CHAPTER ONE

He was a handsome man. A handsome boy, his mother called him, because she started praising his looks when he was five. Before that, he received the compliments children necessarily get: 'Beautiful baby' and 'Isn't he lovely?' His father was never there. He left school at fourteen – you could then – and went to work in a market garden, a slaughterhouse and finally a cosmetic factory. The boss's daughter fell in love with him. He was twenty by then, so they got married. Anita's father said he would stop her having the money her grandmother had left her, but in the event he was too tender-hearted to do so. It wasn't a very large sum, but it was enough to buy a house on The Hill in Loughton, twelve miles from London but almost in the country. Woody, as his mother and his wife called him, as someone at school had first named him, hated work and decided never to do any more as long as he lived. There was enough money left to live on, but whether for the rest of his life he didn't know. He was only twenty-three.

In those days, you had to get married. There were no two ways about it. Living together was not far short of a crime. They were happy enough for a couple of years. His mother died and he inherited her house as well as a small amount of money. Next, her father died. People died at a much younger

age in the 1930s. She was an only child, so it was her turn to inherit a parental legacy, and this time it was very much in excess of what Woody got. Because he didn't work, Woody was always at home. He thought he owed it to himself to keep a close eye on his wife. She was always going to London to buy clothes, always having her hair done, going off for weekends to stay, she said, with girls she had been to school with and who were now married. He wasn't invited.

A woman came in to do the cleaning. Woody thought his wife could have done that and he said so, but he couldn't stop it. She paid. She didn't even look after the child, took very little notice of it as far as he could see. He had read somewhere that once, sixty or seventy years ago, an Act of Parliament was passed letting married women keep the money that was theirs. Before that they had to hand it over to their husbands. He hated that Act. How perfect life must have been when the men got all the money.

When the war came, he was thirty. The horrible possibility of being called up loomed. But he had a stroke of luck. He told the doctor he wanted to know if he was perfectly fit so that he could join up. The navy was his choice. He felt well, he always did, nothing wrong with him – unfortunately. But the doctor found a heart murmur, the result, he said, of pneumonia when he was a child. Woody remembered that pneumonia, remembered most of all his mother's anxiety and terror. But he was overjoyed, too thankful to dwell much on his heart. He put on a show of sorrow for the doctor and said in a regretful tone that he felt all right and would no doubt live to be a hundred.

A lot of his wife's friends were always in the house. One of them was in uniform. He wasn't as good-looking as Woody, but the uniform was no doubt a great attraction. Another young man who was staying nearby was often to be found

making himself tea in Woody's kitchen or drinking it in Woody's lounge with Woody's wife. He wasn't much to look at.

'You judge everybody by their appearance,' said his wife. 'That's all that counts with you.'

'I judged you by yours. What else was there?'

If his wife wanted to be unfaithful to him, there was nowhere for her to go. But love or something will find a way. How did he know where she really was on these visits to old school friends he was supposed to accept? His wife had red hair and dark blue eyes; her friend, the one in uniform, eyes the same colour and light brown hair. One afternoon he walked into the kitchen to get money out of the biscuit tin to pay Mrs Mopp – she was really called Mrs Moss, but Mrs Mopp was a funny name and Mrs Moss wasn't. She was just behind him, too greedy for her cash, he thought, to let him out of her sight. His wife was sitting at the kitchen table holding hands with the one in uniform. Her hand was lying on the American cloth cover of the table and the man's was lying on top of it, holding it there. They snatched their hands away when Woody came in, but not soon enough. Woody paid Mrs Mopp and walked out, saying nothing to the pair of them, who just sat there, looking down into their laps.

For Woody, anger was cold. Cold and slow. But once it had started, it mounted gradually and he could think of nothing else. From the first, though, he knew he couldn't stay alive while those two were alive. Instead of sleeping, he lay awake in the dark and saw those hands: Anita's narrow white one, with the long pointed nails painted pastel pink; the man's brown one equally shapely, the fingers slightly splayed. The third member of the family Woody was usually aware of. He

doubted that Anita was. She ignored the child. Once he saw her run along the hall towards the front door and not see the little boy. She ran into him in broad daylight, knocking him over, not hurting him but leaving him there to pick himself up and start to cry. He wouldn't miss his mother, glad to see the back of her, no doubt.

