

I

The pavement rises up and hits her. Slams into her face, drives the lower rim of her glasses into her cheek. She is laid out there, prone. What is this? Voices are chattering above her; people are concerned. Of course.

Bag.

She says, 'My bag.'

A face is alongside hers. Woman. Nice woman. 'There's an ambulance on the way, my dear. You'll be fine. Just keep still till they come.'

Bag.

'Your shopping's right here. The Sainsbury's bag.'

No. Bag.

Bag is not. She'd known that somehow. Right away.

Another voice, up above. Man's voice. 'She's been mugged, hasn't she? That's what it is.'

Ah.

Voices discuss. She is not much interested. *Nee-naw, nee-naw, nee-naw*. Here it is. Know for whom the bell tolls.

Expert hands: lifting, bundling. In the ambulance, she is on her side, in some sort of rigid tube. She hurts. Where is hurt? Don't know. Anywhere. May as well try to sleep for a bit.

'Keep your eyes open, please. We'll be there in a few minutes.'

Trolley ride. On and on. Corridors. People passing. Right turn. Halt. More lifting. They take the tube away. She is on her back now.

Nurse. Smiling but businesslike. Name? Address?

Those she can do. No problem.

Date of birth?

That too. Not a good date of birth. Rather a long time ago.

Next of kin?

Rose is not going to like this. It's morning, isn't it? Rose will be with his lordship.

Next of kin will be at work. Not bother her. Yet.

On Mondays, Rose arrived at the house later than usual, having stopped off at the bank to collect some cash for her employer and to pay in any cheques that might have arrived the week before. Henry did not care to fiddle with cash dispensers and could not be doing with the electronic transfer of money. He insisted on paper in the hand for minor payments such as lecture fees or book reviews. Email too was beyond his remit; Rose dealt with that. Probably Henry did not know how to turn on the computer. Though you wouldn't put it past the old devil to be cruising cyberspace once she was out of the house, googling old friends and enemies.

'I propose we drop Lord Peters and Mrs Donovan, Rose. All right with you?' Her second week with him, way back, and actually it hadn't been all right, not at first. She had called him 'you' for months. He was after all her mother's generation, never mind what else he was, or had been. She called some of her mother's friends by their first names? Yes, but she'd known them all her life and they hadn't been Regius professors and heads of Royal Commissions and advisors to a prime minister and what have you. String of letters after his name; people sometimes glancing at him, thinking: Why do I know that face? Shirty enough if anyone looked like taking liberties: 'Curt letter, Rose, saying Lord Peters does not provide puffs for other people's books, and if you're feeling expansive you could add

that, no, Lord P. does not recall his conversation with the author in 1993.'

Well, in ten years a relationship tends to solidify. The newly retired, brisk and self-important Henry for whom she had first come to work had mutated into a querulous, though still self-important, seventy-six-year-old with a gammy knee, a high consumption of claret and certain unpredictable behaviour patterns. You trod carefully. Occasionally you considered chucking in the job. Except that it was extremely convenient, he'd always paid a nice little bit above the odds and you never knew what might happen, which was better than a desk in an office. And at the beginning it had been the answer to a prayer: part-time, mornings only, she could be home to get the children from school, free to be theirs for the rest of the day.

Now, of course, that wouldn't matter – James in Singapore, Lucy at college.

Over half an hour late. There had been a long wait at the bank to get that cheque in. He'll be tetchy. Opening the post himself, grunting over each sheet of paper. Or purring: 'Rather a nice letter from Cornell, Rose. They want to give me an honorary degree. What do you think – shall we go over and collect it?'

He did not like to travel alone now. From time to time she was prevailed upon to escort him. Swings and roundabouts: you got a trip to somewhere you wouldn't otherwise have been; but the trip was with him, who could be a pain. You became 'Mrs Donovan, my PA', and there was a lot of hanging about and making small talk to strangers or no talk at all. The hotels could be a bit of a treat. And, because someone else was paying, it was business flights, or first-class rail.

She walked the last few hundred yards away from the bustling road and into his quiet leafy street with the smart white stucco houses. Expensive houses. Academics are not usually

well heeled, apparently, but Henry's father had been some sort of industrialist; money had filtered down to Henry – hence the house in a grandish part of London. Distinctly grand if you yourself live in a semi in Enfield, and grew up modestly enough in the suburbs of St Albans, daughter of two teachers. Henry was kindly patronizing about her parentage, on occasion: 'Accounts for your exemplary syntax, Rose. Breeding will out.'

