitfully, breathing out a slight soft whistle, shaking himself, shifting position, restlessly. She was convinced that this man, the father of her children, this kind, weak man, who she'd given her whole life to and who in return had provided her with dependability and the freedom to make something of herself in the world – a boring accountant and a golfer, for God's sake – this man was now, she was sure, after all these years, how could it be otherwise, was mixed up with someone else, and she couldn't be quite sure what to do, other than, sometime, to have it out with him, once and for all. That nonsense at the wake. Unforgiveable. She needed to check who he'd been phoning, but how? No, it was all too undignified. If Rupert left her, how would she cope?

Outside, the wind was spiralling around the trees, knocking into fences, forcing the gate, pushing over an empty dustbin, rolling it across the patio.

And her brother, he'd also gone funny. Perhaps he'd become all religious. Which made her snort. Perhaps that snotty, stuck up French woman, who she'd never warmed to once, ever, had got hold of him, turned him. Either that, or he was having it off behind her back, an alternative she much preferred. No, she didn't mean that, or did she?

Rupert, still restless, was dreaming he'd lost his phone. The last time he'd called she didn't even answer, not even to scream at him as she had before. He was beyond the pale, not even a pest. Someone who might have to be reported. Now the phone was at the bottom of the bath, utterly ruined, then at the bottom of a lake, with Shobha standing at the edge laughing, and, as he put his arms in, huge eels circled and bound them, tight. It was so dark he panicked – the bloody thing might be lost forever. But some unconscious mechanism forced his eyes open and he gathered the thought, slowly, that, after all, he had only been dreaming.

There he was staring one way, guilty and frustrated, there Kate staring the other, confused and vindictive.



When Charles didn't appear for dinner, Thérèse wasn't surprised. At breakfast she had been tetchy, annoyed at Charles' increasingly abstract air, which had worsened after Pierre and David had gone back to university. Occasionally, she would throw a fierce look at him, which he pretended not to notice, and he would throw out a gruff question, as though he didn't want to own the question and didn't want *her* to own the reply. 'Is my blue shirt ironed?' He was half-conscious that he was humiliating her, making her feel like someone who simply 'does'. He hated himself but couldn't stop.

He had a whole world inside him that she knew nothing about, and she couldn't bear it. "We must talk," she declared, as he made for the door.

He said nothing, just busied himself, putting things in his briefcase, then disappeared. Nothing. The first time he'd ever done that. Even when they'd rowed, he'd always managed a curt goodbye, through gritted teeth. But this was different. What was it? Arthur's death seemed to set off something. She wandered into the sitting room and looked at herself in the mirror. What she saw was very old, heavy, almost tatty, a failed bourgeois. She shut her eyes, flopped onto the sofa, and curled up in the foetal position.

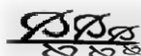
The rest of the day was spent dreading the moment when Charles would walk through the door. She frittered away the time, pottering in the kitchen, the garden, without energy, sleeping, making a fire, putting a few things together for dinner, and brooding. She always worried that her life was less than it should be. Too materialistic, even though she was the one who upheld its ways meticulously. She now regretted not doing what Kate had done and worked throughout the years of child rearing, settling instead for the role of housewife, giving up a career in journalism, and committing herself to bringing up the children. Charles had always supported her in this, thought it right, but she knew Kate had despised her for it, always. And where had it got her? When the children left home, it was as though they had carried away all the love with them, leaving behind a marriage not just without the feelings of love but of love itself.

She gazed out of the window, abstractedly. There were signs of an early spring. Snowdrops under the oak tree, daffodils shooting their stems up through the hard soil. But it was still cold, and wisps of fog had hung around all day.

When 6.30 came, she tensed herself for Charles' arrival. When there was no sound of a key in the lock she'd assumed the fog had made the trains late, or perhaps after this morning, the tension of it, he'd gone to pub with the others. But he usually phones, and this time he hadn't. What does it mean? Not just that he was somewhere else, inside himself, but also that he was somehow against *her* and it was *that* she didn't understand. Why won't he talk?

7.30 came and went. And then 8.30. And no phone call. What little colour and energy she had faded away. She could do no more than sit and look into the fire, and pray.

"Oh, please, God, heal our differences, bring back the unity of our family. Look after my husband wherever he is, don't let him come to any harm. I love him as I could any mortal man, the father of our children. If he's lost, help him find his way. If he has erred into sin, help him find the right path again. You know he is a good man. He's not been your faithful servant but you have eyes to see the goodness in any man. Help him, dear Lord, help him."



This train terminates here. Please remember to take all your belongings with you. When Charles woke, he realized he'd ended up at the coast. He remembered this place. He wandered out of the station and drifted towards the sea. It was too late

now to phone. Let her think he was upset and was staying with a friend. But what if she thinks the worst. That he's left her. He'd phone her in the morning, definitely. In the meantime the cold was getting into him and he needed somewhere to stay. He remembered a small hotel he'd been to before, a long time ago.

"I'm sorry. I missed my train. I was wondering if you had a room for the night."

The young woman at the desk continued to look at the screen.

"A minute," came the disembodied voice, in a foreign accent.

Charles was thinking that he must have looked an odd dishevelled sight. He recalled the time he'd been here before. Salomeya, that was her name. When they were at university, one weekend away together, they had come here. Salomeya, whose Jewish Lithuanian parents had come to England in the thirties.

"Fill this, please."

The receptionist pushed a form in his direction without looking up.

The foyer had looked nothing like this then. It had seemed so homely. He remembered the woman who ran it looking suspiciously at them when they filled in the register. Not married, I see, and wondered whether she ought to refuse them.

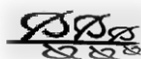
"Why you are filling this? This is the place I write," said the receptionist irritably.

"Oh, sorry."

He had been totally in the thrall of her Jewishness, her sophisticated way of dressing, her artiness and her air of detachment. She wasn't really that bright. She laughed indulgently at his pretentious statements on art, which were meant to impress, and for a time allowed him into her bed. Everything was about allowing him, without really wanting him. He remembered his time with her as torture, laced with the romance of adventure.

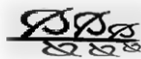
"Room 14, top floor. Breakfast 8 to 10."

He tramped up the stairs, wondering what he was doing here, what he had done. Only this morning he had left home and gone to work as normal, perhaps not quite as normal but he had gone to work.



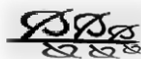
David was still in bed, nursing a hangover, with one half-dead eye looking out at the middle of a room with both irritation and complacent amusement, when the phone rang. Shit. The sound was coming from somewhere within a bundle of leather jacket, jeans, dirty underpants, scarves, a huge French dictionary, a couple of French novels, and a laptop. Forcing himself out of bed, he stepped on his iPad, knocked over an ashtray, pushed aside some old movie magazines, kicked away an empty deodorant spray, and hurt his foot on a set of weights. He dug into the jumbled mass, standing on a half-finished essay, and rescued the phone from the pocket of his jeans.

“Oh, hi. If I’d known it was you I wouldn’t have bothered.... He, what?!.... Oh, Gawd... Silly bugger, what’s he up to?... Is Mum all right?... OK, I’ll come with you.”



Louise phoned her mother at work to tell her that she and Mia had split, but it was OK and not to worry. Kate resisted asking whether it was by mutual agreement. She knew the answer. Between her daughter’s sobs she uttered a few consoling words and urged her to come home.

Kate put the phone back slowly, softly and abstractly. Through the office window she saw darkness soaking into the trees and covering the cars in the car park. Her own spirits took a further dive. What does it all mean? She stared blankly at the proposal, looked around at the bright young editors beavering away, and felt very old. She thought of Louise, of what she must be feeling. At this distance, she could feel for Rupert. Something is wrong. Perhaps she hadn’t given enough of herself to him, thinking her worldly capabilities would be enough for the two of them. Perhaps at the root of it all was a certain contempt, which held her back from him. She knew she had to confront him, but when? With a start, she realized she was muttering, as though her attention were in two different places. “Poor Louise. Poor Louise.”



Jessica was sitting in a café waiting for Samantha, trying not to get annoyed with her. A young mother was struggling to keep her niggling toddler in its pushchair, a Japanese-looking student was sending some email, and an assistant was steam-heating milk. Samantha waltzed in.

“You’re late,” snaps Jessica.

Samantha got a coffee and told her why she'd called. She'd seen their father last night and he admitted that he had been 'seeing someone' but he swore there had been no affair. An Asian woman apparently. Jessica sat there with her mouth open. An Asian woman? Her father? He'd told her there had been tension between him and their mother – well, we know that – but this woman wasn't the cause.

"How banal. Do you believe him?" Jessica snorted. "About there not being an affair?" It all felt rather tawdry and petty, worse than the magazine tittle-tattle she was familiar with because it was for real. "Does Louise know?"

They wondered whether they shouldn't phone home. They didn't want to cause a row, but they didn't think it right that they should know and their mother didn't. But why had he told them before he'd told her? Perhaps he really wanted them to come out with it because he was too frightened to do it himself. She could be very, very scary when she got into one of her moods. But after a while they got bored with this subject. After all, what did they know?

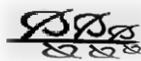
Jessica asked about how Samantha's plans for moving abroad were coming along, trying to keep sarcasm out of her voice.

"Fine. Tom's had some encouraging news about a job," she replied coldly. "What are you up to?" Jessica said she had started a course in dressmaking.

"What's wrong with that?" she retorted when she saw the look on Samantha's face.

Samantha turned to look at the grizzly toddler, writhing to get out of the pushchair as his mother chose some cakes.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."



Charles had also slept in a foetal position all night and woke up with a headache, feeling that everything was unreal. He looked around the dingy room, at the old fashioned trouser press, the tiddly screen jutting out on a wall pivot, at the tiny desk. Was this really the place that he had once associated with yearning and daring? The radiators had pumped out far too much heat all night. Turning the knobs in either direction made no difference, and the window would only open a fraction. Staggering into the bathroom, he tried to steady himself on the towel rail and cursed when he scalded himself. The kettle was part of a built-in tea-tray in the wardrobe and he couldn't find a socket. He remembered he hadn't eaten the night before. He was

starving. Looking at the time, he threw on some clothes and rushed down to the breakfast room, not bothering to shave. The waiter had started to gather up the unused plates and could hardly hide his annoyance when he saw Charles.