Before he did what he meant to do, Woody took the rest of the money out of the biscuit tin and put it in a smaller one that had once held cocoa. The biscuit tin had a picture of variously shaped shortbread biscuits on it and was quite big, maybe twelve inches by eight and three inches deep. It would be big enough, for their hands were small. Anita came and went, with the man in khaki and maybe also with the other man who wore civvies. Woody didn't care about him. He would disappear when Anita did and wouldn't call round asking for her. Mrs Mopp came in and cleaned the house. They seldom spoke. There was nothing to say. The boy went to school and could go by himself; he knew he had to and arguing about it was useless. He talked to Mrs Mopp and seemed to like her, but that was of no interest to Woody. He thought a lot about Anita's money – it took time, that thinking, and delayed his doing what he had to do. There must be a way of getting her to transfer those thousands of hers, and there were quite a few thousands, into his bank account, but she had a suspicious mind.

'I'm not having a joint account with you, Woody,' she said. 'Why d'you want it? No, don't answer. It'll be some low-down thing, some monkey business. The answer's no.'

Pity, but it wouldn't put him off. Nothing would do that. The best he could achieve was to get hold of her chequebook and write a cheque to himself for a hundred pounds. More would arouse suspicion. As it turned out, there was no problem in cashing it and he was rather sorry he hadn't made it out

for twice as much. Now he had to do the deed before she got her bank statement.

Woody didn't think about their early days. He didn't think about what he had once called their 'romance'. He never harked back to even the recent past, saying to anyone who would listen, 'It's over, it's not coming back. What's the point of dwelling on it?' However he did it, there mustn't be blood. He told Anita he was going to stay with his Auntie Midge in Norwich. She was ill and was likely to leave him her money – a motive for his visit his wife would be sure to believe. Once he was out of the way, he guessed Anita and the khaki man would share a bed, very likely *his* bed. He would return in the small hours.

Of course he was right. They were there and fast asleep. Having locked the door behind him, he strangled the man first because Anita was a small woman who was no match for him. Then, chasing her round the room, he knocked her to the floor and used the same leather belt on her. It was soon over. The only blood was his own, where they had both scratched him, and there was very little of it. His slaughterman's experience was of great value to him in removing the right hand and the left hand. Before laying the two hands in the biscuit tin, he took off Anita's wedding and engagement rings. This was a bonus. He had forgotten about the rings when he was calculating what money he could forage. Of course he could sell them. He could go a long way away, down to Devon or up to Scotland, and find a jeweller who would give him a lot for that diamond ring. Anita had bought it herself. She wanted a diamond ring and he couldn't afford to pay for it.

It was October, better than summer because he need not hurry with disposal of the bodies. Now that he had removed the offending hands, the hands that had held each other, he

hardly knew why he had. To look at them? To remind him of his vengeance? But the hand-holding was in the past, and now was the present. He knew he would scarcely want to contemplate those hands in a day or two's time. What he might do was bury them; knowing they were there, hidden, and whose they were, would be enough. He wrapped the bodies in bedsheets and tied them up with garden string.

The child slept through it. He was only just nine, old enough to see everything that went on even if not understanding most of it. Woody knew he would have to get rid of him. Not that he intended the same fate for him that he had meted out to Anita and her lover. Michael was his son, he knew that, anyone would, for the child was lucky enough to look exactly like him. While not feeling anything like love for him, he nevertheless had a kind of tie of blood with the boy. Michael was *his*, and now his mother was gone, the nearest human being in the world to him. He could arrange never (or very seldom) to see him again, but shedding his blood, as he put it, was not to be thought of.

The bodies in their bedsheet shrouds he had stowed in the summer house and covered with firewood. The lid on the biscuit box fitted tightly, so there was no smell. He kept the box in Anita's wardrobe, underneath those dresses she was always buying, but he knew he must find some permanent resting place. He slept in the room where he had killed them and sometimes he contemplated the box, but he never attempted to remove the lid. The process of decay would have begun, and he was afraid of what he would see and smell if he prised open the lid.

He had known for a couple of months where Michael went when he was out playing with the Johnson boy and the Norris boy and those Batchelors from Tycehurst Hill and lovely Daphne Jones and the little kid Rosemary something. He

knew they played underground. He watched Michael cross The Hill. He waited half an hour, and then he went across the road and up to the entrance to the tunnels. The children were inside, but he couldn't see them from where he stood. He shouted out to them. 'I know you're in there. Come out now. Your games are over. Time you went home, and don't come back. D'you hear me?'

They heard him. One by one they came out. Daphne stayed behind to blow out the candles. She was the last to leave, and standing on the wet grass at the top, she gave him her mysterious smile, turning her head away.