Her mother had ever been crisp about Henry. His lordship. Needless to say, they had never met. Her mother was entertained by the stories that Rose could tell of his lifestyle and his remarks – gleeful, indeed, sometimes – but Rose was well aware that she considered the job menial. Rose could have done better than that. The subject was never raised – comment and counter-comment remained unspoken: 'Literate, numerate, efficient – there'd have been all sorts of options.' 'But I never *wanted* a career. I *chose* this.'

And thus had she chosen Henry also, though unwittingly, a blind date as it were. Face to face at that initial interview, across the now so familiar large desk with the tooled leather top: he seems nice enough; rather grand, lovely house; never seen so many books (thought *we* had quite a few); salary's good, actually.

'Do sit down, Mrs Donovan. Suppose I start by outlining my requirements.'

Correspondence . . . diary . . . travel arrangements . . . protect me from the telephone . . . my memoirs.

My memoirs. My Memoirs were but a gleam in his eye then, and remained so for several years. Only relatively recently – 'Commitments, thank goodness, being less consuming' – has the spiel gathered pace, the handwritten sheets waiting each day for her to type them up. 'Here you go, Rose, this morning's offering. You may be amused at what I have to say about Harold Wilson.' Chuckle, chuckle. There'll be quite a few

people distinctly unamused when the spiel at last achieves publication; good thing Harold Wilson's dead.

'Now tell me a bit about yourself, Mrs Donovan.'

What had she told? Secretarial experience, period as PA to a company chairman (who tried to put his hand up my skirt, so I walked out, but no need to tell that), five-year break for family reasons.

Henry does not have children. Dear me, no. A dad figure he is not. Never a wife, either. But not gay, it would seem. There have been ladies, occasionally wined and dined or taken to the theatre, but clearly none have managed to adhere. So Henry is a lone spirit. He had a sister, who died a few years ago, and he appears to have some affection for her daughter, Marion, who is a businesswoman and visits from time to time.

About once a year Henry remembers to ask after James and Lucy. He never displays interest – assumed or otherwise – in Gerry, who is evidently beyond his horizon. 'Ah, your husband . . .' in a vaguely baffled tone, when once Rose mentioned him (with pneumonia, as it happened, requiring unusual attention).

Gerry is not interested in Henry, either. Gerry is interested in local government, carpentry, sacred music and a spot of coarse fishing. Gerry is fine. Who'd want a husband who would run you ragged?

She climbed the steps to that handsome black front door with the pillared portico, took out her keys, opened, entered. She went through to her own office, hung up her coat, removed the cash from her bag, and knocked on the study door.

'Come in, come in.' Tetchy, yes. 'Ah, there you are. A whole lot of stuff from the insurance company that I don't understand and don't want to. Deal with it, would you? Some other bits and pieces we can see to together – here's a fellow I barely remember asking if I'll stand as a referee. He's got a nerve. The

rail tickets for the Manchester trip have come. Why are we going so early? Nine thirty at Euston. Christ!

‘There’s a lunch before your lecture – they’d like you there by twelve thirty.’

‘Inconsiderate of them. Oh – there was a phone call for you. Someone from a hospital. Can you call them back – here’s the number. About your mother, apparently. Unwell, is she? And, Rose, I’m dying for a cup of coffee.’

She thought about the mugger. Her mugger. This faceless person with whom she has been in a transitory, intimate relationship. Him. Or possibly her. Women muggers now, no doubt; this is the age of equal opportunities. Person who was here one moment, gone the next. With my bag. And my packet of Kleenex and my Rennie’s and my comb and my bus pass and my rail card and three twenties I think and some change and the Barclaycard. And my keys.

Keys.

Oh, Rose has seen to that. She said. Changed the locks. And the card. Stopped. Goodbye to the three twenties and the change.

What will he/she buy with the sixty-odd quid I’ve so kindly given him/her?

A handful of Three for Twos at Waterstones? A ticket to Covent Garden? It’ll have to be Upper Circle, I’m afraid. A subscription to the Friends of the Royal Academy?

Drugs, they say. Day’s supply of whatever is their particular tippie.

No. I prefer to imagine my mugger as a refined soul. Just a rather needy refined soul. Our brief relationship is more tolerable that way. Maybe there’s a Figaro on offer – that would perk him up. Him or her. German Expressionists at the Academy, I think. Hmmn. The new Philip Roth is good. And there’s this book on Shakespeare.

