THREE SOLDIERS EMERGE from their barracks in Arras, northern France. A colonel, a sergeant and a private. It is somewhere close to the middle of the night and bitterly cold. The men make their way to a field ambulance parked next to the entrance gate; the colonel sits in the front with the sergeant, while the private climbs into the back. The sergeant starts up the engine, and a sleepy sentry waves them out and on to the road beyond.

The young private holds on to a strap dangling from the roof as the van lurches over the rutted road. He feels shaky, and this jolting is not helping things. This raw morning has the feel of a punishment: when he was woken, minutes ago, he was told only to get dressed and get outside. He has done nothing wrong so far as he can tell, but the Army is tricky like that. There have been many times in the six months since he arrived in France when he has transgressed, and only afterwards been told how or why.

He closes his eyes, tightening his grip as the van pitches and rolls.

He had hoped he would see things, over here. The sorts of things he missed by being too young to fight. The sorts of things his older brother wrote home about. The hero

brother who died taking a German trench, and whose body was never found.

But the truth is he hasn't seen much of anything at all. He has been stuck in the rubble of Arras, week in, week out, rebuilding houses and churches, shovelling bricks.

In the front of the van, the sergeant sits forward, concentrating hard on the road ahead. He knows it well, but prefers to drive in the day, as there are several treacherous shell holes along it. He wouldn't want to lose a tyre, not tonight. He, too, has no idea why he is here, so early and without warning, but from the taut silence of the colonel beside him, he knows not to ask.

And so the soldiers sit, the engine rumbling beneath their feet, passing through open country now, though there is nothing to show for it, nothing visible beyond the headlights' glare, only sometimes a startled animal, scooting back into darkness on the road ahead.

When they have been driving for half an hour or so, the colonel rasps out an order. 'Here. Stop here.' He hits his hand against the dash. The sergeant pulls the ambulance over on to a verge at the side of the road. The engine judders and is still. There is silence, and the men climb down.

The colonel turns on his torch, reaches into the back of the van. He brings out two shovels, handing one each to the other men, then he takes out a large hessian sack, which he carries himself.

He climbs over a low wall and the men follow him, walking slowly, their torchlight bobbing ahead.

The frosted ground means the mud is hard and easy enough to walk on, but the private is careful; the land is littered with twisted metal and with holes, sometimes deep. He knows the ground is peppered with unexploded shells. There are often funerals at the barracks for the Chinese labourers, brought over to clear the fields of bodies and ordnance. There were five dead last week alone, all laid out in a row. They end up buried in the very cemeteries they are over here to dig.

But despite the cold and the uncertainty, he is starting to enjoy himself. It is exciting to be out here in this darkness, where ruined trees loom and danger feels close. He could almost imagine he were on a different mission. Something heroic. Something to write home about. Whatever is happening, it is better than churches and schools.

Soon the ground falls away, and the men stand before a ditch in the earth, the remains of a trench. The colonel climbs down and begins walking along it, and the others follow, single file, along its zigzag lines.

The private measures his height against the side. He is not a tall man, and the trench is not high. They pass the remains of a dugout on their right, its doorway bent at a crazed angle, one of its supports long gone. He hesitates a moment before it, shining his torch inside, but there is nothing much to see, only an old table pushed up against the wall, a rusted tin can still standing open on the top. He pulls his light back from the dank hole and hurries to keep up.

Ahead of him, the colonel turns left into a straighter, shorter trench, and at the end of that, right, into another, built in short, zigzag sections like the first.

'Front line,' says the sergeant under his breath.

After a few metres, the colonel's beam picks out a rusted ladder, slung against the trench wall. He stops before it, placing his boot on the bottom rung, pressing once, twice, testing its strength.

'Sir?' It is the sergeant speaking.

'What's that?' The colonel turns his head.

The sergeant clears his throat. 'Do we need to go up that way, Sir?'

The private watches as the colonel swallows, as his Adam's apple moves slowly up and down. 'Have you got a better idea?'

The sergeant seems to have nothing to say to that.

The colonel turns, scaling the ladder in a few swift jerks.

'Fuck's sake,' mutters the sergeant. Still he doesn't move.

Standing behind him, the private is itching to climb. Even though he knows that on the other side there will only be more of the same blasted country, part of him wonders if there might be something else, something close to the thing he came out here for: that vague, brave, wonderful thing he has not dared to speak of, even to himself. But he cannot move until the sergeant does, and the sergeant is frozen to the spot.

The colonel's boots appear at the height of their heads, and torchlight is flung into their faces. 'What's the hold-up? Get

yourselves over here. Now.' He speaks like a machine gun, spitting out his words.

'Yes, Sir.' The sergeant closes his eyes, looks almost as though he may be saying a prayer, then turns and climbs the ladder. The private follows him, blood tumbling in his ears. Once over, they stand gathering their breath, their beams sweeping wide over the scene before them: great rusting coils of wire, twenty, thirty feet wide, like the crazed skeleton of some ancient serpent, stretching away in both directions as far as the eye can see.

'Bloody hell,' says the sergeant. Then, a little louder, 'How're we going to get through that?'

The colonel produces a pair of wire-cutters from his pocket. 'Here.'

The sergeant takes them, weighing them in his hand. He knows wire, has cut it often. Apron wiring. Laid enough of it, too. They used to leave gaps, when they had time to do it right. Gaps that wouldn't be seen by the other side. But there are no gaps here. The wire is tangled and crushed and bent in on itself. Ruined. Like every bloody thing else. 'Right.' He hands his shovel to the private. 'Make sure you light me then.' He bends and begins to cut.

The private, trying to keep his beam straight, stares at the wire. There are things caught and held within its coils, things that look to have been there for a long time. There are tattered remnants of cloth, stiff with frost, and in the torch-light the pale whiteness of bones, though whether human or animal it is impossible to tell. The country smells strange

out here, more metal than earth; he can taste it in his mouth.

On the other side of the wire, the sergeant straightens and turns, beckoning for the men to follow. He has done a good job, and they are able to pick their way easily through the narrow path he has made.

'This way.' The colonel strides out across lumpy ground, which is littered with tiny crosses. Crosses made from white wood, or makeshift ones made from a couple of shell splinters lashed together. Bottles, too, turned upside-down and pushed into the mud, some of them still with scraps of paper visible inside. The colonel often stops beside one, kneeling and holding his light to read the inscription, but then carries on.

The private searches the man's face as he reads. Who can he be looking for?

Eventually the colonel crouches by one of the small wooden crosses, set a little way apart from the rest. 'Here.' He motions for the men to come forward. 'Dig here.' A date is written on the cross, scribbled in shaky black pencil, but no name.

The private does as he's told, lifting his shovel and kicking it into the hard ground. The sergeant joins him, but after a couple of spades of earth he stops.

'Sir?'

'What?'

'What are we looking for, Sir?'

'A body,' says the colonel. 'And bloody well get on with it. We haven't got all day.'

The two men lock eyes, before the sergeant looks away, spits on the ground and continues to dig.

Beneath its frosted crust the mud is softer, clinging, and they do not have to dig for long. Soon metal scrapes on metal. The sergeant puts down his shovel and kneels, clearing the mud from a steel helmet. 'Think we might be there, Sir.'

The colonel holds his light over the hole. 'Keep going,' he says, his voice tight.

The men crouch low, and with their gloved hands, as best they can, they clear the mud from the body. But it is not a body, not really, it is only a heap of bones inside the remains of a uniform. Nothing is left of the flesh, only a few black-brown remnants clinging to the side of the skull.

'Clear as much as you can,' says the colonel, 'and then check for his badges.'

The dead man is lying twisted in the earth, his right arm beneath him. The men reach down, lifting and turning him over. The sergeant takes his pocketknife and scrapes away at where the shoulder should be. The man's regimental badges are there still, just, but they are unreadable, the colours long gone, leached into the soil; it is impossible to tell what they once were.

'Can't see them, Sir. Sorry, Sir.' The sergeant's face is red in the torchlight, sweaty from effort.

'Check around the body. All around it. I want anything at all that might identify him.'

The men do as they are ordered, but find nothing.

They stand slowly. The private rubs the small of his back, looking down at the meagre remains of the man they have unearthed, lying twisted on his side. A thought rises in him, unbidden: his brother died here. In a field like this in France. They never found his body. What if this were him?

But there is no way of knowing at all.

He looks back up at the colonel. Impossible to tell if this is the body he was searching for either. This has been a waste of time. He waits for the man's reaction, bracing himself for the expected anger on his face.

But the colonel only nods.

'Good,' he says, chucking his cigarette on the earth. 'Now lift him out and put him in the sack.'

❖

HETTIE RUBS HER SLEEVE against the misted taxi window and peers out. She can't see much of anything; nothing that looks like a nightclub anyway, just empty, darkened streets. You wouldn't think they were only seconds from Leicester Square.

'Here, please.' Di leans forward, speaking to the driver.

'That's a pound then.' He turns his light on, engine idling.

Hettie hands over her ten-shilling share. A third of her pay. Her stomach plummets as it's passed to the

front. But the taxi's not a luxury, not at this time; the buses aren't running and the tubes are shut.

'It'll be worth it,' whispers Di as they clamber down. 'Promise. Swear on my life.'

The taxi pulls away and they find each other's hands, down an unlit side street, dance shoes crunching on gravel and glass. Despite the cold, damp pools in the hollow of Hettie's back. It must be way past one, later than she has ever been out. She thinks of her mother and her brother, fast asleep in Hammersmith. In not too many hours they'll be getting up for church.

'This must be it.' Di has stopped in front of an old, three-storey house. No lights show behind the shuttered windows, and only a small blue bulb illuminates the door.

'Are you sure?' says Hettie, breath massing before her in the freezing air.

'Look.' Di points at a small plaque nailed to the wall. The sign is ordinary-looking; it could be a doctor's or a dentist's even. But there's a name there, etched into the bronze: DALTON'S NO. 62.

Dalton's.

Legendary nightclub.

So legendary some people say it doesn't exist.

'Ready?' Di gives a blue, spectral grin, then lifts her hand and knocks. A panel slides open. Two pale eyes in an oblong of light. 'Yes?'

'I'm here to meet Humphrey,' says Di.

She is putting on her posh voice. Standing behind her, Hettie is filled with the urge to laugh. But the door opens. They have to squeeze to get around. On the other side is a small entrance place, little bigger than a cupboard, where a young doorman stands behind a high wooden desk. His gaze slides over Hettie, in her brown coat and tam o'shanter, but lingers on Di, with her dark eyes, the shorn points of her hair just showing beneath her hat. Di has this way of looking, down and to the side, and then slowly back up again. It makes men stare. She's doing it now. Hettie can see the doorman goggling like a caught fish.

'You've to sign in,' he says eventually, pointing at a large book lying open before him.

''Course.' Di pulls off her glove, leans in and signs with a practised sweep. 'Your turn,' she says, handing the pen to Hettie.

From below comes the throb of music: a giddy trumpet. A woman whoops. Hettie can feel her heart; *thud-thud-thud*. The ink is glistening on Di's signature, which has sprawled out of its box and on to the line beneath. She takes her own glove off and scratches her name: *Henrietta Burns*.

'Go on then.' The man pulls the book back, gesturing behind him to unlit stairs.

Di goes first. The staircase is old and creaky, and as Hettie puts a hand out to steady herself she feels damp wall flake beneath her fingertips. This is not what

she imagined; it's nothing like the Palais, where the glamour is all out the front. You wouldn't think these musty old stairs led anywhere much at all. But she can hear the music properly now, people talking, the sound of feet fast on the floor, and as they reach the bottom a wave of panic threatens to take her. 'You'll stay close to me, won't you?' she says, reaching for Di's arm.

''Course.' Di catches her, gives her a squeeze, and then pushes open the door.

The smell of close, dancing humanity assails them. The club is no bigger than the downstairs of Hettie's mother's house, but it is packed, each table crammed, the dance floor a roaring free-for-all. Most people seem to be in evening clothes – the men in black and white, the women in coloured gowns – but some look as though they have come in fancy dress. Most astonishing of all, the four-piece band crashing through a rag on the tiny stage has a Negro singer, the first Hettie has ever seen. It's dizzying, as though all the colour missing in the city up above has been smuggled underground.

'Killing!' Di grins.

'Killing!' Hettie agrees, letting out her breath.

'There's Humphrey!' Di waves to a fair-haired man weaving his way through the crowd towards them. Hettie recognizes him from that night at the Palais two weeks ago, when he hired Di for a dance – and then another, and another, right up until the end of the night. (For this is their job: *Dance Instructress,*

Hammersmith Palais. Available for hire, sixpence a dance, six nights a week.)

'Capital!' says Humphrey, kissing Di on the cheek. 'You made it. And this must be . . .'

'Henrietta.' She holds out her hand.

He is not much older than them, has an easy handshake and a pleasant, freckled face. He looks nice, at least. Not like some of the ones Di has been with in the past. After a year at the Palais, Hettie has a compass for men. Two minutes in their company and she can tell what they're like. Whether they are married, sweaty-guilty, sneaking out for an evening alone. That glazed look they get when they're imagining you without your clothes. Or sometimes, like Humphrey, when they're actually sweet. 'Come on,' he says with a grin, 'we're over here.'

They follow him, picking their way as best they can through the crowded tables. Hettie makes slow progress, since she keeps falling behind, twisting to see the band and their singer, whose skin is so astonishingly dark, and the dancers, many of whom are moving wildly in a way no one at the Palais would dare. Eventually they arrive at a table in the corner, not far from the stage, where a short man in tails scrambles to his feet.

'Diana, Henrietta,' says Humphrey, 'this is Gus.'

Hettie's companion for the evening is thick-set and doughy, barely taller than she is. His hair is thinning,

his scalp shiny in the heat. Her heart sinks behind her smile.

'May I take your coat?' He hovers around her, and she shrugs it off. Her old brown overcoat is bad enough, but beneath it she is wearing her dance dress, the only one she has, and after a double shift at work already tonight it is none too fresh.

On the other side of the table, meanwhile, Di unwraps, revealing the dress she bought with Humphrey's money just last week. Hettie sinks into her seat. *The dress*. This dress has a physical effect on her; she covets it so much it hurts. It is almost black, but covered with so many beads, so tiny, so dazzling in their iridescence, that it is impossible to tell just what colour it is. She was there when Di bought it, in the ready-made at Selfridges. It cost six pounds of Humphrey's money, and she had to swallow her envy and smile when afterwards, for fun, they rode up and down in the lifts.

Both men stare, until Gus, remembering his manners, takes the seat beside Hettie's, pointing to a plate of sandwiches in the middle of the table. 'They're rather grim,' he says with a smile, 'but they have to serve them with the drinks. No licence, you see. We'll just pile them up on the side.' He lifts them away, and she watches them go. She could murder something to eat. Hasn't had a thing since a ham and paste sandwich in the break between shifts at six.

'So,' Gus pours from a bottle on the table and hands her a glass, 'I s'pose you're awfully good then. You pair – Humph told me – dance instructresses at the Palais, aren't you?'

'Oh . . .' Hettie takes a sip. The drink is fizzy and sweet. She can't be sure, but she thinks it might be champagne. 'We're all right, I suppose.'

They're better than all right, really, she and Di. They've been practising their steps for years, in carpet-rolled-back living-rooms, singing out the tunes they've memorized, poring over the pictures in *Modern Dancing*, taking it in turns to be the man. They're the best two dancers at the Palais by far. And that's not boasting. It's just the truth.

'I'm a terrible dancer,' says Gus, sticking his lower lip out like a child.

Hettie smiles at him. He may not look like much but at least he's harmless. 'I'm sure you're not.'

'No, really.' He points downwards, grimacing. 'Left feet. Born with two.'

There's a raucous cheer from the dance floor and she turns to see the singer goading his band, urging them on. They are American, they must be. No English band she knows looks or plays like this; definitely not the house band at the Palais, not any more, not since the Original Dixies left, with their cowbells and whistles and hooters, to go back to New York. And the crowd – they're dancing crazily, as though they don't

care a fig what anyone thinks. If only her mum could see this. *Respectable* is her favourite word. If she could see these people enjoying themselves she'd throw a fit.

Hettie turns back to Gus. 'It's just practice,' she says, taking another sip of the drink, her body itching with the beat.

'No, no,' he insists. 'I'm *terrible*. Never could get the hang.' He gives his glass a couple of brisk twists, then, 'Up for a go though,' he says, 'if you'd like a turn round the floor?'

'I'd love one,' says Hettie, throwing a quick glance at Di, whose dark head is bent close to Humphrey's, deep in a whispered, intimate conversation that she cannot hear.

The crashing chords of the rag are fading now, and the band is moving into a four-four number, something slow. They shoulder their way through the crowd and find a spot on the edge of the packed dance floor. Gus takes her hands in his and then looks up to the ceiling, as if the mysteries of movement might be written out for him there. Then he bounces a bit, counting under his breath, and they are off.

He was right. He is a terrible dancer. He has no sense of the music, is already two beats ahead, snatching at it, not letting it guide him at all.

Listen! Hettie wants to say. *Just let it move you. Can't you hear how killing they are?*

But it won't help, so she tries to fit her feet to his awkward steps.

(They have a rule at the Palais: never dance better than your partner. You're hired to make them feel good. If they feel good then they'll hire you again. As Di is fond of saying, *It's all just economics in the end*.)

After a few bars, Gus's grip loosens and he looks up, delighted. 'Damned if I'm not getting the hang of this!' They go into the turn, Hettie exaggerates her movements to flatter his, and as the number comes to a close he takes a victory lap around the floor. 'Humph was right!' He beams, coming to a breathless stop. 'You girls are really something. Damned thirsty work, though.' He takes his hanky from his pocket and mops his face. 'Hang on a tick, I'll fetch us something cold from the bar.'

He disappears into the crush, and Hettie finds a spot close to the damp wall, happy for a moment to be alone, just to take it all in. A young couple squeeze past her, giggling, holding each other up. The girl is young and elegant, her body wrapped in blue silk, her long neck trailing pearls, but her lovely face is blurry, and she keeps slipping off her partner's arm. It is a moment before Hettie realizes she is drunk. She stares after them, half expecting someone to come and tell them off. But no one seems to bat an eyelid. She's not at the Palais now.

Just then someone knocks into her, hard, from behind,

and she almost falls, catching herself just in time.

'Sorry. My *God*. Sorry.'

Hettie turns to see a tall man beside her. He seems distracted, an apologetic smile on his lips. '*So* sorry,' he says again. One hand tugs at his hair, the other grips an amber-coloured drink. 'Are you all right? Thought you were a goner then.'

'Yes . . . fine.' She gives a small, embarrassed laugh, though whether for him or herself, she cannot tell.

The man's eyes land on her properly, taking her in, and Hettie feels herself flush. He is a very good-looking man.

'My God,' he says. His smile fades, and a different, shrinking expression takes its place.

Heat stings her cheeks. *What? What is it?* But she says nothing, and the man carries on staring, as though she were something awful from which he cannot look away.

'Sorry,' he says, shaking his head as though to clear it. An echo of the smile is back. 'Thought you were—' He holds up his glass. 'Drink? Must let me get you a drink. Say sorry and all that.'

She shakes her head. 'Thank you. I'm . . . Someone's already buying me one.'

She steps away, wanting to put distance between them, to find a mirror, to check that everything is all right with her face, but the man has his hand on her arm. 'Where are you from?'

'Pardon?' she says. His grip is tight.

'I only meant, are you English then?'

'Yes.'

He nods, releases her. Is it disappointment she can see on his face?

'Excuse me . . .' She ducks away, escaping him, threading through the crowd, which is even denser now, looking for the lavatories, finding them through an archway, small and damp-smelling, a dark spray of mould clinging to the walls.

She examines herself in the mirror, breathing hard. There is nothing particularly terrible to see, other than a red blotch of embarrassment on her neck and that two of her grips have come loose and her hair is threatening to unravel. She pushes the offending pins back into the bristling porcupine it takes to hold it up. Her long, stupid hair that her mother won't let her cut.

If you come home looking like that friend of yours, you'll catch it. Filthy little flapper.

Her mother doesn't know a thing. Di has the best haircut of any of the girls at the Palais. They are always trying to get her to let on where she has it done.

Hettie steadies herself against the cold rim of the sink. It's late. She's been on her feet for hours. The night, which had been filled with promise, is curdling somehow, and the same old doubts are rushing in. She is from Hammersmith. She is too tall. Her dress is old and she cannot afford another since she gives half her

wages to her mother and her useless brother every week. She's scrubbed cleaning petrol and scent on the armpits more times than she can count, but it still stinks and she'll probably never have a dress like Di's as long as she lives. She's got to be nice to Gus. And to top it all off, her breasts stick out, no matter how much she tries to strap them down.

It is that man's fault, she thinks, finding her eyes in the glass. The way he looked at her, and his questions. *Where are you from?* As though he could tell she didn't belong here, in this club with these people who act so freely in their drunkenness and dancing, as if whatever they do, their lives will hold them up.

Come on.

She splashes water on her cheeks, checks her petticoat isn't slipping, and stabs a last stubborn pin in her hair. The red blotches on her neck have calmed a little now.

Back out in the fray, she scans the crowd, relieved to see that the tall man has disappeared. There is no sign of Gus either, and when she finally spots him, his shiny bald head is still bobbing in the queue at the bar. Over at the table, Di and Humphrey haven't moved. Except, perhaps, a little closer together. Hettie can see Di laughing at something Humphrey has said. They don't look as though they'd welcome an interruption. For a moment, as she stands there alone, her fragile resolve threatens to falter. But something is

happening, over on the dance floor. People have stopped moving, and the band is slowing, the instruments dropping out one by one, until only the drummer remains, keeping the beat with a lone, shivering snare. Then he, too, comes to a stop, putting his hand over the bronze discs to still them, and a hush descends on the club. Over at the table, Di and Humphrey look up.

Hettie, breath caught, steps away from the wall.

For an electric moment it feels as though anything may happen, until the trumpeter steps forward and lifts his instrument to play. It flashes in the low light. A flare of purest sound fills the room. Hettie closes her eyes, letting it in, letting it hollow her out, and then, when the man begins to play in earnest, the notes drip molten gold into the space he has made. And standing here, full of this music, it hits her with the force of revelation that it *doesn't matter* – none of it, not really: she is young, she can dance, and it was worth her ten shillings just to *see* this place, to hear these musicians, to tell the girls at the Palais on Monday that it's true: that there *is* a club in the West End, buried underground, with the best jazz band since the Dixies left for New York.

'Are you lurking?'

She snaps open her eyes. The man from before is a few feet away, leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette.

'I'm sorry?'

'You're lurking,' he says.

'I'm not lurking.' Her heart thuds dangerously against her chest.

'You are. I've been watching you for two whole minutes. Two minutes constitutes a lurk.'

She can feel that awful flush creeping back up her neck. 'I'm not, actually – I'm watching the band.' She crosses her arms, looking away from him, trying to focus on the trumpeter's fingers, trying to remember how good she just felt.

From the corner of her eye she sees the man push himself away from the wall. 'You're not one of those anarchists, are you?' he says.

She turns to him, incredulous.

His grey eyes are steady. This time he doesn't smile. 'I've read about your sort. You go into public places like this.' His hand sweeps over the club. 'Hundreds of innocents. Bomb in your coat. Leave it in the lavatories. Lurk a bit, then . . . *boom*.' He mimes something exploding. As his hands move up and away from each other, ash falls, scattering in the air. A few flakes land on her dress.

For a moment, she is too surprised to speak. Then, 'My coat's over there,' she says, gesturing to the table in the corner. 'And there's no bomb inside. Anyway, if I were going to blow something up, I wouldn't *lurk*. I'd leave.'

'Ah.' He nods. 'Well, perhaps I got you wrong.'

'Yes,' she says. 'You did.'

They hold each other's gaze. She tries to keep steady, to read him, but her compass is haywire and she cannot fathom him at all.

Then his face cracks open with a smile. 'Sorry.' He shakes his head. 'Terrible sense of humour.'

Her heart skips. It is disconcerting, the smile; so sudden, as though there were another person entirely hidden underneath. He looks respectable enough, dressed in white shirt and tails, but there is something odd about the way he wears them. She can't say just what it is. Indifference? His hair is unslicked. There are purple shadows beneath his eyes.

He reaches into his pocket, takes out a flask and offers it to her. 'Here, have a bit of this while you wait.'

'No, thank you.'

She half turns from him, cringing as she hears her voice in her head: *No, thank you*. She sounds so Hammersmith. So up-past-her-bedtime. So prim.

'Go on. It's good stuff. Single malt.'

His eyes are laughing now. Is he laughing at her? He is the sort of man who could talk to anyone. So what is he doing hanging around here? It feels like a trick.

She should go and find Gus; he must have been served by now.

She should.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she reaches for the man's flask, takes it, lifts it to her mouth.

Because she's only here for tonight, and her companion is useless and elsewhere, and her friend is otherwise engaged.

And so what has she got to lose?

She is unprepared for the sharp hit of the drink though, and she chokes and coughs.

'Not much of a whisky girl then?'

She takes another, deeper pull in reply. This time she swallows it down. 'Thanks,' she says, pleased with herself, handing it back.

He looks out over the dance floor. 'Are you here to dance then?' he says. 'Or have you just come to lurk?'

'I've come here to dance,' she says, as the whisky flares in her blood.

'Glad to hear it.' He crushes his cigarette in an ashtray nearby and turns to her. 'How would you feel about dancing with me?'

'If you like.'

Fewer people are dancing now, and they can walk straight out to the middle of the floor. Once there, the man holds up his hands. It is an odd gesture, not quite the gesture of a man beginning a dance, more that of a man who is unarmed. Hettie puts one hand in his, the other on his evening coat, which is fitted tight against his back. The crease of his collar touches her ear. His hand is cool. He smells of lemons and

cigarettes. She feels a bit dizzy. Perhaps it's the drink.

The soulful, gorgeous trumpet has faded now, and the band is picking up again, the music moving into a rag, a one-step.

One-two, one-two.

The floor is filling, people pressing all around them, cheering, clapping, stamping the music back into life.

One-two, one-two.

He steps towards her.

Hettie steps back.

And it's there; it's in that first tiny movement – the flash of recognition. *Yes!* The rare feeling she gets when someone knows how to move. Then the music crashes in, and they are dancing together across the floor.

'Good band tonight,' he says, over the music. 'American. I like the Americans.'

'Me too.'

'Oh?' He raises an eyebrow. 'Who've you seen then?'

'The Original Dixies.'

'The *Dixies*? Damn.' He looks impressed. 'They were the best.' He puts his leg between hers as he goes for the spin. 'Where'd you see them?'

'The Palais. Hammersmith.' She comes back to face him.

'The Palais? I went there once – saw them there, too!' He looks eager suddenly, like a boy.

Hettie considers this, wonders if they danced near each other. They definitely didn't dance together. She'd have remembered.

'What was your favourite number then?'

She laughs; that's easy. '"Tiger Rag."'

'"Tiger Rag!"' He grins. 'Crikey. That one's dangerous. So damn fast.'

The fastest of all. Even she used to get out of breath.

'What was he called?' His face creases. 'That trumpeter – Nick something or other.'

'LaRocca.'

Nick LaRocca – the world-famous trumpeter from New York. He used to make the girls go barmy. He'd smiled at her once, in the draughty backstage corridor: *Hey, kid!* he said, and winked as he was doing up his bow tie. She's had his picture above her bed ever since.

'La*Rocca*! That's it.' He looks delighted. 'Crazy man. Played like a lunatic.'

They are on the edge of the dance floor now, where the noise isn't quite so loud. 'So then,' he says, 'tell me. An anarchist with a love for American jazz.'

'But I'm not—' Their eyes catch, and something passes between them; a silent understanding. *This is all a game.*

'What's your cover?' he says, leaning close; close enough for her to smell the whisky on his breath.

'Cover?'

'Day job.'

'Oh, it's dancing. At the Palais. I'm a dance instructress there.'

'Good cover.' He smiles, then his forehead creases again, as though he's remembering something. 'Not in that awful metal box thing, are you?'

She feels the familiar wince of shame. 'Afraid so, yes.'

'Poor you.'