Next day, a policeman came. He wanted to speak to Mrs Winwood. Woody gave him his prepared story. His wife had been ill and was staying with her cousin in the country to convalesce. The policeman didn't explain why he wanted to speak to Anita, or if he was suspicious. He went away.

Sending the boy to Auntie Midge was not to be thought of – she was too old and too poor – but how about his sort-of-cousin Zoe? She couldn't have kids and said she longed for them, God knows why. She was thinking of adoption but hadn't fixed on a child; had seen Michael a couple of times and mooned after him the way some women did. Adoption was easy: more or less the parents' consent had to be secured and you took the kid over. Zoe had just got married, a bit late in the day but never mind that, and there was plenty of money. She wanted the kid so much she didn't want to know where Anita was, or even that she had gone. It was soon arranged.

When the day came, he was so anxious to get the house to himself that he took the kid to the station on the Underground quite early in the morning and more or less pushed him into the Lewes train. The sandwiches he had made he forgot, left them behind on the kitchen counter. But the boy wouldn't want to eat sandwiches in the middle of the

morning. Woody had only one regret at seeing the last of his son. It seemed a shame to lose sight of such a good-looking kid. He got on a bus and off it when it turned down Knightsbridge. A jeweller in a shop full of rings and pearl necklaces bought Anita's engagement and wedding rings off him for close on a thousand pounds. Enough to buy a fine house with, only he didn't want a house. He had one and would sell it as soon as the war was over. The jeweller asked no questions.

Woody was free. But was he? Not while the bodies lay under the firewood in the summer house. He was actually contemplating them from the summer house doorway when Mrs Mopp came down the garden to tell him a police officer was asking to see him. Woody shut the door and locked it. Not one policeman this time, but two. His wife was seriously ill, he said, and he was going up to Yorkshire later that day to join her. They seemed to accept that, but made no answer when he asked them, inwardly trembling, what made them ask.

Not while he had the white hand and the brown hand in the biscuit tin. The latter was easily disposed of, secreted in a place where only he could find it when the time came to contemplate those hands again, to remind himself. Since he had driven that bunch of kids out, none had returned, and now it was winter, too cold and wet for visiting the tunnels. One cold, wet November evening, pitch dark, he had shone his torch down the steps into the tunnels and followed its beam of light, carrying the biscuit box. In spite of the tarpaulin covering, the whole place was growing waterlogged, the only sound the slow, steady dripping of water on to water. He must be careful. It would be a fine thing if he slipped and fell and, with those hands in his hands, had to shout for help. Would he ever be found?

Woody stood still, thinking, staring down a deep hole, from which the yellowish clay-thickened water seemed to be draining away. He could hardly see its bottom, only knowing that down there the liquid was finding a way out. Resting the torch on the lip of the hole, he squatted down and slid the tin over the edge. The light showed him that it had slipped down into the muddy wetness, then by its weight pushed aside some obstacle and disappeared from view. He got to his feet, slipped a little, knocking the torch into the hole. The darkness was absolute. He turned round, telling himself to keep calm, not to panic, and struggled, foot placed carefully in front of foot, hands clutching at the tufts of rank grass that grew here and there from the clayey walls. A little light showed ahead of him, light from the moon it must be, because there were no street lamps. He clambered up the slippery steps, sliding back once, then again, until at last – and by this time he could see the source of light, a full round moon – he emerged on to the grass of the field.

By the moonlight he could see that he was caked with mud, yellow filth, his hands and arms, his feet and his trousers halfway up his thighs. No one was about. Few people ever were on these wartime evenings. And there was silence, not a light showing, not a note of music heard, not a word spoken, not a child's cry. As he opened the gate and let himself into his garden, he glanced at the Joneses' house next door, at the faint strand of light showing underneath the blackout curtain, which he thought might be Daphne's room. Lovely Daphne – if she was only a bit older and had money, she might become his next wife.

He let himself into the house by the back door, taking a look at the summer house from the doorstep. What a way out of his difficulty that would be, to get those bodies, the man's and the woman's, across the road and slide them down

the hole as he had slid their hands. But impossible. He would be seen. He had no car, he couldn't drive. The idea must be given up and the only way would be to destroy the bodies by fire before the police returned to search the place.