“Sorry, sorry. I overslept.”

“Tea or coffee,” spat the waiter, as deadpan as he could.

“Eh. Coffee.”

“The buffet’s over there. What would you like from the kitchen?”

“A full English, please,” which sent the waiter hurtling through the swing doors in undisguised rage.

Charles was determined to finish his breakfast down to the last piece of toast, the last little plastic tub of marmalade, in his own time. The sight of the waiter standing by the door, in apoplectic silence, made him slow down even more.

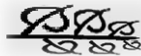
On his way back to his room he stopped at reception and told them he’d like to stay another night. He didn’t know why, but knew that until he had sorted something out within himself, he’d best stay put.

The sea and sky were grey and the wind bitter. Apart from an ear-phoned jogger, a cyclist doing wheelies, a burly woman pulling at a bunch of dogs, an old man combing the beach with a metal detector, the promenade and beach were deserted. The entrance to the pier was bolted and some of its buildings rotten and boarded up. Many of the Victorian sea view hotels and guest houses were closed or empty, the paint coming away from their facades. It seemed as if all the pleasure that this resort had once given was now denied to visitors. And yet the atmosphere suited Charles’ mood. He leant on the railings and stared out at an angry sea thrashing the beach and threatening destruction. You always had to look at it, whatever its moods, even when it was sleeping. Breathing gently. No-one sits with their backs to it.

And yet isn’t that what he was doing with his life? He imagined what his father’s reaction would have been. He knew that skipping work without explanation and not talking to his family could destroy everything. For a moment the thought of clearing away the past gave him a feeling of elation but it evaporated when he imagined everyone’s reaction. Thérèse might have thought he’d left her. Others might think something awful had happened to him. They all knew he had been affected by his father’s death. Perhaps he would be forgiven if he just turned up. He hated the

thought of his family suffering, fearful, not knowing anything, but he also knew he wasn't ready to pick up the pieces and reunite with them. He fumbled for his phone, but remembered there would be frantic voice messages and texts. He couldn't face them. Cursing his own weakness, he set off along the front towards the town. The hotels were getting grander, the restaurants more chic. At a swanky gym, ghost-like figures were expending energy on their machines, wrapped within themselves.

It was that world, our world, the unreal world, that he wanted to turn his back on. He hated the talk. Everything non-practical was gossip or figments of the social and political world, media talk. Why could we not say the deeper things to each other? He had been a part of this waste land all his life and he'd had enough. He stopped, turned, and walked back in the other direction, away from the town, back towards the decaying part, along the seafront.



“We need to talk.”

Rupert caught Kate's stare across the breakfast table, started, and looked down into his coffee.

“Do you think Jessica wouldn't say anything to me? But I guessed anyway.”

In the silence his passivity hardened. He didn't know what to say. What if he contradicted Jessica? He mumbled something about nothing happened, it was a casual friendship that went nowhere. Kate, up for the challenge, assumed he'd wanted it to go somewhere.

“.... so she turned you down,” she spat, exchanging sarcasm for a dagger.

He didn't contradict her. She wanted to know his 'plans' (the sarcasm returning), and he said he had none, to which he knew her response before she made it.

“And you expect everything to carry on as normal?”

His frame seemed to shrink before her eyes.

“And what if she'd accepted you?”

He could do nothing but take this assault.

“Whether you had anything physical with her,” said Kate using the decorous phrase to sneer at him, “is neither here nor there. The intention was there.”

Rupert denied that angrily, some stature returning.

“You expect me to believe that a stupid old man like you going after a younger girl and there’s nothing there.”

She flung open some drawers in search of a cigarette. She hadn’t smoked for over a year but she needed one – badly. Rupert relaxed momentarily.

Kate sat down and inhaled deeply.

“So she was some kind of intellectual, was she?” Kate’s sneering was now getting imperious. “You’re disgusting.”

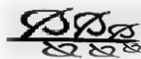
Kate would frighten anyone in this mood. She had right on her side, she knew your weaknesses, and she attacked you ruthlessly.

Rupert wanted to say something about his need for warmth but he knew how Kate would tear into that. After all, what does he give her? He could see that her ego was now puffed up in self-righteousness and no excuses would calm her, so he simply apologised. “You’re only sorry because you didn’t get your way with her.” The anger rose in him but he could say no more. Kate looked at this weak man, her husband, the supreme organiser of things behind the scenes, with contempt and frustration, but all the same she was ashamed at her ferocity.

“You’re a fool,” she said more gently.

He wanted to tell her everything as it really happened, all of it, as open as they once were each other, years ago, but he knew it could never be. Calmly, she told him he must sleep in another bed for the time being. She had to get ready for work. “We’ll talk about where we go from here but not now.” Being in control gave her some satisfaction. She could choose whether to make him suffer or lessen his pain.

Rupert, slumped forward, decided he’d only get himself together after Kate had left. He’d be late for once.

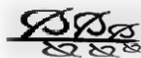


The sea held Charles in its grip for a while until indifference took over. Finally, he wanted no more to do with its grey emptiness and its suggestion of annihilation. He needed colour, water that he could drink, and green that promised food. The winter left-overs of the manicured civic gardens were so dreary. There must be somewhere

at this barren time of the year. The relentless, squawking seagulls mocked him as they squabbled and scavenged.

Charles turned away from the sea and walked up a narrow chalky path, through gorse bushes, towards common land higher up. The path was stony, and several times, trudging along determinedly, he twisted his foot, as the heathland became more barren. Occasionally, out of breath, he would pause and look around. A scattering of sheep nibbling away at tufts of grass, the sea now low down and smoothed out, as if a backdrop. A blue wash was emerging from behind the grey of the sky and some warm sunshine was chasing shade from the land. Clouds, more purely white were over the sea, which was now bluish, as sunlight reflected over its surface. His heart lifted.

Once at the top of the hill he looked over at a very different landscape, a scene of rolling, rural England as it has been for centuries. Down in the valley, a small cluster of rooftops and, surrounded by trees, a Norman church, modestly, snugly nesting. At his feet the gorse was in flower but lower down he noticed early snowdrops and heard the sound of a woodlark. It must be nesting about now, happiness spread through him at the thought, and running down, he nearly toppled over in delight. Altogether greener everywhere, he found himself confronted by a row of yew trees shielding the small church and its graveyard, overgrown and untended. The sun had gone in and there were drops of rain. He threw himself on to a grassy bank and sunk his head between his knees. What have I done? Oh, my beautiful family, why isn't this moment yours as well as mine? And once again he reached for his phone, and, once again, not being able to face what he knew what he would be greeted with, hesitated. No, I'm not ready, even though the longer he left it, the worse it would be.



Pierre and David couldn't bear their mother's tear-stained face. They wanted to report him missing in case he'd had an accident. He hadn't been into work. Thérèse was convinced he'd left her.

"Left you, and us," said David angrily.

Pierre thought Arthur's death had caused a mid-life crisis and he'd be back.

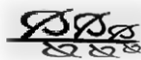
"We'd best admit it. We had been growing apart as a family," he said philosophically.

“Perhaps that’s inevitable once we leave home. I can’t see Dad having another woman but I guess it’s possible.”

His complacent tone annoyed Thérèse. They sat in silence, sipping their tea, unusually the boys too respectful to slurp. This is real life, thought Pierre, as though tasting forbidden fruit. Up to now he had prided himself on their family being different from others. Most of his friends’ mothers no longer lived with their fathers. He had liked having a French mother, and a father who seemed prepared to subordinate his own tastes and fancies to hers, out of love and the unity of the family. He even accompanied her to Mass, to support her. They had always been good parents, disciplined, and yet the atmosphere at home had been vivacious. Disintegration was now staring them in the face, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about it. Mother hadn’t changed. She was the same good mother she had always been. But Pierre had a feeling of late that his dad’s mind was somewhere else. Hadn’t mother hinted at Christmas that a mixed nationality marriage wasn’t necessarily a wonderful thing?

David was devoured by resentment. Mum had made all the compromises. She was the one who had agreed, reluctantly, to live in this country, his country, and now he was treating her like this. If he’s got a problem, why doesn’t he talk to her about it, be a man. Instead he runs away and skulks. He hasn’t even had the good grace to get in touch. Put her mind at rest.

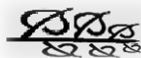
Thérèse felt her heart hardening. She has no real friends in this country. The friends she had when the children were growing up were young mothers embarked on the same adventure, not friends bonded by harmonies of character. They liked her but kept at a distance, hurtfully, even when they were being kind. There was a Parisian detachment about her which they thought was arrogance. Why stay on in this country? What was the point? If Charles wanted to do his English thing, then let him. The boys are pretty well grown up, they’ll be all right. She could move, rent a little flat in Paris, why not?



Charles was leaning on the wicket gate staring at the stone pile, with its slit windows and plain arch. Something about it so ordinary and homely. Where is the aspiring spire, the dart pointing to heaven? And yet something inside him was calmed. The centuries had become a single moment in time, neither old nor modern, and the

Reformation had never happened. Opening the gate, he felt as though he were being lured into some mystery. Courage. He walked along the rubble path, passing under the tympanum to the oak door with its enormous iron handle. Clearly the place had been abandoned by the twenty-first century, a few tatty notices left behind on the board, stained and torn, as if after an apocalypse. The handle turned easily, invitingly. The church was empty but there was some faint presence there that stilled him. He tiptoed past the font, which was dry, through the stalls, under the oak beam roof, towards the altar. For a moment he felt the impulse to kneel, which he had never done in a church before. So strange in a place that had been abandoned by God and His faithful. And yet he still felt something forcing him on to his knees, into humility. But he resisted. Instead he eased himself onto a pew and lowered his head, as a compromise. After a few minutes he imagined a slight breeze, a spirit, and without thinking walked up to the altar and fell to his knees, muttering. I have been shut up in myself only, I have left my family in a state of anxiety. But there was no answer. In his own way he was asking for forgiveness, but why here, why not ask *them* for forgiveness? The breeze was imaginary, a thing of the past, almost imperceptible. He felt foolish. Self-pitying and melodramatic. He had to get out of there. Striding back down the aisle, he stopped and shuddered. All the same, he loved the lack of pretension of the place and its quiet absorbed divinity. Yes, divinity was there, faintly, even now. Something English, something that was of his home too. He closed the latch, and stood in the porch, confused.