Hip. Hurts. Despite painkiller. Does not kill. Makes you woozy. As though hallucinating. No – sod you, mugger. Why didn't you just ask nicely? Sod you. Go and slurp your heroin or whatever it is. No Figaro for you.

Rose had had to call Henry from the hospital to say that she would not be back that day. He did remember to enquire after her mother when she arrived the next morning.

'They're looking after her well, I hope? No joke – broken bones at our age. Now . . . we're drowning in paper, Rose. Two days' post not dealt with.'

She explained that it was possible she would not be able to accompany him to Manchester. It would depend on the date of her mother's release from hospital, not yet decided. 'I'll need to bring her home and settle her. She'll be coming to us for a while.'

Consternation. 'Oh dear. Well, let's face that when we come to it. I suppose at a pinch Marion . . .'

Rose's spare room.

'For a month or two, Mum. At least till you're off the crutches.'

'I'd manage . . .'

'No. And, anyway, the hospital is quite firm about it. So there.'

So. Just what one didn't want. Being a burden and all that. What one had hoped to avoid. Derailed. Thanks a lot, mugger.

Sorry, Rose. And Gerry. And bless you. Let's hope this won't blight a beautiful relationship. It's the classic situation: tire-some old mother moves in.

Old age is not for wimps. Broken hip is definitely not for wimps. We are crutch-mobile now. Up and down the ward. Ouch. Sessions with delightful six-foot New Zealand physio-therapist. Seriously ouch.

Of course before the hip there was the knee, and the back, but that was mere degeneration, not malign external interference. The knee. The back. And the cataracts. And those twinges in the left shoulder and the varicose veins and the phlebitis and having to get up at least once every night to pee and the fits of irritation at people who leave inaudible messages on the answerphone. Time was, long ago, pain occasionally struck – toothache, ear infection, cricked neck – and you made a great fuss, affronted. For years now, pain has been a constant companion, cosily there in bed with you in the morning, keeping pace all day, coyly retreating perhaps for a while only to come romping back: here I am, remember me? Ah, old age. The twilight years – that delicate phrase. Twilight my foot – roaring dawn of a new life, more like, the one you didn't know about. We all avert our eyes, and then – *wham!* – you're in there too, wondering how the hell this can have happened, and maybe it is an early circle of hell and here come the gleeful devils with their pitchforks, stabbing and prodding.

Except that life goes on in parallel – real life, good life, with all its gifts and graces. My species tulips out and blue tits on the bird feeder and a new book to look forward to this evening and Rose ringing up and a David Attenborough wildlife programme on the telly. And the new baby of Jennifer next door. A baby always lifts the spirits. Rose certainly did, way back. Pity there were no more, despite trying. But her own, in due course, thanks be.

Charlotte views her younger selves with a certain detachment. They are herself, but other incarnations, innocents going about half-forgotten business. She is not nostalgic about them – dear me, no. Though occasionally a trifle envious: physically spry, pretty sharp teacher, though I say it myself; all my lot got As at A level, no question.

And further back yet, young Charlotte. Gracious, look at her – stepping out with men, marrying, pushing a pram.

All of which – all of whom – add up to what we have today: Charlotte washed up in Ward C, learning laboriously how to walk again. Ward C is full of breakage – legs, ankles, arms. The elderly fall off steps, trip over kerbs; the young pitch off their bikes, exercise too carelessly. People are grounded, heaped up here together – an arbitrary assortment of misfortune: middle-aged Maureen who borrowed a neighbour’s stepladder to put up her new curtains, with disastrous consequences; young Karen who tried to overtake a bendy bus on her scooter; old Pat who braved an icy pavement, and should not have done. Ward C is exhausting – noisy, restless; you don’t get a lot of sleep – but also perhaps in some ways an expedient distraction. You don’t fret so much about your own distress when surrounded by other people’s. You endure, but also observe; you become a beady eye, appreciating the spectacle.

‘Like watching *Casualty*,’ says Rose. ‘Only you’re in there too.’

They are in the patients’ Rest Room, to which the crutch-mobile shuffle to receive their visitors. They have had the spare-room conversation, Charlotte and Rose. The thing is settled; Rose is firm, Charlotte resigned. Charlotte is leaving hospital next week; Rose will fetch her and install her in the spare room, which is being prepared, her clothes and other necessities brought from home.

‘It’s the day I was supposed to be going with Henry to Manchester,’ says Rose. ‘I’ve told him I can’t.’