The Pen. *That awful metal box*. Where she and Di sit, trapped, along with ten other girls, till they are hired, while the men without partners shark up and down, deciding if they want you, if you are worth their sixpence for a turn around the floor.

He leans back, as though to see her better. 'You don't look like the sort of girl who's for hire.'

Is he making fun of her again? It could be a compliment, but she can't be sure.

'I'm Ed, by the way,' he says. 'Terribly rude of me. Should have introduced myself before.'

She hesitates.

'Right then,' he says with a grin. 'You can tell me your name when I get the thumbscrews out later.'

She laughs. The dance is almost over. Over his shoulder she can see Gus standing on the edge of the floor, staring out at them forlornly, two drinks in his hands, and as the music comes to its close she is clumsy suddenly, aware of her body, of the parts where it is close to Ed's. She takes her hands down, steps back.

'Wait.' He catches her wrist. 'Don't go,' he says. 'At least, not before you've told me your name.' His face has changed again. The smile has gone.

'It's Hettie,' she says. Because whatever game they were playing is clearly over, and, all told, she's not the sort of girl to lie.

'Hettie,' he repeats, tightening his grip. Then he leans in close. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'I won't give you away. I know how much these things matter. I want to blow things up, too.'

Then he lets her go, and turns and walks, without stopping, without looking back, through the crush of people, across the floor, up the stairs and out of the club.

The room wheels, a queasy kaleidoscope around her.

And here is Gus, crossing the floor towards her, sagged now, all jubilation spent. 'Who was that then? Someone you know?'

She shakes her head. But she can feel him still, this Ed, this man she doesn't know, a Chinese burn scalding her wrist.

'You looked as though you knew him,' says Gus. He sounds aggrieved.

Hettie is furious suddenly. With poor, bald Gus. His awkward dancing, and that half-cringing look on his face. And then, seeing that he sees this, she is sorry for him. 'Perhaps I knew him,' she says quietly. 'Perhaps I met him before.'

He seems a little appeased. When she doesn't say any more, he nods. 'Lemonade?' he says, holding out her drink.

❖

'EVELYN.'

Someone is calling her name.

'*Evelyn*, turn that bloody alarm off, would you? It's been racketing for an age.'

Evelyn opens her eyes to darkness.

She reaches from under the blanket and gropes for the clock on her bedside chest. There's a sudden, shocking silence, until Doreen grunts on the other side of the door. '*Thank* you.'

Evelyn curls on to her side, her knuckles in her mouth, biting down, as Doreen's slippered footsteps retreat.

She was having the dream again.

She lies there for a moment more, then takes her fist away, sits up and pulls the curtains aside. Thin light touches the face of her clock. The immovable realities of morning make themselves known. It is eight o'clock. It is Sunday, her mother's birthday, and she has to be in Oxfordshire by lunch.

Bloody hell.

In the bathroom, the pipes clank and creak. She

hauls herself out of bed, the soles of her bare feet cold against the floor, and while Doreen hums and splashes next door she dresses in the half light, choosing her least tatty blouse, her longest serge skirt, slipping into her stockings and shoes and pulling her cardy tight.

The light is stronger by the time she has finished dressing; still, she avoids her reflection in the mirror on the wall.

Outside, in the scrubby patch of grass that passes for a garden, she pushes open the door of the damp lavatory and squats, shivering as she pees, before pulling the chain and stepping out. There's a battered packet of Gold Flakes in the pocket of her cardy and she coughs as she lights one up. She looks up at the trees, at their wet black winter branches latticing the lightening sky. As she stands there, a single, tired leaf detaches itself, twirling down on to the path. After a couple of drags she drops the cigarette beside the leaf and puts her foot over them both, grinding them into the ground at her feet.

In the kitchen, she boils water for her coffee, then pours the coarse grounds straight into her mug, taking it to the table and lighting another cigarette.

'Good morning.' Doreen's smiling head appears around the door.

'Morning.' She dumps two heaped spoonfuls of sugar into her cup and stirs.

'How's you?'

'A1, darling.' Evelyn salutes. 'A1.'

'Breakfast?' Doreen disappears into the pantry to root around.

'God, no.' She sits down.

'Off to the country?'

'Paddington. Ten o'clock.'

Doreen emerges with bread and butter. 'Better get a move on then.'

Much as Evelyn loves Doreen, much as sharing this flat with her is the calmest, the least troubling living arrangement that she can imagine, just now, just this morning, she really doesn't want to talk. She would rather sit here, alone, with the remains of her dream wrapped around her like a stole against the grey morning air.

Doreen pulls out a chair and begins slicing bread. She is humming. Dressed to go out, wearing a pretty frock, her cheeks scrubbed and powdered, her hair up. Though it's hard to tell in this light, she may even be wearing rouge.

'What are you up to anyway?' says Evelyn. 'It's Sunday. Shouldn't you be in bed?'

Doreen looks up from her slicing. 'I'm off today, too. The man, remember. I told you last week. He's promised to take me out of London. Said I was languishing in the smoke.'

'Ah.'

'I know he'll drag me up a godforsaken hill somewhere and make me look at a view. Still . . .' Doreen smiles, apologetic, flushed.

Evelyn crushes her stub in the ashtray. 'You're right. I do have to get a move on.' She pulls on her coat. 'You look lovely. You *are* lovely. Have a lovely time. Say hello from me.' She goes to the door, turns back. 'And wish me luck.'

'Luck,' says Doreen, grinning, holding out her buttery knife. 'And remember, don't let the old girl get you down.'

Evelyn stands beneath the clock, tapping her foot against the ground, scanning the Paddington crowd for her brother. No sign. She checks the departures board one last time and then heads off across the station, moving through wide slices of morning light. Irritating. It's irritating he should be late.

The engine is spitting ash when she arrives at the platform, and she just has time to jump on the last carriage before it pulls away. She walks the length of the swaying train, checking each compartment for her brother's tall, rangy shape, the welcome of his smile. He is nowhere though, and the train is full, but in the last carriage of second class she finds a compartment to herself.

Where the hell is he, then? They've had this arrangement for weeks. She feels a brief, worried contraction

on his behalf, but then pushes it away. She doesn't want to think about her brother. Her brother can more than look after himself. She wants to think about her dream. About how it begins.

It begins like this: she's in the sitting room of the house she grew up in, and she is reading a book. The doorbell rings; she marks her place and stands, moving across the carpet to the door. Now all she has to do is turn the handle and step into the hall, and Fraser will be there, waiting for her on the other side. Her hand is over the doorknob, and she is touching it, can feel the cool brass of it sliding into her palm; she presses down, the door swings open and—

She never gets any further than this.

These are things she remembers: a morning in summer; Fraser beside her on the bed; the shifting patterns across his face.

The train rattles through a tunnel. When it emerges again into the unpromising morning, Evelyn catches sight of her reflection in the mirror above the seat. Because of the way it's angled, slightly downwards, she can see her parting clearly. She hasn't seen her hair in daylight for a while, and in amongst her dark hairs are coarse white ones, too many now to count.

And here is the truth of things, she thinks. Even if the dream were real, if he could assemble himself from his thousand scattered parts, if she could open the door and find him standing before her, whole, he

would be horrified: she is thirty next month. She has betrayed him. She has become old.

Outside, London's suburbs slide on. She thinks of all the people, in all the houses, waking to their grey mornings, their grey hair, their grey lives.

We are comrades, she thinks, in greyness.

This is what remains.

When Evelyn wakes, there's a small boy on the knee of a large woman sitting on the seat in front of her. Both of them are staring. The child has a headful of orange curls and a round, pasty face. The woman turns immediately away, as if caught in the act of something shameful, but the child carries on looking, mouth open, a thin silver slug trail from nose to chin. Three more people sit in the carriage, too: a man, and two elderly women over by the door. Evelyn looks out of the window. They are pulling out of a station. *Reading* – halfway there.

'That lady's got no finger.'

'Shh,' says the woman with the child. '*Shh*, Charles.'

Evelyn raises an eyebrow.

'Look out of the window, Charlie,' says the woman in a high, strangled voice. 'Can't you see the sheep?'

'*No*,' says Charlie, wriggling and squirming on the woman's lap. '*Look*.' He appeals to the man next to him. 'Lady's got no *finger*.' He is leaning forward now, the line of drool almost touching his mother's skirts.

Evelyn looks down at her hand. She has indeed got no finger. Or half a finger. Her left index finger ends in a smooth, rounded stump just after the knuckle.

'Good gracious, Charlie.' She looks across at him. 'Do you know what? You're quite right.' She waggles her stump in his direction. 'Did you eat it while I was asleep?'

Charlie jumps back. The rest of the carriage takes a sharp breath, and then, as if in a game of Grandmother's Footsteps, everyone freezes their gaze straight ahead.

'You can touch it if you like,' says Evelyn, leaning towards the little boy.

'Can I?' the boy whispers, reaching out.

'No!' manages his purple-faced mother, yanking Charlie back. '*Absolutely not*.'

'Well,' shrugs Evelyn. 'Let me know if you change your mind.'

Charlie slumps back on to his mother's lap. His eyes flicker from the stump to Evelyn's face and back again.

'And where are you going to, Charlie?' says Evelyn.

'Oxford,' says Charlie, punch-drunk.

'Perfect. Me too. You can wake me up when we arrive.'

At Oxford Evelyn waves goodbye to Charlie, changes trains and takes the branch line that leads out to the village. She still half expects to see her brother

emerging sleepily from further up the train, but she is the only person to alight on the tiny platform. The small ticket window is shuttered up; a few straggling remnants of geraniums survive in the hanging baskets, the brittle skeletons of foxgloves in the beds. She walks out over the crossroads, where the butcher's and the post office face each other with blank-eyed Sunday expressions, and passes the low, five-housed terrace that leads to the green.

There was a boy who lived here, Thomas Lightfoot, the son of one of the men who worked for her parents; her brother played with him sometimes when they were children. She always liked his name. He was the first person she knew to die. She remembers her brother telling her, one sunny afternoon in London, in the spring of 1915. He had a wife and a child and he lived and died and all before he was twenty-three. She looks into Thomas's house as she passes now, sees a young woman through the window, back turned, scrubbing at something in the sink.

Evelyn walks on, her feet the only sound on the road, leaving the village behind, until she is passing open fields, where scattered crows pick at the stumps of the crop. The sun is out. She shuts her eyes against it, letting the light dance orange on her lids, and takes a lungful of pure air, glad, despite herself, to be out of London. Ahead of her, the low stone wall that marks the boundary of her parents' land comes into

view, behind it are clusters of high firs, branches dark against the bright sky.

She takes the road that leads behind the house, so she can approach without being seen, opening the gate in the wall and standing on the lawn. In front of her is the house, seen from the side, its Cotswold stone deep golden in the sun. As she stands there, a black-clad maid comes running out of the side entrance and scoots around a tree trunk, where she is lost from view. Soon a small cloud of smoke rises into the air. Evelyn smiles. *Good for her*.

She sets off across the lawn, heading for the back of the house. The grass is surprisingly long for November, and by the time she reaches the steps her shoes are soaked. She pushes the door open with her hip and swears under her breath as she reaches to unbuckle them. They are suede, thinly strapped, the only vaguely ladylike pair she owns and a rare concession to her mother's tastes, but they are too wet, now, to wear. She kicks them off and takes them to the cupboard by the back door, where a familiar smell greets her: damp and cobwebs and the close winter-rubber smell of stored galoshes. She chucks her shoes in between the umbrella stand and an old tennis press, considers for a moment the merits of wearing galoshes to lunch, thinks better of it, then pads in damp stockings on cold flags down the corridor, past the kitchen. A quick glance through the interior window

tells her that it is buzzing, with a platoon of servants scurrying to and fro.

When she reaches the end of the corridor, she stops, puts her hand to the wall.

Because once she turns the corner, she will be in the main hall, at the end of which is the glass front door, and behind the front door is where Fraser stands in her dream. And she knows it is stupid, but still—

She closes her eyes, lets the feeling of his nearness fill her, fill her chest, her arms, the air before her face, until—

'*Evelyn*.'

She snaps open her eyes.

'*What* are you doing?' Her mother, trussed in cream and gold, rears before her. '*Where* are your shoes?'

'I . . .' Evelyn looks down at her stockings, clinging wetly to her toes, 'came in around the back. They're in the cupboard,' she adds, 'under the stairs.'

Her mother makes that noise, that special back-of-the-throat click.

'Well, it won't do. And neither will that blouse. You look like a shop girl. Is this your latest pose?'

'I . . .'

'Your *cousin* is here.' Her mother leans forward, hissing. 'Your old dresses are upstairs. Now *go at once and change*.' She steps back, narrowing her eyes. 'Where is your brother?'

'I . . . don't know. We were supposed to come together, but then . . .'

'But what?'

'But then he wasn't there.'

'He wasn't *there*? Well, where is he then?'

Evelyn shrugs, defeated. 'I'm sorry, Mother. I really don't know.'

Her mother pulls herself up to her full height – and she is magnificent, really, even Evelyn has to admit – and steers her great Edwardian bosom into the wind.

Evelyn grits her teeth. Occasionally, just occasionally, she can muster the strength to pick her battles. 'Mother?'

Her mother turns back towards her.

'Happy birthday.'

Her mother nods once, swiftly, as though acknowledging something painful but necessary, like the removal of a tooth, then pushes open the door to the kitchen. As the door swings shut, the hubbub within dies. Her voice barks out an order, something about fish.

Evelyn turns back again, closes her eyes. But it is useless. The feeling has gone. She walks around the corner. The front door is there, ten feet of impassive wood, but behind its panels: nothing. No one is waiting for her on the other side. There is nothing but the brightness of the day, and the dancing patterns made by the sun as it hits the bubbled, blown glass.

❖

JACK PUSHES HIS BREAKFAST plate away and stands, then, 'I forgot this yesterday,' he says, taking a squash from the bottom of his haversack. 'It's a good-looking one, I think.' He puts it in the middle of the table and shoulders his empty bag. 'Right then. See you tonight.' He stays there a moment, as though there were something more he wanted to say.

Twenty-five years.

Ada stays seated. His wide-shouldered bulk fills her view. He is wearing his old Sunday clothes, allotment clothes, softened and worn with use. She can still see the young man in his silhouette. Just.

'Yes,' she says. 'See you tonight.'

He nods, goes, the back door shuts behind him and his footsteps disappear down the path.

Twenty-five years tomorrow. Twenty-five years since they went into the round chapel and said their vows, the day as warm as springtime as she walked the uneven stone path to the door. Then the cool darkness within, and gasping, as though she had been plunged into water: she could hardly breathe, she was laced in so tight. For a moment she had the sense that she was alone, until she saw the shape of him, standing next to the minister at the top of the aisle. Slowly, she could make out their guests, too, scattered in the rows on either side. She

set her course for Jack and tried to walk straight.

'All right there.' He took her hand in his and winked. 'Here goes nothing, then.'

The morning kitchen is dim, but the squash he left her is a bright orange-yellow colour, its skin seeming to pulse with the memory of sun. It will be one of the last pickings before winter attacks the allotment with frost. It fairly hums with life.

She picks up the breakfast plates, puts them in the sink and goes outside, filling the kettle from the pump in the yard, then coming in and putting it on the range to boil.

From the back window she can see the fences and gardens of seven houses. She knows the names of all the mothers in this street and the next, all the children, all the men, alive and dead. She has lived in this house for twenty-five years. Jack even carried her over the threshold, the neighbours gathered, laughing, delighted at the unexpected show.

When the kettle is whistling she pours half the water into the washing-up bowl, the rest into the teapot, then scrubs the congealed remains of breakfast from the plates. She'll use the squash tomorrow. A dinner to celebrate. Stew and dumplings. Buy some good meat to go in it. It pleases her, this plan.

When the plates are dried and stacked, she goes to move the squash from the middle of the table, to put it in the pantry till tomorrow, when a sound comes from

the front – a scuffling almost, as though an animal has come to the door. At first she thinks it must be Jack, back for something he's forgotten. But he'd never come to the front. A neighbour then? Ivy? But she wouldn't come to the front either, not on a Sunday, not on any day.

There's a knock, and Ada jumps, moving quickly, taking off her apron, smoothing her skirts, and then going to open the door.

'Yes?'

A young man stands on the step. Thin sandy hair, pale eyes, an attempt at a moustache struggling over his top lip. Where his fresh-shaved skin has met the morning air his face is raw. He looks surprised, as if it were she disturbing his peace, rather than the other way around. He takes off his hat, holding it close to his chest. 'Morning, Missus.'

'Good morning.'

His eyes flicker over her face and shoulder to the hall beyond. He clears his throat. 'Do you live here, Missus?'

'Yes.'

'Then w-would it be possible to trouble you for a minute?' He seems relieved when the words are out. What can he want? Then she sees the heavy bag at his feet. They are everywhere now, boys with bags like these; on every street corner, peddling everything from matches to bootlaces. Or begging. Knocking and asking for cast-off jackets or shoes.

'We don't need anything.'

The boy stares. 'Pardon, Missus?'

'We don't need anything,' she says, moving to close the door.

He steps forward and there's panic in him. 'Can I come in? Just for a minute? Please?' His voice is wheedling. He moves slightly, revealing his left arm beneath his jacket. She catches sight of the yellowed edge of a sling. She stays where she is, the door open a crack, the boy shifting his weight from foot to foot. Then something in her softens and she steps back, opening the door a touch wider, letting the young man slide round.

The two of them are standing close. She can smell him, sour beneath the clean, hard smell of the outside air. There are white flakes scattered over the shoulders of his jacket. They stand there for a couple of awkward seconds. She doesn't want to take him into the parlour, but one of them needs to move.

'In here then.'

He follows her into the kitchen. At the sink she turns to face him, arms across her chest. The boy hesitates at the door, as though waiting for permission, and when she inclines her head slightly, in a series of odd, lurching movements he comes into the room. When he reaches the table he holds on to the back of the chair.

'Nice place you got here.' He sounds out of breath,

as though the small effort has exhausted him. 'Nice and quiet.' He stares at her, as though he is expecting her to make whatever move has to be made.

'You'd better show me what you have,' she says eventually.

'Sorry?'

'In your bag.'

'Oh, right.' And he bends, lifting brown paper packages on to the table, each movement with a similar careful intensity, as if he cannot rely on his body to carry out the small commands he gives it. He reminds her of her son when he was small: the jerky unpredictability of his limbs.

Shell shock.

One of those.

She looks at the well-thumbed packages in his grubby hands, knows that there will be nothing but cheap rubbish inside. 'I'm sorry,' she says. 'We don't need anything after all.'

He looks up at her, pale face tight, and nods briefly, as though acknowledging the futility of their exchange.

She waits for him to gather his things, but he makes no move to do so. Instead, he carries on, his voice rising a couple of desperate notches. 'Dishcloths?' He opens one of the paper parcels to reveal a pile of loose-woven sandy cloths. 'Everyone needs those.'

'I'm fine for dishcloths, thanks.'

'What about a tea towel?' He leans towards his bag.

The bag is large. They could be here all morning. 'How much are the dishcloths then?'

He jerks back up. 'Dishcloths?' He looks surprised. 'They're . . . tuppence. Tuppence for five.'

'I'll take them. Five. That'll do. I'll just get my purse.' She goes towards it, but then realizes she is trapped, cannot get to her money without showing him where her purse is kept.

'Would it be all right if I had a smoke?' he says; that wheedling voice again. 'Just a quick one? I'm fairly done up with the cold.' He moves quickly, before she can say no, taking out a packet with his good arm, shaking a cigarette into his mouth and reaching into his pocket for a light. 'Like one?' He holds them out towards her.

'No, thank you.'

He nods, puts the pack on the table. 'Can I sit down?'

Something strange is hovering in the air between them, something beyond the brazenness of this boy. Ada feels a thin sense of dread. But she nods, slowly, and he pulls out a chair.

'Thanks.' There's the scratch of a match against the box, the small fizz of the flame in the room.

She goes over to the fire, gives it a quick stoke, then walks quickly behind him towards the drawer that contains her purse. She turns to see if he is watching, but he has his back to her, smoking in quick, jabbing

drags. She slides the drawer open as soundlessly as possible, lifting the purse out, searching inside, when there's a sudden noise, a sort of strangled cry. She turns to see him staring at the air in front of him, curled forward, his whole body straining towards something she cannot see.

'Michael?' he says. Then his head jerks once, twice, as though caught in a fierce current, and is still.

Ada drops the purse back into the drawer. 'What did you say?' She moves over to face him.

'Nothing.' The boy flinches, shaking his head. 'I never. I never said nothing.'

'You did.' She speaks slowly, though her heart is pounding. 'I heard you.'

'I never.' He stands up. Stabs out his cigarette. Takes a couple of crablike steps away from her.

'You said "Michael".'

Then the boy begins to twitch, and the twitching spreads, until he is fitting, almost, in awful spasms, and it is terrible, and she should help him, but he is terrifying, and she cannot, and so she stands, stranded, until the fit has passed and he is still.

It is a moment before she can speak.

'Why did you say "Michael"?' She tries to make her voice light, easy. She wants to keep him here.

'I never.' The boy snatches up his packages. 'I never did. I just knocked on your door. I'm just selling stuff, aren't I?' And he holds his hopeless little packages

out to her, before stuffing them back into his bag.

'You said "Michael". You knew him.'

'No, I never.' His head swings violently from side to side. 'I don't know any Michael. No.'

'Stop it,' she says. '*Stop that.* You knew him. You knew my son.'

But the swinging movement only gets faster and faster, until he takes a couple of steps towards her, grabs one of her hands in his, and puts it on to his head. 'I'm sorry,' he says, pressing her hand hard against his skull. 'I'm sorry, Missus.' Then he stumbles from the room.

For a moment she is still, feeling the burning, buzzing touch of him against her. Then she runs down the hall, out of the house, calling after him to stop.

But there is no one on the quiet Sunday street. The boy has disappeared.

As though he was never there at all.

❖

Just outside the small town of Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise, near Agincourt, on the road that leads to the coast, from her room in the barracks of the British Army a young nurse watches a field ambulance arrive.

It is very odd; it is the fourth such ambulance she has seen today.

The nurse blows her nose. She has a cold and is out of sorts. She has been reading a letter from home, trying to stay as close as possible to the tiny little stove. The letter is from her fiancé. A perfectly pleasant letter, full of perfectly pleasant things. He is a perfectly pleasant man.

And yet.

She had her demob papers last week. One of the last left over here. She hadn't been in a rush to go. Soon she will have to face him. This small, uninspiring man who was wounded in 1918 and whom she tended, and felt sorry for, and agreed to marry, when all of this was done.

Since then the nurse has fallen in love. A French captain. She met him at a social. He calls her chérie*, like the fruit.*

She knew the French captain was married. He never lied about that. But he did promise he would leave his wife. Then, last week, when she was out shopping on her day off in Saint-Pol, the ugly, bruised little local town, she saw them: the whole family. Two dark-haired little children, the Frenchman and his pretty young wife. All of them laughing, holding hands, jabbering away in a language she couldn't understand. She hid in a doorway, mortified, till they were gone.

The nurse puts down her letter and goes over to the window, pulling her cardigan closer against the cold. A coffin is being unloaded from the ambulance by four men. All the other ambulances today have held coffins too. She watches as the men lift the plain box and carry it into the small chapel that went up last week. That, too, was strange,

since no one said why they were building the little Nissen hut, or nailing a cross above the door. They've managed perfectly well without a chapel until now.

She wonders who is inside the box.

It is odd to see a coffin nowadays. Not like before, when they loaded and unloaded them like so many loaves of bread. The nurse reminds herself to ask around, find out what might have happened that four bodies have been brought here today.

When the ambulance has gone she goes back over to the stove and picks up the letter. Then puts it down again. She will write to him later. For now, she cannot think what she might say.

❖

IN HER OLD BEDROOM at the very top of the house, Evelyn sits on the edge of the bed and smokes. She stares balefully at the rack of dresses in the open wardrobe in front of her, tipping the ash into her palm. Then she pulls open the window sash and throws the butt out.

In the distance she can see the blue-grey waters of the lake. It's not really a lake; she grew up calling it a lake, but really, from up here, it's an overgrown pond. She can just about make out the red roof of the two-roomed summer house that stands on the reedy little

island in the middle. There's a fireplace in one of the rooms. She could sneak downstairs to the kitchen now and steal some wood, take the little rowing boat over there, light herself a fire and spend the day hidden and reading. It wouldn't be the first time she's ducked out of a family gathering in the same way.

Rather that than the performance of her mother's birthday lunch; rather that than her cousin Lottie and her tiny bites of food, her tiny nibbles of conversation from her tiny, tidy mouth.

It'll be ten times worse without her brother, too.

There's a knock at the door. She pulls herself back from the window as a uniformed young woman enters the room. Evelyn doesn't recognize her. She must be new. Her mother has always got through maids like other people get through handkerchiefs.

'Yes?'

'I was sent to ask if you want any help.'

'Help?'

The girl blushes. 'With changing, Miss.'

'Oh, right. No. Thank you.' She waves a hand. 'Please tell my mother I'm more than capable of choosing a dress.'

The girl, looking relieved, disappears, and from somewhere deep in the house a gong sounds, insistent and low. Evelyn goes to the wardrobe and runs her palm along the rack of dresses, which bob and jingle on their hangers, pretty, pliant as puppets. She plucks

out the most muted dress she can find, a green silk day dress she hasn't worn for years, and pulls it over her head. It smells of must and mothballs. The colour is all wrong, draining her already pale skin.

Bright chatter from the morning room spikes the hall as she makes her way down the wide, main staircase of the house. She listens, but cannot hear her brother's voice and so heads across the hall to the dining room instead. They'll all be in here soon enough.

Two young men, little more than boys, are putting the finishing touches to the place settings. They must be new, too, as she doesn't recognize either of them. They nod at her, then turn and bow and slide away.

She walks to the window, looking out to where the lawn slopes down to the lake. She can just see the little boat, tethered up against the deck, and conjures the damp wood and varnish smell of it, the friction of the oars against the heels of her palms.

'*Here* she is.'

She turns to see her Aunt Mary, Lottie's mother, plump and bejewelled, leading the march. She submits to being kissed and then scrutinized at arm's length.

'You look tired. Are you still *working*?'

'Mmm . . .' Evelyn nods.

Her aunt's face wrinkles. 'And are you still in that *horrible* little flat?'

Despite herself, Evelyn smiles. 'Yes, Aunt Mary,' she

concedes, detaching herself gently from her grip. 'I'm afraid I am.'

Then here they come, the rest of them: Uncle Alec, cousin Lottie, Anthony – *Lord* Anthony – Lottie's husband. All of them pink and smug and smiling. No sign of her brother. For a brief moment she wonders if something is really wrong, but then they are upon her, and she steels herself, arranging her face to meet them, making the right noises as she progresses down the line, the sudden, reluctant welcoming committee to her mother's birthday lunch. Her father nods at her, chin set, eyes locked, as ever, somewhere to the left of her head. But next to him, her mother's gaze strafes her, head to toe. And in it is the inevitable, illimitable disappointment. *Better*, says her expression, *but still not good enough*.

The family take their places around the table and the two young men reappear with the soup trolley, moving quietly around the room. Anthony takes the seat across from Evelyn. The space to his right is free.

'So,' says Lottie, to Evelyn's left.

'So,' says Evelyn, turning to her cousin, who is resplendent in yellow lace.

'How's London?' Lottie tilts her head to one side, as if London were a wayward old acquaintance she used to run around with but with whom she has lost touch. When she married, two years ago, Lottie moved from a short-lived flat-share in Chelsea into Anthony's ugly,

crenellated Victorian pile. She is a lady now. *Lady Charlotte. Lady Lottie*. Evelyn can only guess at the fury that engendered in her own mother's breast.

'London seems well,' says Evelyn, taking a sip of wine. 'Bearing up. Shall I pass on your regards?'

Lottie gives a little indulgent smile. 'And are you still living with Doreen?'

They were all at the same school, Lottie, Evelyn and Doreen; Evelyn and Doreen were three years ahead, fused in friendship by their mutual loathing of everything the school stood for. When Evelyn inherited a small sum from her grandmother at the age of twenty-one, bought a flat in Primrose Hill and invited Doreen to live in it too, her family couldn't have been more scandalized if she'd announced that the two of them were planning to keep a brothel.