That evening Pierre received a text: TELL MUM NOT TO WORRY. I'M OK. WILL EXPLAIN. WILL BE IN TOUCH IN A DAY OR TWO. SORRY.



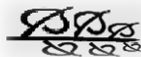
The last thing Kate wanted was to make small talk with the marketing team, so she pretended to sleep. The sound of the plane and the drink and food rituals made it easy to avoid – they, like everyone else, were concentrated on getting the maximum comfort for themselves in this weird, tight space. They didn't seem quite real – they were so young and full of energetic optimism, and Kate felt old. She had been like them once, excited by ambition and the ease with which she was able to realise it. Her instincts had been good, she had known which projects to run with, how to handle authors, how to push her senior managers to agree, and how to get Marketing to put the most successful spin on a project. She was good, and she knew it. Of course, it

hadn't been without its difficulties, determined as she was to fit in child-rearing. As the children grew up, Rupert did most of the ferrying around, which she thought was only right, given what she'd done at the beginning. When Louise first confessed her lesbianism she was taken aback and questioned herself but soon got used to the idea and accepted it.

This was different. For the first time in her life she felt vulnerable and weak, which made her vengeful. She knew the shallow certainties of her work colleagues, behind which lay insecurity and the need to be thought well of. Until now, she had never felt insecure. Rupert was weak but he had always been there, making things happen in the background.

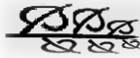
She remembered how she had despised Charles, a successful man in advertising, for losing hold of his life in recent times, seeing him swayed by his wife's religiosity when their father died. She had suspected him of sentimentality. Had he forgotten how they were treated as children and how their mother was treated?

And here was she, fighting back from a loss of confidence. Isn't it common for an ageing and rather dull husband to be tempted by forbidden fruit? Wives have dealt with it by simply throwing the man out, as he deserves. A few years ago she would have sorted it one way or another with her usual energy but age had eaten away at her certainties. Then she might have forced her husband to get rid of a competitor and humbled him into further submission. But at this stage of their lives recovery would be impossible. She had anyway been on the cusp of retirement, looking forward to it and dreading it, and the situation with Rupert had complicated the situation. If they split, she would leave her job, and the question then would be how she was to live the rest of her life.



Thérèse had decided that enough was enough. Not a word to her, just a pathetic text to Pierre. Her relief that he wasn't dead was outweighed by the conviction that he had betrayed her trust. She told the boys that she was going to Paris for a few days, perhaps until the end of term. Her parents were old and would love to see her. She didn't know what Charles was up to, whether there was 'someone else', and right now she couldn't care less, which was more bravado than true, but she was determined. He had to sort himself out. At the moment she didn't want to talk to him.

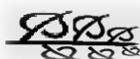
“I don’t blame you,” said David, the anger rising in him.



Jessica was putting on her make up. Marcus, the boyfriend she’d had since her first year at university, was still asleep. Outside, it was dark, but she could just make out the heavy frost in the playground and a scrawny dog having a pee against the railings. Jessica was the buyer for a small specialist clothes shop in a fashionable suburb. She had never really wanted to work much. If only Marcus had more ambition and got a real job, she would have happily kept house for him, had his babies and have a meal waiting for him when he got home. But the men she knew weren’t like that. They almost kept themselves back and let the women do the lot, have the ambition, do the organising, earn the money. Marcus hadn’t had a job for six months and only half-heartedly went around looking for one. Yes, she adored him. When she got home he would drape himself around her neck and all was forgotten. He made her laugh and was very sensitive. But she also resented him. It was all very well for him to be full of fun and energy when she came home, exhausted. If we go out, who’s going to pay? Me, and I’ll be too tired to enjoy it. He says why don’t we go travelling for a month, not thinking how difficult it would be for her to get the time off. And how would we pay for it? The rent on the flat took over half her salary.

At the same time she was tired of her work, unsatisfied, going through the same routines in a fairly lowly job. She loved looking at the new designs, seeing them paraded on the catwalks, and enjoyed the bit of power she had when deciding what to buy, but what she really wanted to do was to make something. If it wasn’t to be babies, then maybe dresses, which is why she had started dressmaking, as a hobby.

The other thing that troubled Jessica was having told her mother about her father’s infatuation. Why had she done it? It was nothing to do with her. Besides, he had talked to Sam, not her. She felt guilty at not being able to keep her mouth shut, feeling like a common gossip, even though it was for her mother’s sake. How young and naive she felt. She adored her father and now she had betrayed him. After all, didn’t he say that ‘nothing had happened’?



“Listen, I need to talk to you. Can I come and see you?”

Charles had gone for a brisk walk around the hotel and was phoning Emily, who had heard nothing of his flight.

“I hardly speak to anyone.”

“It’s nothing, really. Just a bit of... Oh, I’ll get a coach. I’m not far away.”

“Why me?”

“I don’t know. I just want to.”

Charles snapped his phone shut, feeling rather stupid.

He then scuttled back to check out, expecting an argument about having to pay for the extra night. He looked a strange sight, still half in his work clothes, without a tie, slightly dishevelled, a bit mad, self-absorbed, not walking purposefully, so that passers-by instinctively looked askance and gave him room.

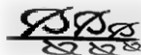
His thoughts were all over the place. At one moment he was wondering what his work colleagues were saying about him. Then he was pondering the mediaeval view that reality can only be found in one’s faith, not in the human consciousness. Thérèse would say that his whole life had been a rebellion against faith, an assertion of ego, and that’s why he feared death.

Damn. He had walked straight into the path of an old lady pushing her shopping trolley and sent the whole lot flying, fruit, packets of biscuits, eggs.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Sorry. I’m so sorry. Let me clear it up. Here. I’ll put it all back. Take this money. No, no, it’s for the eggs. I’m sorry.”

“Young man, do calm down. And look where you’re going in future.”

He got back to the hotel, paid for the extra night and checked out.



“Why don’t you talk to me, Dad?”

There was tightness behind the lightness in Samantha’s voice. Kate was away on a publishing trip and Samantha had come round hoping to encourage a reconciliation. She hated all this falling apart and tried to resist blame, even though it was obviously his fault.

Rupert tried to resist blaming Kate, though when he thought of her lack of everyday affection for him, his spirits fell. He did say that these days Kate seemed not to want

to be alone with him, which he was sorry about. He did *not* say that he never really felt he was his own man – he wasn't quite sure what he meant by that – as she seemed to be her own woman. Did he really want such a thing anyway?

Samantha was losing patience with all the things unsaid, and the muddle that was in his head.

“Mum, is suffering too.”

Rupert wondered what it was in Kate that was suffering. Her ego? Her pride? He knew she was trapped by needs he could not meet but said nothing of this to his daughter. Kate had long ago lost all sexual desire for him, and his desire for her was a kind of enthrallment with something that was no longer there. Emotional fulfilment had only been possible when the children were living at home. When they left, the animating spirit went with them.

Rupert told Samantha he still loved her mother, which sentimentally, as an idea, was true, and Samantha, through tears, urged them not to split.

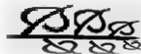
“It's not down to me.”

“It's down to both of you.”

“Oh, youth, so sensible.”

“I can't leave this country happily if you two aren't together. I wouldn't feel free.”

Looking into each other's teary eyes, they started to laugh.



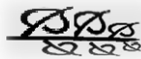
It was a cold day but the bench she found in the little park overlooking the sea was bathed in sunshine. Wrapped up in a heavy cardigan, a long pale green scarf and a little beret, Emily tapped into some inner peace, and sat there motionless.

But troublesome thoughts began to take hold. She stared without looking at a couple of homeless men kicking empty cider bottles round their sleeping bags. What did Charles want? Since the funeral, phone calls with the family were a trial. She could feel their anxiety, as though Arthur was alive inside them, preventing their spirits from settling. She was relieved that the father inside *her* had been appeased but she feared that whatever Charles wanted would make her anxious too. No, he's my brother. If he's in trouble, I must help him. Odd, though, she reflected, that she couldn't see deeply and clearly into her family as she could her closest friends. She wasn't sure

whether it was because she was too much of them or too little. Contact with them was never easy or open.

One of the homeless men returned Emily's distracted gaze but turned away when he realised she wasn't looking at him. The remains of a free newspaper were under her feet. *PAIR WHO FEAR ADOPTED SON WILL KILL THEM*. What a weird world we are living in. So unrelenting this horrible newspaper stuff. She knew the world could be nasty and brutish but you rarely hear of the beautiful things that could be found in it.

A couple passed by, he tattooed and shaven-headed, pulled along by two Rottweilers, she, large in jeans, lip ringed, eating her way through a bag of chips, popping every second one into his mouth. Deep inside Emily there lurked the remnants of a snobbish middleclass sensibility, which made her want to turn away, but the woman looked at her and gave her the sweetest of smiles, which bound them together in common humanity.



Louise felt a tap of her shoulder.

“Thérèse! What are you doing here?”

Louise had just come back from a weekend in Barcelona and Thérèse was on her way to Paris. Around them, skis and golf bags were swinging from shoulders and young children were being shouted at.

“Let's go and have a coffee. You've plenty of time,” suggested Louise.

Thérèse always felt tense in airports. All systems programmed to work exactly, the minimum of staff, one computer failure, chaos, no-one to help. Louise on the other hand shut herself down in public places and did what had to be done.