It was only after the fire had burned the bodies and wrecked the garden that he realised he could never inherit Anita's money because as far as anyone knew she wasn't dead. Officially, to the police or the lawyers or her relatives, she could never die. There was no certificate, no funeral, no will, no death notice. He looked at himself in the mirror and thought, my face is my fortune, always remember that. A headline in a newspaper told him that a direct hit had destroyed the police station in Woodford, which was only a few miles from Loughton. A lot of officers had been killed and Woody wondered if this was why the police had failed to come back. They had forgotten about him and let him alone. No one ever called him Woody again.

CHAPTER TWO

It is a fantasy many have, a kind of dream, a place to think of to send one to sleep. It begins with a door in a wall. The door opens, confidently pushed open because what is on the other side is known to the dreamer. They have been there before. They have seen somewhere like it, somewhere real, but less beautiful, less green, with less glistening water, fewer varied leaves, and where the magic was missing. The secret garden is always the same: perfect, the plants in flower, the sun always shining, a single bird singing, a single dragonfly in flight. The dreamer never leaves the secret garden. The garden leaves the dreamer, replacing it with that sense of loss that is sadness and hope departed, perhaps the first they will ever have.

Their garden was not beautiful. It had no flowering trees, no roses, no perfumed herbs. Tunnels, they called it at first. The word 'qanat', an impossible word, was found by Daphne Jones and adopted by the rest of them. It meant, apparently, a subterranean passage for carrying water, in some oriental language.They liked it because it started with a q without a u. Their schoolteachers had taught them that no word could ever start with q unless followed by u, so Daphne's

idea appealed to them and the tunnels became qanats. In time to come the qanats became their secret garden. They were Daphne, of course, Michael Winwood, Alan Norris, Rosemary Wharton, Lewis Newman, Bill Johnson and all the Batchelors, Robert, George, Stanley, Moira and Norman, and the rest. They discovered the qanats in June in the last year of the Second World War, tunnels that were secret gardens to them or to those of them who had dreams and imagination. They never said a word about them to their parents, and in those days few if any parents asked their children where they went in the evenings, telling them to come home only if the air-raid sirens sounded.

It was not countryside where the qanats were. Building had begun on these fields before the war started and stopped when the first sirens sounded. They were on the edge of Essex, an outer suburb of London on the borders of Epping Forest. Green meadows still remained, divided by tall, thick hedges composed of many varieties of trees, uncut, seldom even trimmed: squat oaks two hundred years old, screens of elms flourishing before Dutch elm disease was heard of, blackthorns and hawthorns creamy-white in spring, crab apples with pink-tinted blossom. In the fields where hay was no longer cut grew yellow ragwort and blue speedwell and red campion and bee orchids. Painted Ladies and Red Admirals and Peacocks deserted the wild flowers and made for the buddleia in the gardens of the houses of The Hill and Shelley Grove, and dusk brought out the Red Underwing and the Lime Hawk moths. The children thought the fields would always be there, they knew nothing of change. They played in the grass and the hedges, running home to Tycehurst Hill and Brook Road when the sirens set up their howling. Bombs dropped, but not here, not on Loughton, only one in the whole war. One day, when no siren had gone off for a week,

a group of them, several of the Batchelors and Alan and Lewis, came upon a cave, a hole in the ground that looked like the entrance to a tunnel.

It was June 1944. School hadn't broken up for the summer holidays and wouldn't for another month. It finished at 3.30 in the afternoon and everyone had come home. The Batchelors, Robert and George and Stanley and Moira – Norman was recovering from chickenpox – all went out into the fields and Stanley took Nipper on the lead. Alan and Lewis and Bill were already out there, sitting up in the hollow oak, in the broad circular space where someone a hundred years ago must have chopped off the top of the tree and a dozen branches had grown up around it. In summer when it rained you could sit in there and not get wet, protected by a canopy of leaves. It had been raining that day but was no longer, so Alan and Lewis came down and joined the others in their wandering up the slope on the other side towards The Hill. Would they ever have found the qanats if Moira hadn't spotted a rabbit dive into the hole? Not one of the boys would even have noticed it, not even Stanley the animal lover, not even Nipper, who had seen the Joneses' dog on the pavement outside the Joneses' house and begun plunging about on his lead, barking and growling. Stanley had to stay outside while the others went into the hole. Someone had to hold on to the dog. The Joneses' dog was making such a racket that Daphne came out to grab it and drag it back into the house.