'Still living with Doreen,' says Evelyn.

'And is she still . . .' Lottie pauses delicately, '*unattached*, too?'

Evelyn meets her cousin's watery gaze. 'Yes,' she lies. 'She is.'

There's a flurry in the corridor. Her brother's voice. *Finally*. She looks up to see him handing his coat to one of the young men.

'Edward!'

'Sorry, Ma. Got caught up. Missed the train. You're looking divine.'

As Ed embraces their mother, her skin registers pink

delight. He's not looking his best – his jacket is creased and his hair looks as though he has wet it in the kitchens on the way through – yet, somehow, he carries it off. As the ripples from his arrival spread across the smiling room, Evelyn is struck, not for the first time, by her brother's easy grace, his seemingly limitless ability to dispense charm. If it were *she*, late for a family gathering in this way, she'd have been cut out of the will.

She is the last to be reached. When he leans in to kiss her, he smells of alcohol, not fresh, but saturated, as though he's been drinking for a long time.

'I thought we were supposed to be coming down together?' she hisses in his ear.

'Sorry, Eves.'

'Where've you been, anyway? You look like hell.'

'Out.' He shrugs.

She rolls her eyes as he takes his place diagonally across from hers. Her mother knows better than to seat her two children together. The young men resume wheeling the soup trolley and start to serve.

'And what about you?' Evelyn turns to Lottie. 'Country life treating you well?'

Lottie picks up her spoon. 'I *am* rather well, actually. I mean, in a manner of speaking. I've been a little sick too.'

'Excuse me a minute.' Evelyn tries to catch her brother's eye, but he is already in conversation with

Anthony, so she leans forward and steals a cigarette from his case on the table in front of him. She turns back reluctantly to Lottie. 'What was that you said?'

'I'm going to have a baby,' Lottie's wispy little voice rises at the end of the line, as if she is unsure herself about this state of affairs.

Evelyn lights up.

'I'm going to have a baby,' says Lottie again, a little louder.

'I heard.' Evelyn blows out a lungful of blue smoke. 'Goodness me.'

To her right, at the top of the table, she can feel without looking that her mother's eyes are upon her. She turns properly to Lottie, giving her mother the back of her head. 'That's wonderful,' she says, too loudly. 'Congratulations. What do you think you'll have?'

'Excuse me?' Lottie looks confused.

'What do you think you'll have? Cannon fodder? Or the other kind? What shall we call it? Drawing-room fodder? *Tedium* fodder?'

Lottie puts down her spoon. 'I'm not sure I quite know what you mean.'

'Boy,' says Evelyn slowly, 'or girl?'

On the other side of the table, as though alerted by some chivalrous instinct, Anthony and Ed look up. Anthony clears his throat and leans forward. 'So, how are you, Evelyn, old thing?'

He looks even plumper, thinks Evelyn, meeting his

gaze, while Lottie looks thinner than ever. Perhaps they've got things confused and it's Anthony who's eating for two. For a brief, horrible moment an awful mental picture assails her: Lottie and Anthony, deep in the act. He smiles encouragingly. 'Coming along with us on Thursday then?'

'Thursday?'

'The burial. Westminster Abbey. Got a friend with a place on Whitehall,' says Anthony. 'Good view of the Cenotaph. We'll be having some drinks. You're most welcome.'

The burial. Few drinks. He makes it sound like a trip to the West End.

'I'm not sure,' she says. 'I'm not really one for funerals.'

Anthony looks at her, seeming to weigh the relative truth of this.

'Still fighting the good fight?' he says eventually. 'What is it again? The labour exchange?'

'Pensions, actually,' says Evelyn.

She knows that he knows this. They have had this conversation before.

'*Pensions*.' He shakes his head. A loose flap of skin already hangs beneath his chin. Soon he will be one of those men with necks like farmyard fowl.

'I don't know how you stand it,' chimes in Lottie, giggling, braver now the reinforcements have arrived. 'I'm sure I never could.'

'*I* know why she does it.' Anthony leans forward.

All the other conversations around the table appear to have ceased.

'And why's that?' says Evelyn.

'Men.' Anthony cackles, leaning back in his seat. He slaps his leg and holds out his arms. 'All of those *men*. Just the thing for a girl like you. Cripples, most of them, can't run away. Must be able to just pick them off.' He lifts both his hands and mimes shooting. 'Fish in a barrel, what?'

Lottie sniggers.

Evelyn feels her skin flare. 'Hardly,' she says. And finally, now, she manages to catch her brother's eye. He is smiling, but the look is a faded version of the one she has seen so often before: of mingled awe and humour that dares her to go on. He looks tired, as though he hasn't the strength for whatever is about to unroll. And she is furious then, more furious with him than with the whole lot of them put together. 'Hardly,' she says again, a little louder this time.

'And why not?' Anthony smiles encouragingly.

'I think we all know where I stand on this.'

'And where is that, Evelyn?' says her mother from the head of the table. 'Where exactly is it that you *stand*?'

Evelyn turns towards her mother. 'Why, on the shelf, of course.'

'The shelf?' says Lottie.

'Yes. The shelf. You know the one. The dusty old shelf.' She looks around the table, none of them quite looking at her, none of them quite looking away. 'Haven't you heard of it? It's quite comfortable up here, I assure you. The view's not bad. You wouldn't understand though, any of you.' She lifts up her fish knife. 'You're all on the other side. What's the opposite of the shelf? *In the mix?* In the cake mix? Look at Lottie–' she waves her blade at her cousin, who gasps. 'Isn't she lovely? She's a veritable little currant, wouldn't you say?'

'Evelyn,' says her mother slowly.

She turns her head. 'Yes, Mother?'

'Would you like an ashtray?'

She looks at the cigarette in her other hand, whose precarious length of ash is on the cusp of falling into her soup. One of the young men slips an ashtray under her right arm.

'Evelyn?' repeats her mother.

'Yes?'

'When are you going to learn?'

'Learn what?' She crushes out her cigarette.

'Bitterness is simply not very attractive.'

Evelyn opens her mouth. Closes it again.

When she was growing up, she used to imagine her mother as a savage with a blowpipe, dispensing poison darts. She never missed. One had to learn to duck.

She puts down her knife, lining it up with the side of her plate.

Bitter?

She isn't bitter.

Bitter is the last thing she is.

❖

ADA IS ON THE other side of the small park when she sees Jack heading home, his back slightly hunched, his head bent against the cold. She has been out here longer than she intended, trying to calm herself, breathing in the chill afternoon air, walking looping circles of the patchy grass, one end to the other, avoiding the piles of fallen leaves. She sets off towards him now; if she walks fast enough she can catch him up.

Jack lifts his head as she approaches. 'Ada.' He looks surprised. 'What are you doing out here?'

'I just . . .' She tries a smile, but her cheeks are numb. 'Fancied a bit of air.'

'You could have come to me.' He adjusts his pack. 'There was plenty to do on the allotment today.'

Is his tone resentful? She cannot tell, but they fall in step beside each other anyway, crossing the park towards home. Ahead of them the sun is hanging low in a sky the colour of tin. Between them is the slight,

constant distance, the distance they cannot name, or broach. She takes a breath. 'Jack?'

He slows, turning to her. 'What's that?'

She comes to a stop, hands clenched in her pockets.

'What is it, Ada?' His eyes seek hers out. 'What's wrong?'

'Earlier – just after you left – a boy came. He knocked on the door.'

His brow creases. 'Who?'

'I don't know. He was just one of those boys, selling things. Rubbish, most of it. But I . . . let him in.'

'You let him in?'

'He was wounded,' she says.

He nods, accepting this. 'What was it? Did he do something to you?'

'No, nothing like that. No.'

'Well, what then?'

She breathes in the scent of the leaves held in piles around them, the sweet beginnings of their decay. 'There was something about him,' she says. 'Something not right. I said I'd buy some dishcloths, just to make him go. But when I went to fetch my purse, when I was standing in the corner . . . he said it.'

'Said what?'

The old flicker of danger.

Their marriage is tripwired.

You can still stop.

' "Michael",' she says.

The fuse is lit. She can feel it, fizzing in the air between them.

Jack is suddenly very still. 'He said "Michael"?'

'Yes.'

'Michael Hart?'

'Just Michael.'

He takes a step away from her. 'Well, who was he? Did he give you his name?'

'I didn't ask.'

'What did he look like then?'

A young couple walk past, heads bent towards each other. Ada waits until they have gone, and then speaks in a low, urgent voice. 'He was small. Wounded. Had his left arm in a sling. I was standing with my hand on my purse and he said "Michael", and when I turned around he was looking in front of him. As if he could see something.'

The wind troubles the plane trees. A shower of leaves falls to the ground around their feet.

'He was sitting in your chair.'

'What happened then?'

'Nothing.'

'*Nothing*?'

'I asked him why he'd said it. He said I'd imagined it. He said I was wrong. But I wasn't wrong.' She feels her heartbeat increase. 'I heard it,' she insists. 'Plain as anything. Michael. That's what he said.'

Jack holds her gaze a moment more, his eyes

searching, his face lined and reddish in the afternoon light. Then he looks away.

'What?' Ada says. 'Say something. What?'

'It's cold.' His voice is flat, controlled. 'I'm going to go inside. Are you coming?'

She is silent, furious.

'Right then.' He walks a couple of paces away from her.

'Jack! He said his *name*, Jack.'

He doesn't reply, only shakes his head, before setting off across the park.

Ada takes one breath, two. She looks up to where the sun is setting, bleeding into one of those glorious autumn sunsets that stain the sky. Then she puts her head down and follows her husband inside.

❖

FOR SOME REASON the light in their compartment doesn't work. Evelyn fiddles with it, growing increasingly cross, and then goes out into the corridor. The lights are off there, too. There's no sign of the conductor, but the next carriage is bright. The middle-aged man occupying it looks up from his crossword, catches her eye and smiles out at her. Frowning, she turns and goes back to her compartment and sits back down in the dark.

There isn't even any decent conversation to be had, since in front of her Ed sleeps, just as he has since the train left Oxford, with his mouth open and his face slack. From the look and the smell of him at lunch, he probably didn't sleep at all last night. She thrusts her hands into her pockets. It's freezing in here; the heating must be run on the electric, too. The fields beyond the window are blue in the fading light. She used to like this time of year. Winter. The run-up to Christmas. Now it makes her uneasy. There's nothing but darkness till spring.

The train jolts and Ed wakes. He rubs his face, giving her a vague, sleepy smile, before turning to look out of the window. 'Where are we?'

She peers out. They haven't passed a station for a while. 'No idea.' Her breath is beginning to cloud in front of her face. 'Sleep well then?'

'Fine, thanks.'

'So.' She can't help it. 'That was well played.'

'What's that?' His eyes find hers.

'Turning up late.'

He chuckles. 'I wasn't really late though, was I? Not in the end.'

'Where did you get to, anyway?'

'When?'

'This morning. You were supposed to meet me at ten, remember? Paddington station? Under the clock?'

He yawns. 'Sorry, Eves. Had a late one.'

'Whereabouts?'

'About.'

She thinks of what she did last night. Came back from a walk to an empty flat, read till her fire gave out and went to bed. He has never invited her on one of his nights. She can only imagine where he goes. She studies his silhouette in the gathering dark. The easy lines of him. For years they were close. Now they rarely speak. She wonders what goes on beneath the surface. Even the war has hardly seemed to scar him; he barely appeared to miss a step, his face and body unblemished, his charm, if anything, increased.

He turns back, catches her looking and smiles, taking out his cigarette case and offering one to her. 'Funny,' he says.

'What? Your night?'

'No. Well . . .' He rummages in his pocket, brings out a light. 'It was, sort of, but that wasn't what I meant. I meant today.'

'Really? What was funny about it?' She can't think of very much that was funny at all.

'I remembered something, when I went for a smoke in the garden earlier on.'

'And what was that?'

A flame flares, hollowing his face. She leans in to light her cigarette.

'The summer house. On the island,' he says. 'Remember when you hid there for a night?'

'It was two, actually.' She feels a small sting of pride.

'You're right.' He chuckles. 'I remember now. They were beside themselves in the house.'

'I was only eleven. There were hardly many places I could go.'

'I knew you were there though, all along.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Well, why didn't you come sooner then?'

'I thought you'd rather be on your own.'

She pulls her coat tighter around her. 'I'm sure I probably did.'

She didn't used to mind, then, being on her own. She used to do things like that all the time.

'Eves?'

'What?'

He stretches. 'You all right, old thing?'

'Fine. Why? Shouldn't I be?'

'You just seemed a bit . . .'

'What?'

'I don't know. Just a bit – off-ish at lunch.'

'*Off-ish*?' She bridles. 'That's rich, coming from you. You looked like death warmed up.'

'Fair enough.' He holds up his hands. There's a silence, then. 'Come on, Eves,' he says quietly. 'How long can you be like this for?'

'*This*? What does *this* mean?'

Someone passes in the corridor outside.

Am I bitter? Am I?

Tell me. Please. I'll listen to you.

Ed leans forward, and she can just see his eyes in the plummeting light, the halo of blue smoke around his head. 'It's just – it's not a crime to be happy, you know.'

She whistles. 'Really? Gracious. What an incredibly facile thing to say.'

'I'm sorry.' He sits back. 'Sorry, Eves. I suppose it is.'

She turns away, to the darkness thickening outside.

Easy.

Easy for you to say.

Everything's always so bloody easy for you.

❖

'Dɪ?'

'Mmmm?'

'You awake?'

'Mmm.'

There's no fire here in Di's small room, and Hettie's nose is cold.

'What's the time?' Di yawns, her voice thick with sleep.

'Don't know. But it's getting dark.'

Di rolls on to her back and Hettie has to shift. Her right arm is dead anyway. She dangles it down the

side of the bed and the blood returns in pricks and swells of pain. 'I'll have to get back,' she says. 'My mum'll kill me if I'm late.'

Their breath blooms in soft clouds above their heads.

'You could just stay here instead.'

Hettie brings her arm back under the covers. It's tempting. Given the choice, she would. Stay here in Di's rooms above the furniture shop, where there are no mothers to look you up and down, or sniff out the traces of the night on your clothes.

'Can't. Told her I'd be back for dinner, didn't I?'

But she doesn't move. Not just yet. It's cosy under the covers, here in their body-scented warmth.

'It was a killing night.' Di stretches, and Hettie can hear her smile.

They stayed for hours, and when they left it was morning: startled pigeons eyeing them, the men in overalls sprinkling the roads. Humphrey gave Di the money for a taxi which they rode through half-deserted streets, upon which the pink winter sun was just starting to rise.

There's a silence, then, 'Humphrey wants me to go away with him,' says Di.

'*What*?' Hettie turns so they are lying face to face. 'When?'

'Next weekend. To a hotel.'

It is too dark to see Di's expression, but Hettie feels

something cold take possession of her insides. 'And will you go?' she whispers.

'Yes,' says Di. 'I think I will.'

Hettie's heart thuds into the space between them. They have spoken of this, endlessly. Of what it would mean, to finally be with a man. Not the boys they grew up with, or those they work with at the Palais, who are always trying to get them round the back of the stage door for a cigarette or something more. Not most of the men who hire them, in their shabby lounge suits, pressing themselves up always that bit too tight. But a real man. Someone you liked. Two girls they know have done it already – one with a soldier in the war, who had to give the baby away, and another, Lucy, from the Palais, who did it with a man from Ealing, for five quid; the deposit on a sealskin coat.

It is here then. The future, come for Di.

'But what if you . . . you know . . . what if you get caught out?'

'I won't,' says Di lightly. 'I know what to do.'

Hettie closes her eyes. Sees a darkened hotel room, a bed. A girl and a man. But it is not Di and Humphrey inside.

I've been watching you for two whole minutes.

A sharp ache floods her. It frightens her, the force of it.

'What about you?' says Di. 'Did you like Gus?'

Hettie opens her eyes, breathing out into the dark.

She danced with Gus for hours in the end, but can barely resurrect him now – the pieces of him indistinct, the shape of him too blurred. 'He was . . .' She searches for the word. 'Nice.'

'He liked you,' says Di. 'I could tell.'

'Mmm.'

There's a silence.

'I'd better go.' Hettie slides reluctantly from the bed.

She slept in her dress, since it was freezing when they got back, and so has only to put her feet in her shoes and pull on her hat and coat. 'I'll see you tomorrow then.'

They hug briefly, Di's body warm and heavy, already slipping back into sleep.

Hettie makes her way to the door, where Di's dress is tossed carelessly over the back of a chair. She reaches for it, lifting a section of its black, diaphanous material, feeling the delicious crunch of sequins beneath her fingertips. Behind her, Di turns in the bed.

'Ta-ra then,' says Hettie, bringing her hand away.

Outside, she pulls her scarf tight, passing the plate-glass windows of the furniture shop, eerie in the twilight, its beds and chests and chairs in small, clannish arrangements, as if they didn't need humans to intrude in whatever dark business they are upon. At the end of the street she turns left on to the Goldhawk Road, where the tang of fish and the iron smell of meat and the soft, sweet pall of vegetable decay still hang

over the shuttered-up stalls. Then, hurrying now, into the low-housed streets that separate Shepherd's Bush from Hammersmith. She can see people sitting down to dinner, house lamps spilling light as curtains are closed against the coming night. Everything in its right and proper place, everything with that ordered, stultifying Hammersmithness that sometimes, in her darkest thoughts, makes her wish that the Zeppelins had dropped their bombs here rather than carrying on to the city instead.

It is because she doesn't fit. Ever since she can remember, she has felt it, this hunger for something more. Something that thought it would be happy with the job she used to have at Woolworths, but wasn't, no matter how well paid, or how smart the uniform she was given to wear. That thought it would be happy at the Palais, but instead feels she is just going in circles, round and round the floor. Di has it, too, this same desire, Hettie knows she does. But Di has transformed it into angles of the head and lowerings of the eyes which bring her men and money and means of escape. Hettie doesn't have those skills, doesn't know how to flatter and flirt, doesn't even know if she wants them, and so it stays inside her, this hunger, ragged and raw.

The smell of boiled mutton hits her as she opens the front door, and she checks herself in the mirror in the hall, sending up a small, silent prayer that the adventures of last night will not be written on her face.

'Het? Is that you?' Her mother's querulous voice comes from the kitchen.

'Coming.' She takes off her hat and goes down the narrow passage to the kitchen. Her mother is standing by the stove. Her brother Fred is in shirtsleeves, leaning on his elbows on the table, the windows misted with cooking and heat and the thick mutton smell over everything. Fred lifts his head, giving her the usual glassy-eyed, empty stare.

'Hello, Mum. Fred.'

Her mother gives her the up and down. Fred murmurs hello.

'You're late.'

'Am I?'

'We were wondering where you'd got to.'

'I was at Di's.' She picks one foot up, touches it to the back of her opposite calf. 'I said, remember?'

'You took your time coming home. We thought something might have happened. Didn't we, Fred?'

Hettie casts a look at her brother, who doesn't seem as though he's wondering much at all.

'Why didn't you come home earlier? I don't like to think of you coming through that market at night.'

It is safer to say nothing.

'Take off your coat then, and carry these over for me.'

She does as she's told, taking two plates and putting one in front of her brother's place.

'Thanks,' says Fred softly.

Thanks, he can manage. *Please* and *thank you* and sometimes, if you're lucky and you ask him a direct question, *yes* or *no*. Anything else is a push. Ever since he came back from France. He speaks enough at night though. Cries and shouts out the names of men in his sleep. She can hear him through the walls.

'So,' says her mother, taking her seat, 'shall we give a bit of thanks?'

Hettie rests her chin on her clasped hands.

This was what her father used to say. *Shall we give a bit of thanks, then?*

He was Irish, and kind, and he used to look at them sometimes in a startled way, as though astonished he should have washed up here, with this English wife and these English children, sharing a life with strangers masquerading as his kin.

Hettie closes her eyes, and for a flashing moment she is back in the club, as though it were projected there on the back of her eyelids – the Negro singer, the frenzy of the band, the way they all danced as if they truly didn't care.

'For what we are about to receive . . .'

Are you here to dance then?

'. . . may the Lord make us truly grateful,' mumble Hettie and her brother.

She opens her eyes. On the plate in front of her a piece of mutton sits beside a lump of marbled bubble,

the lot of it surrounded by a pool of sticky gravy. Her mother makes her gravy on a Sunday night with the bones of the joint, so by next Sunday dinner, having eked it out over the week, it most resembles what it mostly is: glue.

Her mother takes up her knife and fork and quiet descends; lumpy, Sunday silence, broken only by the squeak of knife and fork on plate.

'Saw that Alice at Mass. The one you used to work with at Woolworths.'

Hettie pokes at her food.

I've been watching you for two whole minutes.

'Hettie?'

'What?' She looks up. Her mother is staring over at her.

'That Alice? The one whose sister died of the 'flu, same time as Dad?'

Hettie sees her father, lying on the bed. One day he was fine, the next he was dead, his skin shining and purple; a terrible blooming, the colour of the heliotrope flowers in the garden out the back. She misses him. He more than made up for her mum. 'I remember,' she says quietly.

'She's married. Expecting now.'

'Oh.' She knows what's coming.

'Says her job's coming up.'

Her mother has never forgiven her for leaving the household goods section of Woolworths, where she'd

worked since she was fourteen, and taking the job at the Palais. It was as though she had bought a ticket for the next train to hell. Non-stop, no changes. *All the way down.* Her mother wasn't interested, or happy, or proud when Hettie told her how many other girls had gone for the job. *Five hundred, for eighty places*, whittled down in the course of a day. All her mother managed was, *No respectable girl would be seen dead in a place like that*.

'I've got a job, thanks, Mum.'

Her mother grunts.

Hettie pokes at her mutton with her fork.

'How's Di?'

'Fine.' Hettie sighs. 'Di's fine.'

A well-rehearsed conversation:

But why's she got to live alone?

She doesn't live alone, Mum. Her landlady's in the room next door.

Still. There's something about it. It's not right, is it? Anything could happen.

There's no use in explaining that was the *point*; and if Hettie had her way, she'd be living there too.

She looks up at them: her mother, thin hair pulled back in a bun, wearing the wrap-around overall that Hettie hates because it makes her look like what she is – a char who has to go out every morning and clean other women's homes. The tidy little kitchen. And Fred, chewing, eyes glazed – so pale you can almost see the wall behind.

For this she has to give over half her pay. Fifteen shillings a week for this. On the table on a Monday night. Every week since her brother came back useless and her dad died and left them in the lurch. She'd be able to board at Di's for less. And have some money left over for clothes.

You're not one of those anarchists, are you?

They're not real, she thinks. Neither of them. Her mother or her brother. Neither is this kitchen. None of this is real.

I want to blow things up, too.

Hettie imagines an explosion, enormous, the house made rubble, the street in flames, the wide sky and stars above her, and walking out into the vastness with ashes fluttering in her hair.

'What?' says her mother.

'What?' says Hettie.

'You were smiling.'

'Was I?'

Her mother's face darkens. 'What's so funny?'

'Nothing,' she says, shaking her head.

Then she looks down at her plate and lifts a forkful of mutton to her mouth.

DAY TWO

Monday, 8 November 1920

In Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise, just past midnight, Brigadier General Wyatt climbs down from a military car. He is the Director of the Imperial War Graves Commission, the man charged with organizing the burial of the dead of the British Army. Beside him is his deputy, Colonel Gell. The men walk towards two soldiers standing guard in front of a makeshift hut. The more senior of the soldiers steps forward and salutes. 'They're ready for you, Sir.'

'And have the selection parties gone?'

'Yes, Sir, they have.'

'And their arrivals were staggered as ordered?'

'Yes, Sir, they were.'

'Very good.' Wyatt steps around the man and through the corrugated-metal doorway. Beyond a small paraffin lamp, barely visible in the dim light, lie four stretchers. He stands, listening to the wind as it lifts and whistles through the sides of the hut. To his left, standing open and empty, its lid beside it on the ground, is the shell of a plain wooden coffin. On the stretchers before him are four shapes, each of them covered with a Union flag.

They are very small bundles. These cannot be bodies. These are just scraps of things, they look like little more than rags.

For a second he is seized with the sense that something has gone terribly wrong.

But then he shakes his head. Of course they are not bodies. They have been in the ground for far too long for that.

He thinks of what has brought him to this spot, barely three weeks since the Cabinet's decision to go ahead: of the flurry of telegrams, the brief, rushed meetings of the emergency selection committee; the work it took to persuade a reluctant king that this might be a good idea.

He hopes it is. He very much hopes that they have judged the country right, and that in four days' time this will be seen to have been worth it, after all.

Outside, he hears one of the soldiers cough.

Wyatt gazes out over the coffins as though to fix this moment in his mind. Then he closes his eyes and, very briefly, reaches out, touching his hand to one of the stretchers. He knocks on the wall of the hut and the colonel steps inside. Without speaking, Wyatt indicates the stretcher he has touched. The two men lift the bundle, still wrapped in its sack, each end tied up with string, and lower it into the waiting coffin. They screw the lid in place and cover it with its tattered flag. Then they leave, climbing back into their regimental car, which backfires once, twice, into the night, and drive away.

In the early hours, while the sky is still dark, two more men approach the hut. They exchange salutes and the guards stand aside.

The men see the closed coffin with the tattered flag draped across. They pause for a moment before it, and then move to the other stretchers, the three that were not picked. They lift the first and load it into the ambulance. Then they come for the second stretcher. Then the third.

A chaplain, roused from sleep, an Army greatcoat thrown hastily over his robes, joins the men in the front of the ambulance. They drive south along the road leading to Albert. When they have been driving for twenty minutes or so they stop. By the side of the road is a large shell hole. The men came past here earlier in the day and marked the place.

They light a storm lamp and place it on the ground, where its flame illuminates a medium-sized hole, about fifteen feet wide. A sharp wind cuts across their faces. They are eager to be back inside, in bed. They slide the first sack into the hole. It hardly makes a sound as it falls. When all of the sacks are lying in the earth, the chaplain climbs down from the vehicle. He stands beside the shell hole with his leather-covered Bible in his hand. The shapes of the sacks are just visible at the bottom of the pit. Standing at the lip of the hole, the wind whipping his hair across his forehead, he says a short prayer. When he has finished, the soldiers take up their shovels and hastily cover the bodies with earth. Then the three men climb back into the ambulance and drive away.

❖

ADA RISES AND dresses quickly, going over to the window and pulling the curtains wide. The street below is quiet, the sky brightening. It is early, and though Jack has left already, some of the last men are still making their way to work. The light of morning fills the room, finding familiar things to fall on, lifting the shadows of the night before.

She has hardly slept. All yesterday evening, she and Jack circled each other, and it seemed to her as though that boy were there still, in the room between them, and their son, Michael, his name echoing in the space, the first time it has been spoken in over three years.

But there is something about standing here, in this ordinary light.

Perhaps she heard the boy wrong. Perhaps she heard only what she wanted to. It wouldn't be the first time.

Whatever the explanation, from the way he left, the boy isn't likely to come back.

She turns to the dresser, where there's a photograph of her and Jack, taken twenty-five years ago today. The pair of them are staring straight at the camera and laughing. She picks it up, bringing it closer. It had been her idea to have it taken. In giddy spirits, straight after the wedding ceremony, she'd dragged him into the studio on the High Road, where a fussy young man showed them into his back room and held things up for them to look at: a stuffed teddy, a feather duster, a

bicycle horn. When he honked it they laughed out loud, as the camera exploded in a burst of light.

They look so young. She brushes the top of the dresser lightly with her sleeve and puts the photograph back. She remembers how she felt, walking up this street for the first time, towards their house: the future unrolling before them, waiting to be stepped into, sunlit, wide.

Twenty-five years of marriage. Of learning to live with someone. Learning to love them. Learning to bury the things they cannot bear to face.

It is Monday, and so, as she does every Monday, she strips the bed down. But today, before lifting the sheets, she stops, caught again by memory. They would spend whole mornings here, Sundays, when they should have been in church, his fingers twined in her hair, their legs wrapped around each other, speaking low. She gave birth in this bed, with a midwife from the next street. The shock of it. The astonishing, red-bawling jubilance of her son.