‘His lordship will be put out.’

‘He was.’ Rose is unperturbed. ‘It’s all right – he’s roped in his niece, Marion. The interior designer. She’s got to do duty.’

‘Is she the heir?’ demands Charlotte, who calls a spade a spade.

Rose shrugs. 'No idea. Well, someone has to be, I suppose.'

'Nice girl?'

'No girl, Mum. She's my age.'

Charlotte sighs. 'Of course. Talking of heirs, when I hand in my dinner-plate, I want you to give a little something to Jennifer next door for her baby – a couple of hundred for her piggy bank.'

'Mum . . .'

'Not *much* . . .'

'Don't talk like that. You're not going to . . .'

'Well, not this afternoon, or indeed tomorrow, probably. But bear it in mind. Is she competent, this Marion? Will she get him there and back in one piece?'

'She's very organized. Runs a business. Doing up rich people's houses. She's got this showroom in her house – all too elegant for words. You can see her shuddering when she comes to Lansdale Gardens.' Rose grins.

Charlotte has never been to Lansdale Gardens. 'I thought it was quite grand?'

'There are some nice *things*. And the house is. But it's all a bit seedy too.'

Charlotte shifts in her seat, grimaces. Hip is giving her stick. Marion what's-her-name is a distraction. 'People *pay* to be told what colour their curtains should be? I'm on his lordship's side. Mail order ready-made always did me fine. Is she rich?'

'Nice clothes,' says Rose. 'But I really wouldn't know.'

Marion is doing money at the desk in her office next to the showroom; she is also awaiting a call from her lover, and remembering that she has a client due in half an hour. Marion is good at doing money – careful, efficient, numerate – but is not in fact rich. Comfortable, yes, an adequate sufficiency, but needs always to keep a sharp eye on the figures, on that

irritating but manageable overdraft. Right now she is checking suppliers' bills and running through last month's bank statements and hoping that Jeremy will ring before she has to put the phone on answer while the client is here. Her mind is flicking also to Henry, and this tiresome matter of the Manchester trip next week, when she really cannot spare the time.

Thinking of money, she considers for a moment Henry's resources. He is of course well off. That house. The lifestyle – his club, the pricey restaurants to which he goes from time to time. The minions – Rose, Corrie who cleans and shops and does some cooking. Henry is . . . getting on. And has no relations except for Marion. Eventually someone has to inherit, unless all is destined for Oxfam or a cats' home.

Not that Marion considers this. Of course not. She has an affection for the old boy – he is after all her uncle, her only uncle. She respects him too. He is something of a grand old man, no question; she has not been above dropping his name from time to time. If only he would let her do something about the Lansdale Gardens house; every time she goes there she shudders at that fearful old chintz sofa, those leather armchairs, the murky brown velvet curtains. As for the kitchen . . . But Henry dismisses the least proposal of change; Marion has not been able to infiltrate so much as a cushion.

'I am beyond the reach of good taste, my dear.' A chuckle; good taste itself is in question, it would seem.

Marion rejects the term, of course. Hackneyed, meaningless. Effective decor is a matter of surprises, co-ordinations, contrasts; the unexpected rug, those interesting colours, that mirror. But no point in trying to explain this to Henry, for whom her trade is an amusing diversion, something with which she fills her time, an activity beyond his horizon. Henry is interested in powerful people past and present, in good claret, in academic gossip, in writing his memoirs and perhaps

still, marginally, in eighteenth-century party politics, his original field of study. All of these are the central and seminal issues, so far as Henry is concerned; anything beyond can be a matter for idle and transitory comment but nothing more. Searching for conversational departures, Marion has sometimes talked of her clients; if they are prominent in some way, Henry will be intrigued, even if their prominence is in areas unfamiliar to him. 'Goldman Sachs? I've heard of it. *What* did you say this man earns? Outrageous!' Actors catch his attention: 'The name rings a bell – not that I get to the theatre so much these days. Of course I knew Alastair Sim at one time – did I ever tell you that?'

Henry has known many people. His conversation is laced with names, most of them unknown to Marion, though there pops up the occasional recognizable celebrity. Henry has hobnobbed with leading politicians, has consorted with men and women of letters; he has known everyone who was anyone in the academic world.