There were steps inside the hole, muddy and rain-soaked, cut out of the clay. Who had cut those steps? Who had made this place? They didn't know A passage led along under the field, under the grass and the wild flowers and through the tree roots. It was dark, but not so dark you couldn't see each other or the tarpaulin roof, though you could tell you'd need candles in the night-time. The walls were just earth, but earth

composed of ginger-coloured clay, the kind of clay their fathers complained about when they had to dig the garden. The six of them, for Daphne Jones had joined them, saying Stanley had told her where they were, emerged into a wide round area like a room that other passages led into. It was no secret garden, but it had certain secret garden qualities. It was quiet. It would have been silent apart from the noise they made. It was still and welcoming. It was dark until you lit it.

'We could come in here,' George said. 'We could bring food and stuff. It'd be good if it was raining.'

'It'd be good anyway,' said Alan.

'I'm going to explore,' said Moira, and they all went with her, discovering what passages there were and how deserted it was, as if no one had ever been there but to dig it out, dig steps down to it where they had come in, cover it up with tarpaulins, then had just gone away and abandoned it to the rabbits and the squirrels.

'Qanats,' said Daphne Jones, and qanats they became.

As you get older, you forget names: those you studied with, worked with, lived next door to, the people who came to your wedding, your doctor, your accountant and those who have cleaned your house. Of these people's names you forget perhaps half, perhaps three quarters. Then whose names do you never forget, because they are incised on the rock of your memory? Your lovers (unless you have been promiscuous and there are too many) and the children you went to your first school with. You remember their names unless senility steps in to scrape them off the rock face. Alan Norris had not had enough lovers to forget the names of those he had had, and his wife had had none. This was a subject they never discussed. Nor did they think about those people they had been to their

first school with, but they remembered their names. They had also been in those tunnels that they gave a peculiar name to, but they had no reason to think about it until it was all over the papers.

'Qanats,' said Alan, who something over fifty years ago had married if not the girl next door, the girl in the next street.

Rosemary said she had always disliked that name, even when she was only ten. 'Why not tunnels? That's what they were, after all.'

The *Daily Telegraph* spread out on the dining table, Alan was reading about a discovery made by three Polish builders under a house called Warlock, on The Hill. Reading about it and looking at a picture of what they had found, a biscuit tin and its contents.

'What a name,' said Rosemary, reading it over his shoulder. 'Zbigniew. Is that how you pronounce it?'

'No idea.'

'That's the one who dug it out. They were putting in a basement, it says. That's the last thing we want in Loughton, basements. Those things are hands, are they? Just bones by this time, thank goodness. They'll never finish doing that basement now.'

Alan said nothing. He was reading about the builders with the strange names unearthing the tin box with their digger and the police coming and afterwards all digging being made to stop. The tin had once contained shortbread biscuits. When found, it held the skeleton hands of a man and a woman.

'I wonder,' said Rosemary, 'if they've closed it all up. I mean, put wire all round the garden and that blue and white tape you see on TV. We could go up there for our walk and have a look.'

'We could.' Alan's voice had a faint ironic edge to it, not lost on Rosemary.

'Not if you don't want to, dear.'

He folded the paper up. 'There's no mention of the qanats – the tunnels, I should say. Only of finding these things under Warlock. We don't even know if it was in the qanats that they were found.'

'I do wish you wouldn't call them that.'

'The tunnels, then. We don't even know what they were, tunnels dug in a field and covered up with tarpaulins. George would know. I think he would. If we're going for a walk why not go and see George and Maureen?'

'If you like.'

'Why did we never know what the tunnels were, darling?'

'I suppose we never asked. Our parents would have known, but we never asked them. We never even told them.'

'We knew they'd have stopped us going there.'

Rosemary went back to her sewing room, while Alan returned to memories of the qanats. The things they used to do, the games they played, the food they brought with them: dense wholemeal bread – how he had longed for white bread – with jam made from turnips and rhubarb; fish-paste sandwiches; potatoes wrapped in clay and baked in an old water tank they found and made a fire in, their fortunes told by Daphne Jones. The name again brought him a shiver of ancient excitement. Acting Mary, Queen of Scots, and the murder of Rizzio. Why Mary, Queen of Scots? Why, come to that, the murder of the Princes in the Tower? Lady Jane Grey? He had forgotten. In spite of those rediscovered memories, so many reasons for things were lost, buried deep underground like those hands. He had a vivid memory of Stanley Batchelor bringing his dog, a white dog with black patches, and Alan had loved it; he and Rosemary hugging the dog and stroking it and saying to each other, 'He's so lucky. Why can't I have a dog?' Eventually he could, his beloved Labrador, and Rosemary her spaniel, when the war was over.