She turns, catching herself in the mirror. The sideways light from the window is not kind. What does he think, her husband, when he looks at her now? She puts her hands to her face, pulling it so that the heavy skin around her jaw tightens, briefly, before she allows it to fall.

What is wrong with her today? It is the anniversary, making her remember, keeping her from her work. She

bundles the laundry into her arms and goes downstairs, filling the buckets at the pump in the yard, putting the sheets into the copper to boil. She makes up the starch, stirring it first with cold water, then hot, then rinsing the sheets and turning them through the mangle. It's hard work, and as she turns the handle, another sudden memory assails her: her son, as a small boy, standing beside her, helping her, holding the sheets as straight as he can, while she turns the roller, feeding the sodden cotton through.

Michael.

It winds her, this memory.

After a moment, forcing herself to breathe again, she pushes it away.

THE QUEUE IS A long one this morning. Evelyn can see it as she passes the entrance to the underground, all the way around the corner and halfway down the street. She needs to cut through the line to reach the back door of the office, so she pulls the brim of her hat down and lifts up the collar of her coat. 'Excuse me.'

A fair-haired man makes room to let her through and she squeezes past him, shoulders hunched. She's relieved when she reaches the office door; sometimes some of the repeat visitors see her, and it doesn't do to

be recognized in the street. She takes off her hat and coat and hangs them in the hall, then goes through to the cramped little kitchen. Despite the chill of the day, she opens the sticky window that gives out on to the courtyard at the back. For a moment, in the quiet, she thinks she must be the first one in, until she hears the door from the office open and Robin moving down the corridor towards her.

'Good morning.' She turns to see Robin standing in the doorway, his broad frame encased in a tweed jacket and trousers, smiling, as though he knew something pleasant about what today might have in store.

Irritating. Immediately irritating.

'Good morning.' She makes her voice as neutral as she can. There's little point making much of an effort. He is still quite new, has only been here a week or so. There have been many Robins. They come for a month, for two; sometimes, the sturdy ones, for as many as six, armed with their smiles and their good intentions, and then, after a month or two, they leave, defeated by the monotony, the misery and the men. One of them only lasted a day, a small, red-faced man who'd been a teacher before the war. Someone had made him cry. As he was leaving, he turned at the door and told her she was a fool, that this was worse than being in France.

Robin picks up the battered kettle and leans over the sink to fill it. 'Nice day,' he says, nodding

appreciatively at the open window. 'Good and crisp.'

'I'm not sure that you have enough time for that.'

He looks surprised. 'I suppose not.' He puts the kettle down on the other side of the sink. 'How are you this morning?'

He looks so fresh, and rested. So *friendly*. He actually seems as though he'd like to know.

'Fine,' she says. 'I'm absolutely fine.' She leaves him standing by the window, picks up her satchel and makes her way into the small office, where the hunched shapes of the waiting men are visible outside. The first few in the queue are slumped on the ground, asleep most probably; they will have been there for hours. When she switches on the light those who are sitting on the ground haul themselves to their feet amid a general pushing and jostling about. She can hear their muffled expletives through the glass.

As Robin enters the room behind her, she checks she has everything she needs for the morning's work: sharpened pencils, enough of each of the differently coloured forms that she must fill in for each case, each comment, each complaint. Pink for officers, green for the other ranks. Then she looks at her watch. Three minutes to nine. She takes her bundle of keys from the top drawer of her desk and goes over to the door.

'Early,' says Robin.

'Yes, well.' She turns back to him. 'Are you ready, or not?'

He manoeuvres his tall frame around his desk, and when he's settled in his seat, salutes her. 'Ready or not.'

She rolls her eyes and opens the door.

There's a surge from the back, and some of the sleep-dazed men at the front topple, before regaining their balance. Evelyn steps out into the chill morning air. 'Any men caught making a nuisance will be asked to leave or go to the back of the queue. Is that understood?'

A bit of heckling rumbles from further down the line.

'*Is that understood?*'

The heckling quietens. A few sheepish 'Yes, Miss'es float towards her. She goes back to her desk, feeling the familiar tug of concern for this shabby bunch of men. But compassion is a swamp. It's better not to get stuck in it. Especially not at nine on a Monday morning. She'd never get through the week.

As her first man makes his way towards her desk she gives him a swift look. *Amputee*. From the way his right trouser leg is pinned it looks as if it has been taken off all the way to the hip. There's no false leg; the stump was probably too small to fit against. He takes his place on the seat before her. It's a game with her, to guess a man's rank before he speaks. In this post-khaki world, the extremes at either end of the scale are easy to spot, and have remained, so far as she can see, as

rigid as they ever were, but the middle ground is different, has not yet settled. The temporary gentlemen are the trickiest, those who were promoted from the ranks for their service in the field and are now stuck between society's strata. *Temporary gentlemen* – such a mean-spirited little phrase; still, it just about sums it up. This one, she is sure, is no gentleman, temporary or otherwise; from his dress and bearing, he is a private through and through.

She dips her head and picks up the first of her forms.

When her fourth man approaches the desk, she knows that he's trouble without looking twice. 'You ready for me now then?' he says, sitting down before her.

There's something about him, a confidence, a posture. Officer? His accent is indeterminate. She lines up the form against the side of her desk. Rank? Difficult to say: she can't call this one.

'Name?'

'Reginald Yates.'

'Rank?'

'Second Lieutenant, as was.'

She writes *Reginald Yates* on the top of a pink form.

'And is this your first visit to the Ministry?'

'No,' he snorts. 'I'll say it's not.'

He has a sharp face, brown hair greased tightly back from his forehead, and a neat moustache. It's difficult

to tell his age. He could be twenty-five, but he could be ten years older. There's something restless, bristling about him. Evelyn is used now to assessing the potential danger that might come her way; a woman was attacked once, a year ago, by a man with a knife. Her last female colleague. The woman spent the night in hospital and never came back.

'I'm getting less,' he says, extracting a packet of shag from his pocket and expertly rolling himself a quick cigarette.

She slides the ashtray in front of him. 'Less money, you mean?'

'Yes.' He lights up and blows smoke into the air between them.

'This happens, I'm afraid, Mr . . . Yates.'

His eyes find hers through the smoke.

'May I ask what your injury was?'

'No, you may not.'

At this, she sees that the sheen has come off his cockiness somewhat. 'All right,' she says. 'That's up to you.'

Buttocks then, or groin; those are the ones who never want to say.

He leans forward, jabbing the air with his finger as he speaks. 'The only thing you need to know is I was on seventeen bob a week, and now I'm getting less.' His accent, she notes, is slipping a little now.

'Well,' says Evelyn, 'you should know, Mr Yates,

that for what the department calls second-grade injuries, and these are any injuries that do not include the loss of a limb, the payment drops after three years. Can I ask when the injury was sustained?'

'1917.'

She opens her hands. 'There we are then. I'm sorry, Mr Yates. You're welcome to file an appeal.'

The man spits a stray piece of tobacco out on to the floor. 'Is that it?'

'That's it, I'm afraid.'

'You're not going to tell me if I'm going to get more?'

Evelyn sighs. It astonishes her still that she is here, the mouthpiece for a committee that regards every claim as suspect, every man a malingerer, guilty until proven innocent, forced to plead for scraps from a government that has long since ceased to care.

'I'm sorry, Mr Yates, but we're only a first port of call. If you wish to file an official complaint, then we are able to register that complaint and forward it on. You should have a date for reassessment, which will include a medical examination, within the month.'

'Within the *maaanth*?' He leans forward, mimicking her accent. At this he is, she notes, not bad at all. 'What about the benefits, then? How come if I'd stayed a private I'd be drawing more? *Land fit for heroes*, is it?'

He's right. In a way, the ex-privates are the lucky ones; they have been given a small unemployment

benefit. No such benefit has been given to the commissioned classes; they are supposed to have friends, or means. Temporary gentlemen have come down to earth with a bump. He leans back in his chair, pointing his cigarette at her as though deciding whether to fire. 'Fucking woman.'

'Yes, well,' she says. 'I'm afraid unemployed women haven't been given any benefit either.'

He looks as though he could spit.

She shoots a quick look over to Robin, but he is deep in conversation with a red-headed man in front of him. Something the other man has said has made him laugh.

'I'm sorry,' she says, turning back, 'Mr Yates. Now, if you'll—'

'How many kids you got at home then?'

'That's none of your—'

'Five,' he says. 'I've got five.' He coughs, leaning forward, lowering his voice. 'You haven't got any, have you?'

She says nothing.

'Spinster, aren't you? I'll bet you're dry as a bone down there.'

Whatever sympathy she may have had is long gone. She imagines hitting him, or stabbing him in his hand with her pencil.

'I bet you love this, don't you? Up there on your high horse.'

'Of course I do,' she says, leaning back in her chair. 'Do you want to know why?'

'Why?'

She leans forward again. 'Because I'm a sadist.'

He opens his mouth, closes it again. 'Bitch,' he swears under his breath, standing up, his chair legs scraping against the floor.

'That's right, Mr Yates. I'm a sadistic bitch.'

Then she reaches out a hand and, without looking up, puts the pink slip on the pile to be filed.

'*Next!*'

❖

THICK BARS OF morning light stripe Hettie's bed, touching the faces on the pictures above her, tacked in a careful arrangement on the wall: Vernon and Irene Castle in the middle of a foxtrot; Theda Bara; and, in a still from *Broken Blossoms*, Lillian Gish. Beside them are the Dixies, in a photo cut from the paper just before they left London: Billy Jones, Larry Shields, Emile Christian, Tony Spargo and Nick LaRocca, brandishing his trumpet like a lethal weapon.

They all look happy this morning, grinning in the unexpected sun.

In the room behind her she can hear Fred getting ready to go out. Her mother has already gone to work,

long before the light. Once Fred has gone, the house will be hers for a blessed few hours until she has to leave for the Palais at twelve. She'll boil some water and have her bath. First, though, she wants to lie here, in this lovely bit of sun, and think about the man from Dalton's. Ed.

She closes her eyes, tries to conjure him. The smell of him. The way he danced. The way he talked, as though everything were a game.

Two minutes constitutes a lurk.

No one has ever talked to her like that.

Behind her head, Fred's wardrobe opens with a judder she can feel through the wall. Hettie snaps her eyes back open, defeated. She can't concentrate on anything good with her brother rooting around in there.

Fred woke her up again last night. It was just a few short shouts this time, and then he must have woken himself, because everything went quiet after that.

Clothes hangers clatter as he takes his jacket out. He gets dressed every morning, and goes out, even though he hasn't anywhere to go. Hasn't got a job. Not since coming home from France, two years ago in December, just after their father died. For weeks after his demob, he didn't leave the house, just sat there in their father's armchair in the parlour. She would come back from work at Woolworths and he would still be in the same position as when she had left. Often, the dim light and something about the way he sat made

her think it *was* her dad, come back from the dead. It gave her the creeps. But Fred just stayed there, hour after hour, as if that old armchair might tell him where to get a job.

That was when she had to start handing over half her wages. And there was Fred, just sitting there, doing nothing about it at all.

He wasn't like that before. You couldn't shut him up. He was annoying. He took up room. He would spread his bicycle bits all over the kitchen table, and tease her about her dance classes and her film cards. He worked at the lamp factory down at Brook Green with their dad. They both used to set off together in the morning on their bicycles. Peas in a pod. Sometimes, after work he would go to the pub and come back singing and their mum would pretend to be angry, but you could tell she wasn't really, because Fred was always her favourite. He had a girlfriend called Katy, who had hair so fair it was almost white and who smelled of pencil shavings, since she worked at the stationer's down by the tube.

He could be kind, too. Once, when he came back on leave from France, it was over Hettie's birthday, and he wrote and asked her what she wanted. She'd asked to go to the theatre, and he bought tickets for Her Majesty's to see *Chu Chin Chow*. It was the first time she'd been to the West End, and the show was full of musical numbers and dancing and real animals on the

stage. In the middle there was a Zepp raid, and instead of going into the cellar with everyone else, they both went out on the street, and shared a cigarette and watched the airships as they floated past in the late-evening light, their bellies swollen like giant whales.

'Don't tell Mum.' Fred had winked, as though they were in on it together, and she'd felt excited, and grown up, and grateful for it all.

But the next time he came back from France he had changed. It was as though all of the noise and mess and life had been blasted out of him and only the empty, silent shell remained.

Hettie hears his footsteps pass her doorway now, his soft tread on the stair.

'Fred?' she calls out. He doesn't reply, and she slides out of bed, goes over to the door and opens it.

He is standing halfway down the stairs.

She leans on the banister above him. 'Going out then?'

He nods, cringing, as if caught in the act of something shameful.

'Where you off?'

'I'm just . . .' He shrugs, clears his throat, turning his hat in his hands. 'Going down the labour exchange. To have a see what's what.'

'Going to try to get a job?'

There's a horrible, stretched silence in which Fred's cheeks flare a painful-looking red. He seems about to

say something – but busies himself instead with straightening the brim of his hat. ''Spect so,' he says eventually. 'Yes.'

Then he puts his hat on and almost runs down the stairs.

Hettie goes back into her bedroom, closing the door behind her and leaning against it.

He doesn't go down the labour exchange.

She saw him once, when he was out for one of his walks. Just shambling along, like an old man. He has become like those men from the Palais, the quiet ones; the ones who hire you and then shuffle around the floor, their silences like the thin skin on blisters, covering the things they cannot say.

Her eyes light on her dance dress, discarded by her bed.

If Fred got a job, at least she'd have a bit of money for clothes.

Why can't he just move on?

Not just him. All of them. All of the ex-soldiers, standing begging in the street, boards tied around their necks. All of them reminding you of something that you want to forget. It went on long enough. She grew up under it, like a great squatting thing, leaching all the colour and joy from life.

She kicks her dance dress into the corner of the room.

The war's *over*, why can't all of them just bloody well *move on*?

❖

'Morning, Mrs H. What can I get for you today?'

The butcher boy's apron is red with wiped finger-prints. The smell in here is strong today, hitting Ada like a wall as she steps inside.

'What have you got that's good then?'

'This liver's grand.' The lad presses the purple meat with his finger, and a small puddle of blood oozes on to the silver tray beneath.

'I'll have some, and about half a pound of that beef.'

'Right-o.' The boy, whistling, turns round for his knife.

Ada takes her purse from her bag. There's a cage of ribs laid out on the counter in front of her, the whitened bone sticking out of one end of the marbled flesh. The heavy smell seems to increase. She looks away, out on to the street, to where the sun is striking the ground. Two women stand beneath the awning of the fishmonger's, a young man walking past them, his head turned away from her.

The boy is slim and brown-haired. He looks like Michael. He looks like her son.

'Mrs Hart?'

The butcher's boy is handing the parcels of wrapped meat over the counter. Ada doesn't take them. Instead, she rushes out on to the street. At first she can't see him, but then catches sight of the back of

his head, fifty yards in front of her on the other side of the road. He is walking briskly, his arms swinging at his sides. She shouts after him, but he is too far away and doesn't hear. A van makes its way up the road between them, cutting off her view: *Sunlight Soap for Mother*, a shy-looking girl in a blue pinafore and hat holds out a box of flakes. Ada weaves behind it. Her son is still there, walking steadily up the street in the sun, heading towards the park.

'Michael!' she calls, quickening her pace, but he seems to be moving faster than before. She tries to close the gap between them, keeping him in her sights. He looks well. She can see this, even from behind. He has both of his arms, and both of his legs, and he walks strongly and easily and his head is not bowed, and his hair is clipped just as it was the last day she saw him; and the sun is touching the tips of his ears, and whatever has happened to him, wherever he has been, he has come through it and is alive and well. She shouts his name again.

A small queue is gathered outside the grocer's, but she pushes her way through it, feels heads whip round to stare. Her heart is racing now, sweat breaking at her hairline, on her back, and it is difficult to catch her breath, but the gap between them stays the same. He must feel her behind him, because it is as though he is varying his pace to hers, as though they are playing some kind of tortuous game.

When he reaches the top of the street, she sees him hesitate, finally, standing beside the ironmonger's, as if deciding where to go, as if he is unsure, suddenly, of the way.

Turn left.

Go home.

He turns left, and she shouts after him as he disappears from view.

She lets herself slow a little now she knows he is heading home, but when she reaches the ironmonger's, she sees the road to her left is empty. Her son has disappeared. An old man comes down the street towards her, moving slowly, a boxer dog snuffling the pavement at his side.

'Excuse me?' She goes to him and grips his arm. 'Did you see someone come up here?'

'What's that?'

'Did you see someone come this way? A boy? A young man?'

The old man, looking frightened, shakes his head. 'No one, love. No.'

She releases him, leans back against the wall, gathering her breath.

'You all right?'

'Yes.' She nods. 'Fine. I'm fine.'

She pushes off, hurrying, heading up the street that skirts the park, her thoughts jagged. Then it comes to her, and she could almost cry with relief, because she

realizes he must have been *running*; when he saw where he was, when he knew how close he was, he must have run the last distance home. And she wants to run too, but makes herself walk; she doesn't want to be a hospital case when she reaches him, out of breath, unable to speak. Still, when she reaches the kitchen door she is shaking so much she needs both hands to turn the key.

Inside the house, everything is as she left it. The mangle in the corner, the air still heavy with heat and soap, the washing draped on the fireguard and hung on the dryer above her head. 'Michael,' she calls, her voice deadened by the damp air. Then louder, 'Michael? Are you there?'

She lifts the damp sheets. Looks behind chairs in the parlour. Stands at the top of the cellar steps and calls down into the musty dark.

Upstairs, the bedroom she shares with Jack is empty. She steps on to the landing and waits outside the door of Michael's old room, her heart hammering. Nothing but silence. Heavy silence. Thick. She pushes open the door with her hip.

The room is empty. She hesitates on the threshold, and then steps inside.

Months have passed since she has been in here. It is hard to breathe. She lifts the blanket, sees only unused sheets. She gets down on her hands and knees and stares at the empty air beneath his bed. Now there is

only the wardrobe in the corner left. When she opens it, it smells woody, unused. There is nothing inside. Nothing but two empty hangers and a small cardboard box, tied tightly with string. A box tied so that no one would open it in a hurry; a box that hasn't been opened in years.

❖

EVELYN PUSHES REGINALD Yates to the back of her mind and works steadily, each man a new piece of paper, each complaint copied down and registered on the correctly coloured form. At a quarter to eleven she rings a bell and locks the door for a break. There's a groaning from the men outside. It's not too bad today, though. After the chill start, the weather is mild, unseasonably so; the sun has been pouring through the front window of the office all morning, making the room stuffy. She could do with some air. She snatches her cardigan and cigarettes and pushes her way out into the dirty little courtyard at the back, where she leans against the wall and tips her head to the sky. Her neck is still sore from sleeping upright on the train last night. She puts her hand up and cricks it from side to side.

'Mind if I join you?'

She turns to see Robin in the doorway.

'I didn't know you smoked.'

'I don't. I'm having a fresh-air break.' He says with a smile, 'If I'm not disturbing your peace?'

She shrugs.

Fresh-air break. Trust him to say something like that.

He takes a place against the wall beside her. 'How are the troops, then?'

She lights up, blows out smoke, shrugs. 'Same as ever.'

There's a slight pause before he speaks. 'I had rather an interesting one.'

'Oh?'

'Someone I'd known a little, before the war.'

'Really?' She looks up at him. 'How?'

'We used to climb together.'

'Climb? Climb what?'

'Mountains.' He gives a brief, rueful smile. 'We met in Wales. The hostel at Pen-y-Pass.'

She takes a drag of her cigarette. 'That must have been nice.'

He either misses or ignores the sarcasm in her voice. 'It was,' he says. 'We were there in 1912. Again in '13. We'd climb in the day and drink and talk at night. It sort of felt as though anything were possible.' He is staring straight ahead, as if his past were somewhere there, hovering in front of him, instead of a scrappy courtyard and a soot-blackened wall. 'He lost a leg,' he says, 'same as me.'

She looks up at Robin, properly, for the first time. He isn't unattractive. Lots of people might even think him handsome. He is well built, with a broad body, a pleasant face. The sort of man that's made for mountain peaks. But there's something about him: his health, his *niceness*. The very idea of him exhausts her. She looks at her watch.

'Time to go back already?' He sounds disappointed.

'Yes.' She rubs her cigarette out on the wall behind her and pushes past him, back to her desk.

THE CARDBOARD BOX is beside her on the blanket. Ada isn't touching it though. Her hands are in her lap. But they are itching and her head is buzzing as though a swarm of bees were trapped inside.

Why has she seen him again? Why now?

Is it her? Conjuring him? Making her mind play tricks?

No. It is that cold, stuttering boy.

Reaching out for her.

Scuttling like a crab across the floor.

She lifts her head. The room around her is empty, the only signs left of her son's habitation the slight differences in colour, the faint shadow of the paste Michael used to stick his football pictures to the wall.

She puts her fingertips to them now, tracing their pattern.

Test me on the players. Go on, Mum.

Her son's twelve-year-old face screwed tight with concentration, sitting in the kitchen after school, uniform on, with the door open to the garden and the summer afternoon outside.

Parker,

Jonas,

McFadden,

Scott.

Clapton Orient. *The O's*.

Jack started taking him along to home games when he was six, his small hand clasped tight in his dad's, and neither of them ever missed one after that, not as far as she can remember, right until they stopped the football in 1915. By that time all of the first team had joined up. Their picture was on the front of the newspaper, smiling away in their uniform. That was the year of Kitchener, his image plastered everywhere: omnibuses, tramcars, vans, his finger accusing you from every last patch of wall. YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU! Wherever you moved, he held your gaze. Guilty. That's what he made you feel. She used to wonder how on earth they made it work.

At the last football match of the season, all the players processed around the stadium, then walked down the High Road to show themselves off. Ada stood and

watched with the rest of them, Michael in front of her, all of them waving and shouting themselves hoarse, cheering with the crowd.

The next day Jack found him down the recruiting station, standing in the queue trying to join up. He pulled him out of the line by his ear and marched him up the road to their house. Michael was spitting. He couldn't understand why they were making him stay at home when he had to chance to fight alongside his heroes.

The rows they had, after that.

Once, when Michael had stormed out of the house, she went up to Jack, who was standing by the sink, staring out. She touched him on the arm and he jumped as though he'd been burned.

'What?'

'Perhaps we should let him go,' she said. 'The war will be over soon enough.'

He turned on her. 'You believe what you're told, do you? That the war will be over? With Kitchener's brave men?'

His contempt shocked her. Because she did believe it. It was everywhere that summer, a growing feeling of optimism, of hope.

They were all training: Parker, Jonas, McFadden, Scott and the rest of the Clapton O's; Joe White, Sam Lacock and Arthur Gillies from their street – boys Michael had grown up with, just a little older than

him. They and a million other young men were training, turning into the soldiers who would win the war. The whole country was waiting that early, lovely summer of 1916, waiting for them to be ready, as though everyone was holding their breath.

The guns started in the last week of June. Ada could feel them from her Hackney kitchen, a sort of low booming, just on the edge of hearing, day and night for a week. Then they stopped. Seven o'clock in the morning, the first of July. She walked out on to the street of brown-bricked terraces, in the sudden silence of a midsummer morning in which the sun was already high. Other women were out there too. Ivy White was there. She crossed the street towards where Ada was standing. 'That's it then,' she said. 'Isn't it?'

She gripped Ada's hands in her own slick wet ones. They were covered in suds. 'They'll be going over now, won't they? It's the end of the war.'

But it wasn't the end. Jack was right. It was the beginning of something terrible and new. The papers printed the casualty lists, longer and longer each day. Ivy's son Joe was missing, presumed killed. Ada would see her sometimes, at the end of the day, standing at the front window, looking out on to the street expectantly, as if Joe was going to appear there, whistling on his way home.

Even Kitchener was killed. Drowned on his way to Russia. Sunk by a German mine.

Some time at the end of that July she came home to find Michael sitting at the kitchen table, a newspaper open in front of him, his head in his hands.

'What is it?' she said. 'What's wrong?'

He looked up at her, his face white, shoved the newspaper towards her and went outside.

At first she couldn't see what he had been looking at. Then she saw the photograph: *Private William Jonas, Clapton Orient*. His black hair was plastered down into a smart parting, his young face serious above the deep V of his strip. The paper said he had died in a trench alongside Sergeant McFadden. Beside his picture was a list of his football record: *Centre forward, 73 appearances, 23 goals*. Outside, there was the sound of a ball being kicked angrily against the wall.

She went out, the paper held in her fist. 'Look,' she said. 'Look at me.'

Michael carried on kicking.

'Aren't you glad you're here?' Her voice was high, uncontrolled. She didn't care. 'Aren't you glad your dad brought you home that day? That you're safe? It could have been you.'

He stopped the ball beneath his foot and turned on her.

'*Safe*?' her son spat. 'There's nothing safe. There's no such thing, is there? Not for anyone, not any more.'

She went inside, sat down and held her shaking hands in her lap.

He was right.

And she knew then it was coming. That it was coming for them all. It was like the Bible, the stories she remembered from childhood, as though an order had been issued for all the boys to be killed.

The autumn came, and the days began to shorten, and conscription began to take hold. She began to pray then, something she hadn't done in years. She prayed selfishly, frantically, for herself, for Michael, for the war to stop at her door. She didn't know who she was praying to, didn't know who was more powerful: a distant God, who may or may not be listening; the hungry war itself, growling just beyond the gates; or Kitchener, his weather-faded face half covered over by adverts for Ovaltine and cigarettes, but his finger still pointing, still accusing from beyond the grave.

Michael's birthday was 20 February 1917. The recruiting letter came in the first week of March.

The night before he left for France, when he had finished his training and was home at the end of a week's leave, she knocked on the door of his room. He was packing the last of his things, his big bag and greatcoat already waiting in the hall. He had his haversack open in the middle of the floor and laid out around him in a fan shape were bits of his kit. She walked around the neat half-circle he had made. Toothbrush, soap and small towel, two spare

bootlaces, mess tin, fork and spoon. The window was open and pale sunshine was filling the room. He looked up at her, squinting in the light. 'You inspecting me, Mum?'

'Might be.'

He sat back on his heels. 'Proper sergeant major, you are.'

She crouched down beside him and picked up a small sewing kit, turning it round in her hands. 'They teach you to use this, then?'

'Just a bit.'

She put it back in its place on the floor, went over and sat on the bed, watching her son. He was stronger-looking than when he'd left for his training. The soft, changing shapes of his boyhood were settling, the lines emerging of the man he would become. She watched his head as it bent and dipped, his long narrow back, the sunburned skin moving across the bone at the top of his spine. There was something hanging from his neck. 'What's that?' she asked, pointing.

He looked up at her, and then followed her gaze down. 'It's my tag.'

'Can I see?'

He brought it out of his shirtfront, stood up and came over to her. 'That's my name,' he said, pointing at the brown fibre disc. 'My regiment there. And my number.'

She stared at the number. Six digits. His pulse in the vein beside it, keeping time. Her son.

'You all right, Mum?'

'Grand.' She nodded, tucking it back into his shirt, doing the button up.

He left in the morning, before the sun was fully up. They had offered to walk him to the station, but Michael hadn't wanted them to. They didn't argue. They just stood together at the door and watched as he shouldered his pack, then waved his funny, overladen silhouette off, his tin hat bumping against the back of his neck. He turned, once, at the bottom of the road, and lifted his arm in the brightening morning, before he disappeared from view.

A train passes on the tracks outside, making the windows rattle in their frames.

Ada reaches out and brings the box into her lap. She tries to pick at the knot, but it is stubborn, tied so tightly she'll need something to open it with. She hesitates briefly – but it is only brief, the hesitation, before she goes downstairs to fetch a knife.

❖

'AFTERNOON, LOVELY.' GRAHAM the doorman salutes Hettie with his good arm. 'How's my favourite dancer, then? You on a double today?'