“How's... sorry... I can't remember her name.”

“Mia. No, we've split up.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry.” They threaded their way through the crowds and Thérèse felt her heart beating faster.

Over coffee, and after an awkward silence, Louise explained she liked travelling on her own, and was thinking of giving relationships a rest for a while. That kind anyway.

“Oh!” said Thérèse, genuinely surprised. “Why?”

“They tire me. Sometimes I think I don’t have anything to give – or if I do, I don’t want to give it. I’m happy on my own.”

Thérèse looked at her, quizzically, and thought she understood.

“You’re so young,” said Thérèse.

“Does that matter?”

Louise saw a vulnerability in Thérèse’s eyes she had never seen before. Awkwardly, she tried to find some common ground.

“I go to Mass from time to time. Of course, I can’t take communion. Or share in the devotion.”

Thérèse was taken aback, and a bit irritated.

“I’ve always been a bit religious in a non-churchy way. I don’t like Anglicans because they’re so sanctimonious. Mass feels more spiritual. I don’t understand all the rituals. They feel a bit strange.”

“Forgive me, Louise, I would have thought you would be an atheist, like your mother.”

“We don’t talk about things like that. You know how she is.”

“It’s sad when you can’t talk to your mother,” said Thérèse, a little guiltily, her irritation growing with Charles’ family.

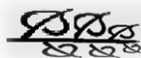
“If only she knew half. Actually, I’d really like to dedicate my life to something. Become a nun, perhaps.”

Thérèse didn’t know how to respond to this. It was so shallow and flippant, and yet she recognised kindness in Louise and knew she was trying to make conversation.

“Anyway, they wouldn’t take lesbians. We’re sinners,” said Louise

Thérèse laughed.

“Listen, Louise, I don’t know if anyone’s told you. Your uncle Charles has disappeared, or left me, I’m not sure which. I’m going to Paris to see my mother.”



“What’s the matter, Cha?”

When Emily got back from shopping, Charles was sitting on the step outside her flat, waiting.

“You look awful.”

“Thanks, sis.” And he followed her up the stairs.

“So what’s going on?”

“Tricky. I don’t know how to say this. I haven’t been back home the last few days.”

“Have you flipped?” she asked with a mock smile.

“I don’t know. It’s not as though we’ve actually rowed. Neither of us has done anything wrong.”

“Are you sure about that? Let’s have some tea. What does Thérèse say?”

“I haven’t spoken to her. She doesn’t know I’m here.”

Emily didn’t know whether to laugh or throw a teacup at him.

“I thought, if you didn’t mind, I could just stay here for a couple of days. Talk things through.”

“What, be your therapist?”

“Go on, mock.”

“Lemon and ginger?”

Emily wore her warm, enigmatic smile, Charles looked drawn and anxious.

As he got up to look out the window, the phone rang.

“Kate, good Lord. What do you want?” said Emily.

Charles looked alarmed and waved a finger from side to side.

“...I don’t often hear from you.”

“No, well I’m always very busy and I never quite know where you are.” Which sounded lame, even to Kate. “Anyway, listen. I think you ought to know. There’s a bit of trouble in the family.”

“Really? Oh, no.” And she blushed at her own insincerity.

“Louise has just phoned to say she bumped into Thérèse at the airport. It seems as if Charles has left her.”

“Oh.”

“Is that all you’ve got to say?”

"I don't know what else there is to say."

"Well, anyway, I thought you ought to know."

"Thanks." And Emily realized that the years of Kate's disapproval had left its mark.

"You don't sound surprised. Have you heard from him?"

A pause, which made Kate suspicious.

"No. What was she doing at the airport?"

"Who? Louise or Thérèse?"

"Thérèse."

And out of the corner of her eye she saw Charles jump up.

"Going to see her parents, I think. I don't really know. Are you sure you haven't heard from him? Look, Emily, I know we haven't always been the closest of sisters but..."

"Oh, Kate, there's no need for that."

"There's something else."

"Oh, no. What now?"

"I don't know how to say this really. Rupert and I are also having problems."

"What?!" And she had to stop herself from laughing.

Charles thought they were still talking about him and hovered nervously. Emily had to wave him away.

"Yes, oh, it's silly really. He developed a juvenile passion for an Indian woman he met. Nothing happened, he says. Things haven't been right for some time."

"Kate, I don't think..."

"No, well. I thought you'd better know from me before you heard from some other gossip in the family."

"I..."

"And then there's my job, but that's another story."

So much in one day. Normally Emily is left alone to get on with her life in her own way and now twice in one day all these supposedly stable relationships – and family, what's more – are dumping their problems on her. What was she to do?

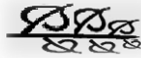
“Maybe we should meet sometime and talk about it,” suggested Kate.

“Well, you know if you’ve ever in this part of the world...”

Again, a look of panic on Charles’ face.

After she’d put down the phone, Emily excused herself and rushed rapidly to the loo, where she sat for a while staring at the back of the door.

“What am I to do?”



Pierre looked at Anne sleeping and thought he saw something of his mother in her. This unsettled him, as only an hour before they had been in the most intimate of embraces.

The first time he caught sight of her was in the lecture hall over two years ago. She was looking quizzically at their lecturer, an earnest young man sitting casually on a table at the front, legs tied in knots, arms tied in knots, tying his sentences in knots, and her beauty and earnestness seemed other-worldly, and her movements bird-like.

His heart overflowed with romantic rhapsody, and after the lecture he approached her gallantly. Within weeks they were lovers. She liked being adored, and she liked him in return, as long as he didn’t force himself on her, which he didn’t. The stronger passion was his. There was always something self-contained in her, which both drew him to her and shut him out.

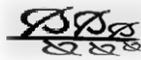
From time to time, she needed reassurance and let him into her bed, giving herself as completely as she knew how. And when he came to her with a soul-fracture, as he had done today, she offered herself as a palliative.

His mind wandered. Poor mother. Poor loving mother, she is so alone. As children, they used to think of her as cold and distant in company. With his friends she seemed formal and stiff. They thought she didn’t approve of their table manners, which was partly true. She was acutely conscious of being a foreigner, and hung on tightly to her sense of differentness. Which Pierre found strange since she had lived in her adopted country longer than she had lived in France, and longer than he had been alive.

He always thought his father understood her and they seemed very close. What had happened? They were ideal parents in most ways. She was strong, intelligent,

encouraging, nearly everything a son could want. She kept the family afloat when Dad was away at work. She never burdened them with her stronger emotions, giving them the freedom to be themselves, although David sometimes said she should 'open up a bit'. Dad was open, funny, and warmly emotional and met their need for affection. A bit of a clown sometimes, so a balance of sorts. So how had it come to this? It's like a bad dream. He had replied to his father's text ('*PLSE PHONE IMMED. ALL VERY WORRIED*'). How could he not have responded? It was a rejection of them as well as their mother.

And when Pierre had tried to phone him, it went straight to voicemail. He sat up in bed and stared at the fading light coming from the sides of the curtains. I must phone Mum when she gets to France. Whereupon Anne opened an eye, and smiled.



Charles wasn't sure how he felt about Thérèse being in Paris. He couldn't blame her. If she had upped and gone, it was his fault. In one way he was relieved that she wasn't isolated at home waiting for him to reappear. On the other hand, he wasn't happy that she had gone back to her parents, and to France. It seemed to widen the gap between them and would make it harder to resolve anything. He could imagine the indignation of his mother-in-law and the coldness of his father-in-law as they heard their daughter's story. It wouldn't help that Thérèse was at a loss herself.

Lying in Emily's spare bed, he realised how weird the situation was. What was he doing here? They'd had a good marriage. They enjoyed the physical presence of each other and had a good family life. There was 'no-one else', although his parents-in-law would assume there was.

They were, in conventional terms, 'happy'. So why allow their relationship to fracture?

What if she had been a career mother, like his sister Kate, and been less dependent on him financially? No, he had always liked and respected that she wanted to be at home to bring up the children. The whole family had benefitted. Besides, it seems that even Kate, who knew everything, and who told everyone how to run their lives, was having problems.

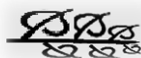
Or was it because she had kept some of herself back, even from him? Nationality fault lines. It's true she'd had to compromise. She had given up a career in Paris for a

domestic home life in a country she had never wanted to live in. Perhaps this uneasy misalignment had become a juxtaposition of aliens when his father died, and he had slid back into an inherited Englishness with such disruptive force that, without intending to and without realising it, he had pushed her away.

In one way it was not really about Thérèse at all. It was more like he was trying to bore through to something deeper in himself, which right now felt like unforgivable self-indulgence. He was glad that it had happened after his father died. Arthur would have denounced him as stupid, morally reprehensible and lacking the male principle of 'sticking it out', as well as gone on about the whole situation being symptomatic of social collapse. And he would have been right.

But in another way, it *was* about Thérèse. Their spirits had become merged over the years and any greater understanding of himself must include empathy for her, and her faith. And yet whenever he stood on the edge of conversion, he found himself pulled back, not by the weedy Anglicanism of his parents but by the recognition that he was part of Christianity's epilogue, where he could only touch its spirit momentarily, though its art. Perhaps it was this failure that had made him withdraw. His wife had faith, he did not. He was just scratching away at the lack, wishing he were different. Spiritually, she was alive, he wasn't. So why not cherish her instead of causing a rift. She wasn't forcing him to convert, and had always accepted him as he was. So why was he willing himself, and their marriage, into extinction?

At this point Charles got out of bed and stood naked at the window, not noticing some workers in the house opposite laughing at him.



“Are you absolutely sure you know what you’re doing?”

Kate was sitting on the black leather sofa in the CEO's office. The CEO, in a smart grey suit and an open neck shirt, came and sat on the sofa next to her.

“Yes, I've thought long and hard about it. I think the time is right.”

“You realise your name's been in the frame for the Divisional Director's job.”

These days this kind of talk depressed her. 'In the frame' – oh, please!

“No, I didn't know. I'm flattered. But it makes no difference. I've been here nearly thirty years. It's too long.”