He took the paper with him to find Rosemary. She was sitting at the treadle, her fingers guiding the hem of the dress she was making for Freya. Possessing and using a sewing machine was commonplace when they were first married. Rosemary had made all her own clothes over the years. When sewing grew less common, she made their children's clothes and now their grandchildren's and great-grandchildren's. 'Because they're much nicer than anything I could buy.'

Alan disagreed but he didn't say so. There had been a phase when she tried making his shirts but he put a stop to that. The hand that held the cloth in place was wrinkled now, the veins prominent, but there was no sign of arthritis in the joints. Rosemary looked up and lifted her foot from the treadle.

'I think we should go and see George Batchelor and take the paper with us,' said Alan. 'It's ages since we saw the Batchelors.' An unwelcome thought struck him. 'If he's still alive.'

Rosemary laughed. 'Oh, he's alive. I saw Maureen in the High Road last week. He'd had his hip done and he was just coming back from St Margaret's.'

'And still living in the same place?'

'Not the same phone, though. Maureen gave me her mobile number. Shall I phone them, darling?'

Alone among them, Michael Winwood had a parent still living. They had very little contact with each other. There had been no positive quarrel. Neither had ever said to the other, 'I will never speak to you again,' but Michael intended never to see his father and he was sure his father never intended to see him. He wondered if John Winwood had read about the hands, the man's hand and the woman's, in the

biscuit box, or if perhaps such a discovery would mean nothing to someone of his father's age.The old man would be a hundred in less than a year's time and would no longer be compos mentis. Perhaps he would have cared if his father had been poor and living in wretched circumstances, but according to Zoe, he was in the most luxurious old people's retreat in Suffolk. His home was an apartment with en suite shower rather than a room, and he had everything an ancient human being could require. Michael didn't care, he felt no guilt.

What would Vivien have said about the hands in the box? What would she have said about his father? He would go up to her room, the room that had once been hers, and ask her. Just tell her, really. Lie on the bed beside where she had once lain and talk to her about it. When he closed his eyes he could see the house called Anderby, on The Hill, and on the other side of the road, where there were no houses then, he could see the tunnels, the entrance and the children gathering. A week after they'd discovered them, there were more children, twenty or thirty children. He could see them following each other down the steps and into the long hole, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin without a piper, disappearing into the darkness under the tarpaulin, and then the lights coming on in the depths as someone began to light the candles.

When he thought about Anderby, which he couldn't help doing sometimes, though he tried not to, he usually heard his father singing. That phrase, if you said it to anyone, sounded nice, especially as it was hymns he sang. He wasn't religious; Michael and his mother and father never went to church, but his father had as a child. Hated it, Michael had once heard him say, but the hymns he sang he remembered, the tunes and most of the words. 'Lead us, Heavenly Father, Lead Us' and 'Summer Suns Are Glowing Over Land and Sea'. That one about the sun was meant to make you happy,

but when John Winwood sang those words it was preparatory to coming downstairs and snarling at Michael to get out of his sight.

Michael went upstairs and told Vivien about the hymns, laughing as if it was funny.

Alan and Rosemary walked over to York Hill, having invited themselves to tea.

'We don't drink tea,' said Maureen Batchelor on the phone. 'George says it's an old person's drink and when I say we *are* old, he says there's no need to rub it in. Come and have a sherry, why don't you? It's never too early for sherry.'

'So sherry's not an old person's drink,' said Alan. 'I bet you if you went into the King's Head' – they were just approaching this hostelry – 'and asked for sherry, the young woman behind the bar wouldn't know what you were talking about.'

George, the eldest of the Batchelor siblings still living, was still in the town where he had been born and grown up, a not uncommon phenomenon in the outer London suburbs. This was true also of Alan and Rosemary and almost of George's brother Stanley, but not of George's brother Norman. So it was a surprise to walk into George and Maureen's living room in the sprawling bungalow called Carisbrooke and find Norman sitting beside his brother on a sofa, George's leg stretched out in front of him and supported on what Maureen called a 'pouffe'.

'How are you Norman?' said Rosemary. 'Long time no see.' It was a phrase Alan particularly disliked. It was a phrase that she believed the people she called 'Chinamen' used.

'I live in France now. I'm not often here.' Norman went off into a gushing eulogy to French culture, food, drink, transport, the countryside, the health service and his house. A glazed

look came over Maureen's face, the expression of someone who has heard it all before. She got up and returned with a trolley laden with glasses and bottles of various sherries, Oloroso, Amontillado and Manzanilla among others.