''Fraid so.' She leans into the little hutch where he sits by the door, oil heater on. It smells cosy, of warm wool and pipe. Graham is a fixture of the Palais. A brawny Cockney with an accent to match, he used to work on the railways before the war, and his stories are legion. It is said you can lose hours in his cubby hole, emerge blinking in the light and be ten years older, your youth stripped away.

One of the last to be called up.

Didn't want an old bugger like me.

Proud to lose it in the end.

Two days till the Armistice!

Saw it there, twitching on the ground. Hand still moving.

Knew it was mine from the tattoo on the wrist!

'Commiserations,' says Graham.

'Need the money.' Hettie shrugs.

'Don't we all. Hang on a sec.' He reaches into his pocket and takes out a tin, opens it and takes a tablet out. 'Here you go.' He passes it over the hatch towards her, a Nelson's meat lozenge, brown-red. 'Keep your strength up.' He winks. 'Kept us going for hours, they did. Route marches. All the way 'cross France.'

This is what he always says.

'Thanks,' says Hettie, tucking it into her cardigan pocket. 'I'll keep it for later.'

This is what she always does. This is their little routine.

Does he suspect that she only keeps the stinky little tablets long enough to put them in the cloakroom bin?

But it is their ritual, and she supposes it makes both of them feel good.

'I don't know how you girls do it,' he says, shaking his head. 'Dancing for hours. I really don't.'

Hettie shrugs, as if to say, *What's to do?* Then pulls her cardy round her, heading down the long, unheated corridor to the strip-lit dressing room at the end. The scattered girls turn to greet her, and they exchange hellos as she hangs her corduroy bag on the rail. Those girls who are changed already are sitting, chattering, puffing on illicit cigarettes despite the NO SMOKING signs nailed to the walls.

The chilly Palais cloakroom is one of the dubious perks of the job. It's not what you'd expect, though, from the ones out front, which are all decked out with Chinese wallpaper covered in pagodas and birds. The walls back here are just covered in paint, and a dismal green colour at that. Some of the girls have scratched their initials into the plasterwork, which is already starting to peel. Some wit has even written a poem at knee height:

Beware old Grayson
If he thinks that you're late, son
He'll take you behind and
He'll give you what for.

When Hettie first started, she had to have it explained to her: Grayson, the thin-lipped floor manager whose hard line on tardiness is legendary, is rumoured to live with another man somewhere in Acton Town. The boys swear he's forever giving them lingering looks.

She takes off her cardy, blouse and skirt, hangs them on the rail and pulls on her dance dress, shivering in anticipation of the cold to come. Without the press of bodies that fills the Palais later in the week, the vast dance floor will be freezing. The management don't allow you to take your woollies inside, so the girls try all the tricks they can, sewing extra layers under their dresses, or wearing two pairs of stockings, but nothing much will work on a winter Monday afternoon; your only hope is to be hired and keep moving so you don't have to sit still for long.

'Hey, Hettie!'

'Did you get in then? Did you see it? Dalton's? Saturday night?'

She turns to see that a ring of girls has gathered behind her, their faces expectant; hungry animals, waiting for the scraps. 'Yes, we did.'

'So it's real, then?'

'It's real, all right. It's so hidden, though, you'd never know it was there.'

The girls seem to exhale as one, and she can almost feel their breath alight on her, gilding her with their

envy. She thinks of telling them about the dancers, about the way those people moved as though they didn't care, but it's just too tricky to explain.

'And what about the band? Were they as good as the Dixies?'

'The band were *killing*.'

'And Di's man? What's he like?'

'Smitten. And rich.'

The girls sigh, draw away, back to the mirrors, their powder and cigarettes, giving last-minute adjustments to their faces, their hair. Hettie pulls her dance shoes out of her bag and sits down to buckle them on, warmed by a rare glow of satisfaction. She is envied for once. It may not be nice, but it still feels good.

Di rushes in just in time, pulling a face, whips off her coat and changes at lightning speed, as the door opens and Grayson's head appears around it.

'Time, ladies.' He claps his hands. 'Out on to that floor.' He puts his head into the room and sniffs theatrically. 'And if I catch *any* of you smoking, that'll be pay docked for a week.'

The girls move out into the chilly corridor, Hettie and Di at the back, the boys coming out of the dressing room opposite. Twelve of them, all dressed in their suits, ready for the afternoon shift.

The usual mix of feelings compete in Hettie as the dancers pass through the big double doors on to the floor. There is no doubt that the Palais is

spectacular: everything out here is Chinese, the whole dance floor covered by a re-creation of a pagoda roof; painted glass and lacquer panels showing Chinese scenes are hung around, and the ceiling is supported by tall black columns, all of which are decorated in dazzling golden letters. In the middle of the floor is a miniature mountain, with a fountain running down its sides, and beneath one of two smaller replica temples the band is warming up.

The first time she saw the Palais was when she came down for her audition on a cold day in January. Parts of it were still roped off, and the sound of hammering and sawing formed a background to the thumping piano accompaniment as Grayson drilled the hopeful dancers in front of a severe-looking woman, who barked out orders and culled the men and women from five hundred to eighty during the course of the day.

Even then, in its unfinished state, smelling of shavings and planed wood, you could feel it was going to be something special.

There were the adverts placed in all the local newspapers:

PALAIS DE DANSE! THE TALK OF LONDON!
Largest and most luxurious dancing palace in Europe!
Two Jazz Bands.
Lady and Gentlemen Instructors.
Evening Dress Optional.

Hettie used to cut them out of the paper and leave them on the kitchen table for her mother to read.

Six thousand people turned up that first weekend, and stepping out on to the dance floor that first time, seeing it in all its glory, it truly did seem like a palace. But what Hettie soon came to realize was that none of its splendour was meant for the staff. It was all for the punters, for the ones who had paid their two and six. For Hettie and Di and the other dancers, the Pen waited. As it still waits.

They file in now, boys on one side, girls on the other, heads bowed as Grayson inspects the line for any cardigans, any hankies visible, anyone slouching, any contraband cigarettes or knitting needles that might while away the dances that you spend unpicked. His gaze rakes them; *General Grayson* – that's what the boys call him, especially the ones who were out in France.

Twelve boys, twelve girls a shift.
Twenty dances in the afternoon (3–6),
twenty-five in the evening (8–12).
Sixpence a dance.

'Bloody freezing in here tonight,' hisses Di, as Grayson stalks past.

Grayson stops. He turns slowly, and Di looks down at her hands. But there's no time for reprimands since the heavy door opens and the punters stream through;

hundreds of them, even on a Monday night, heavy footed on the sprung wooden floor.

The band makes a bit of a ragged start and the few first couples brave it out. It's always a waltz first at the beginning of the night. Hettie surveys the scrappy scene, hands in her armpits against the cold. If people ever bother to wear evening dress to the Palais, they definitely don't on a Monday, and the dance floor is a sludge of brown and black and grey, the men in lounge suits, the women mostly in blouses and skirts.

An upright matron trussed into a woollen two-piece is crossing the floor with a determined stride, heading towards the male pen. Di nudges Hettie and giggles. 'Here she is.' Across the aisle, Simon Randall sits up straighter, spits surreptitiously on to his hand and smoothes down his hair. The woman stops before him, holding a ticket coyly in her hand. Simon, smirking, takes it and lets himself out. *Hired*. Simon is one of the most popular men, rented out two afternoons a week by this same woman at eleven shillings a time. Not including tips.

The crowd are scattered now, some of them sitting at tables, a few buying drinks from the little cabins around the sides of the floor. The cavernous room is filling up, the dance floor thickening, the band sounding stronger, the afternoon starting to find its shape. Hettie's eye catches a tall man, moving slowly amongst the crowd on the other side of the floor, and

she sits up, leans forward, her heart hammering; it looks like him, the man from Dalton's: Ed.

The Palais? I went there once.

She grips the rail. Would he come here looking for her?

The man steps out on to the dance floor and she leans forward, the better to see, almost standing in her seat, but as he comes closer she sees it isn't him. This man, other than being tall, is nothing like him; this man has the hesitant, shuffling gait of the false-legged. You can tell them a mile off. You have to be careful with them; they can trample all over you and not even know.

'What was that about, then?' whispers Di.

'Nothing.' Hettie, feeling cross, shakes her head.

But the man has had his attention caught and is making his way across the floor. She knows the look: a little vague, half-whistling through his teeth, as though he is pretending not to know how this business works. 'Afternoon,' he says, hands in his pockets.

'Good afternoon.'

'How much is all this malarkey, then?'

'Sixpence,' says Hettie.

'Sixpence?' The man looks aggrieved, his voice rising a notch. 'But I've just paid two and six to get in.'

'Come with a partner,' Di chimes in, 'if you don't want to pay.'

The man flushes crimson.

Hettie feels immediately terrible. Her heart wilts – for him, for her, for the whole damn business. 'You buy your ticket over there,' she says gently, indicating the cabin to her left. 'It's a foxtrot next.'

The man swallows. 'I'll come back,' he says, 'shall I?' His *shall I* aggressive, daring her to say no.

'Yes.' She smiles at him. 'Please do.'

The man walks stiffly away, as though if he bumped into anything he might break and he and his dignity smash all over the floor.

Di snorts. 'That'll be fun.'

'It's all right for you.' Hettie rounds on her. 'I need the money. I haven't got a man who'll buy me things, have I?'

Di's mouth rounds into a surprised little O. 'What's got into you, then? Get out on the wrong side of bed, did you?'

Hettie shrugs. She doesn't know why, but she's irritated with Di today. With the Palais. With all of it. The man is back, his ticket in his hand. She takes it from him, puts it in her pouch and lets herself out of the small metal gate. And when she smiles at him, it's not just for show, because, really, heaven knows what it must take them, any of them, to come here alone.

She lifts her arms, opens her palms.

This is how it works: you are hired, and you dance. If you're nice to them, and they like the way you move, then they ask you for another, which means another

sixpence, and so it goes. The management takes half your pay, so it pays to be nice.

The man's hands are clammy as he pulls her close. He smells of sweat and basements and clothes that need a wash. He's about as far from the man in Dalton's as it's possible to be.

That makes two of them then.

The band strikes up, and they move out across the floor.

❖

BY THREE THE queue is almost finished, and only five or six men are left. Evelyn sits back in her chair, stifling a yawn. The man at the front of the line is eyeing her, hesitant, moving very slightly from side to side, as though the ground is shifting beneath his feet.

Shell shock.

Private.

'Come in,' she says. 'Take a seat.'

He perches on the chair in front of her.

'Name?'

'Rowan.'

She unscrews her pen.

'Surname?'

'Hind.'

It's such a lovely name that it stops her in her tracks.

Hind: gilded and natural all at once. She looks up, finding herself looking more closely than she ordinarily would, searching for a corresponding beauty in his face. He is no beauty though: too small for his demob suit, left arm in a filthy sling, he has the wizened, old-man look of those who have lived their lives skirting close to the edge. One of the ones who signed up for the grub.

'Rank?'

'Private, Miss. As was.'

Her pen scratches over the paper. The afternoon sun warms her cheek. Hopefully, by the time she finishes there will still be enough light to walk home through the park. 'And what can I do for you, Mr Hind?'

'I was just passing,' he says. 'And then I-I . . .'

She sits back. She is used to them: the stammerers, the stutterers. She can be patient when she wants to be; she can be kind. Rowan Hind's gaze drops, and he is silent for a moment. Then, 'Your finger,' he says, catching sight of it.

'Yes?'

'How did it go?' His pale eyes meet hers.

There is something strangely compelling about him, disarming; she decides to tell him the truth. 'It was in a factory,' she says.

'The war?'

She nods.

'Munitions?' he asks.

'Yes.'

'Thought so.' He looks pleased. 'Canary, weren't you? You still got a bit of the yellow on your face.'

'Have I?'

'Did it hurt, then? Must've hurt.'

She looks down at the gap where the finger used to be, as the rest of her hand curls around it, a reflex, protective action. 'It did,' she says. 'Though not at first.'

At first she laughed. The astonishing sight of it: a finger. *Her* finger. Until a second before, attached to her hand. The strange, spacious moment before the blood burst out over her apron, her face. She remembers turning to the woman who was working on her left, and seeing that her face, too, was spattered in blood. Then back to the machine still stamping away, the finger inside it, the white tendon stretched like glue. She remembers someone screaming. Then everything went black. By the time she came round, she was bandaged and in an ambulance on the way to the hospital.

In front of her, Mr Hind is nodding away. 'I saw that, too. Men lose their arm or leg, first few seconds they don't know their arse from their elbow. If you were a soldier,' he leans forward conspiratorially, 'you'd get a pension for life.'

'Yes.' She smiles ruefully. 'Well.'

She can see the man behind Rowan shuffling his feet.

'Was there a complaint?' she says. 'Is that why you're here?'

He seems to think about this, then, 'No,' he says. 'It's not that.'

She waits for him to elaborate, but he simply sits there, staring at his hands.

'Are you working at the moment?'

'I'm working.' He lifts his eyes. 'Salesman. Yes.'

'And how is that?'

He raises his thumb to his mouth, chewing a bit of skin at the side of his nail. 'It's terrible,' he says.

Of course it is. Do people like him, then, when he knocks at their doors? Travelling salesman? Little Mr Hind?

'It's not that, though,' he says. 'It's something else.'

'Yes?'

'I want to find my regiment. I want to find my captain. I didn't know where to look . . . And then I was passing, and I saw the sign. I was in the Seventeenth Middlesex, you see, fighting with Camden men, during the war.'

'I see.' She takes a scrap of paper from her desk and reaches for her pen. It's not her job, but she can always go to the Records Office with her worker's pass. Can always bend the rules from time to time. 'It shouldn't be too difficult. Providing, of course, that the man in question's still alive. Shall I take your address first?' She unscrews the lid from her pen.

'It's 11 Grafton Street, Poplar.' He leans towards her, watching her write.

'And your regiment?'

'Seventeenth Middlesex.'

She writes this down. 'And which years did you serve?'

'1916 until 1917.'

'And 1917 is when you were invalided out?'

'Yes.'

'And what was your injury?'

He hesitates. 'My arm.'

'I can see that.' She waits for him to elaborate. 'You can't use it?'

'No.'

Again, he doesn't say any more. She feels a small flicker of irritation. 'And your captain?'

'Yes.'

'What was your captain's name?'

His face twitches. 'It was Montfort,' he says.

At first she thinks she has misheard.

'Captain Montfort.' He leans forward, waiting for her to write.

She looks down to where her pen is held in her hand, pressing into the paper. The ink is running unevenly into the little grey marbled troughs and valleys. She lifts away the nib. 'Captain Montfort?'

He nods.

'Well, I'm sorry.' She sits back. 'I'm afraid I can't help you with that.'

'What? Why?'

'We only deal with pensions here. Pensions and benefits. We are not a missing persons bureau.' She takes a slip from the pile beside her, turns it on to the blank side, takes out a small, leather-bound book, opens it and copies out an address. She does everything slowly and carefully, keeping her pen as steady as she can. 'I imagine the best thing to do would be to contact the Army directly. All of the information is here.'

He looks at the piece of paper in her hand as if the letters are from a foreign alphabet. 'But,' he looks up at her, 'you said you could do it. You just said you could help.'

'I'm sorry. I was wrong.'

He is studying her fixedly. He knows she is lying, she thinks. She holds his gaze. His head starts to jerk.

'Mr Hind?'

The jerks are rising in intensity, passing through his body until he is moving like a jack-in-the-box and his face is contorted, horrible. But she has seen these fits before. However awful, you can do nothing but wait. She digs her nails into her palms and looks away, at the stained, brown-carpeted floor at her feet.

'All right, old thing?'

She looks up to see that Robin is standing directly in

front of her, his hand on Rowan's shoulder. For a second she thinks he is speaking to her. Then, 'There, there.' He speaks quietly, as though calming an animal, his hand moving slowly up and down the smaller man's back. He looks enormous beside Rowan, rooted as an oak. 'There we are. That's it. There.'

Slowly Rowan's fitting stops and he regains his self-control, breathing hard. Robin moves a little way away from him, allowing him space, creating a triangle between Rowan, Evelyn and himself. He thrusts his hands into his pockets. 'All right there, old chap?'

Rowan nods, his eyes on the ground. 'Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir.'

'There's nothing to apologize for,' says Robin quietly. He looks at Evelyn. 'Everything all right?'

'We're fine,' she says curtly. 'Thank you.'

'That's good then.' He gives her a quick look and walks back to his desk. She watches him go, blood raging; they all try it, at one time or another. Telling her what to do. She hates nothing more. She has been here for two years; she is the longest-serving member of staff. She turns back to see that Rowan is staring right at her.

'You,' he says. He speaks slowly, as though pushing the words before him through something thicker than air. 'You looked just like him, just then.'

'And who is that?'

'The man,' he says. 'The man I want to see. '

'Well,' she says, passing the piece of paper over the desk towards him. 'These are the people who will be able to tell you if – the man you're looking for is still alive.'

❖

THE COFFIN IS loaded into military ambulance number 63638. Alongside it: six barrels of earth, from six different battlefields, one hundred sacks in all. The ambulance sets off on the long straight road that leads north to the coast. A military escort accompanies it: two cars in front and one behind. Four soldiers sit silently in each car, their hats held on their laps.

The land here, though still ravaged, looks more like countryside than the Somme, further south. Here signs of life are returning to the farms. Here, even after everything, fields still look like fields, like land where something still may grow.

The convoy passes a farmer on his plough. The farmer looks up at the escort and the scarred old ambulance as they pass by. He returned to this farm just last year. He was wounded at Verdun and lost an eye, and was released back home, secretly relieved. An eye seemed a small price to pay for his life. But he left the farm to stay with his father-in-law in Burgundy after the German advance in 1918, after the Germans raced forward in that spring offensive and

requisitioned his farmhouse, his cellar and his lands. After they drank him dry, killed and ate his chickens, stunned by abundance, boys who had been starving behind the lines. After they got so drunk that he and his wife and children were woken by them, shouting in the courtyard, naked, reeling, their helmets held on their crotches, empty bottles of wine rolling around them on the ground. He knew then that it was over. That the Germans were finished. That the advance had been stalled by these drunken, starving boys.

These are some of the pictures he carries of the war. Now he only wants to be left alone. He wants to get through his ploughing without disturbing any ordnance that may have been left here. He knows of many farmers who have lost limbs, or worse, trying to make the most of their fields.

He wonders briefly who the approaching cars carry: a foreign dignitary, perhaps? But he doesn't wonder long. He bends back to his work, hunched against the drizzle, against the grey skies, thinking of eating his dinner in front of the fire, sitting alongside his wife.

❖

IN ONE FIERCE, clean movement, Ada slices through the knots, and with a small puff that looks like smoke, the string falls away.

On the top are Michael's letters to her and Jack, two thick piles of them, each held in place with another

knotted piece of string. She lifts them out and puts them beside her on the bed. Not yet.

Lying beneath them is a smaller, loose collection of picture postcards. One is a picture of a church. *Albert*, it says, on the bottom right-hand corner. At the top of the bell tower is a statue of a woman with a baby, the woman holding the baby in her outstretched arms, dangling it over the empty air. On the back, her son's handwriting:

> *The woman is the Virgin Mary. She's been leaning like this for a couple of years. They say if she falls then the war will be over. Pray she falls when we're winning, Mum!*

It was the first card he sent her, after he arrived in France in 1917, and from the day she received it, she had it tacked up on the kitchen wall. It made her uneasy, though; there was something about that woman, dangling over the empty air, holding so desperately on to her child, that reminded her of herself.

She had the same chart on her wall as everyone else she knew; it had come free with the *Daily Mail*, and the town of Albert was right in the middle of the British Zone, marked red on the map. She drew a circle around it. Now she could picture him somewhere, at least, could look at the church, see something that he had seen. It sounded like a good English name, too;

Albert, easy in the mouth, not like some of the other names on the chart: Ypres, Thiepval, Poperinghe. She wouldn't have had the first clue how to pronounce them.

She shuffles through the contents of the box. More postcards fall out from beneath that first: a picture of a river and a riverbank, and picnicking people wearing summery clothes. *The Somme*, it says on the bottom. On the back of the postcard, Michael has written, 'It doesn't look much like this any more!' She remembers what she did when this postcard came to the door: searched the faces on the riverbank, relieved when the French didn't look so very different from the people at home.

The last picture is of the cobbled street of a town. Something is stuck face-up on to the back of it. She peels it carefully away: it is a photograph of Michael. She remembers now: he sent it to her at the same time as the one that she has in the frame downstairs in the parlour, not long after he arrived. They must have been taken seconds from each other, and by the same photographer, because the same background shows, a painted wall, on each. He is not smiling here, though; his eyes are guarded and his edges are blurred, so that it is difficult to see where the wall ends and his uniform begins. She knows he must have moved as the shutter came down, and that this is the explanation for the way the photograph has turned out, but still

she doesn't like it. It is as though he is already moving into a future in which he doesn't exist.

Underneath are three smaller pieces of light-brown card. These postcards have no pictures on them, and each of them reads the same, with printed writing ranged all the way down the left-hand side:

I am quite well.
I have been admitted into hospital
{*sick* / *wounded*} *and am going on well.* / *and hope to be discharged soon.*
I am being sent down to the base.
I have received your {*letter(s) dated.....* / *telegram " .....* / *parcel " .....*}
I will send you a letter as soon as possible.
I have received no letter from you
{*lately* / *for a long time.*}
SIGNATURE ONLY
Date.....

The first two cards are from June 1917, from when he first went into battle. She remembers that they didn't receive a letter for over a week, and then these postcards came, one day after the other, with all of the phrases crossed out except one: *I am quite well*.

How relieved she had been to get these, however little they said.

When they finally printed casualty lists for his company, she fell on the newspaper, running her finger down the list, frantically searching for his name amongst the injured and killed. It wasn't there. Still, they had to wait a week for a proper letter from him. Meanwhile she could read, and try to understand what it meant: there had been fifty survivors from two hundred men.

And she knew then that, whatever her son had seen, it was something that took him somewhere far beyond her reach.

One more field service card remains in the box. This one is dated 14 September 1917. It came after two weeks of silence. Two weeks in which she had written to him four times. Two weeks in which every morning, when the letterbox went, she would run into the hall; in which every evening Jack would come into the kitchen, hat twisted in his fist, pretending that he wasn't looking to see if there was a letter propped up against the teapot for him to read. This card, too, read the same:

I am quite well.

It was the last that they heard from him: 14 September 1917.

They scoured the papers, but this time there was nothing about his company. Nothing about any action they had been involved in, no clue.

At the bottom of the box is a letter in a small brown envelope. She takes it out and holds it in her hands. For something so heavy, it weighs nothing at all.

It arrived on a Monday in September, a day of late-summer sun. She was hanging the sheets on to the line. There were women out all the way along, doing the same, their gardens garlanded with flapping white. She hadn't heard the tap of the letterbox, and when she came back into the dim hall she could just make out the shape of a letter lying on the mat. She bent to pick it up and saw the official postmark, Jack's name in black type. She dropped it on the floor and walked straight back outside.

There was the sun, hitting the whiteness of the sheets on her line and all the way down the row of gardens, as though all the women of London were surrendering at once. Just in front of her was the rabbit hutch that Jack hadn't got round to fixing yet. She stared at the place where the hexagonal wires were ripped away from the grey, unvarnished wood. A fox had come and torn them years ago. Next-door's cat was sleeping beside it, lazy in a patch of warmth, its belly falling and rising in the sun.

The next thing she remembers is standing in the kitchen with the shadows lengthening around her, and

Jack coming into the room. Holding the letter out towards her. Telling her to sit down.

'Don't open it,' she said.

But he did. She watched his face as he read. His eyes as they moved along the page. Stop. Move back to the top. And in those tiny movements she felt her life, her future, contract and collapse.

'It's not true.'

He put the letter on the table. Pushed it towards her.

She looked at her husband's hands, at the spray of black hairs on the top of his fingers.

'You have to read it, Ada.'

She took it from him.

Dear Mr Hart,
I am very sorry to have to tell you that your son Michael died of his wounds on the 17th September.
Yours,
——

These were the only words, struck into the page. Not even a name, just a signature at the bottom, but blurred, as though it were written in haste, or in rain.

'It's not true,' she said, looking up at him. 'I'd have known if it was. It's not true.'

No further letter came, nothing to say how their son had died. Jack wrote to Michael's company, but they did not receive a reply. Everyone got two letters.

Everyone she knew who had lost someone. Most got more than that: a letter from someone who had been there at the death, someone who had words of comfort, some small detail to impart.

She was sure there had been a mistake.

For a while afterwards, people stopped her in the street to say how sorry they were. How he was a credit to her, as though in his dying he had somehow raised her stock. She just stood there while they talked, until they passed on again. She did not take out the mourning dress, packed in a chest at the end of her bed, folded with mothballs and tissue paper; the dress she wore last for her mother, twenty years ago.

Then, in the winter of 1918, when the war was over, the boys began to come home. They were everywhere suddenly, swarming the streets in their demob suits and fifteen-shilling coats. It was as though some contrary magic had occurred, over in France, as though, far from dying, they had flourished over there in the boggy fields, bred themselves again from the fertile soil. The papers were rife with stories, with miracles: boys who had been hiding behind enemy lines, had walked the whole way home; who hadn't even known that the war had finished, but had turned up in the back garden ragged and filthy and in time for their tea.

That was when she saw him first: at the edge of a group of lads on a street corner, his back turned away from her. She went up to him; the boy turned, but it

wasn't him and she hurried away, sweaty, shaking. Then a few days later, there he was, arm in arm with a girl in the park. She started after him, calling his name. It wasn't Michael. It kept happening. She would run after him, only stopping when she saw that it was someone else, someone the same height, with the same tilt of the head or the same colour hair. Or the boy she was following would simply disappear.

Often, restless in the night, she would leave Jack sleeping and climb into her son's bed instead, lying on the narrow mattress in the narrow room, with the football pictures stuck to the wall. She began to see him there. She would wake to find that he was with her, sitting on the bed. She was never surprised. She reached for him, but he put his hand out, as though to stop her. There were shadows moving about nearby.

'Who are they?' she said to him.

'Shhh.' He put his finger to his lips and smiled. 'Don't worry, Mum, they're all right. They're only dead.'

One day, near the end of the long winter of 1918, a doctor came to the house. He gave her an injection, a quick scratch on her arm. When she came round she was back in the bedroom that she shared with Jack, and Jack was in the chair in the corner. The light was clear and cold. He came over and helped her to her feet.

'All right now,' he said. It wasn't a question.

On their way downstairs they passed Michael's bedroom. The door was open, the room stripped bare. Only the blank spaces and darker borders showed where his football pictures had been; only the tiny flecks of the flour and water that he had used as a paste. She looked into the room and back to her husband.

'Where are his things?' Her tongue felt too large in her mouth.

'I've put them away.' He looked guilty, but bullish, his jaw set tight.

She thought that she hated him then, but even the hate seemed distant, as if it were happening to someone else, close, but hard to reach, as though trapped behind a pane of glass.

There's a sound downstairs. The back door opening. Jack's tread in the kitchen.

Ada scrabbles the postcards together. The sky outside the windows is dark.

'Ada?'

The meat, left at the butcher. The meal she was going to cook. The day, disappeared. Where has it gone? She pushes the letters down into the box, but the official letter she keeps out, slipping it into the pocket of her apron. She tries to tie the string, but her fingers are clumsy and it is useless and he is already on the stairs. She puts the box back in the wardrobe,

closing it as quickly as she can. As Jack opens the door, she turns to him, smoothing down her hair.

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing – I – was . . . cleaning.'

'In here?' He looks at her empty hands, back up to her face.

'Yes – I – haven't been in here for months, so . . . I thought I'd check, see if it needed anything.' Her heart is going like the clappers.

'Cleaning with what?'

'Nothing, yet. I was – just about to start.' She feels herself flush to the roots of her hair.

Jack looks around the room, takes in the bed, the scissors still lying there. 'Looks all right to me.'

'Yes,' she says. 'It does.' She edges past him, picks up the scissors and hurries downstairs, grateful for the cool, dim kitchen. She can hear his footsteps overhead. She listens as he walks across their son's floor. It sounds as though he is standing by the window, looking out. The footsteps turn, hesitate. Will he open the wardrobe? See that the box has been disturbed? She hardly dare breathe. But the footsteps cross the floor again, then leave the room and make their way downstairs. She reaches for the sink to hold herself up.