Having 'heard a whisper' there might be problems at home, the CEO offered her extended leave. She realised this was 'kind', the right thing to do, but she resented this skating on the surface of things, not touching anything she really felt.

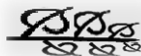
"I think it's just time for a change of direction," she said. The expected mechanisms on both sides were well in control. The CEO did not want to lose someone as 'professional' as Kate, and was irritated that now he was going to have to go through the whole recruitment thing. His crestfallen look was part how he felt, part management manipulative.

"What will you do?"

"I'm not sure yet. I think a few months off. Money's not so much of an issue these days. I'd like to work for an international charity, but not on the management side. I'd like to get my hands dirty."

"It sounds like you're going back to student days."

Kate felt as though she were suffocating. She made her excuses and left.



"You seem to have got it sorted one way or another," said Charles.

Emily looked puzzled. Charles didn't really know what he meant, other than she gave off an air of serenity.

The pebbles they were sitting on, with their backs to the world, were cold and uncomfortable. As the harsh wind came off the sea and travelled inland, it was warmed by the afternoon sun.

"Here we are, your siblings, Kate and I, allegedly successful, while you seem to have no ambition but to live on thin air."

"And to make as small a footprint on this earth as possible. The secret is not to listen too much to others," she laughed.

"You mean we are nothing to you."

"Not at all. I care deeply about you, possibly more than you do for me..."

"That's not fair."

"It's the false voices, the empty voices I try not to listen to."

“They’re everywhere,” said Charles gloomily.

Emily said she tried to keep them out and listen only to the voice inside, but it wasn't easy, as false voices were always trying to make themselves heard.

“But isn’t this all about you? Don’t you get bored with listening to yourself?”

Emily smiled at him. You have to start somewhere and inside is as good a place as any. Besides she tried to do good to others.

They sat in silence.

“Sometimes I think the inner voice is not me anyway,” said Emily.

Charles said nothing.

Then Emily whispered, in a strange voice, as though the words were not really hers that what he had done to Thérèse and the boys was about his ego.

“You’ve got a nerve, Emily. You with no husband to worry about or children to bring up. You’ve never been through it all.”

Charles got up and paced around her, and told her she was a cheeky bloody sister. She found the crunching pebble sound of his steps amusing but instead of mocking him, she gave him the warmest of smiles.

“Dear brother,” she said in a slightly old-fashioned way, but affectionately. “I never asked you to come here. You came because you wanted something from me. Well, what I’ve said is all I’ve got to offer, though you can stay with me as long as you want.”

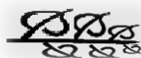
He was exasperated because he had thought Emily would understand.

“I understand that you don’t understand, that you are having a crisis of self. But we’re talking about actions. If you came to me to justify yourself, and seek confirmation that what you are doing is pardonable, get my sympathy and reinforce your self-pity, then no, I can’t do that.”

“You know those are harsh words.”

“Are they? All I am saying is that I can offer you very little. I meant them kindly.”

“Oh, Emily,” and like an impetuous romantic youth flung himself on to the pebbles next to her. Emily smiled and snuggled up next to him.



Louise hardly recognised the voice. It was so cold and detached. All the devotion had gone.

“Listen, Mia, I just wanted to say, let’s have no hard feelings.”

“Sure. No. None. I have none.”

“Can’t we be friends?”

“No, I don’t think so. Besides.”

“Besides what?”

“Like there’s someone else in my life now.”

“Oh,” and, despite herself, Louise felt hurt. “That’s good. Anyone I know?”

Mia said that she was painter, a good one. They had loved each other immediately and were very happy. Louise heard a note of triumph and vengefulness in her words.

Mia hesitated, before blurting out that they planned to marry. Louise couldn’t help but laugh, this was so unreal.

“That’s quick.”

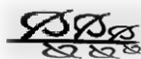
Louise knew that the kind of relationship that Mia had wanted would not have suited her in the long run. Louise was both a loner and socially gregarious. Mia would have resented her need for independence and tried to control her need for company.

Louise sighed. “I’m very happy for you.”

“Do you mean it?” Mia asked, suddenly anxious.

Mia put the phone down and sat on the edge of her bed, musing. For a moment the old feelings of longing for Louise rose and threatened to take possession of her. In time, she muttered to herself, in time.

Louise too was sentimentally recalling their moments of serenity. Mia used to say they were like the couple in that Courbet painting. Louise determined that in future such moments would only come with lovers who would want nothing from her. No family, nothing to perpetuate the race. So be it. A dead end. The world was better off without any more children.



Rupert was sitting in the cold spring sunshine, sipping whisky, looking in spite of his mood, distinguished and fitting. He’d escaped from the office on the phony pretext

of a bad back and tried to take his mind off life's disasters by getting in a round of golf. But it hadn't worked. He found the two he had been playing with incredibly dull, and his mind kept drifting off. They were nice enough, but he could never let on to them about the rough and tumble of his recent history.

Golfers' talk depressed him. Anything 'serious' was a rehash of the clichéd jabbering of the media. His broken personal life had opened up a more serious awareness of things generally, and he recognised for the first time the shallow materialism, the 'conspicuous consumption' of the new leisured class of which he was a part, and how it all fitted into the machinery of modern capitalism. With a jolt, he realised that he had become a Marxist at war with himself, and laughed.

As the light faded, he went back over recent events. The bar inside had emptied, and apart from the odd greeting he was left alone. How come his marriage had fallen apart so quickly? He was not used to events slipping beyond his control. Something must have gone wrong long before, and he had not recognised it.

He remembered a scene in their street a few years ago. An ambulance and a police car were parked in front of a building site, and the police were setting up a cordon. The atmosphere was quietly perturbed, and he sensed repressed excitement. He walked across to get a better look when a policeman told him to keep away. As he turned, he noticed a sheet of tarpaulin, covering what looked like a mound of earth, and two boots sticking out at the end.

His first instinct was to laugh, but checked himself when he realised something dreadful had happened. A neighbour told him that the dead man was the foreman, who only an hour before had been looking at plans and barking orders. Incredible, really. A heart attack. His family and friends won't have been told yet. They'll be assuming it's a normal day at work.

Rupert imagined the shock and pain to come. Once more he felt the fragility of life. How we waste its gifts, when it can so unexpectedly be taken from us, long before 'our time'. Wasn't he, Rupert, like the dead man, someone borne along unconsciously by his routines, never considering the end? As they said in the local paper the following day, the foreman had been a popular man, a good family man, loved by all who knew him.

The whisky was having its effect, melting his cool, separate self, and sentimentalising his feelings. Don't push me away, Kate, it so unnecessary. But the cool, separate self

was still there. He glanced into the nearly empty clubhouse. Where did he truly *belong*? Not here for sure, not with Shobha and her world, and now not even at home.

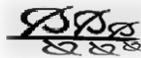
Slowly a four-ball was working itself way up the fairway. How absurd they looked, how pointless that pastime of theirs, and how laughable his pursuit of Shobha had been.

Samantha was getting away from them all, and he did not blame her. How can you live in a country where a million voices sound off and there is no common understanding or belief?

Jessica will be all right once she sorts herself out, but Louise, oh Louise, God knows what she's up to, which girlfriend she's being pursued by now.

With that hard spot in his heart that he took for crystal clarity, he thought his future doomed. With a second whisky, the thoughts blurred into simple cries. What is the point? Why don't I just end it all in some quiet spot?

"Someone got a day off then?" And one of his clients, a beefy, bluff, ex-rugby player, who ran a pretend-posh hotel next to the club, plonked his beer glass on the table, and drew up a chair.



David was staring at his screen. He had made a few half-hearted comments on Twitter and wondered whether he ought not to make a start on his linguistics project. But all interest had gone, even in the French language. Last night, instead of polishing off some wine and going on about French poetry to his housemates, he had spent the evening in bed staring at the ceiling. The others assumed it was just a bad hangover, or he had someone up there, and left him alone. In reality, David was wondering what he could do to prevent his parents from splitting up, for nothing in his imagination could be worse. Which struck him as odd, given his libertine ways, and the ease with which he went in and out of relationships.

But this was different. They were different. He needed them to be loyal to each other. No, he decided, when the day comes that he commits, he won't even indulge in the French practice of keeping a mistress. How dare his father, the man whose easy nature he adored, treat his fragile mother like that. Even if there is no-one else, he should talk to her, help her understand. She was vulnerable, easily hurt, and lost in

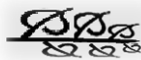
an alien culture. She had now gone back home, and he couldn't blame her. But he did blame his father for giving her no choice.

Poor David, his soul divided between the one and the other, between two parents and two cultures, both of which were at the same time alien and familiar. But it was his father that dismayed him the most.

He saw that that generation, the post Second World War generation, had become clapped out and money-obsessed. His own generation was a weird mix. Responsible and nice, in naïve way, but self-obsessed, and under the control, largely, of the media, both traditional and social. And yet he himself felt differently. Or so he thought. The 1960s may not have been as wonderful for the young as his father's generation believed but they did show that youth can influence the political situation.

The world was in an even bigger mess now. Resources were running out and nature was being destroyed beyond repair. Was it not down to the young to help shift direction? It seemed hopeless but he had to believe it.

And what about mother? Dear mother. His instinct was to get on the train, go to Paris and bring her back. Or failing that, stay by her side in Paris. But he must talk to his father first if there was to be any hope of reuniting them.



Kate opened the front door.

"Oh, Mum, you look tired," said Samantha as she marched in, making straight for the kitchen, as she always does. Kate noticed the sky was grey and without character, and shut the door.

"Get away with you, you daft thing."

"Oh, hi," said Samantha, seeing Jessica at the table, her hands round a hot mug of tea. "Any chance of a cuppa, somebody?"

"Oh, hark at her expecting to be waited upon," Kate rejoindered jovially. How good it was to have the children home again.

The sisters chatted and Kate busied herself making the tea.

"Look," she said. "Thanks for coming, you two, but I wanted to tell you, and I'll tell you straight away."