Having accepted a glass of Amontillado, Alan handed George the *Daily Telegraph*. 'Have you seen this?'

George barely glanced at it. 'Sure. We take the same paper.' He nodded in a sage sort of way. 'I built it.'

'What, Warlock?'

'Me and my brother did. Batchelor Brothers. Like we built a good many of the houses on The Hill.'

Alan knew he meant not that George and Stanley had built these houses with their own hands but that their firm had, and on those fields across which they and all the other children had run when the sirens sounded and then the all-clear.

'When was it, George?' Rosemary asked.

'Sometime in the early fifties. Fifty-two, fifty-three?'

'OK. Now maybe you can tell me if you think our tunnels were underneath Warlock.'

'Oh no,' said George. 'Though that's what they were, the foundations of a house.'

Rosemary echoed his last words. 'The foundations of a house. I never thought of that.'

'They were all gone by the time I acquired the land. We dug new foundations for Warlock. A Mr Roseleaf had it built. Funny name, I thought, that's why I remembered.'

Norman, having found fault with the sherry as being Spanish and not French, had fallen asleep but now awoke with a snort. 'So that's what they were,' he said. 'The foundations of a house. That was a funny name too, Warlock.'

'It means a man who's a sort of witch,' said Maureen.'Very funny, in my opinion.'

'Nothing to do with witches,' said George. 'It was because he'd lived in a street called Warlock Road in Maida Vale.'

'Well I never,' said Norman. 'You were there, Alan, weren't you? And Rosemary. And Lewis Newman – remember him? And do you remember Stanley's dog Nipper? He was a nice dog. My mum hardly ever got cross with us, not with anyone, but was she mad when she found Stanley'd been taking the dog out in the evening without asking.'

Rosemary smiled, remembering. 'Nipper was lovely. We longed for a dog, didn't we, Alan?'

'You didn't find those hands when you were building that house, did you, George?'

'I think I'd have said, don't you?'

George softened his scathing tone by struggling to his feet and refilling sherry glasses. Several guests noticed that he was pouring Amontillado into Manzanilla glasses, but no one said anything. Rosemary got Oloroso instead of Amontillado but she didn't mind; she really preferred the sweet sherry though she hadn't asked for it as it was known to make you fat.

'That was where we met,' she said. 'In those tunnels.'

'What, when you were ten?' George asked.

Rosemary nodded, suddenly embarrassed. Met there, lost each other when someone's father turned them out, shouted at them to go home and not come back, met again years later, at a dance this time, dated (though that was a term never used then) and got married. It seemed to her that the others were staring at them as if she had described some tribal ritual, ancient and now unknown. Except for her and Alan, they had all been married at least once before, divorced, moved, even lived abroad like Norman.

She said brightly, trying to cover a kind of shame, 'Who was it that turned us out of the tunnels? Someone's father? Michael Woodman? Woodley?'

'It was Michael Winwood's dad,' said Norman. 'They lived on The Hill next door to the Joneses, the Winwoods did. And Bill Johnson's people lived further up The Hill. Winwood found out we were all going into the tunnels in the evenings. I suppose Michael told him. He just walked across the road, found the entrance and shouted down to us to come out and not come back.'

While he was speaking, his brother Stanley had come into the house very quietly by the back door. Norman jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder, got to his feet and the brothers embraced. Rosemary said afterwards to her husband that she hadn't known where to look, brothers hugging each other. Whatever next! Alan thought it was rather nice but he said nothing. Throughout his marriage he had often taken refuge in saying nothing. They were always weird, those Batchelors, said Rosemary on the way home. For instance, the way Norman, the youngest, used to go about telling people he'd been born on the kitchen table.

George, more conventionally, shook hands with his brother and pointed to his hip with a doleful look. 'We were talking about those Winwoods. Remember them?'

'They lived next door to Daphne Jones on The Hill. I remember her all right.'

That name again, Alan thought. He'd forgotten her and now her name had come up three times in – what? The past couple of hours? At least he hadn't blushed. What did Stanley mean by that 'all right'? Alan's voice sounded squeaky and he wondered if anyone noticed. Rosemary might. 'Is she still alive? She was older than any of us.'

'She wasn't. She just looked sixteen when she was twelve. She wasn't really older.' Stanley nodded knowledgeably. 'I've sort of kept in touch with her.' He seemed proud of it. 'She's been married three times and now she's called Daphne

Furness. Lives in Hampstead or St John's Wood or somewhere. We don't all cling to our roots.'