'Dark in here.' He comes into the room behind her.

'Yes.' She lights a match to the gas. Yellow light laps the walls.

'Is there nothing to eat?'

'I'm sorry. I – forgot.'

'You *forgot*?'

'Sorry,' she says, turning to him now. *Twenty-five years*. She waits for him to say something, to mention the date. But he doesn't.

'I'm going to go and get a piece of fish,' he says eventually, steadily. 'Would you like one too?'

She nods, wretched.

He hits out his cap, puts it on. 'I'll see you later then.'

She watches him go. Sinks to a chair. Thinks of the meat, left on the counter with the butcher's boy. What must he have thought of her, that boy, running away like that? She puts her head in her hands.

Some silly woman, getting old.

Running after ghosts.

Shouting for her dead son in the street.

❖

THE FIELD AMBULANCE carrying the coffin passes the British and French troops who line the streets of Boulogne. It passes through the gates of the old town, then climbs the steep hill that overlooks the harbour, crossing the bridge that leads to the fortified entrance to the chateau and then under the great stone arch, drawing up in the courtyard, gravel crunching beneath its tyres.

Eight soldiers carry the coffin along the twisting corridors of the old chateau, past waiting French troops, to the officers' mess in the old library, where a temporary chapelle ardente*, a burning chapel, has been ordained. The room has been decorated with flags and palms, its floor strewn with the yellow, orange and red of autumn flowers and leaves.*

A guard of French soldiers comes to watch over the body. All from the 8th Regiment, all of whom have recently been awarded the Légion d'honneur for their conduct in the war. Candles are lit. The soldiers stand on either side of the coffin with their arms reversed, rifles held against their shoulders. One of them, a thirty-year-old veteran, looks briefly at the coffin, before casting his eyes to the ground. The box is raw and rough. Not the coffin of one who will be buried in state. He wonders if this understatement is a peculiarly British thing.

The British he knew in the war were crazy, funny men. One, in particular, he will never forget. He met him one night in an estaminet, just behind the lines. The English boy was eating egg and fried potatoes. That was what they all asked for, the Tommies, all the time, in their funny, blunt voices; all they wanted: egg and chips! Egg and chips! This one was small and stocky. When the French soldier sat down in front of him with his beer and the Tommy looked up, the soldier knew, without speaking, what they would do to each other before too long. And they did: at the back of a ruined church, by ancient gravestones, their bellies full of beer and fried food.

Afterwards, he remembers, the boy broke down and cried. And he knew that it was not for what they had done, or not really, but for everything else. And they held each other, between the crumbled stones, until the birds started singing and a bleached sun rose over the remains of the church.

That was in June 1916, just before the Somme.

The French soldier stares at the ground, blazing with colour in the candlelight. He looks at the leaves, at the flowers at his feet.

❖

EVELYN PACKS UP her satchel, preoccupied. Robin spoke to her as he left, and she replied to him, but now he has gone she cannot recall anything of what either of them said. She has even forgotten to be angry with him for earlier, for interfering with Rowan Hind. She switches off the lights and stands there for a moment, looking out. Through the window, the afternoon sky, which had looked already black with the lights on, is revealed to be a high, deepening blue.

Captain Montfort.

She conjures the man's face when he'd said the name. He'd looked frightened. Plenty of men every day look frightened. Was that a reason not to help him?

She pulls on her hat and coat and walks down the

dark corridor, stepping on to the street, bringing her keys up to lock the door.

'Evelyn?'

She lets out a yelp and jumps back, dropping the keys, her hand at her throat. Robin is standing in the gloom of the doorway beside her.

'For God's sake, you frightened me.'

'Sorry. Didn't mean to.' He bends towards her keys on the floor. She realizes that he is going to try to pick them up.

She bends down and swipes them up herself. His face is pale in the darkness. 'Well?' she says eventually. 'What is it? Have you forgotten something? Do you need to get back in?' The light is fading. She wants to get to the park before it closes. She passes the keys through her fingers, making no effort to disguise the irritation in her voice.

'I just wanted to ask something.'

'What was that?'

He steps forward. 'I – often go along to dances in the evening and – I wondered if . . . Well . . .' He straightens himself to his full height, his face looming above her. 'Cut a long story and all that, I wondered if you'd like to come along. There's a rather good Dixie band on Thursday night. Armistice Day. Thought I might mark it, you know. Do something different. Not so bleak.'

She takes a step away from him. 'No,' she says. 'Thank you, Robin.'

'Oh.' The air leaves him. 'Other plans?'

She waves her hand, something noncommittal.

He turns his hat over in his hands. 'Then some other time, perhaps?'

'Perhaps.'

There's a silence. 'Well. Can I . . . ?' He gestures towards the underground. 'Are you?'

'No. I'm walking home.' She stops herself before mentioning the park. She doesn't want him walking along beside her with that leg, going out of his way. It occurs to her that she has no idea where he lives, that she knows next to nothing about him at all.

He nods. 'Well, tomorrow then.'

'Tomorrow?'

'I meant, see you then,' he says, and turns to go.

She buttons her coat all the way up to her neck. 'Robin?'

'Yes?' He turns back towards her, his face expectant again.

'In the future, I'll thank you not to interfere.'

'I'm sorry?'

'My shell-shock case. Everything was in hand.'

'Oh.' He takes a pace towards her. 'I'm sorry. It's just something that I learned in France. Sometimes it . . . well, it rather seems to work.'

'I'd rather you didn't try out your methods on my time.'

There's a silence. Beside them, on the pavement,

people thicken in the home-going dusk. 'Of course.' He nods. 'I'm sorry. Till tomorrow then.'

She turns and walks away from him, out on to the main road, heading in the opposite direction, happy to put distance between them, to let herself be swallowed by the crowds. She pushes against the tide making for the tube and turns right, heading up Parkway. *Robin*? Asking her to a dance? It's almost funny. Perhaps he was just being kind, taking pity on her. Or then again, perhaps he had it all planned, the conference of the afflicted: they could shuffle inexpertly around the dance floor together; she could talk about her missing finger, and he could talk about his missing leg. *Dance*? She hasn't danced for years. The thought is almost obscene.

Fewer people are about when she reaches the entrance to the park. The iron gates are open. They are supposed to shut at dusk, but dusk has come an hour earlier since the turning back of the clocks two weeks ago. But there is no sign of the park-keeper yet. Once inside the gates, she takes big, greedy gulps of air, eyes hungry for the last of the light, walking fast up the steep rise of the hill, glad to be moving after the day spent sitting down, hands swinging by her sides, feeling the blood move, rise in her cheeks.

Her heart lifts when she reaches the top, and she sees that her bench is free, and that, apart from a few solitary dog-walkers scattered across the hill beneath,

no one else is around. Below, on one of the many paths that lattice the grass, the lamplighter is moving slowly, a trail of small yellow fires in his wake. Low clouds race each other across the gunmetal sky. Despite the cold, she pulls off her gloves and puts her palms down flat against the rough wood of the bench.

This is where they sat, here on this seat, she and Fraser, under a burning sky, three years and four months ago, the seventh of July, three o'clock in the afternoon; the last hour that she spent with him on earth.

He'd written to her at the end of June, 1917. He'd been told he was getting ten days at home, the first in ten months. He was lucky. Lots of leave had been cancelled. There was something big coming up. He would have to go to Scotland to visit his family, but, depending on the trains, he would have two days at least at the end.

The thought of London, with all that khaki everywhere, is almost as grim as being here. Can we go somewhere else? Somewhere green? Somewhere neither of us knows? I want to sit in a field with you by my side and look at nothing but green.

She was working in an office then, high above the Strand, ticking lists of goods from the docks against government orders, and it was as dull as death. Her nearest neighbour was a large, clammy woman one

desk over who came in every day from Horsham and whose chatter consisted mainly of the minor calibrations of the train services that invariably made her late. The day she received Fraser's letter, Evelyn went out in her lunch hour and bought a map at Stanford's, wedging it under the shipping orders where no one could see. Then she studied it all through the fetid afternoon, while flies threw themselves against the windowpanes, six floors up.

She searched the map, looking for nothing but green, and picked a village at random, somewhere between London and Hastings, on the mainline from Victoria. On the map it was surrounded by fields, and there was a patch of deep blue, a lake or a reservoir, nearby, about the size of her little fingernail. Perhaps, she thought, they'd be able to swim.

When the day came, the weather was stifling. Far from escaping uniforms, the train was stuffed with men and their girls on their way to the sea. Fraser had arrived early in the morning, on the train from Edinburgh, just in time to cross London and meet her. She almost walked past him at the station. He caught her arm and she stopped, stunned. She hardly recognized him. He looked ten years older, hollow with exhaustion. She saw in a moment that the plan was ludicrous. She wished they'd simply decided to stay at home.

He slept the whole way down, his head lolling and

rolling on his neck. Every so often a fractured singsong would break out and he would wake with a start, and look frightened and confused, and then see her beside him, and squeeze her hand and smile, and go straight back to sleep. She pulled a book from her bag and tried to read, but the print jumbled before her eyes. There was something desperate behind the strained jollity in the smoky carriage, filled with the sour smell of khaki and bodies and heat. The window was stuck shut, and the train kept getting held up for no reason between stops. It made her even more uneasy; being held like that, in the middle of the country, the lushness of the green foliage pressing against the windows, seemed shocking somehow, sinister; the summer in full, unconscious bloom.

She shook Fraser awake as they arrived at the little station she had chosen and they bundled off the train, which pulled away in a cloud of smoke and steam, leaving them staring at each other in the silence, strangers suddenly, adrift.

He shook out a cigarette and lit it. 'I was dreaming,' he said eventually.

'Really? What of? Can I have one, too?'

He passed the cigarette over and lit another for himself. 'I'm not sure.' He shielded his eyes, looking out over the other side of the tracks to where fields stretched away into the distance. 'Something nasty, I think.'

The wheat was high. The sun was at its peak. The air was the temperature of blood. He was a tall man, but looked shrunken under the beating sun, diminished, in a way she had never seen before. She had the terrible conviction that something would happen to them, out here in the countryside; that she wouldn't be able to save him if anything did.

'We don't have any water,' she said. Useless. How could they have come away without any water? Or any food? She had had days to plan this. What had she been thinking of, all those days? Now they were out here, and they were unprepared, and something terrible was bound to happen to them, and coming here had been the only thing he had said he wanted to do.

'Well,' he said, turning to her with a smile, 'at least if I die of thirst I won't have to go back to France.'

As they passed out of the station, he reached for her hand and they walked together down a hill, past a small terrace of red-bricked cottages whose gardens were foaming with summer flowers. A cat dozed in the shade of a tree. Somewhere in the distance, church bells chimed the quarter-hour. At the bottom of the hill they turned into a lane where the trees touched, forming a canopy overhead. Their footsteps were the only sound on the cool earth road.

They were silent, but her mind was racing. It was always like this: after all those letters, then having his real physical form before you and clamming up.

She sifted things and rejected them. It seemed impossible to ask anything about France. She thought she should ask about Scotland, after his parents, how it had been to go home, but she couldn't think of how to begin.

'Shall I get out the map?' she said eventually. 'It's in my bag.' She had brought that, at least.

When he turned to her, he looked distracted, as if she had interrupted something important. 'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'Let's just keep on walking like this.'

They carried on up the hill. The canopy was less thick now, and whenever a slight breeze got up, the leaves above them would lift and the ground dapple with sudden light. After a little while they came to a gap in the trees, from where they could see out to the country beyond, and she felt a cold sinking: the fields here were not green at all. They were yellow and bland and full of wheat.

'I—' She broke off. Fraser wasn't looking at her; he had his hand to his eyes.

'There.' He pointed.

She followed his finger to a copse of trees standing on a small rise, and they set off towards it. There was no room to walk together and so they walked single file, she behind. Every so often he would glance to the left or right, as if something might come at them from the wheat. Eventually they reached the copse and sat

down in the scrubby shade of an oak. He sat with his knees up, his elbows resting on them, staring out over the land, which dropped away a little below where they were sitting. He seemed to relax a fraction, now they had reached the higher ground, and he lit another cigarette. She fished into the pocket of her cardigan for one of her own. In the fields below them, small birds began to swoop and dive. In the heat, her head was beginning to pound. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

He turned to her. 'What for?'

He looked so exhausted that her stomach threatened to cave in.

'For this.' She raised her arm vaguely towards the fields. 'It's all a bit . . .' She wrinkled her nose.

He stared out, nodded briefly. 'Can we go back?'

'Where?'

'London.'

'Already?'

'Yes.'

'But why?' She could hear her voice, rising like a child's.

'Because this is wrong.'

'I'm sorry,' she said again.

'No. It's not your fault. I just – I'm just very tired. Can we please just go back?'

'Am I wrong?' The words were out before she could think of stopping them.

Fraser carried on looking down into the valley, as

though there was something there that he couldn't quite make out, as though out in the blue of the distance was something he was struggling to see. 'Don't ask me that,' he said eventually. 'That's not fair.'

She could feel herself wanting to cry, feel it forcing its way up in her chest. She took a deep drag on her cigarette to push it down.

That night, back in London, she lay beside him, wide awake, his weight possessing the narrow bed. He had slept all the long way back on the train, and then again as soon as he had lain down in the flat, and had slept through the long, hot afternoon, and as afternoon turned to evening and the sky turned a dusty navy, he slept on. But she stayed awake all through the short night, and when the sky began to lighten she got up and stood by the open window, listening to the birds. When the sun had been up for a while, she heard him stirring in the bed behind her.

'Evie?'

She stayed with her back to him. It was early morning, but already hot. Two children were playing in the street below, their high, thin voices drifting up on the still air.

'Evie?'

She turned to him.

'Come here.' He had propped himself up on his elbows. His face was slack, generous with sleep. The

pillow had imprinted creases on the side of his cheek. 'Come here,' he said again. 'I'm sorry, Evie. Please.'

A breeze from the open window touched the back of her neck. She crossed the room towards him. He reached out, but she didn't go to his arms; instead she climbed back on to the bed and brought her legs up and curled around herself, their faces inches apart.

'I'm so sorry,' he said again, pushing her hair away from her forehead and tucking it behind her ear. She saw there was a sheen of sweat gathered in the slight depression above his top lip. She put her finger to that place, and then brought it back to her mouth. It tasted salty; the tang of sleep. He kissed her cheeks then, one after the other, and unbuttoned the shirt of her pyjamas and held her there, against his chest. Then he closed his hand around her neck and brought her towards him.

'Is this all right?' he asked her.

'Yes,' she said.

Afterwards, she lay with her head on his chest. Above her she could hear the crackle of his cigarette paper as he inhaled. The sun was reaching into the room, touching and warming her legs, the soles of her feet, and the sounds of the morning travelled up from the street below, the way that sound travels in the summer: percussive, as though the city were a drum, tightened by heat.

They came outside then, to the park, and walked up

the hill to this bench. There were two hours to go until he got his train. He closed his eyes and she watched them, flickering beneath the lids, the grooves underneath them a little less black.

'You know,' he said, 'the men out there. Sometimes I think they're ridiculous.'

'Why?'

'Because they believe in things.' He opened his eyes slowly and took her hand in his. 'Even after everything they've been through. Most of them believe in God. They all believe in a life after death. I walk amongst them in the evenings and I know that none of them think they're going to be killed. None of them.' His fingertip traced the line that curved across her palm. 'They tell fortunes.'

Something tightened in her. 'Do they?' She tried to make her voice light. 'And . . . what about you?'

'What do you mean?'

'Have you ever had your fortune told?'

'No,' he said, sliding his hand into hers.

She knew he was lying though.

The land around them was baked hard, the yellow-green of a London summer. The sun was at its height. She could feel him beside her, and inside her, too – the memory of him, of the way they had been in the bed, just moments ago, as though it were still happening: his weight, the scrape of his cheek on hers. His mouth.

'Do you think the same?' she said eventually. 'That you won't be killed?'

'That's the thing,' he said with a small laugh. 'When it comes down to it, I know I'm exactly the same as them.'

He squeezed her hand, and she felt the life in him race through her.

And they sat, with the July sun overhead, and the smell of summer and the insects and the birds and the air full of buzzing, murmuring life.

'Billy, *Billy*.'

Evelyn opens her eyes. Her hands are freezing. A wind has picked up and is blowing the clouds across the low sky below. A yappy little dog is sniffling around her ankles. Behind her the owner calls out its name, his voice thin and high on the wind. '*Bil-ly*. Come on, Bill boy. Time to go home.'

The little dog scampers away and Evelyn stands, stamping her feet to get some feeling back into them. It is almost dark. She puts her hand to the bench for a moment more, feeling its coarse wood beneath her palm; then she turns her back and sets off down the hill.

Halfway down she stops, pulled up short again at the memory of Rowan Hind.

I want to find my captain.

Captain Montfort.

What did he want with her brother?

She feels a wave of queasy guilt. Pushes it down. There could easily be more than one Captain Montfort. If she helped every lost and hopeless case who ended up in front of her, she would never have any time for herself.

❖

WHEN THE PUNTERS have gone, when Hettie, Di and the rest of the dancers have stood straight-backed before the eyes of Grayson (*No slouching during the anthem!*) while the band play the last resounding chords of 'God Save the King', when the clock has struck twelve, the dancers are finally, *finally* allowed to go home.

'Time, gentlemen, please!' shouts Simon Randall as the double doors to the dance floor swing shut behind them and they are free from Grayson's gaze. A few of the boys laugh and jostle each other. 'If *only* . . . What I wouldn't give for a pint right now.'

The girls file wearily back into the cloakroom, pull on cardigans, jumpers, coats, stow dance shoes into bags. There's never much chatter at this time of night.

'How many?' says Di.

'Twenty.' Hettie slumps down on to the wooden bench. Nine in the afternoon, eleven in the evening. Not bad for a Monday double shift. 'What about you?'

'Twenty-four.'

Hettie shrugs. She hardly ever beats Di at this.

'Day off tomorrow,' says Di.

Hettie rouses the energy to nod, bending to unbuckle her dance shoes and rub her feet.

Di is fastening her coat, wrapping her scarf round her neck. 'Come on then, walk down to the market with me?'

'Not tonight.' Hettie shakes her head.

'Het?' Di sits down beside her; her pale, pretty face is puckered with concern. 'You're not cross with me, are you?'

Hettie looks up. How to explain? She feels a bit empty with all of it. It's since Saturday. It's clear that Di is moving towards her future, while she is standing still. And who knows how long Di will even stay at the Palais now?

'No.' She shakes her head. 'I'm – just tired.'

'Come round tomorrow?' Di gets to her feet. 'We can have a look round the shops.'

'All right.'

'Bye then.' Di pulls on her hat, and she and the other girls drift away, their voices echoing down the corridor and out into the night. Hettie stays there on the bench for a minute without moving, staring at the dusty tiles on the floor. She's slow tonight. Whatever borrowed lustre she may have held from Saturday has faded long ago.

She is the last to leave, turning the lights off after her and making her way down the darkened corridor to where Graham's light illuminates a small patch of floor. She's about to drag herself past without stopping, but remembers her pay, and pops her head around the door of the hatch. Graham is there, back turned, sorting through some papers.

'Night, Graham.'

'Hettie!' He turns, smiling, to face her. 'Thought I'd missed you! Here you go.' He rummages in his pocket, passes a lozenge through the hatch. 'See you home.' He winks.

The sight of it turns her stomach. 'No, thanks.' She pushes it back over towards him. 'You keep it. I couldn't. Not tonight. Have you got my envelope, please?'

He turns to the wooden pigeonholes in front of him. 'Let's have a see . . . Burns. Here we go.' He pulls it down, passes it across.

'Thanks, Graham.'

She fingers the slim brown envelope. There will be three ten-shilling notes inside. Fifteen shillings expected on the kitchen table in half an hour.

She moves to go, but Graham puts up a finger. 'Hang on a sec. There was something else.'

He rummages in his pocket, takes out a piece of paper, folded in half. 'Came for you earlier on,' he says, pushing it through the hatch.

She stares at the folded paper without touching it. Her first thought is danger. Or death. Of her father. The swiftness with which awful things strike.

'Nice-sounding man,' he says with a wink.

'Who?' She looks up at him.

Graham shrugs, and she opens it.

Thinking of blowing your cover.
Blackmail imminent.
Shall we meet to discuss terms?
Dalton's? Tuesday? Ten o' clock?

'Who was it?' She leans towards him, hands shaking. 'Did they come here?'

Graham shakes his head. 'Nah. Phoned it through, didn't they?'

She looks back down at the page.

Thinking of blowing your cover.

Di? Playing a joke?

But Di didn't see him. Di didn't meet him. Di didn't hear how he talked.

Blackmail imminent.

This is how he talked.

'Very posh. Very polite. Asked if there was a Hettie there, and if I could pass this message on.' His face creases with worry. 'Hope I haven't upset you, love.'

'No,' she says, shaking her head, smiling. 'You didn't upset me. Really. Not at all.' And she leans in

and kisses him on his leathery, pipe-smelling cheek. 'Thanks, Graham!'

'Blimey.' He grins. 'I'll try and rustle up another of those for tomorrow then!'

'Night-night.'

'Ta-ra, lovely.'

Hettie almost skips down the corridor, through the door to outside, to where the sky is high above her and there are no clouds, only stars, scattered as though thrown from a generous hand.

Thinking of blowing your cover.

No one she knows talks like this.

And it is there, in the night air; she can taste it. The future, come for *her*, finally, fizzing like sherbet on her tongue.

BY THE TIME Evelyn reaches home, she is frozen. She just about manages her key in the lock. The flat is silent and empty around her. She hauls herself up the stairs, disappointed. Doreen must be out again, with her man. They hardly see each other any more. They just leave curt little messages – *Char?? 10 shillings. Your share!* Or *Milk?? Two bottles?? Disappeared.*

She lies down on her bed, hands plunged in the pockets of her old coat, too tired to light a fire, too cold

to move. For a long while she just stays there, the branches of the tree outside casting strange shadows across the ceiling, the wavering yellow of the street-lamp the only light in the room, listening to the sounds of the night as they rise and pass away: the chain in the bathroom of the flat next door; a couple walking quickly up the street, their voices low, until the woman laughs, sudden and bright; and then a motor cab, stopping only long enough to drop someone off, then turning in the street.

She rolls on to her side, props her head on her hand. She sees Rowan Hind again, almost as though he is in the room with her: his small face, his jerking body. His hanging, useless arm.

Captain Montfort.

Was it really her brother he wanted to see?

What could a private want with a captain, after all this time?

She hauls herself over to the fireplace and rakes over the coals, blowing on her hands to warm them, then twists paper in swift, tight rolls and packs them into the grate. There's a small stack of twigs by the scuttle and she piles a few on top. As the fire catches, she takes out a cigarette and lights it, hugging her knees to her, staring into the flames.

It came in a short, simple letter from his father. Because they were unmarried, she had been told nothing, since she wasn't his next of kin.

But Fraser had told him something of her. Had left them her address in case of this. They were very sorry not to have met her. They were very sorry that this was the first time that they had spoken. Perhaps they might meet her one day?

Two weeks. Two weeks in which she had believed the world still held him in it, in which she had been sending off letters, sitting in the stuffy office with the woman from Horsham, with the thought of him keeping her steady somehow, as she moved about her life.

How was that possible? Why had some instinct not stopped her in her tracks?

So this is how it feels.

It felt like nothing though; it felt numb, as though she had performed some trick, had stepped out of herself and was looking from outside. She read the letter again, trying to concentrate on every little detail.

At first, since there was no body—

She looked up. Tried to think about this. *No body.*

She looked back to the page.

At first, since there was no body, there had seemed to be hope.

But then two reports came from his company: He was seen, moving forward, and then a shell exploded right beside him. When the shell cleared he had disappeared.

Disappeared? What did that even mean? How was it possible to disappear? She had the strangest compulsion to laugh. She started to, and then the laugh

stopped. She waited for something to take its place, but nothing came.

To walk forward.

To disappear.

To have no body any more.

One instant there, the next blown to the four winds.

They were sorry, they wrote, *that there was no body. That there would be no burial place. But in time, they hoped, there would be somewhere to go.*

They were so polite. As though it were their fault that their son had vanished from the face of the earth.

She looked up, at the things around her: the umbrella stand with the broken umbrella in it, the table that was scarred from when she and Doreen had carried it in and bashed it on the doorway in the communal hall. Everything seemed like itself and not like itself at the same time; and she saw now, absolutely, what he had meant. Nothing here was real.

She had to make herself real.

The next day she went to the munitions factory and asked for a job. They told her she could start on the shell casings on Monday. They gave her a uniform on the spot.

DAY THREE

Tuesday, 9 November 1920

OUTSIDE, THE RAIN lands quietly, the slurry of dead leaves breaking its fall. Ada lies awake, thinking about her son. About wherever he lies in France and whether it's raining there.

Jack stirs beside her and she closes her eyes, pretending to be asleep as he stands and scratches and yawns. She can hear every tiny movement, every little grunt and groan as he pulls on socks, buttons his flies, tightens and pops his braces. When he has gone she turns on to her back and stares up at the ceiling, watching as the light fills the room.

Downstairs, Jack gathers himself for work. She hears his footsteps halt briefly, as though he is debating whether to call to wake her up. He doesn't. The door bangs shut behind him.

So, it's easier for them not to speak to each other then.

It's always easier not to speak.

She gets out of bed and dresses, goes over to the wooden chest that stands at one end of the room, opens one of the drawers and takes out the letter from beneath the pile of linen where she hid it last night. She slides it into the pocket of her cardigan. She

will need it later; there is someone she needs to see.

❖

THE OFFICE TELEPHONE was installed a couple of years ago, but it is supposed to be for emergencies only and is hardly ever used. Evelyn goes over to it, picks up the receiver. Most of the morning it has been drizzling, but it is raining now in earnest, fat greasy streaks racing each other to the bottom of the glass. Outside the men hunker down under greatcoats and pieces of tarpaulin, their smoke a damp pall above their heads.

'Grim,' says Robin, looking out.

'Yes. Well.' They've been more awkward than ever with each other this morning; neither has mentioned their exchange of last night. She puts the receiver to her ear and waits for the operator.

'Hello, caller?'

'Can you put me through to London 8142?'

The telephone rings and rings, and she listens to its hollow tone. She can feel her breath against the receiver, her blood swooshing like a distant tide; then, after what seems like a long time, the phone is picked up.

'Ed?'

'Eves?' Her brother's voice is confused, thick with sleep. 'Sorry, I was . . . just a bit tied up.'

'How are you?' Her voice sounds stilted, she's no good at talking into these things.

'Fine. Just a bit of a cold, but . . . fine.'

'I was wondering,' she taps her fingers on the pale wood of her desk, 'if you'd like to meet for lunch?'

To her right she hears Robin shift slightly in his seat.

'Today?' Her brother sounds surprised.

'Yes.' She tries to make her voice bright. 'Why not?' She hears him light a cigarette, cough. His voice is stronger when he speaks again. 'Fine. Whereabouts?'

'I haven't got long, just an hour, there's a Lyon's round the corner from the—'

'A *teashop*?'

She could have predicted this. 'All right. What about that little French place, just between you and the park. La Forchette. See you there? Ten past one?'

'All right. See you there. Eves?'

'Yes.'

'You all right, old thing?'

'Of course. I just . . . thought it would be nice.'

'Right – well, see you then.'

She puts the receiver back into its cradle and stands, her hand resting on the mouthpiece. Behind her Robin clears his throat. She looks over towards him. He gives her a half-hearted smile.

'Lunch date?'

'Oh no, it's—' She feels herself colour.

'Sorry.' He puts up a hand. 'Too curious.'

'Just my brother.'

Outside, a man taps on the window, his breath clouding before him, gesturing to the clock above Evelyn's head. It is high time that she opened the door.

❖

'BUT WHO *IS* HE?'

They are sitting on Di's bed. Despite the fact that it's almost lunchtime, and the day is doing its best to make its presence felt behind the thin curtains, Di is still in her nightie, her black bob mussed from sleep, smoking, leaning forward, peering down at Hettie's note.