Samantha's heart sunk immediately, as Kate could see.

"Wait a minute. Don't be impatient."

Dutifully her daughters stayed silent, with Samantha making a mocking zipping gesture across her lips.

"I wanted to tell you first – I've left my job."

"You've what?!" said both girls in unison.

Kate explained that she had been there too long. She'd had enough and it was time to go. For the moment she didn't know what she was going to do. Maybe work for a charity. She wanted to do more in life than just make money for other people. Jessica wondered if she wasn't being too hasty, just because of problems with Dad.

"Have you told him yet?" Samantha whispered

"No. Besides, we have other things to sort out."

Samantha was relieved there had been no split.

The light began to fade. Kate gave Samantha her tea.

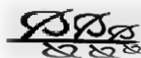
"The other thing I want to say," she began, "is that you are the future. I hope you have children and they learn what it means to be part of a family. Without families living in harmony with other families the human race cannot survive."

Samantha raised her eyebrows with as much irony as she could muster. Why do you think we want you and Dad to stay together?

Kate knew what they were thinking, and searched in the drawers for an old packet of cigarettes – she'd given up over five years ago, but every now and then the craving became too strong.

"I do so want you to have a life you don't regret," said Kate, inhaling deeply. "Louise is different, but she is a good person, kind to others. She'll be all right."

Kate assumed Rupert was at work and did not want the girls to say anything about the job until she had spoken to him. Jessica and Samantha looked at their tea and anticipated the gloom that would descend on the house after his arrival.



Charles had been out walking in the middle of the night and had picked up a chill.

In the morning Emily went off to see some friends while he stayed in bed, snatching scraps of sleep, sweating, throwing off bedclothes, staggering to the loo, drinking from a large bottle of water, and being possessed by dreams.

Images of Thérèse mingled with those of the Virgin Mary. A burial service for two young babies, with the faces of Pierre and David as teenagers. A shaft of sunlight through a hole in a ceiling. Himself on the floor in a feverish spasm ("Your will be done."), himself crashing into furniture, his voice telling him to wake up. "How long, O Lord?"

In his delirium he heard a phone ringing but ignored it. It was Pierre trying to get hold of Emily, wanting to know if she had heard from his father. And then Kate's voice excoriating him for borrowing his wife's gibberish.

From then on, the dream became calmer, and Thérèse, with a slight smile, stood motionless before him, naked. It was the young woman he had met all those years ago, principled and dignified, warm and distant. Then an older Thérèse, also naked, next to the younger self, the mother and home builder of later years, revealing all the beauty of maturity, a beauty his self-obsession had obscured. Slowly the image of the younger Thérèse passed over the older, and started to fade. The whole scene was erotically charged and Charles felt himself losing his will. He slid into a deep sleep. When he awoke, his chill had subsided, and he became conscious of a deep, tranquil desire.

Emily came back. Charles was washed and dressed, ready to go.

"My," she exclaimed. "You look different."

"I've made up my mind. I'm going to see the boys and hope they'll forgive me. Then I'm off to Paris and ask Thérèse to be my wife again."

"My! Where did all that come from?" she laughed.

"I don't know. I prayed in my sleep. And thank you, dearest sister, for being so good to me."

Emily laughed again because he sounded faintly silly, a bit pompous. But she also looked deeply into his eyes. They were clear. He was not used to speaking this way.

"You were right. The problem all along was my ego."

"Yes, dear brother."

"I need to learn to be fully myself without being full of myself."

Emily laughed again. "That sounds neat." Charles, too, laughed.

"Let life flow through us and unite us." Charles tried to sound self-mocking.

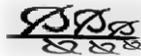
"Amen to that," said Emily, still a bit bemused. "Are you sure this is you speaking?"

As he was about to go, he sensed the odd mixture of Emily's loneliness and self-sufficiency.

"Kate would never understand about me praying."

"That doesn't matter. She has her own ways."

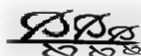
Charles' final image as he left Emily at the door was of her loving smile, which was at the same time ambiguous and half-mocking.



For some time, Rupert sat in his car in the club car park, wondering whether he was legal to drive. Half an hour of hearing his client babble on, and trying to maintain a polite composure, had left him angry. He forgot his momentary desire to put an end to things and remembered what he hated about the place. As a working man, joining in and playing the game was just something he did. Golfers were 'all right', you could josh and gossip, whinge and chatter, lie and boast, express prejudices, sincerely or insincerely held, without fear of contradiction. Wanting to be accepted, he played his part in the general patter. They were all blokey-blokes – women by club convention played with women – but he never really liked them, they all seemed empty, and he held much of himself back. They were merely there, part of the machinery of the place.

But today a deep contempt for that world stirred another self back to life. Why not just walk away from it all?

And then he thought of Kate. Dear Kate. And her coldness and her accusations, which had always so terrified him. His spirits were aroused. He would find somewhere else to live. Why not? Before she left him or she asked him to go. At the moment, in his whisky haze, he didn't care which. He would let events happen.



Thérèse was sitting on the terrace of her parents' flat close to Sacré Coeur in the 9th *arrondissement*. The flat, surrounded by courtyards, was on the first and second

floors and very quiet for its location. Thérèse loved it. She loved the fireplace flanked by huge mahogany bookshelves, the piano between the terrace windows, the lovely, carved oak dresser, the marble statuettes, her mother's knick-knacks, her father's maps. When she was in England the memory of her childhood home nourished her. Her family and national traditions were one and the same. She felt more at one with them than she ever did when she was in Paris. In all the years away, she had tried not to be nostalgic. She had surrendered herself, as best she could, to her new life, her husband and family. But she found it hard, not least because she found the English strange.

It was a relief to her to be back in Paris, without the compromises she would have to make if Charles and the children were there. She smiled ruefully when she remembered how in her teens she had wanted to escape from the place, in particular the snobbery and arrogance of her parents' friends. And yet when she went to live abroad other people saw these characteristics in her, and it disturbed her. The more she kept herself apart to protect herself from their opinions, the more they thought her offhand and 'foreign'.

Her mother had been sympathetic but surprised to hear what was going on. She had always thought of Charles as *un homme de bien*, not one to leave his wife, or be cruel. Whereas a Frenchman might expect to flirt a little, and sometimes a lot more, she saw in Charles something of the Anglo-Saxon puritanism which would make him a good husband. But if another woman was not involved in the current mess, then she could not understand it all.

Charles and Thérèse, her *petite fille*, had always seemed close and they had two fine boys. Her husband of course assumed that there was a *maîtresse* somewhere and Charles was not admitting it.

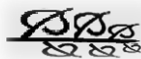
Thérèse did not understand either. She was convinced there was no other woman but it was clear that their past oneness was disintegrating. She couldn't say when or how it had started but once Charles' father had died, she felt him withdrawing from her as quickly as an outgoing tide, and acting peculiarly in all sorts of ways.

Thérèse soaked up the warm spring sunshine, and felt a pleasure she had not known for a long time. It seemed almost as if everything up to now had been a sacrifice, and here was a moment for her. It did not really matter what happened next. This moment had the feeling of eternity about it. Time the destroyer, time the healer.

Rested and blank in her mind, Thérèse was ambling back into the *séjour* to look for her mother, when she caught sight of herself in a large, ornate mirror – the one she

remembered from her childhood. A woman in her middle years, not unattractive, experienced in her mien, a degree of inherited composure, she thought. A true Parisienne. But what was she really? She could see nothing of her years in England in this image.

Nor could she see herself as the mother of her children. Or the wife of her husband. The longer she looked, the more she felt her head spin. She closed her eyes and half imagined an image of herself, thin and pale, swooning, as though the breath of life was draining from her, and what was left was the skin and powdered wig of an old hag. Time seemed to be taking its revenge on her. The images became more bizarre. Flanked at her shoulder were her boys, changing from babies into old men, and, at her feet, the formless corpse of her husband. Oh, please God, no, no. Hearing herself scream, she felt the impact of the floorboards as she fainted, causing her mother to rush in shouting, "*Lucien, Lucien. Vite. Vite.*"



Rupert was not the sort to do anything dramatic, like walk out on his wife without first arranging everything that needed to be arranged, a characteristic Kate found both reassuring and depressing. She wanted a man to be exciting but not one who made dramatic gestures all the time. Passionate, predictable and one she could control when necessary. Someone who would appeal to all sides of her nature. If only he were a bit more imaginative.

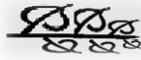
The girls did not want to be there when their dad returned and had gone out for a drink.

Kate sat on in darkness. She understood that Rupert's reckless gesture had been half-hearted. Another man would have dumped his careerist wife and whisked off the 'other woman' regardless. All the same she could not let him get away with it. If it had happened when she was in her prime, she would have dealt with the situation resolutely, and got over it. Punished him, yes, but got over it, and life would have gone on. Now that she was at a crossroads herself, she needed support and he had let her down.

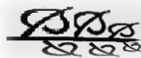
Things could not go back to normal. Part of her felt sorry for him, and she saw some irony in wanting to work for the common good and yet be unforgiving to the man she shared her life with. Was it not the case that while he was pulling away from her, she

was pulling away from him? How far each was to blame for the compulsion in the other she could not begin to speculate.

Such thoughts were beginning to make her feel tired and heavy. She had decided to go off to bed when she heard a car in the drive.

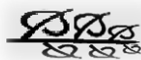


Lulled by the rhythm of the train, calm in his thoughts, Charles watched the northern French countryside pass before his eyes. He knew Thérèse would not forgive him easily and he knew he would not be able to explain his actions in a way she and her parents would understand. If it was only about his father, he could have shared his desolation with her. A crisis of religion, who better than her to share it with? But a crisis of the personality, particularly the ego, that was harder to admit. But now for the first time, as he drifted into sleep, he felt calm and free of the enemy within. He would worry about what to say to her later. He would tell her everything as deeply and truly as he could.