Aware of feeling envy, Alan wondered what had come over him. How must it feel now to have known and possibly often seen Daphne Jones over the years? He suppressed the thought. He was an old man, a great-grandfather, and George was hoisting himself to his feet once more and stood as if about to make a statement, swaying. 'It's just come to me. I've got a photo – a snap we used to call them – of us in the tunnels. Well, me and my brothers and my sister Moira in the entrance. Robert's not there, he took the snap. Where's that photo got to, Maureen? Can you lay your hands on it?'

'Of course I can. How can you ask?'

Alan expected a little black and white or even sepia photograph. Instead Maureen brought out an album that looked too heavy for a small woman to lift. It was brown, with pages of thick card to which what seemed like hundred of photographs had been pasted. Familiar with the contents, though she hadn't been one of the children in the tunnels, she opened the album at a page with the date 1944 printed on it, and laid it on the coffee table. George shifted along the sofa and gingerly set his foot to the ground, lifting his left leg with both hands. Stanley sat beside him, squeezing between him and Norman.

'Now let Alan and Rosemary have a shufti,' said Maureen. 'You lot can see the pics whenever you want.'

Eventually the album was rearranged so that everyone could see but no one could see very well. George placed one finger on a dim-looking snap of five children crowded together in what was apparently the entrance to a small cave. It was out of focus and as a result looked as if Robert Batchelor had taken it through a thick fog. 'Me and Stanley and Norman and poor Moira,' said George. He called her 'poor' because

she, the youngest but one of them, like Robert, the eldest, was dead.

'Who's that?' said Rosemary, pointing to a boy with a mop of curly hair.

'Don't know.' George produced a magnifying glass, enlarging the boy's face to a blur. 'Could be Bill Johnson.'

The other photographs on the page were of little interest to Alan and Rosemary, being of interiors of the Batchelor house in Tycehurst Hill, of Stanley holding a cricket bat, and, mysteriously to anyone not familiar with Norman's life history, a small shot of a table covered in a checked cloth.

'Look at that,' said Norman. 'I took that. Fancy you keeping it, George. I was born on that table. My mum was walking about the house, waiting for the nurse to come, in labour of course, though we were never told that part. It was never put into words, though that's what it was. George and Moira carried it out into the garden for Robert to get that shot on account of it was too dark in the kitchen. Fancy you keeping that. Can you unstick it, George, and let me have it?'

'No, I can't. It'd spoil the album.' George looked around him. 'You want to see any more? I ask because my leg's giving me hell.'

'Give it here,' said Maureen. 'Let Alan and Rosemary have a closer look.'

She lifted the album and laid it across Alan's knees. 'Robert took some more of the tunnels on the next page,' said George.

Alan turned it over and there she was, sitting on a pile of bricks with Stanley on one side of her and Michael Winwood on the other. She was wearing a summer frock and her hair, a nearly black dark brown, hung in ripples over her shoulders and halfway down her back. Alan started at the sight, something like a shiver, sudden enough to make Rosemary turn on him a look of concern. That hair – she sometimes wore

it in pigtails and the waves appeared when the plaits were undone.

'There she is,' said Stanley, craning his neck to see. 'She doesn't look like that now, but you can still see the young Daphne in her.'

Hurriedly Alan turned the page to a set of some ten or eleven photos of Stanley's dog.

'Nipper. There he is, my first dog. I reckon I've had ten since then, they all lived to a good age.' Stanley sighed. 'Alfie died last year aged eighteen. I won't have another, not now. It'd be sad for him if I went first, and I easily might at my age.'

A thin blight settled on the meeting after that. They were old and hadn't long to last and they shirked facing it. Alan asked where Stanley was living now and was told Theydon Bois, a not-far-distant village in the forest. He wanted to ask more about Daphne but hesitated and asked after Michael Winwood instead. North-west London, he was told, and then he stood up to go.

'Should we get in touch with the police?'

'Let sleeping dogs lie,' said Stanley. 'Or bones, should I say?'

'Better let them know.' George shifted his bad leg and winced. 'I'll tell them, if you like. I mean, I built Warlock and I've got those pictures. I'm the one to do it. They're not taking my album out of the house, though.'

'We could try to find some of the others too,' said Norman. 'Maureen could do that. Genius with the technology, aren't you, Maureen?'

'More like the phone book,' said his sister-in-law.