'I told you,' says Hettie, 'I met him at Dalton's. I danced with him there.'

'How many dances?'

'One.'

'When?'

'Early on.'

'Where was I then?' Di looks suspicious.

'You were busy, with Humphrey.'

'And where was Gus?'

'At the bar.'

Di's eyes widen. She looks astonished that Hettie could be capable of such a thing. 'But . . . why didn't you *tell* me?' she says, in a small, wounded voice.

'I don't know.' Hettie shrugs. 'I just . . . didn't have the chance.'

Di stands up, goes over to her chest of drawers, rummages around on top of it and brings over an old sardine can, balancing it on the yellow counterpane between them. 'So . . . who *is* he then?' she says again, tipping her ash into the remains of the oil.

'I don't know.'

Di lets out her smoke in an incredulous little puff. 'You don't *know*?'

'No.' Hettie pushes the piece of paper away from her with a sigh. 'You're right. I suppose I shouldn't go.'

'I didn't say that, did I? Give it here. Let's have a see.' Di picks it up, reads it haltingly. '*Thinking of blowing your cover.*' She looks up, a delicate eyebrow raised. 'But what does that even *mean*?'

'He said . . .' Hettie plaits the tasselled edge of the bedspread, 'that he thought I was an anarchist.'

'An *anarchist*? What? Like in the papers? Like with the bombs?'

'He was joking. Or – at least I think he was.'

'Oh. Well.' Di hands the paper back to Hettie. 'He sounds like a crackpot to me.'

'He probably is.'

'Is he handsome?'

Hettie nods. 'But sort of different.' She thinks of his face: his grey eyes, and then the way they cracked open when he smiled, as though it was all a mask

and someone else entirely was hiding underneath.

'*Different*?' Di looks unimpressed. 'Is he rich?'

'I don't know. Well, he might be, but . . .'

'But what?'

'Oh, I don't know.' It's impossible to explain. Hettie looks back down at the piece of paper in her hands.

Dalton's? Tuesday? Ten o' clock?

'I'm going to go.'

'*Whaaat*?'

'I liked him. I'm going to go.'

'You might well have *liked* him,' says Di, eyes like plates, 'but what if he's one of those . . . *perverts*. Or a *white slave trader*.'

Hettie smiles.

'Or what if . . .' Di leans over the bed towards Hettie, speaking in a low voice, 'he wants to take you to Limehouse and make you *smoke opium*?'

They both saw *Broken Blossoms*, saw it three times and could have seen it more, over in the big cinema on the Broadway, sitting there amongst the sucked oranges and the cracked peanut shells, swooning while Lillian Gish fell in love with the Chinaman and smoked opium and was battered by her father and died.

'He's not going to take me to Limehouse,' says Hettie.

'How do you know?'

She reaches for Di's cigarette. 'I don't.'

I want to blow things up, too.

'I'm going,' she says again, taking a deep, satisfying drag.

'You're mad!' Di squeals, shaking her head.

She may be. She may be mad. But she feels suddenly, gloriously free.

'Di?' she says.

'What?'

'Can I borrow something to wear?'

Di frowns.

'Please? I've only got my old dress. And it stinks.'

'Why don't you wash it then?'

'Di. *Please*?'

Di looks disgruntled, her bottom lip thrust out in a pout. 'I thought we were going to the pictures tonight. The *Mark of Zorro*'s on in town.'

This is not usually how it works. Not this way round. Di is the smaller one, the prettier one, the one the future wants. She is the one who knows how to carve out her life, the one things happen to. Hettie can see her, wrestling with the turn that things have taken, trying to be nice.

'All right,' she says eventually, grudgingly. 'What do you want to borrow, then?'

But she knows. Hettie knows she knows. There is only one dress. She can see it, hanging up on the rail beside the bed, its dark beauty winking in the hazy, filtered morning light. Hettie can feel her need for it

twisting the pit of her stomach. 'Can I . . . the black one?'

'The *black* one?' Di groans. 'Oh God.'

'*Please*?'

'Oh all right.' She throws herself on her back on the bed, blowing a resigned smoke cloud up into the air.

'Really?' Hettie scrambles to her feet.

'Please.' Di puts her hand over her eyes. 'Don't ask me twice.'

Hettie crosses the room towards it, lifts it towards her. It's beautiful. Heavier even than she imagined, and she can feel it now, that skirt falling against her legs, moving against her as she dances with him around the floor.

'How are you going to get to Dalton's then?'

Hettie turns around, the dress clutched against her. 'I'll take the tube. I'm meeting him there at ten.'

The words batter the air like typewriter keys.

`I'm meeting him there at ten.`

Incredible. Indelible. No way to take them back.

'You better look after it,' says Di, sitting up and pointing, 'or I'll have your guts for garters.'

'I will. I promise I will.' Hettie goes over to where her friend lies, leans down and hugs her. '*Thanks*, Di.'

'Hmm.'

Hettie folds the dress, stowing it carefully in her bag. 'There's . . . something else,' she says, straightening up.

Di raises an eyebrow.
'Something else I wanted to ask . . .'

❖

THE RESTAURANT IS smaller than Evelyn remembered it, only five tables, each covered with the same simple cloths, a lit red candle at each. Only one of the tables is taken: an elegant woman and balding man, heads bent over their food. They look up as she comes in, and she can feel the small ripple as they register her presence – a woman here alone. She shakes out her umbrella and puts it in the stand by the door as the waiter comes to take her coat. A *menu fixe* is chalked up on the blackboard: steak and potatoes, *tarte tatin*.

She takes a seat facing the window, orders a carafe of wine and, when it comes, drinks half a glass quickly, staring out through the rain-spattered window to the street beyond. She lights a cigarette. The couple at the next table look across at her and she feels their hot disapproval in the air. She puts it out, and then is furious with herself for doing so. When she lights it again it tastes foul.

The door opens, and Ed is there, holding a sodden newspaper above his head. He comes towards her, laughing. 'Didn't look out of the window properly. Had no idea it was raining so bloody hard.' Her

brother looks pale. He's dressed carelessly, a jacket and badly knotted tie, as though he rolled out of bed and got ready in the dark. The dining couple look up. She sees the woman sit taller in her seat, lengthen her neck.

Ed, as usual, seems happily oblivious to the effect he causes. He always has been. At those awful country balls they were forced to attend when they were younger, the twittering girls would queue up for him, but he was always just as happy dancing with her. And, because she hated those occasions, the small talk, the inept dancing, the chaperones, the marriage market of it all, Evelyn was always profoundly grateful for that. He was the best dancer of the lot.

She twists her watch face round. It's already twenty past one. 'I'm hungry. Shall we order now?'

'You order.' He waves his hand as he sits. 'I don't mind.'

She calls the waiter over, orders the steak for them both.

He leans over, takes a sip of her wine, and makes a face.

'Oh, come on, it's not that bad.'

He lights up a cigarette. 'So you say.'

'So,' she can't resist, 'still in bed at eleven then?'

'Late night.'

'Easy life.'

'Whereas you, old thing, are a connoisseur of the

rocky road.' He picks up his glass. 'This wine, for instance. Can we even *call* it wine?' He beckons to the waiter. 'Can I see the wine list, please?'

The list is brought. His eyes flicker down the page. 'I'll have the red Burgundy,' he says. ''94.'

'Let me see.' She snatches the menu back. 'That's two pounds a bottle!'

'So?'

'So, I've got to get back to the office, Ed.'

'Come *on*.' He grins, leaning forward. 'When do we ever do this?'

Not often enough. And whose fault is that?

The new bottle arrives, along with two fresh glasses. Ed indicates that she should taste. The waiter pours a little into her glass and she drinks, closing her eyes for a brief second. It is delicious. Of course it is. It costs two pounds. She nods to him, and the waiter pours a full glass for them both and moves away.

Evelyn takes another generous sip. It goes down so easily. Outside, rain is bouncing off the pavements and the soft hoods of the parked motor cars, battering the sodden geraniums in the flowerpots either side of the door. She sits back in her seat. She is glad to see him, she thinks, her handsome brother. Glad to drink his two-pound bottle of wine. She could just stay here, in the warm cocoon of his ease, and drink this bottle down. Not go back into the rain to the dreary office, with dreary Robin and the rest of the dreary men.

'So?' His eyes look amused. 'What's all this in aid of, then? Do I detect subterfuge?'

'Subterfuge?' She colours. 'Not at all. I just—' She puts down her glass. 'We don't do this enough any more.'

He raises his glass to her. 'I'll drink to that.'

Their glasses clink.

'I meant to ask you, actually,' he says.

'What's that?'

'Are you going to come on Thursday?'

'Where to?'

'Anthony's invitation?'

She must look blank, because he shakes his head, smiling. 'The flat on Whitehall. For the ceremony. The *Unknown Warrior*. Do you read the papers at all?'

'Oh.' She wrinkles her nose. 'I haven't thought about it much, to tell you the truth.'

'I thought we might go down together.' He leans forward. 'Make up for Sunday. Leaving you at Paddington. Dereliction of duty and all that.'

'I don't know, Ed.' It makes her feel queasy somehow. A public burial, all the pomp and state. 'Don't you think it's all a bit . . .'

'What?'

'I don't know. Hypocritical? As though it could make a difference. Make people forget.'

'I'm not sure it's to make people forget, Eves. Surely it's remembrance, if it's anything at all.'

She shrugs. 'Perhaps.'

'Well, think about it. We could make a day of it. Go on somewhere afterwards. I'd love to go with you, if you'd like.'

She is pleased, despite herself. 'All right,' she says. 'That might be nice.'

The steaks arrive. Thin, peppered, cooked in cream, and steaming, buttered potatoes on the side. She loads her fork, looks up, and notices her brother isn't eating. 'Aren't you hungry?'

He shrugs. 'I might eat in a bit.' He opens his cigarette case. 'Do you mind?'

'Not at all.'

He smokes, and she eats, in companionable silence.

'So,' he says, when she has nearly finished. 'Come on then. What's this really all about?'

She has a last mouthful of steak and cream, then puts her fork down on her plate. 'I had a man,' she says, 'come to the office yesterday.'

'Yes?'

'I think he was looking for you.'

'For me?'

'I think so, yes.' She takes a piece of bread from the basket and crumbles it on to her plate. 'His name was Rowan Hind.'

Her brother's hand has stopped, quite still, the smoke from his cigarette travelling straight up into the air. She can hear the chink of glasses from the

waiter behind her, the scrape of the forks of the diners to her left.

'Rowan Hind?'

'Yes.' She puts the bread and cream in her mouth, chews, swallows.

He takes a sip of wine. There's a small groove in the middle of his brow. 'What did he look like?'

'It's quite an unusual name.'

'Yes, it is.' He nods. 'And I'm sure I'll remember. Remind me. Any distinguishing features?'

She leans back in her seat. 'Not really.' She takes a cigarette for herself. When she thinks about it, the most distinguishing thing about him was his utter ordinariness. 'He was small. Hungry looking. He'd been a private. Invalided out in '17.'

'And what was the injury?'

'Lost the use of his arm.' She lights up. 'Though it was still there, in a sling. And nerves, I think, as well.'

He nods. 'Well. And why had he come to you?'

'To find you.'

He looks astonished. 'But that's ridiculous. How in hell did he know?'

'He didn't. He had no idea I was your sister. It was chance that brought him to me.'

'And did you tell him who you were?' He leans closer.

'Of course not. It would have been unethical.'

She looks at her brother's face, at the vein beating at

his temple, the skin stretched tight across his skull. 'But I gave him the address of the Records Office. If they take pity on him then they might tell him where you live.'

'Unlikely.'

'Why?'

He sits back in his chair, takes a big swig of wine, looks down at his steak; a thin skin has formed where the butter in the sauce has congealed. 'Excuse me a minute.' His napkin drops from his lap to the floor as he stands. She leans down to pick it up, and puts it beside his place.

'Have you finished?' The waiter is at her elbow.

'Yes, thank you.'

'Would you like some dessert?'

'Thank you, no. I think we'll just have the bill.'

She drums her fingers on the tablecloth, drinks down her glass of wine. There's still most of the bottle left. She pours herself another large glass. Behind her, she hears the sound of a lavatory flushing, and a door shutting, and then Ed reappears, standing to her left, just behind her chair. 'I should be getting back.'

'I've asked for the bill,' she says, twisting round, her tone conciliatory. 'Sit down till then.'

He sits. His leg is jiggling under the table, making the glasses judder and ring as though a tube train were passing underneath.

'Ed? Are you all right?'

'Fine.' He cannot look her in the eye.

'It's just odd, isn't it?' She leans forward. 'Why would a private be looking for you? After all this time?'

'How should I know?' he snaps. 'Come on, Eves. You know what people are like. They get ideas fixed in their heads. They can't move on. Surely you, of all people, know that?'

That stings.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

He opens his hands. 'Take it how you want.'

'No. Tell me. What? What do you mean?'

He leans towards her. 'Listen, Eves. Don't take this the wrong way, but you should try to get a bit of air round things. It might stop you brooding quite so much.'

She can feel the familiar acid of anger seeping through her, turning the afternoon, curdling her steak and wine and cream. 'Is that what I'm doing, then? Brooding? Forgive me. I wasn't aware.'

He takes another swig of wine and then looks around for the waiter, his face clenched, impatient. He looks just like their father, suddenly. In a flash she sees him, fifteen years from now: the same assurance, the complacency, the set of the jaw.

'What's the man doing? For *Christ*'s sakes.'

'Ed—'

'What?' He flings her a look.

'You're saying you have no recollection of a Rowan Hind?'

'I didn't say that. I've told you. The name. That's all. Do you know how many men I had under my command?'

She doesn't. 'A hundred?'

He looks scornful. 'Two hundred and fifty. There or thereabouts. You think I remember every little private that lost his mind?'

'I didn't say he lost his mind.'

She feels something then, a chill, settle in the air between them.

Her brother pauses, then, 'Eves,' he says very quietly, 'what exactly did you want to achieve by my coming here?'

'I—' She closes her mouth. She doesn't honestly know: information of some sort, but what?

'Leave it.'

'What was that?'

'I said leave it. You're meddling.'

'*Meddling*?'

'Yes, Eves. That *job*. It's depressing. For God's sake, it's not good for you. It's not as if you even *need* to work.'

'No. Well. We don't all want to stay in bed till midday. Remind me again – what, other than order decent wines, is it that you actually *do*?'

His leg is jiggling again. He puts his hands on the

table, as if to still it, but it doesn't work. 'I'll pretend you didn't say that,' he says. 'Shall I?' The air between them feels tinder dry, as though it only needs a spark to set it alight.

She turns to see the waiter at her shoulder, the saucer and the bill in his hand. She goes to open her bag, but Ed is already up. He throws down some notes and leans across the table, his lips brushing lightly against her cheek. 'I'll see you soon, Eves. I hope you'll be feeling better by then.'

He is out of the door by the time she has got to her feet.

THE SHOP IS small and intimate, tucked away down a side street at the back of Shepherd's Bush. It smells of shaving foam and leather and men. It took a bit of persuasion, but eventually Hettie got it out of Di.

'*It doesn't look like much from the outside. You'd never know it was the place. It looks more like a barber's. Which is what it is. Ignore the men – they'll stare at you, but don't take any notice. Just ask for Giovanni. Say I sent you. He's the best*.'

The decision was easy in the end.

It wasn't even easy; it was already made.

And now here she is, sitting in a cracked-leather

chair, in the middle of a busy barber's, with what looks like a white tablecloth tucked into her dress and an old Italian man wielding a pair of scissors behind her head.

'How much?' he says again. It sounds like *Howa mucha?*

Hettie can see two men standing staring at her through the window. But she doesn't care. *She doesn't care*.

'All of it,' she says.

He walks around her, a full half-circle, lifting long hanks of hair and letting them fall. 'All – of – it,' he repeats to himself as he walks, then comes to a stop. 'You have beautiful hair,' he says, his eyes finding hers. 'But it looks terrible. You look like a horse.'

'I know,' says Hettie. 'That's why I want it cut.'

'Not a horse.' He corrects himself. 'Little horse.'

He lifts a handful, holds up his scissors. The blades flash in the afternoon sun. 'This will be a pleasure,' he says.

Snip!

He holds the first hank in his hand. A trophy. A severed pony's tail. For a moment, she is horrified. For a moment, she expects there to be blood.

Snip!

She sees her mother.

Snip!

Your father! Your father loved your hair.

Snip!

She sees her dad, the lines on his face. The way they softened when he smiled.

Snip!

Sorry, Dad.

Snip!

I'm so sorry that you died.

Snip!

Filthy little flapper.

Snip!

Snip!

I'm thinking of blowing your cover.

Snip!

Snip!

Snip!

Do you like blowing things up?

Snip!

The future is coming.

Snip!

It's getting closer.

Snip!

It

Snip!

Is

Snip!

Almost

Snip!

Here!

The shock of the air. Her neck revealed.

The man steps back. 'Beau-ti-ful,' he says.

'Killing,' Hettie whispers, as her eyes meet his in the glass.

I HOPE YOU'LL be feeling better by then.

It rattles round and round in Evelyn's head. How *dare* he? As though something were wrong with her, as though she were *ill*, and that is why she has dared to question him, question any of them. As if all of it, the whole bloody war, were nothing more than an extended gentlemen's club.

The rain is still falling and the pavement is hazardous, clogged with pedestrians and umbrellas. She clashes with a man in front who is moving slowly, and stumbles, catching herself against his heel. She has to grab an iron railing to steady herself.

'Watch where you're going, can't you?' He is old but upright, the bearing of a military man, his ringing voice cutting through even a wet afternoon like this.

Evelyn stands, swaying, staring after him. There are too many men like this: they are everywhere, and she is sick of them, of their florid intactness; it is the old who have inherited the earth. 'Oh, go to hell,' she spits.

The man opens his mouth as though to bark a response, and then closes it again. He turns first, impeccably upright, and walks stiffly away. Evelyn is immediately ashamed. She grips the spikes at the top of the railings. The world around her is hazy. Now she has stopped she is starting to realize just how unsteady she is. How much wine did she drink in the end? Nearly the entire bottle on her own. She's in her cups, all right. She'll have to gather herself before she gets back to work. She shakes her watch from her cuff and stares blearily at its face. She's already late, but can't arrive like this. Her flat's not far from here, there's a shortcut she can take if she turns right now. She could go home for a minute and sort herself out. It's tempting, and it's much better to be late than drunk. She pushes herself away from the railings and turns on to a side road, moving fast, almost running, skirting the puddles, lifting her umbrella high.

The flat has the blank, slightly surprised feeling of a weekday afternoon. The air is still, a little stale. Days' worth of dirty dishes are piled in the sink. Her bedroom curtains are drawn. She can't remember the last time she opened them. She does so now, and a movement in the flat opposite catches her eye. Someone is over there, in the shadows; she can't quite see them in the depths of their room. She stands there for a moment longer, looking out, but the view blurs in the rain.

She turns back and winces. Her bedroom is atrocious in the daylight. A pit. Why has their char not been? Then she remembers. She is away, visiting her mother; Dorset, Devon, something like that. Doreen left a note about it last week. She takes off her wet coat and leaves it on the bed, then goes to the bathroom and runs cold water into the sink. She lifts her face and stares at herself in the glass.

Her brother was lying.

Liar, Edward Montfort. *Liar*.

She takes off her blouse, splashes freezing water on to her face and gasps.

He knew exactly who Rowan Hind was; she could see it all over his face.

So what has he got to hide?

She splashes the water again and again until the top of her camisole is wet through. She pulls that off, too. Then she brushes her teeth thoroughly, dries herself off with a towel and goes back into her room.

In the flat across the road the shadows move. Evelyn jumps. She had forgotten that she had opened the curtains. She is naked from the waist up. The rain has lifted now, the view is clear. The shadows thicken, then part, and reveal themselves to be a man, a man in a wheelchair, staring out over the street towards her.

As she stands there, watching him, he wheels himself closer to the glass. She can see the pale line of his skin, his hooded eyes, and the shadows beneath. He is

younger than her; from where she stands he seems no more than twenty. He has a beautiful face, and he is looking straight at her, straight into her eyes.

She can feel the skin around her nipples contract.

Her cigarettes are lying on the corner of the bed. She can just see her case and lighter from here. Carefully, and without turning, without taking her eyes from the boy's face, she bends and picks them up.

She lights one, inhales and lets out the smoke, letting the lighter fall. It lands on the bed beside her with a soft thud. The boy unbuttons his trousers. She watches as he reaches his hand inside. She can feel the air across her skin; hear her breath, low in the room. She takes another deep pull at her cigarette. The boy's hand begins moving slowly up and down. He doesn't take his eyes from her face. She opens her legs slightly, feels the friction of her knickers against her skin: the swollen pulse of herself. She pulls again at her cigarette. They stay there, eyes locked together as he moves faster, faster. Her breath catches in her throat. When she sees him slump she lets out her breath in a sigh.

His head is bowed. He stays like that for a long moment and then, without looking up, wheels himself from the light.

She puts her arm across her chest and pulls the curtain, plunging the room into sudden darkness. She sits on the edge of her bed and puts her head into her

hands. For a moment, she feels as though she might weep.

But she doesn't. She stands. Pulls herself together, takes another camisole from her wardrobe and pulls a jersey on over the top.

She is over an hour and a half late when she finally arrives back at the office. By some miracle the queue is not so bad, and only ten or fifteen men wait outside.

Robin doesn't notice her as she slips into her seat. She feels the exact moment when he does though, a few seconds later. She can feel him shift, feel a slight buzzing in the air between them. It is odd, the buzzing, but she doesn't look up to meet his gaze.

❖

'ADA!' IVY STANDS in the doorway. Her broad cheeks are rosy, and there's a fine film of sweat glistening on her skin. 'This is a nice surprise. Kettle's just boiled. I'll make us both some tea.'

Ada touches the envelope in her pocket, and then follows Ivy down the dark hall to the kitchen, where something sticky is simmering on the stove. The windows are covered with mist and the table is a jumbled mass of branches, the smell of cut wood mingling with the sugary steam. 'Something smells good.'

'Rosehips.' Ivy lifts a bowlful of the shucked fruit. 'You know me. I always make a bit of a syrup for the winter colds. I'll bring you some over when I've done.'

'That'd be nice.'

'Sit down and I'll get the tea on, shall I?'

Ada sits at the scrubbed table, watching Ivy as she bustles about the room, lifting the lid off the teapot, peering in, swilling the liquid, shaking in a few more leaves, and then pouring the steaming water inside. Ivy is heavier than she ever used to be, moves a lot more slowly now. They have known each other for years: Ivy was living here when Ada moved on to the street, Ivy older by three years or so; she already had her two girls then. They were pregnant together with their boys though, Ada with Michael, and Ivy with Joseph, her third. Ivy was lovely back then, always throwing her head back and laughing at the smallest thing. She lost her son in the summer of 1916. She didn't laugh for a long while after that.

Ivy carries the pot over and arranges cups and saucers and pours.

'Feels like ages since I've seen you.' She smiles, and Ada, as always, is taken aback. Ivy got given new teeth, just at the end of the war; her daughters saved up and bought them for her; she had the old ones pulled out and new ones fitted, bottom and top. They look funny, as though they were made for someone else. They don't

fit too well either; they clack and whistle when she talks. 'Jack doing all right, is he? Much coming out from that allotment still?'

'There's still a few things coming out.'

'That's good.' Ivy takes a seat. 'I'm glad you popped over actually; I've been wanting to ask you something for a while.'

'What's that?'

'About whether you're going to go to town, for the burial. The Unknown Warrior. You know.'

So far, she and Jack have avoided this subject. Ada knows without asking that he will not want to go.

'I was reading in the papers,' says Ivy, 'they're going to put up barriers in the streets. They're expecting thousands.'

'Is there going to be space for everyone then?'

'That's the point, isn't it? For everyone to go, for all of us to pay our respects.'

'I suppose so.'

'I thought I'd be going with my girls, but neither of them want to.' Ivy looks saddened briefly, and then brightens. 'But then I thought we could walk there together . . . If you like?'

'I'm . . . not sure. Can I have a think about it?'

'Of course. You take your time.'

Ada touches the letter in her pocket, puts down her cup. 'Can I ask you something, Ivy?'

'What's that?'

'It's something about your Joe.'

'What about him?'

'You got a letter, didn't you? Telling you how it happened? After he died?'

'Yes, I did.'

'And then did you get another one? Telling you about his grave? About where it was?'

Ivy nods.

'Can I see it?'

There's a moment in which Ada worries she has said too much. Then, 'Of course,' says Ivy. 'If you really want to. I'll fetch it for you now.'

She goes into the parlour and Ada can hear her moving about. In the darkened garden, beyond the window, a sudden breeze picks up, tossing a spray of small leaves into the air. *The Unknown Warrior*. It sounds so grand. She knows the meaning behind this burial – the one to stand for all of the many bodies which have not come home – but why didn't they just call him a soldier? Just like everyone else?

'You read it.' Ivy is back, standing in the doorway. 'I'm sorry, I can't.' She puts two brown envelopes on to the table in front of Ada. 'I'd better start clearing these anyway.' She lifts an armful of the branches and takes them over to the counter, where she begins snapping them in two.

Ada slides the first of the letters from its envelope.

Madam,
I am directed to inform you that a report has been received which states that the late Private Joseph White is buried about 2,000 yards North West of Guedecourt, South West of Bapaume.

The grave has been registered in this office, and is marked by a durable wooden cross with an inscription bearing full particulars.

I am,
Madam,
Your obedient servant,

Captain,

Staff Captain for Brigadier-General,
Director, Graves Registration and Enquiries

The other letter is longer, in a denser type. There's a stamp on the top dated 20 March 1920. She squints at the page. It is difficult to read in the failing light.

Madam,

I beg to inform you that in accordance with the agreement with the French and Belgian Governments to remove all scattered graves and small cemeteries which were

situated in places unsuitable for permanent retention, it has been found necessary to exhume the bodies buried in certain areas. The body of Private White has therefore been removed and re-buried in Grass Lane Burial Ground, Guedecourt, South of Bapaume.

I am to add that the necessity for this removal is much regretted, but was unavoidable for the reasons given above. You may rest assured that the work of re-burial had been carried out carefully and reverently, special arrangements having been made for the appropriate religious services to be held.

I am,
Madam,
Your obedient servant,

Major D.A.A.G.
For Major-General,
D.G.G.R. & E.

'They don't half put in lots of big words,' says Ada, folding it back.

Ivy slides the pan off the stove, shaking her head. 'It's all a load of old balsam though, isn't it? They're just making it easier for themselves. They're just lumping them all together so as it's easier to count them up.

I don't like to think of it. Why couldn't they have just left him in peace? And that bit at the bottom, that bit about religious services. They never even asked me what religion he was. He might have been a flaming Hindu for all they knew. He was an atheist though, wasn't he? Like his dad.'

'They didn't even ask?'

Ivy sucks her teeth. 'No. And you seen the other bit there?' She brings a candle over to the table. There's a second piece of paper tacked on to the back, which contains only the information:

Name Joseph White
Regiment 10th London.
Location of Grave. A.I.F. Burial Ground, (Grass Lane) Guedecourt. Plot 7. Row. D. Grave 4.
Nearest Station Bapaume
Nearest Town "
Nearest Enquiry Bureau Albert

'I know that place.' Ada points, feeling a thrill of recognition. 'That was on the card that Michael sent back. Albert. It's the place with the church, with the woman and the child.'

'That's right,' says Ivy. 'I've seen pictures of that, too.'

'Here.' She takes her own letter out of her pocket. 'Would you have a look at this for me?'

Ivy eyes the envelope. 'Sorry, Ada. I don't know if I can.'

'Please?'

Ivy relents. Taking the thin letter from its brown envelope, she reads it quickly, then nods and pushes it away. 'I got one of them too, at the beginning. That's what they always send, don't they?'

'I know,' says Ada. 'But I never got anything else. Nothing about how he died. Nothing about where he was buried. None of this.' She gestures to the letters on the table.

Ivy starts. 'Why didn't you say something at the time?'