Hand in hand, Kate and Rupert were sitting in the dark. He had sensed her presence when he came in and said nothing. The row never happened, the words never came. She had accepted his gesture of an outstretched hand without a murmur, and squeezed his softly. In the moonlight she was struck by the softness and passivity in his eyes – how it had appealed to her all those years ago – and in turn he felt, for one brief moment, that her face was bathed in a light that took her outside time.

But something had to be said. Kate was torn between inviting him into her bed, because it felt the emotionally logical thing to do, and wanting to talk it all out, which would follow a different kind of logic altogether. She knew the latter path would be without forgiveness and the more likely to lead to a rupture.



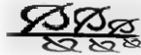
Charles phoned from Gard du Nord. Thérèse's mother answered saying that her daughter was ill in bed and it was better if he didn't call at the moment. He assumed it was an excuse and persisted.

"*Maman*, please tell her I've just arrived in Paris. I must see her to explain everything."

There was a pause while she considered what to do.

"Very well. *Rappele dans une demi-heure.*"

Charles noticed the inevitable coldness in her voice, in defence of her daughter. What was this illness? Was it real or feigned? He started to worry again. What had he done?



"I'll give up my job, too," Rupert was saying.

"You can't do that," replied Kate.

"Why not? If you can, I can."

"Don't be so silly. You're just copying me."

"No, it is to be with you, to be part of you."

Kate said it would not work but she hesitated before confessing that the real reason was that she wanted to spend time on her own, to do things by herself.

"Why?"

"Because. Just because."

"What things?"

But the old Kate was winning and Rupert's heart sank. This was going nowhere. The Kate of a few minutes before, the new-old Kate, the Kate where there were more complicated emotions to talk about, had gone. He was just faced with her decision.

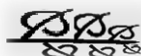
Not that she didn't have emotions. She did. Powerful emotions. Very often. It was just that they came at you at a blast. She would never share them with you, you could only react, and then get steamrolled.

"Are you saying you want to split up?"

Kate sighed deeply and simply shook her head in confusion.

"I don't know," she muttered softly.

Rupert moved his face out of the moonlight.



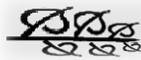
“She’ll see you tomorrow morning. She needs sleep. She’ll meet you at eleven at the café near the *Parc Monceau*. She says you’ll know which one.”

“Is she all right?”

There was silence for a moment.

“That’s not a very sensible question. No, she’s not all right. But her... *maladie*... her *maladie est*...”

Charles heard the imperious anger in her voice, the blame aimed at him. He knew that she wanted to say that the sickness was a sickness of the soul, brought on by him, but couldn’t quite bring herself to say it.

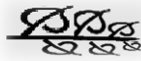


Back to back, neither of them really sleeping. Kate had already been in touch with a charity that did work in Costa Rica, and were looking for someone with management experience to help run an orphanage. Divorce would not be necessary. Rupert could stay on in the house, and keep his job. Samantha and Jessica were doing their own thing. They will have their families. Already, she could feel her confidence back. In her mind she organized Rupert’s life as well as her own. All this tangled emotional stuff didn’t suit her. She needed everything clear and straightforward.

Rupert suffered. Nothing had changed. His emotions were still chaotic, his need for affection was unchanged, and the romantic in him remained unsatisfied. Kate's back was set hard against him, refusing the tenderness he had to offer. He wanted her to be the self of the early days of their marriage, and he both understood and didn’t understand why that was impossible.

In the morning their half-sleep had left them tired and depressed. Kate was less certain now. Was she not just swapping one work situation for another, even though it was ‘doing good’ rather than making money. But she had handed in her notice and that was that. She had better face up to it. And while she was at it, perhaps she ought to hand in her notice to Rupert, make a clean break, be true to herself and become independent, be alone. But that was absurd. She ought to be able to organise it so that there is something left of their marriage. After so many years a collapsed marriage would be a failure, and a black mark against her. She had no excuse. He believed Rupert when he said he never touched the woman. And when she really

thought about it, if she did not want to be alone forever, was there any man who would be more right for her than Rupert? His very plasticity suited her well, enabled her to be exactly what she desired of herself, supremely her own maker, and if only Rupert would admit it, a maker of him too. So the choice was clear. Go it alone, really alone, or make something of what was left of a life with Rupert, and retain a true independence at the bottom of herself, keeping calm and at a distance.



They were sauntering in silence through the park, in the spring sunshine, breathing in the smells. Charles had always liked this park, this Monet park – its chestnut trees, its flowers in bloom, the follies, the statues, and the little waterfall. But after a few tense exchanges – when did you get here, how’s your mother – he realized that any real conversation was down to him. Thérèse was determined to say nothing that mattered.

“I have nothing to declare but my stupidity,” he said.

Thérèse gave a quick half-smile and looked down.

“What can I say?” he added, hoping that it would provoke her into a response.

They walked another few minutes. They came to the little lake and stood and stared, sensing its beauty, without seeing, in silence.

“Forgiven?” he pleaded, looking sideways.

No reply, so they kept walking, saying nothing. He felt tension growing in her. Then a children’s play area, and they stopped. A bench. Just as he was about to sit, tentatively, maybe get her to sit too – she stood rigid in front of him and just stared, anger and contempt shaking her whole body. He panicked.

“It wasn’t you, it wasn’t about you, it wasn’t about you, it was what was wrong with me,” he spluttered.

She flashed back at him and spoke slowly, very, very slowly, spitting out the words.

“I trusted you, and I thought you trusted me. We had no secrets. My love for you was absolute, without condition. And I thought it was the same for you. But you left without a word, on some piece of... of... self-indulgent, self-pitying... no, it wasn’t about me. I don’t know, and I don’t care. You are pathetic. How could you?”

The words and tears were now flowing.

“What do you think you have done to our children? Do you think they can ever treat you the same? I don’t know if there was another woman. I don’t know and I don’t care. The effect is the same. I can no longer trust you.”

Charles sank to his knees. A group of children stopped their game and stared at them, frightened. A father carrying a young baby gave them a wide berth.

“Please forgive me. No, no other woman. Nothing like that. As you say, self-indulgence. I lost my faith in everything, myself, even my love for you. You felt like a stranger, through absolutely no fault of your own. I felt dead, I felt the soul of the world was dead. I needed to believe in life again. Please.”

“Bollocks.”

Involuntarily, he laughed at the Parisian way she said it.

“Please. I learnt something in your absence. I learnt that I was consumed by myself, separated from the world by my ego.”

“Ha!”

And one of the older children who had been playing started to laugh. This mad couple were obviously rehearsing a foreign soap. The children started up their game again and ignored them.

“You’re a fool.”

“Yes, a fool.”

That was too easy.

“I can’t go back to trusting you.”

“Please, my love, try and understand. You have the security of your faith. I’m not like you. I grew up in a materialist family that had no faith, so it’s harder. But I am trying.”

“Oh, do stop. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

But Thérèse’s will was weakening as her anger subsided, and Charles sensed it.

What was all this talk? The simple fact was that he had just disappeared and said nothing. Where was he when she was in despair?

But she had assumed that he had simply lost interest in her as a woman, and Charles's passion, for all its ridiculousness, at least sounded sincere. She'd never heard him talk like this before, and it disturbed her. It made her feel a little mean-spirited and a little ashamed. But she would not admit that to him. Not now.

He got to his feet and hobbled across to the bench, drained, knocking into one of the young girls.

"Oh, *pardon*. Look at my knees," he said to Thérèse, and pointed to two wet patches. She half-smiled.

"You're a fool." But the touch of affection in her voice soothed him.

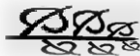
"Don't, please. No. I need to talk to the children. Go back home. I'll think about it. At the moment, I don't know."

"I've never lied to you."

She shut her eyes, turned on her heels and walked purposefully away from him, to find the exit.

"I'll be in touch," she muttered over shoulder, and her accent, suddenly so French, caused a wave of light-hearted love to pass through his body. He remembered the desire he had felt at Emily's.

The children stopped their game, sensing the end of the scene and applauded.



This wasn't her environment. And having to wear a dress as well. Louise was flicking through some magazines fanned out on the glass table and trying to make out what was going on behind the darkened glass. Nervously, she would take off her reading specs, sweep a few strands of hair from her face, and put them on again.

Suddenly the door of the interview room opened, and out walked... her mother.

Louise knew from Jessica that her mother was looking to work for a charity – but this one!

"Louise!" And they burst out laughing at the same time.

"Costa Rica?" asked Kate.

"Costa Rica," replied Louise.

It turned out that Kate had applied for the job of project manager in a children's charity, and Louise had applied for the job of 'comms manager'. They both grinned at the coincidence. Kate explained that it had been a good interview and that they would let her know tomorrow.

"Wouldn't it be funny if we ended up in the same place?"

"I'd like that."

When Louise mentioned her dad, Kate looked down. Louise put her hand affectionately on her mother's arm.

"You and I have lost touch since granddad's funeral. I've heard something about what's going on from my sisters. To be honest, it wasn't a surprise. When we were young, you two were quite different, much closer."

Kate was amazed that Louise had suspected anything. She suddenly seemed so grown-up.

Louise said she had seen Thérèse at the airport recently, and although it wasn't any of her business, everyone seemed to be having a mid-life crisis.

Kate was tired of all this talk, and asked Louise about herself. Louise joked that she had had her mid-life crisis early, and realized she didn't really need people very much. Kate was depressed her daughter could feel that way.

"Basically, Mum, we're both running away, aren't we?"

"Are we? But not alone, if we both go there."

"Do you really want that?" Louise wondered. "Wouldn't you prefer it on your own. Really get away."

"No, I'd rather be with you. A mother and daughter couple. I'd like that."

"Don't you care what Dad does?"

A moment's pause. Kate said she did but the only thing she wanted to do was to take a break and get away.

"I think, Mum, when I have done, done all this running away, been my own woman, I'm going to try and integrate back here. Costa Rica, Timbuktu, they're all foreign. I want to be part of my country again, for better or worse."

Kate looked at her. How she had grown up, her little Louise, how intelligent. The future is with her, people like her.