Macmillan consulted him, as did Harold Wilson; he has tales to tell of Stephen Spender; Maurice Bowra was a chum. Oh, there is fuel enough for the memoirs, even if Marion's eyes glaze over, periodically, during tea or one of Corrie's rather awful lunches (Scotch broth, steak-and-kidney pie, treacle sponge pudding – Henry is a culinary conservative; Marion used to wonder how he managed in those posh restaurants to which he goes, but it seems that he knows the ones that cater for gastronomic retards). The names flow forth, and are rubbished or extolled, while Marion declines a sandwich or asks for a small helping, and wishes she could sneak in a new tablecloth. Sometimes, with Henry settled into cathartic discourse, she wistfully designs the entire room, sources wallpaper and curtain material, installs a lovely old Provençal table.

Marion has her own style, of course, her signature style, but

where clients are concerned she is flexible – she wants to know what sort of thing they have in mind and then infuses that with her own suggestions and ideas. And of course they will have sought her out in the first place because they fancy the sort of thing she does – that fresh, appealing marriage of New England simplicity – the blues, the buffs, the painted floorboards – with French rustic and a touch of Kettle’s Yard: the Arts and Crafts chair, the clever arrangement of shells or stones on a sill, an intriguing painting above the mantelpiece.

Marion’s own house is the expression of all this. It is also her showcase: clients come there to be shown, and also to wander around the big ground-floor room, which displays fabrics, wallpapers, paint colours, objets d’art that Marion has picked up, the odd chair, table, lamp that nicely tunes in with the house style. Henry has seldom been here; when he has come he appeared to notice nothing. He would ensconce himself in one of the pretty pale linen-covered armchairs in the upstairs sitting room, and hold forth as if in his own habitat. Henry does not see what does not concern him.

As someone who sees compulsively, Marion finds this both irritating and incomprehensible. Her mother shared her own interest in domestic interiors – their home was elegant and considered. How can her brother be so entirely impervious? His own childhood backdrop was rather imposing – a Dorset country house stiff with antique pieces, good rugs, silver, the works. Not especially considered or contrived, but effective in its way. A few objects from there have fetched up at Lansdale Gardens, looking out of place: the seventeenth-century Italian cabinet amid the sagging leather armchairs of the sitting room, the Regency mirror against the floral flock wallpaper of the hall. They are there not because Henry particularly appreciates them but because they are furnishings.

Marion’s clients are people who furnish as an occupation.

They have become rich by one means or another, they may as well spend the dosh and their surroundings are of prime importance to them. They change house frequently, each new abode will require dressing from top to toe and, even if they stay put, periodic makeovers will be necessary. Prime spenders will lash out many thousands on a single room; even Marion is sometimes surprised at their capacity, while grateful. She will find herself supervising the disposal of a whole lot of stuff not that long installed because the client got tired of swagged curtains and urban chic and likes the idea of Marion's calm palette and elegantly casual compositions. Sometimes sofas, chairs, hangings can be sold back to the original suppliers, who will be unsurprised. There is a cargo of interior adornments forever on the move, filtering from one mansion flat or bijou Chelsea terrace house to another.

This is how Marion met Jeremy Dalton – sourcing, not disposing. She was in need of the perfect fire surround for a client and had heard of this new place, just opened, in south London – an emporium, apparently, a cut above reclamation, just crammed with good things, run by some man with a genius for acquisition. So she had ferreted her way through an unfamiliar area and found this immense warehouse – a wealth of fire surrounds, Georgian through to art deco and beyond, you name it; stained-glass panels, claw-foot baths, some mouthwatering Arts and Crafts pieces. And presently there was this man at her side, Jeremy someone – helpful, charming, funny, absolutely on her wavelength. They spent ages talking, then coffee in his office, with just the right fire surround sorted, and she'd have to come back when she'd had a further think about the little cane settee . . . And so it all began, the way things do.

That was nearly a year ago. Jeremy's wife, Stella, was not working with him in the business. She lived in Oxted, where he had had his previous, smaller, outlet, and was a doctor's

receptionist. There were two teenage daughters. Complications, then. Marion herself was uncomplicated, being childless and tidily divorced a while back.

The situation must be kept under wraps, they agreed – at least for the foreseeable future: the daughters; Stella, who was excitable and had had a depressive episode in the past. But with Jeremy in London most of the time, spending many nights in the small rented flat near the warehouse, there was really no problem about seeing each other. Of course, he was away quite a bit in pursuit of stock, but that had made for several happy periods deep in Wales or up in Cumbria, with Marion snatching some time off. There were plans for an excursion to Provence in the summer, in search of old armoires and bed-heads.