'I kept thinking he was coming back, didn't I? That they got it wrong.'

'Didn't you ever try to write to anyone?'

'Jack wrote to the company. They wrote back and said that he had to write to the War Office. So he wrote to them. Then he heard nothing back.'

Ivy sucks the moisture from her teeth. 'God, it makes me boil. After all those boys did, and they just don't care. Here, take a look at this.' She goes over to a drawer, comes back with a folded piece of newsprint and puts it down on the table. 'You seen this? They're doing tours now, so as you can look at the graves.'

'I've seen.'

'You seen how much they're charging then?' Her

finger hovers over an advert in a bold box at the bottom of the page.

> All-inclusive tour. Graves and battlefields. Led by sympathetic veteran. £6 – food and transport included.

Ivy shakes her head. 'They asked me for an inscription, for the gravestone. That was sixpence a letter on its own. You'd think they'd pay for that, wouldn't you? An *inscription*, at the least. Then I sat down with my Bill and I counted up how long I'd have to save. Twelve pounds for both of us to go on a tour. What's that, then? I've got fifteen shillings a week to manage this house on. If I save two shillings a week it'll take over four years. They didn't think about that, did they? When they decided not to bring them home?' She is shaking with anger. 'It's all right for those who can, isn't it? Like every bleeding thing else.'

A light, acrid smell is coming from the range.

'Hang on, let me have a look at this.' She goes over to the stove. Outside, the wind picks up, rattling the windows. Ada plaits her fingers in her lap.

'Ada?' Ivy sounds calmer now. 'You remember my cousin May? Lives out Islington way? Lost both her boys? You met her last summer, Ellie's wedding.'

Ada looks to where she stands, slowly stirring the contents of her pan. 'That's right. I remember.' May

was a small bird-like woman, sadness struck through her.

'Well, she got a letter about her boys just the other day.'

'Oh?'

'Said they were going to be on a memorial. A big one in France, where people would be able to go and pay their respects, with the names of her boys on it along with all the rest. It was in one of those places with a funny name. Began with a T, I think.'

Ada nods. She cannot really conceive of this. Of how this memorial might look. Of how it might possibly help.

'They didn't find anything of her boys, you know.' Ivy speaks quietly. 'Not one little bit.'

There's a silence.

'You've not had a letter like that then, Ada?'

'No.'

'It might be coming though.'

'It might.' She puts down her cup. Picks up her own letter, turning it in her hands. 'Ivy?'

'What's that?'

'What about that woman? The one you saw.'

'Which one?'

'The one who said she could speak with the dead.'

Ivy puts the lid back on the pan, turns, wiping her hands on her apron. 'What about her?'

'Could she do it, do you think? Did it work?'

Ivy crosses her arms in front of her chest. 'What's this all about, Ada? What's brought all this on? What you got to go digging around for now?'

Ada rubs the side of a knuckle with her thumb. 'A boy came to the door,' she says, speaking quickly. 'Selling some rubbish. I don't know why, but I invited him in.' Something occurs to her, and she looks up. 'Did anyone come here? Sunday morning? Did you have anyone knock on the front door? Selling dishcloths and that?'

Ivy thinks, shakes her head. 'No, and I was in all day.'

'He came into the kitchen. I didn't want to buy anything, but he was cold, so I let him have a smoke. And then, then he— He said Michael's name.' She looks up. 'And I know this is daft, but when he spoke, this boy, it was as though he was looking at him. As though he could see him in the room.'

Ivy comes to sit in the chair beside her. 'What do you mean? Like a ghost?'

'I suppose . . . Yes.'

'But Ada,' says Ivy gently, 'you know there's no such thing.'

'I know that. But then yesterday . . . I saw him in the street.'

'Who?'

'Michael. And I followed him all the way to the house, but when I got home . . . he had disappeared.'

'Oh, Ada darling.' Ivy reaches out, and for a brief moment they sit there, clasped together, until Ada pulls her hands away. She hasn't finished. Not yet.

'Then yesterday, I went and got out all his letters. I haven't looked at them for two years. And I kept thinking, *why*? Why didn't anyone tell us what happened? And why did that funny boy come to see me? He didn't come to see you, did he? He can't just have been selling cloths.'

'You never know.'

'No.' She shakes her head, fierce now. 'He came to see me. I know it. I know he knew something about Michael. And then I thought, he's never coming back. And I'll never know. And then I kept thinking of her, that woman you saw. And I couldn't get her out of my head. Where was she? That woman? Where'd she live?'

Ivy's face closes. She stands, shaking her head. 'I don't like to talk about it. The dead are the dead, best just leave them be.'

There's a knocking at the window. The two women freeze. There's a shape out there, a humped black mass, but with the candle so close it's impossible to see just who or what it is. Ivy stands and goes over to the glass. 'It's Ellie,' she says, and Ada can hear the relief in her voice as she opens the door. There's a blast of cold air as Ellie, Ivy's daughter, a smart, tidy girl, bustles into the room, baby on her hip.

'All right, Mum?' Ellie peers into the dusk. 'Ada? Hello! You all right? I was just at Sal's. Thought I'd pop by to see how you're getting on.'

'We were just having a cuppa.'

'You need a bit more light in here.'

'I should be going.' Ada stands.

'Don't go on account of me.' Ellie looks from one to the other of them.

Ada rustles up a smile. 'I've got to get the dinner on anyway. Jack'll be back soon.'

Ellie nods, losing interest, and wanders over to the stove, showing the baby the syrup bubbling in the pan. 'What's this then, Johnny, eh? What's this?'

'Ivy,' Ada says. 'Please. Just give me her address.'

'Ada,' Ivy's voice is low, warning, 'I've told you. It was four years ago anyway. A lot can happen in four years.'

'I know that. I just—'

Ivy leaves her side. She goes over to stand with her daughter and grandson at the stove. 'Ada's going, John,' she says to the little boy. 'Say ta-ta.'

Ellie looks up. 'Granny says say goodbye to Ada.' She lifts the arm of her son, who submits, gurgling, his mouth stretched wide, his cheeks bright red in the warmth of the stove, as she waggles his arm up and down. 'Ta-ta, Ada. Johnny, say ta-ta.'

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Two British undertakers walk through the winding, vaulted corridors of the chateau, their footsteps echoing on the stone-flagged floors.

Their names are Mr Sowerbutts and Mr Noades. They arrived in France yesterday, on the evening boat train. In the pocket of his suit, Mr Sowerbutts carries a letter of introduction from Sir Lionel Earle, Permanent Secretary of His Majesty's Office of Works. Six British soldiers follow them, carrying the heavy, empty coffin that the undertakers have brought with them from London. The coffin has been hewn from an oak tree that grew at Hampton Court Palace. Messrs Sowerbutts and Noades oversaw the construction themselves. It took two weeks, in which the oak was planed, sanded and polished to the undertakers' exacting standards, in which iron girders were strapped around the wood, in which rings were riveted to the girders. In which a Crusader's sword, given by the King, was grafted on to the lid, and the following was inscribed in gothic script on the lid:

A British Warrior Who fell
in the Great War 1914–1918
For King and Country

At the threshold of the chapel, Mr Sowerbutts and Mr Noades pause. They stare in astonishment at the floor, strewn as it is with curling flowers and leaves. The colours are extraordinary. There is something faintly disturbing, faintly pagan almost, about the scene.

The French guards salute, their boots ricocheting like a fusillade as they leave.

Mr Noades gestures to the British soldiers behind him to set the oak coffin down. Mr Sowerbutts grips the bag that he has brought with him from England. He moves to stand beside the plain wooden coffin.The two men were told that they might ask for anything they needed for this day's work, but they are perfectionists. They consider themselves, with good reason, to be the very best; they prefer to work with their own tools.

They have been told nothing of where exactly this body has come from, nothing of how long it has been in the earth. They know only that it has been taken from the fields of northern France. They are curious. They know that the fields there are made from thick, muddy clay. But how high was the clay content? How wet was the soil?

Mr Noades joins his colleague on the other side of the coffin.

'Ready?'

He nods. There's a pause, and then the two men lift the lid.

A close, musty smell escapes from the box. Not particularly unpleasant. Well past putrefaction and decay. The body is still inside the hessian sack it was wrapped in two

days before. Mr Noades takes his shearing scissors and cuts open the material from bottom to top. Both men lean forward, breath held.

Inside is a small, hunched skeleton. Small remnants of skin cling to the bones of its skull. There is a patch up near the right cheek. It looks like parchment. Another covers the chin, and a tiny bit more remains on the scalp. Muddied khaki still adheres in places to the bones; the jacket is fairly intact, though most of the trousers are missing, except around the groin, where the skeleton appears to have been bent over itself in the ground.

Five years, thinks Mr Sowerbutts.

Four and a half, thinks Mr Noades. Depending, of course, on the wetness of the soil.

Autumn 1915, thinks Mr Sowerbutts.

Spring 1916, thinks Mr Noades.

Gently, they lift the remains of the man in the sack and arrange them in the oak coffin. They can do very little in the way of traditional preparation. They simply spread the bones with care, so that the skeleton is lying on its back, arms by its sides.

The men carry out their work silently.

Soon, these men know, the whole of the country will have their eyes on this coffin. The very power of this coffin will depend upon every person that looks on it imagining that the body inside belongs to them.

It is strange to know, even approximately, when this man fell.

And though they have been desperately curious, all the way here, there is something diminishing, somehow, about deciding on a year, about pinning this down.

Nevertheless, as they work, each of them crosses off men they knew who served: one who was taller than this, or one who died later than this one in the war.

When the body is ready, the undertakers seal the heavy lid.

Without saying anything, each knows they will not speak of this. Not of the sight of this body, never, to anyone. No matter who may ask.

EVELYN DOESN'T LOOK up from her desk until the last man has been dealt with. Then she sits back in her chair and stretches. Five o'clock.

Robin is standing over by his desk, buckling up his bag with his back to her. 'Shall I lock up?' He speaks quietly, without turning around.

'If you would. I just have to finish something off here.'

She takes the round of keys from her bag and puts them on the edge of her desk. She doesn't look up as he crosses the room towards her, but she sees his hand reach in and lift them, the fine light hairs on the tops of his fingers. While his back is turned, she rifles through the papers on her desk. She cannot find

what she is looking for; must have filed it yesterday.

'Well, goodbye then.' He is standing beside her.

'Wait.' Evelyn looks up. 'Listen, Robin, I'm most dreadfully sorry for leaving you like that this afternoon.'

'It's fine.'

'No, it's not. It was my lunch. It overran.'

'Lunch with your brother?'

'Yes.'

His eyes flicker to her jersey. She remembers that she has changed, is wearing different clothes, and feels the blood race to her cheeks. There's no way of making this seem better than it looks. She will only be digging herself a deeper hole.

'Here.' He holds out the keys in his palm. 'For you.'

She puts them on the desk. 'Wait, Robin.' For some reason she doesn't want to be left here on her own tonight, not even for a minute or two. 'Would you wait, just for one moment, please?'

'If you like.' He sounds surprised.

'I won't be long, I promise.' She goes over to the ranged boxes on the wall, following them down until she reaches the letter *H* and then rummaging through the drawer until she finds what she is looking for: a small blue slip with Rowan Hind's name at the top. She copies his address into her notebook, *11 Grafton St, Poplar*, then looks up. Robin's tall silhouette is over by the window, hands in his pockets, staring out. Rain

falls from a stooped grey sky. It is almost dark already. Evelyn feels the same strange beginnings of panic she felt a moment earlier; Doreen will most likely be out again, and she will be going home to an empty flat. 'Ready,' she says, after a moment.

He still has his back towards her, looking out of the window.

'That rain looks foul.'

'Yes,' he says, 'it does.'

'I'm not sure I'm up to braving it just yet.' She gives a small laugh. 'I might make a cup of tea.'

'Fine.' He nods. 'See you tomorrow then.' He makes to go.

'Would you care to join me?'

He halts beside her desk. 'For the tea?'

'Yes.'

'Er, no, thank you. I don't much go in for consolation prizes.'

'Oh God. I didn't mean it like—' She stands up too quickly and her head is pounding. Her drunkenness of earlier on has shrunk to a thick, tight band across her scalp. 'Actually,' she shakes her head, pressing her fingers against the desk, 'I'm not going to have a cup of tea at all. I'm going to go for a proper drink. How about that instead?'

He starts to speak, but then she raises her hand. 'You know what? Don't bother. Do what you like. I'm sorry that I asked.'

She puts on her coat and gathers her things. But Robin hasn't moved. When she looks up at him he is smiling. A strange sort of smile she hasn't seen before. 'Actually,' he says, 'I was going to say that a proper drink is just what I need.'

The pub is on the corner, a few doors down from the office, one of those brown-hued working-men's pubs where women are rarely seen. Usually she would avoid it, but it's raining hard, and she has no idea how far Robin can easily walk.

Inside it's fairly quiet, just a few men drinking on their own, hunkered down over their pints. She makes sure that she is the first to reach the bar. 'I'll have a gin and orange, please, and . . .' She turns to Robin.

'A pint should do it.' He gives a brief nod to the barman.

'Gin and orange and a pint then, please.'

Robin looks across to the rain-spattered windows. 'Filthy day.'

The memory of herself, half naked, drunk and standing by a window, floods Evelyn. 'Yes,' she says, drumming her fingers against the wood of the bar. 'It is.'

The barman puts their drinks down and Robin reaches into his pocket.

'No!' She puts her hand on his sleeve, and then pulls it immediately away. 'I mean, let me. I wanted to make it up to you, for this afternoon.'

His eyebrows shoot up, but he half steps away from the bar and opens his hands in mock defeat.

'Got a live one there,' says the barman to Robin, who smiles. Evelyn takes out her purse and pays with a stony glare. They turn with their drinks, and stand, awkward. Which table? Over in the corner is too intimate; by the door, too draughty. She makes for an empty table in the middle of a row, slipping into the seat on the side closest to the wall. As Robin settles himself into the chair in front of her, she sees that his leg sticks out slightly; out and to the side.

I often go along to dances in the evening.

How the hell does he manage then, with that leg?

'So,' she says.

'So.' He looks at her. And there is something different in it. Challenging. It's the same look that he gave her in the office before.

'Was it dreadful then?' She sips her drink.

'I'm sorry?' He looks momentarily confused.

'This afternoon.'

'Oh, no, it was fine. Though I should probably pretend it wasn't.' He smiles, lifting his glass. 'This is interesting. I've never had a woman buy me a drink before.'

She raises an eyebrow as she lights her cigarette. 'I'm sure it tastes the same.'

He makes a great show of holding the liquid to the

light. He takes an exploratory sip. 'Yes,' he says. 'Everything seems to be in order.'

Despite herself, she smiles. She can feel the gin from her own drink hit her blood and the band around her head ease a merciful notch.

'Listen, I don't suppose I could have one of those, could I?' He points to her cigarettes.

'Thought you didn't smoke.'

'Just sometimes, when I'm having a drink. Used to smoke like a chimney, like the rest of you, but I got a bit of poison, you know, bit of gas in the lungs.'

She pushes them across the table towards him.

He lights up, takes a small puff and then puts the cigarette down in the ashtray, where it plumes blue smoke into the silence between them.

'So,' she says eventually, 'how are you finding the job?'

'How am I finding the job?' He sits back in his chair. 'Well, it's . . . many things.' He turns his glass in his hands. 'Harder than I thought in some ways; simpler in others. Mainly I'm just happy to be in employment. It's not the easiest with – this.' He gestures to his leg.

Evelyn rests her eyes on it briefly. For a moment she wonders what it looks like. The plastic instead of flesh. How it must have been, getting used to that.

'And it beats selling magazines door to door or matches in the street.' He leans forward, his fist around his glass. 'I saw a man the other day. He had a

barrel organ, and there were photographs on the side of all his children.'

'How many?'

'I counted nine.'

She lets out a low whistle.

'And beside all of that, a list of his service record.'

'Whereabouts?'

'The Somme, and others. The duration, from what I could tell.'

'God.' She picks up a beer mat and tears it in half. 'They make me furious. It's as though we're walking around a pit, all of us. One of those awful bomb craters in the middle of the city, only a million men are inside it and no one is looking. People are just walking past, whistling, pretending not to see.'

'I don't know about not seeing,' he says quietly.

'Well, all right.' She looks up at him. 'Perhaps not that. But I just boil with fury that they should be there in the first place – reduced to begging in the street. It's the older ones that always get me most; they stand there, in their best suits and their hats, and they look so *patient* and they all have such . . . such *dignity* and we all just . . .' She trails off, shaking her head.

'Then why do you work for them?'

'Excuse me?'

That same look of challenge is on his face. 'The people that put them there. If it isn't the pensions

service, then who is it? Surely if there were a fairer distribution, then—'

'You're confusing the messenger with the message.'

'Perhaps. But you could always do something else.'

'Perhaps I could.' She leans back, opens her hands. 'What do you suggest?'

He shrugs. 'There must be many office jobs out there.'

'You know as well as I do that's not true. Especially for women. Not now.'

Are they arguing? She's not sure, but it feels like it; her blood is up.

'How long have you been there then?' His tone is softer, conciliatory.

'Two years.'

'And before that?'

'Before the office, or before the war?'

'Both. You can start at the beginning, if you like.'

She gives a brief laugh. 'We'd be here all night.'

'Well,' he looks down at her empty glass and his half-full one, 'we could certainly have another drink.'

'Yes.' She smiles. 'I suppose we could.'

He drains his glass, gets up and goes over to the bar. His cigarette is still smouldering gently in the ashtray and she leans over, takes a couple of last drags and crushes it out. She watches as he comes back with the drinks. It is difficult to tell from watching him walk that he has a false leg; he moves surprisingly well.

'How long have you had the leg for?' she says as he nears the table, then immediately regrets it, but he doesn't flinch.

'Three years.' He puts the drinks on the table. 'Though it took a while before I had one that fit. But hang on –' he lifts a finger, 'we're not finished yet. You were going to tell me what you did before this.'

'Munitions.'

He raises an eyebrow, seems surprised. 'And how was that? Hard?'

'Hard enough.' She wonders if he will comment on her finger now.

'And before that?'

'I . . . well.' She puts her finger and thumb from her good hand into her drink and squeezes the little slice of orange. It bobs on the surface, bumping against the ice when she lets it go. *Before that I fell in love.* 'I moved up to London. Shared a flat. Did this and that. Thought I had plenty of time to decide, and then the war came, and . . .' She looks up at him. He is watching her so intently that she has to look away. 'By the time it was finished I was here.' She picks up one half of her beer mat and rips it in half again. 'Well,' she says. 'Your turn now. You've been very clever so far at making me talk.'

'I'm not sure you've really told me very much at all.' He smiles. 'But all right then. Perhaps I could pretend to smoke another of your cigarettes?'

She pushes them across the table towards him.

He lights one up, but this time keeps it in his hand. 'I was in university when the war broke out. I'd gone there late. Somehow I thought it would be the thing to travel first.'

'Whereabouts?'

'India, Nepal, the Levant.'

'How was that?'

'Have you ever visited?'

She shakes her head.

'You should go.'

She looks up at him, surprised. *Should I?*

'I had not very much money, and I lived cheaply and spent rather a lot of my time away from people and things. And it was rather wonderful.'

'What did you do?'

'A lot of walking, mostly. Some climbing, too. Northern India and Nepal. I had a thought that I'd like to be attached to the colonial government, but when I was out there I decided that . . .' He smiles. 'Well, it was clear that wasn't what I wanted to do. I thought I should do something constructive. So I took up my place at Cambridge and went to study Classics.' He gives a short laugh. 'God only knows why.'

'And was it? Constructive?'

He shakes his head. 'I was already older than most of the other men. Only by three years or so, but I felt ancient. The only thing that I wanted was to get back

out into the world again. So the minute war broke out I hassled for a commission. I wanted to get to Jerusalem. Thought there was a good chance a third front would open up there. And so I pushed for that.' He grimaces suddenly. 'Does that sound terribly cynical?'

She shakes her head. 'Did you get there?'

'No. Strings were pulled, but the wrong ones, and I ended up on the Western Front.'

'Unlucky.'

'Perhaps.'

'Where were you?'

'Ypres first. That's where I got the gas. They sent me home for a few months after that. The leg happened in '16.'

'And . . . how?' She doesn't quite know how to ask.

He looks down at the cigarette in his hand, as though surprised to see it still there. He takes a swift, shallow drag. 'I remember nothing at all of the shell. When I woke in the hospital and they told me the leg had gone, I didn't believe them at first. I could still feel it. I can still feel it now, sometimes. It's . . . strange. And then,' a line appears in his brow, 'all I could think of was those men. Standing at street corners with a crutch and a tin. The fact of never climbing again. Perhaps not being able to walk. And I think I wanted to die.'

He says it matter-of-factly. She likes him the more for it.

'Then that changed, too, and I felt . . . I'm not proud of it, but I felt relief.'

'Yes.' She leans forward.

'And then, when the relief had faded, I was overwhelmed with—'

'With guilt.'

He looks up at her.

'I'm sorry,' she says, drawing back, colouring. 'Putting words into your mouth.'

'No.' He shakes his head. 'You're right.'

But it is as if some delicate membrane has broken, and sound floods her ears. The pub is busy, the air thick with smoke, men talking loudly on the tables either side.

'I should be going,' says Robin, draining the last of his drink.

She has a fleeting vision of him, at home. Living alone? What is his home like? Suddenly she doesn't want him to go. 'Where do you live?' she says.

He looks surprised. 'Hampstead,' he says with a smile. 'The cheaper bit. Further from the Heath.'

She nods, cannot think of anything more to say.

They pull on their coats. He stands back to let her pass and they walk side by side towards the door. Night has fallen properly now on the street outside. The air carries the scent of leaves and evening fires.

'Well.' He smiles, putting on his hat. 'Thank you for the drink.'

'It was a pleasure.' As she buttons her coat to her chin, she feels again that same hollow, racing panic that she had in the office. Is it a terror of being alone? How did it begin, this fear? It is her brother's fault, she thinks; it is the things that he said this afternoon. 'Robin?'

'Yes?' He turns to her.

'That Dixie band that you mentioned. Thursday, wasn't it? Are you still going to hear them play?' She can't believe she's saying it. She can't believe the words are actually coming out of her mouth. 'Or have you found someone to go with you yet?'

'Yes, I am.' He looks surprised, pleased. 'And no. I haven't, no.'

'Well, would you . . . I wonder? Perhaps I could come, after all?'

ADA WEAVES IN and out through the scrubby stand of plane trees in the park. She skirts the cricket pitch, the grass roped off for the winter now, and when she reaches the crumbling brick of the far north wall, turns around and makes her way back again, in and out, in and out, her thoughts thrumming with her footsteps.

Ivy is selfish, *selfish*. There with her pieces of paper, with her maps of graveyards. These are the things of

riches; Ivy is rich. It may well cost pounds to visit France, but if she knew that there was a patch of land that held the body of her son, she wouldn't complain about *money*. She would save everything she had until she could go and visit it. Sit by that piece of grass. Put her hands to it.

It is the lack of a body.

If she had had that, at least.

When her father died, Ada was eight. She stood at the entrance to the downstairs room into which they'd moved him, staring in at where he lay on his back. He was a large man, but looked small on the table, as though death had taken more than his life from him. Her mother asked Ada to boil a pail of water, fetch a washcloth and bring it to the room. 'You can go now,' she said, touching her gently on the top of her head and closing the door. But Ada stayed and listened, her ear pressed up against the wood. She could hear the dipping of the cloth in water, the small sounds of washing, and her mother, sobbing quietly. When she came back out, her mother's face was calm, as though it, too, had been washed clean. Even then, Ada could see there was sense in that.

Not like this though, not this . . . *absence*. No body and no grave.

A gust threatens to take her hat, and she clamps it down on to her head as damp leaves whirl and eddy in the air. There are odd figures scattered in the dusk,

dog walkers, people coming home from work. Jack may be among them. She turns back, heading for the north end of the grass where there are only the trees.

If she had had Michael's body at home, then she would have washed it. However injured, however broken, she would have washed him gently, as she did when he was a baby, when he was a boy. And if not that – if that last rite is to be denied to her, and to all of them, all the mothers, wives, sisters, lovers – then to know where the body lies in the ground, at least.

The wind whips her hair across her face.

Why did Ivy's daughters not get her a ticket to France instead of those stupid, ill-fitting teeth? Why will they not go with her to the burial on Thursday, if that is what she wants? Those silly, preening girls.

She is being unfair. She knows she is. She knows she should leave it. That Ivy is right. That Jack is right, that she should stop picking, stop scratching at this wound that she cannot let heal. But he will not let her. Her son will not let her. It is as though he is pulling at her, tugging at her sleeve, as he used to when he was a little boy.

She comes to a stop, the only figure on this patch of grass, where the trees are purple against the sky. The first lights are coming on in the houses alongside the park, shapes moving at the windows, the women at work in their kitchens, preparing the evening meal for their families – for their children, for their men. It

is odd, standing here, looking from the outside at the rhythms and routines of life. It seems suddenly so clear. Some contract has been broken. Something has been ruptured. How have they all agreed to carry on?

She should go inside. Make some food for their dinner, or there will be nothing to eat for the second night in a row. But at the thought of it, of she and Jack facing each other, silent across the kitchen table, she could scream. Why doesn't one of them do something about it? Just stand up and shout into the silence, 'That's it! I'm not doing it any more.'

Say the unsayable, release the charges, let the explosions blast it all away.

But then what? Where would she go? Nowhere. There is nowhere else to go at all.

She makes her way out of the darkened park, turning left down her road, feeling life claim her with each step. In the kitchen she wipes her face with her sleeve, takes a couple of dirty potatoes from the pantry and begins scrubbing them, hard.

There's a knock at the front door. She ignores it. Whoever it is knocks again, louder this time, and she is forced to give up and go out into the hall.

It is Ivy, wind-blustered, standing on the step. 'Can I come in?'

'Why?'

'I'm so sorry, Ada.'

'All right. You don't need to come in to tell me that.' She goes to close the door.

Ivy puts a hand out to stop her. 'She lived up in Walthamstow. An ordinary house. Ordinary street. Can I come in, Ada? Please?'

They go into the kitchen. Ada crosses her arms over her chest.

'Go on then. What did she do? How did she do it?'

'I'm not sure.' Ivy hovers, nervous. 'She . . . just . . . asked me to take something along – a photograph of Joe, and then . . . something that had meant something to him. I didn't know what to take. I scratched about for ages, trying to think. In the end I took an old bit of cloth he'd had when he was little. He used to drag it around with him for years.'

'I remember that.'

'You remember?' Ivy's face softens. 'If I ever washed it he would cry and cry. I didn't have the heart to take it off him. Anyway, I'd kept a bit of it all this time. Had it in the Bible for years.' She gives a rueful laugh. 'Never took it down to read it, so that was all right. I felt a bit daft, I can tell you, sitting there in her parlour, bringing it out of the bag.'

'And what did she do with it?'

'I think she just . . . sat with it there in her hands. Held it for a bit. And then . . . she started to say things.'

'What sort of things?'

But it is as though whatever energy Ivy has

mustered for this has gone, and she is sagged, finished now. 'Oh goodness, Ada. I don't know, I can hardly remember, honestly. Here.' She steps forward, handing over a piece of paper.

Ada takes it; there's an address written on it in a small, careful hand.

At the door, Ivy turns back. 'I will say one thing though,' she says. 'After I went, I got a letter the next week, telling me they'd found Joe's body. Telling me where he was.'

Ada looks up, her pulse racing.

'They'd identified him from the tag round his neck.'

She nods. 'Thank you.'

'Here.' Ivy crosses the room and pulls Ada towards her, pressing her against her chest in an awkward hug. Ada can smell the wet wool of her cardigan, the soft cleanness of her friend's skin. Ivy steps back, gripping her hands. 'Come with me on Thursday. It'll be good for you. For all of us. Might put a few things to rest.'

'I'm sorry, Ivy.' She pulls away. 'I just . . . don't think I can.'

'Well.' Ivy nods. 'You take care of yourself, won't you?'

'Yes.' Ada fingers the thin piece of paper in her hands. 'I will.'