At that moment the door opened and Louise was called in for interview. Kate said she would wait for her.

The office and its constant movement reminded her of what she was getting away from. The illusory feeling of power and importance, the individual self at the service of a small economic machine within the bigger machine. You are there for one reason only. To make it work. You pull out, and someone else slots in. What she really wanted, she now realized, was not where her ambition had driven her but an ordinary, more dignified form of life, without all the bloody technology, which, in the end, ties us to itself. She certainly did not want to drift into the supernatural, as her brother might. She was too rational for that. This opportunity, and maybe with Louise, in a different place, was a chance to learn afresh.

She remembered how happy she had been in the early days of their marriage. They had had little money between them, and the centre of things was domestic and child-rearing, before jobs became careers. That kind of ordinary life is what she hankered after now. At the same she would like to do good for others.

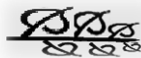
But doubts started to creep in. Isn't this yearning for the ordinary just nostalgia? Even if it wasn't, wasn't the Costa Rica idea a step too far, the whimsy of someone aware of their age?

How could that world in a very different part of the world be 'ordinary' to her? She started to panic. What made her gesture so different from Rupert's feeble attempt at 'straying'?

Weren't they both a need for excitement and change? Wasn't the ordinary an illusion too?

And what if they were attracted to someone else when they were apart?

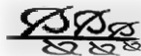
The more confused her thoughts, the more tired she felt. Her sister Emily was right. We should just lie in the grass, look at the trees and watch the flowers come into bloom. But she could never be like that. She was simply made differently.



The Parisian sky was grey, and there was not a breath of wind. How depressing, thought Charles, as he looked out of his hotel window that the woman who had given him love and a family life was nearby in a state of resentment. He had a faint hope

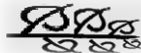
she would get over it, inspired by that moment of softness in the park. But she was now back in her old family home, in the grip of her parents. He dare not phone. She said she would get in touch. If only I could get past her mother. He reached for his phone and saw there were no texts.

Thérèse was looking at the same sky, thinking it odd that her husband, who for so many years she had thought of as at one with her was just around the corner, in separation. It would be a mistake to yield too easily. She wanted him to suffer. But why? All she knew was that he must.

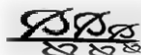


Everything about the Sunday morning in England was grey, and David was staying in bed.

Pierre had phoned to say that their father was in Paris looking for a reconciliation and their mother hadn't yet made up her mind what to do. The boys didn't want a split but it was up to her. He had not been in touch with them, probably frightened of their reaction, and wanted to sort it out with her first. Parents. Whatever... He turned over and went back to sleep.



The sea was grey, and Emily was lying on the shingle, thinking how strange the world was outside herself, and wondering how her brother was getting on in Paris. Would Thérèse let him back into her life. He had been a fool, and now he was looking for some kind of rebirth. It will not come that easily. Being on your own, quietly and contentedly, is hard enough. As for sustaining a marriage, two people living in the here and now with each other for years, it seemed impossible, particularly if trust breaks down. How on earth do you start again? At the very least, both would have to lose their ego-selves, and treat each other kindly and with generosity.



Some time later.

Kate and Louise had got their jobs and flown off to Costa Rica. Before they left, Rupert had said he would like to give up his job and go off with them but Kate had been less than enthusiastic, so he backed off. She did say that she was not looking for

a marriage split at this stage, and that when they came back in a couple of years they could talk it over, see how it was then. Kate would quite understand if Rupert wanted another relationship in her absence and if it got serious, she would only have herself to blame. Samantha and Jessica had rallied round their father, out of sympathy, thinking that everything had happened just too quickly and that their mother was being unnecessarily cruel and actually rather selfish. Two years, for heaven's sake.

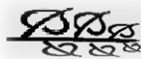
Samantha also felt that some of the thunder had been taken away from her – she was the one who was supposed to be getting away from it all.

And Jessica felt that she was being cast as the dull stop-at-home, the domestic child, when inside her too there were the springs of romantic abandonment, even if there was little determination to see them through. Her fate was clear to her. She would give up the shop, become a dressmaker and have children. Although she envied those who broke away, with no real purpose, she nevertheless felt some comfort and security in the simplicity of her own future. Both daughters wondered whether their mother would have gone through with her 'adventure' if Louise hadn't been doing the same thing, and they wondered too if their dad's silly misadventure was not just an excuse for their mother to do something dramatic. In some ways they felt excluded from the big changes going on around them, and were somewhat resentful. With self-righteous anger, they poured out their sympathy for their father to anyone who cared to talk about it, and were self-consciously determined to 'look after him'.

Meanwhile, Kate and Louise had been met at the Juan Santamaria airport in San José and taken to their hotel. The following morning, they were to be briefed. On the plane, mother and daughter had been practising their rudimentary Spanish, putting themselves in everyday situations, and testing each other on irregular past participles. Kate had been working through her practice book in the days leading up to their departure and could not wait to give it a go in the real world. Typically, Kate was all energy and excitement and on top of all the practical arrangements and Louise was happy to follow along behind. The briefings went well and the project managers were impressed. Not for a moment did Kate cast her mind back to her old job and her life with Rupert. All that was unreal. Only from time to time did she have a pang of guilt about her other two daughters. Once in their base in La Guacima she sent them very upbeat text messages, phoned them from time to time, and emailed lengthy descriptions of what she and Louise were doing. But what she got back was rather cursory, dutiful, nothing corresponding to her own energy or excitement, and this

depressed her. She knew she was not carrying them with her. They asked more about how Louise was getting on than how she was doing. She told herself that time would dispel any resentment. Nevertheless, she was hurt and threw herself into her daily duties, obliterating all pain with the pleasure of work, and the sheer joy of being with her dearest Louise.

At times she felt she had never been closer to any one person than she was with Louise. Their rhythms were in total harmony, they understood their roles in the project, and worked well together, without bickering. They talked openly and honestly about the work, about themselves in relationship to each other, and, in as much as either could with the knowledge they had of themselves, about their family life back home, all their relations and their relationships. They were the perfect couple. Kate had no need for another man, and Louise had no need for another woman. Mother and daughter, absolute.

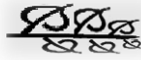


As for Charles and Thérèse, things had gone rather differently. Thérèse had indeed made Charles suffer. She had let him stew in his hotel room for several days and refused to respond to his many text entreaties and phone calls. All he ever got back from her mother was 'she'll let you know'. But in her heart Thérèse knew what she wanted. She wanted the real Charles back, not the husk of a husband she had had to put up with before the crisis, and she wanted compromise. The very fact that she had not totally put an end to their relationship had given him hope. And what he wanted was what Thérèse wanted, a real him together with a real her, and a break from some of the more deadening routines of the past. Both understood the great paradox, that they had to keep their boys integrated into their life, no matter how far away they chose to live in the future, to help them feel free – and Charles knew that he had to spend time with them to rebuild their trust. He believed, though, that there had been twenty plus years of trust and love which had not been completely eroded. If Thérèse would come round, they would too.

And so it turned out. Thérèse did finally accept his plea and did extract a compromise. They would move to Normandy, sell the house in England, maybe keep a little flat there, which the boys could use, or they could use themselves on holidays. Charles promised to give up his job within the year. They would live off their savings, a pension and what they could make out of the house sale. All of which happened.

They both felt the pleasure of starting to growing old together, and the boys started to love them again equally. For them, this new phase gave the depth of security they desired and the freedom to grow up without scars.

Emily watched all this from afar, and smiled.



Rupert, poor Rupert. What was he to do? If he gave up his job, then what? Wait for two years for a possible reunion with Kate? Why? Since she had left, he had had only briefest of communications from her, as though it was her right, given what he had done. Was not that her excuse for lack of love – malice even? He had not done anything that deserved that. And after two years, then what? The chances are she would want a split. She was just keeping him dangling in case things did not work out, damn her. But he would not let her be like that to him? But what was he to do?

And then there were Samantha and Jessica being so attentive. Although he allowed it, and in one way was grateful – he loved them dearly – he couldn't bear to be pitied. It made him feel weak and useless. He was their father after all. He was there to look after them, not the other way around.

And now he had started to drink more seriously. At first it was just during the evenings, then it spread to lunchtimes, and before long he wanted a shot before work. He stuck to vodka because he thought it would smell less on the breath. He could not afford to let his work colleagues know he was a drunk, and sucked peppermints. But they knew. They could see it in his eyes, they could hear it in his talk, the way he walked and the way he dressed. They knew. And his children knew it and tried to talk to him, warn him. Samantha felt she could not flit off abroad and leave her dad in this state. She was no longer free. Rupert knew what she thought and pleaded for her to go – he would be fine. And anyway, there was always Jessica. But he knew that Samantha could never let herself do it – she was too decent, too conscience-ridden, and he hated himself all the more for being a constraint. What was he to do?

One night, in late autumn, it was raining hard. Rupert had had a really good round in the afternoon and was in fine form socially all evening, but when he left the club he was the last to go and was in no state to drive. He tried to get a taxi, but none would respond to his calls. Never mind, it would not take that long. I have walked it before – it is only six miles, about the length of a round – and when I get home, a nice

hot bath. As he staggered along, he tried to hitch a lift but no-one would pick him up. Then, damn it, he tripped and collapsed in a ditch ... oh, this is so comfortable, so lovely... and fell fast asleep. Several hours later he was rescued by a passing police car and taken away by an ambulance. In the days following his condition deteriorated. The antibiotics did nothing to get rid of the pneumonia, but he hardly cared. In his fever he was aware of Samantha and Jessica at his bedside, but he could not bear their emotion and kept his eyes shut. All he wanted was peace and oblivion.

Oh, Kate, what have we done to each other. Forgive me for not being enough for you, he muttered sentimentally. Forgive me. I so much wanted to be the man you wanted me to be but I could not. Whatever it was you needed, it wasn't me. I don't blame you, you are doing the only thing you can do. I blame myself, my wretched inadequacy. Wherever you are, Kate, God bless you.

